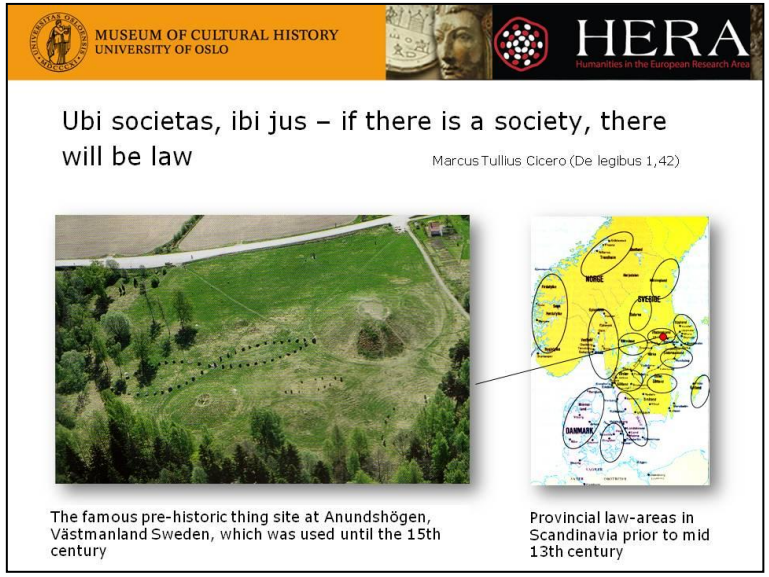


The Assembly Project – Meeting-places in Northern Europe AD 400-1500

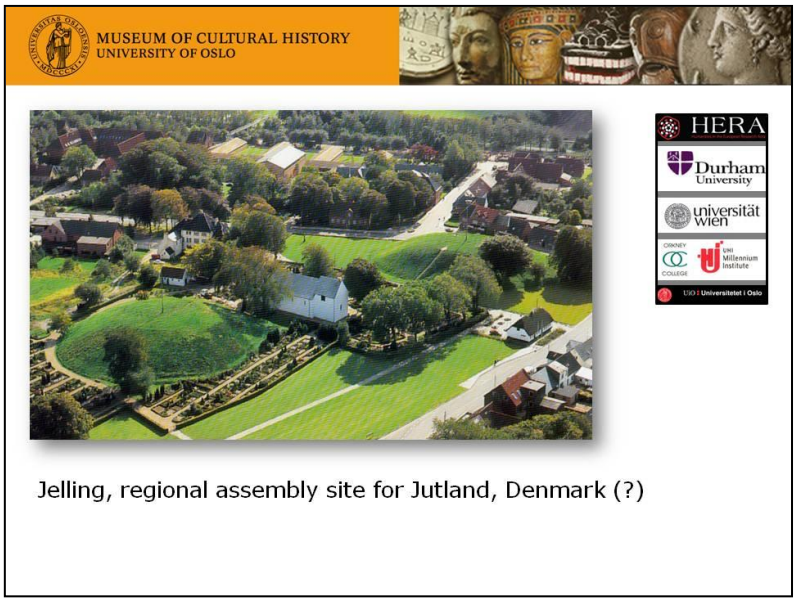
Presentation, Vienna June 25th 2010
Dr. Frode Iversen/TAP

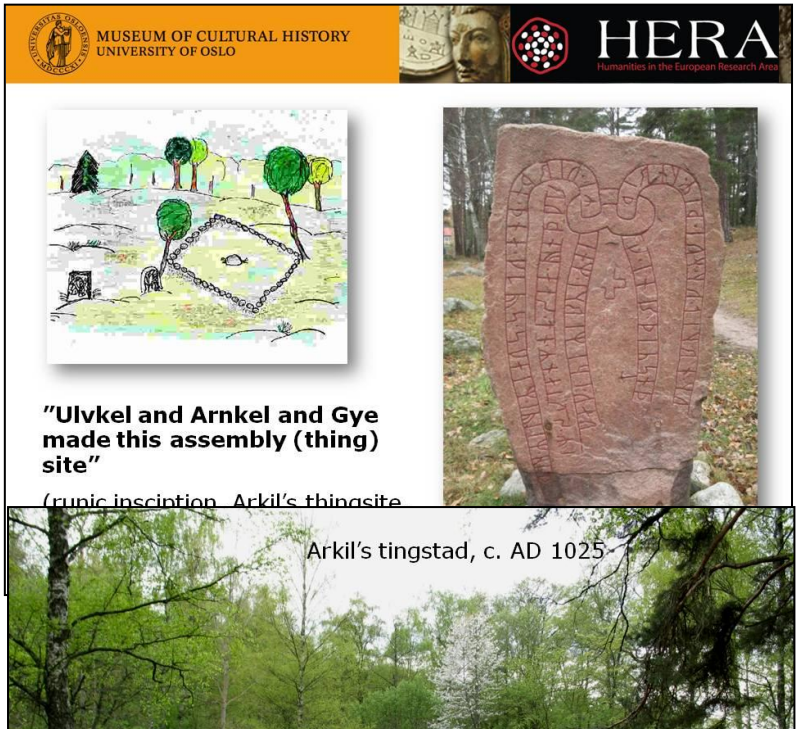


"Ubi societas, ibi jus – "
I will start with this roman proverb: "Ubi societas, ibi jus" - if there is a society, there will be law, and the picture underneath shows what an assembly place among the "barbarians" in the north actually looked like in the middle ages.

The overall aim of the project is to investigate the role of assemblies in the creation of collective identities and emergent kingdoms in medieval Northern Europe

The merging of different regional laws into one national law is a characteristic of the process of Kingdom unification. Laws are





powerful instruments in such contexts. In Scandinavia there were 16 rural provincial law areas prior to the 13th century. By the mid 14th century they had been reduced to only 5. Both Sweden and Norway became uniformed law-areas, more or less similar to the modern nations. The earlier extent manuscripts in Scandinavia date from the 12th century, but these legal systems are much older. Only archeology can illuminate these.

Medieval laws were based on customary practices. The laws were remembered and transferred in an oral form, by a law-speaker – at specific places in the landscape – thing sites. The thing seems to have functioned within a fixed geographical area. Here, the norms of society were formed, the line between right and wrong was determined. Such ritualized meeting places are called "the correct things site" – "den rette tingstad", in Scandinavian laws.

Hierarchy

The thing system was hierarchical. The actual sites vary in appearance from highly monumentalizes places such as Jelling in Denmark, to more straight forward places like the Arkil's thing-site in Sweden.

Here a runic inscription tells that Ulvkel and Arnkel and Gye actually created this assembly (thing) site.

Even more anonymous places were used for thing meetings, for instance Daleting in Shetland. A little ness or cape in the fjord could be a convenient meeting place for local gatherings.

In connection with regional meetings purchase and sale of property would have been going on, murderers were convicted, fines paid, and marriages agreed on. Tribute to a distant king was agreed on, and trade with foreigners took place. The

landowners and all of the free people in the "herred", the hundred, or the Skipreide" as the smallest units were called, were probably obliged to meet at the thing.

Although the law applied to all, it was not equal for all. It was graded according to social position, and if a crime happened at the actual thing-site, this was sacrilege, and far more serious than if it took place for instance in a remote place, such as in a forest. An outlaw – a *niding* or *utlegd* was completely without legal protection – and excluded from society.

Local thing-meetings were usually arranged perhaps once a month or whenever necessary. The regional things were held once a year, usually in summer-time. There would have been a market lasting for a week or so in connection with these meetings. In addition to meetings concerning civil matters, there were separate military-things prior to the 12 Century. They were held twice a year, according to Norwegian law of Gulating. Such meeting are named weapon thing – våpenting, where weapons and equipment were inspected by the kings representative. The thing-system changed over time. Military service turned into taxation, the regional things turned into representational thing, and the king gradually took control over these communal meeting places.


Thing-site ("assembly-site"), Gullanes, Daleting, Shetland



The Assembly Project

Thing sites were often located at good communication points, preferably on a headland in the bottom of a fjord, or by rivers and roads in the inland areas. They preferred places with good acoustics.

The sites, and the farms where they were located, have often given name to the area they served – to the Thing-district. Many of the medieval sites have therefore given name to the current municipalities of Europe, local football-teams and a variety of different companies.

Assembly sites and identities

The sites have in good and bad ways played a significant role in the development of the diversity of identities in Europe at different times. During the period of National Socialism circa Forty thing sites where created in Germany as an expression of a glories Germanic past. This is for instance "The Heidelberger thing site", however, designed internally as a "Roman amphitheatre".

The Assembly Project (TAP)

The Assembly Project (TAP), represents a joint project bringing together scholars from Norway, Austria and the UK. This international team will investigate the role of assemblies in the creation of collective identities and emergent kingdoms in medieval Northern Europe.

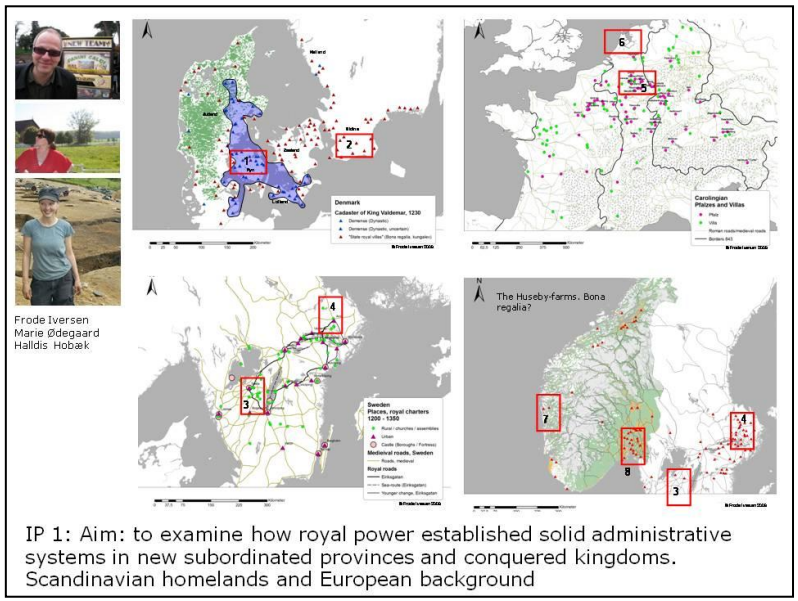
The first systems of governance in Europe have long been a neglected research theme, with the significance of these places in the medieval world highlighted only in recent publications. This project will build on these researches and offer a new,



UiO : Museum of Cultural History

The Assembly Project





innovative, and large scale study of thing sites in the context of the transition from localised polities to supra-regional kingdoms and nation states.

Study area

The key questions will be addressed via multi-disciplinary research examining assembly within the political development of kingdoms in Viking and medieval Scandinavia and those areas colonised and settled by the Norse. By comparing the establishment of administrative frameworks in Scandinavia with new systems in colonised regions, the project will examine how authority was articulated in landscape terms by new and developing kingdoms and how control and consensus were transferred and established. In order to produce a set of comparative data, TAP will also seek to create a complete account of the development of administrative systems within a wider European context. Finally, in order to reflect critically upon assemblies within the Scandinavian core area of study and the areas of comparison, TAP will examine the historiography of research into assemblies. All research questions will be approached in the same manner in Scandinavia and the areas of comparison through a strict framework. GIS and digital mapping will serve as an important analytical tool together with visual analysis, GPS-survey and excavation.

IP Iversen

I will together with two Oslo PhD students, Marie Ødegaard and Halldis Hobæk, focus on how supra-regional royal power established solid administrative systems in new subordinated provinces and conquered kingdoms. This part of TAP offers an overarching study on the European background. It will

The Assembly Project



Dr. Alexandra Sanmark, Centre for Nordic Studies in Orkney.





IP 4 Aim: to explore the establishment of the Norse thing organisation and assembly sites in the areas of Norse settlement and colonisation, compared to the situation in the Viking homelands

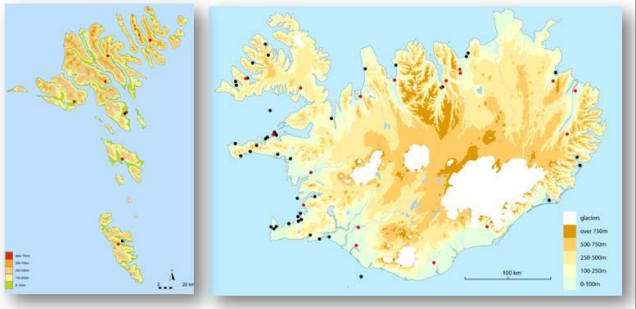


Dr. Natascha Mehler, Department of Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology, Vienna University





Dr. Mathias Hensch
Joris Coolen (Fieldwork)



Thing sites (red dots) and trading sites (black dots) in the Faeroe Islands and Iceland

IP 3 Aim: to examine the economic activities of thing sites and their effects, focusing on economic activities, such as trade at or near thing sites

establish, via 8 case studies in Scandinavia and medieval Germany, the role of the thing institution in the development of supra-regional royal power systems. It will focus on the two kinds of proto-governmental structures: (1) the areas dominated by the kings' dynastic property and (2) the areas with a high density of property belonging to royal office. Assembly locations will be compared with cultural key features in the landscape, e.g. boundaries, burial sites, and farmsteads, as well as topographic features.

IP Sanmark

Dr. Alexandra Sanmark at the Centre for Nordic Studies in Orkney will explore the establishment of the Norse thing organisation with assembly- and execution sites in the areas of Norse settlement and colonisation, compared to the situation in the Viking homelands, and also in a wider European context. Fieldwork will be carried out at a select number of sites in Scotland and the North Atlantic islands. The significance of assemblies for conflict resolution, particularly in newly colonised areas, will be highlighted. The thing places established in these areas will be studied in order to understand if the settlers used sites already monumentalised by the local population or whether they created new ones. The impact of Christianity on the design of the thing sites and the thing proceedings will also be examined.

IP Mehler

Dr. Natascha Mehler at the Department of Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology, Vienna University, will analyze the mercantile aspects of assembly sites, focusing on economic activities, such as trade, craft and exchange, at or near thing sites. These activities involved different ethnic and social groups



Dr. Sarah Semple, Department of Archaeology, Durham University



Tudor Skinner (PhD st)



IP 2 Aim: to investigate past and current scholarship on assemblies, and the hybrid thing institution in the Danelaw

and had implications both for local societies and foreign traders, whose businesses were regulated by the assembly. Mehler will analyze how assembly sites were used for trade, what kind of mercantile aspects were connected to them, and how assembly sites topographically relate to trading sites. New fieldwork will be carried out together with Sanmark in Norway and Iceland, and I have just come from Shetland yesterday were we have finished the first season of fieldwork, and we are pleased by the results, especially from thios site – Tingwall, the main site in Shetland. Already excavated material, as well as written sources, will also be re-examined by Mehler.

IP Semple

Dr. Sarah Semple of the Department of Archaeology, Durham University together with PhD student Tudor Skinner, will investigate past and current scholarship on assemblies. They will establish a new critical understanding of this via historiographic research on the treatment of assembly - exploring how assemblies have been valorised in differing strands of scholarship and used as evidence to support for example ideas of nationhood, and legitimate (leggjittimitt) authority. Building on this critical base of knowledge, but also interlocking with the project core research themes, the PhD project will try to advance our understanding of assemblies and political organisation in the Danelaw in England. Skinner will analyze the enforcement of a norse system into anglosaxon society; and how thing-sites were used to consolidate territorial identities.



Workshops

The project, led by Oslo, started on June 1st and runs for three years. To ensure good cooperation with ongoing projects and other interested parties four workshops will be held in Oslo, Vienna, Durham and Kirkwall. These will focus on 8 themes relevant to the HERA-call:

Valorisation
Rhetoric
Territorialisation
Migration of administrative frameworks
Societal norms
Gendered power-structures
Economic activity
Collective identities

TAP will also host a session with the title *Assembly-sites in Medieval Europe - Cradles of Democracy or instruments of Power and Identity?* for the annual conference of the European Association of Archaeologists - the EAA - in The Hague this September.

Thank you for your attention!