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# Royal villas in Northern Europe

FRODE IVERSEN<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper concerns land use and peasant society relating to settlements, power, and state formation in Northern Europe in the period 500–1200 AD, combining archaeological and written evidence in spatial landscape studies. In the mainly rural society in the Middle Ages, political and economic power seems to have been based on control over land, including people, land, and estates. The king and his followers travelled between a limited number of royal villas, located in the coastal areas or by central rivers and important route-ways. Due to urbanisation and supra-regional state formation, this system gradually changed. Around 900–1100 AD, new towns were established as the main urban centres, which gradually became the king's residences and powerbase. During the High Middle Ages, the old rural manors and estates of the king were split into several units and donated to the king's secular allies and ecclesiastical institutions such as bishops, monasteries, and churches, often located in the towns.

## INTRODUCTION

A central question in studies of rural settlement structure and social organisation in Northern Europe during the middle ages concerns the origin and development of the early medieval estates. I shall discuss some aspects concerning land use, and how the royal power based on landed property changed during the process of state formation in Scandinavia, England and Germany in the period 500–1200 AD.

In earlier research the Carolingian villa-systems west of the Rhine was regarded as a legacy from Roman times and the so-called *Latifundiae* – the unit the Romans primarily ran by slaves. Villa systems east of the Rhine, in the alleged free egalitarian «Germania» did not fit into this picture. Such villa-systems were long considered to have been established by the Carolingian kings as part of their larger conquests east of the Rhine (Verhulst 1995). The German historian Werner Rösener (1995) has however recently questioned how much

influence the Frankish Kings actually had on the extent of the villa-system in these areas. The so-called *Gemeinfreie*-thesis has since 1960 been modified and partly abandoned in European research, as it also has been in Scandinavian research in the last 20 years. It was argued that Germanic societies were almost exclusively made up of free farmers and families of equal status. Today, this society is considered as hierarchically organized, and with some large estate owners (Rösener 1995; Verhulst 1995; T. Iversen 1997; Skre 1998; F. Iversen 2008a; 2009). The *Gemeinfreie*-thesis, was incorporated into a historical materialistic perspective and has now been abandoned. This opens up for new perspectives and the possibility that the villa system can be significantly older in the northern Europe, especially in Scandinavia, than previously expected.

Traditionally, most Scandinavian research on past settlements and farmscapes have been based on fossilized house-foundations and field systems, as they are usually deserted and preserved in «marginal» environments (e.g. Rønneseth 1966; Myhre 1972; Carlsson 1979; Widgren 1983; Gren 1989; Pedersen 1990; Holm 1995; Jerpåsen 1996) (Fig. 1). According to this view, single farms dominated in Norway, while other regions of Scandinavia also had nucleated settlements, hamlets and villages (Lillehammer 1999). In Norway, for instance, the «single farm» has been considered to be «typically Norwegian», and to some extent treated as an ideological and national symbol (Opedal 1994).

In recent decades this has changed, largely due to the methodology of mechanical topsoil stripping. As a consequence of extensive development of land and infrastructure surrounding the expanding towns of southern Scandinavia, there has been a significant increase of rescue excavations. New research has provided valuable knowledge on the spatial organisation of households, farmsteads and agrarian landscapes (e.g. Ahlkvist 2002; Edblom 2004; Streiffert 2005; Söderberg 2005) as well as the relations between sites and settlements in a wider perspective (e.g. Fabech & Ringtved 1999; Carlie 1999; Göthberg 2000; Helgesson 2002).

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**Fig. 1.** Research on past settlements and farmscapes has traditionally been based on fossilized house foundations and field systems, as they are often deserted and preserved in «marginal» environments. The deserted farm Hanaland, Jæren, Western Norway. AD 400–1350. Photo: Norges Landbrukshistorie 2004.

By demonstrating the presence of sub-surface settlements without visible pagan burials outside central farms, scholars like Dagfinn Skre and myself have argued for social differentiation and aristocratic rule in pagan society in Scandinavia in the early Middle Ages. Similar views on power relations are found in several contemporary works (e.g. Larsson 1997; Tollin 1999; Mogren 2000; Hansson 2001; 2006; Berg 2003; F. Iversen 2008a), but have also been subject to criticism. Despite stressing social stratification, the Swedish archaeologist Jan-Henrik Fallgren (2006, 106) argues that the hypothesis of prehistoric manors in Scandinavia is based on hypothetical constructions, not on the existing settlement material.

Perhaps this is because of the failure of archaeologists to put the excavated material into the relevant context. So, what kind of contexts or models can be relevant for understanding settlement systems around royal villas in Northern Europe in the period from 500 to 1200?

#### THE VILLA-SYSTEM

The Belgian historian Adrian Verhulst has described the Villa-system as *bipartite* – divided in two: i.e. the main farm surrounded by dependent

settlements. In German research this is called *ein villikationsverfassung*. It describes a division of the land between the lord at the main farm and dependent settlements with peasants working the lord's land (Verhulst 1966; 1995, 16 with references; Ulsig 1996, 19).

In England the term *manor* is used for the lords' main farm, and means a residence or a settlement. The manor was the physical centre where the lord exercised power over the surrounding landscape, and managed his estate. In Old Norse such centres is called *hovedbol* and in German *Fronhof*. The foremost of these centres could have timber halls and specialized buildings, and large compounds for animals, as it is known at the royal villa Yeavinger in Northumberland around 600. Written sources (*Brevium Exempla*) tell us that the manor (mansion) at the royal Villa Annapes near Lille, France (Asnapium) consisted of a solid house of stone with balconies and room for 11 women, in addition to around 25 other wooden buildings.

The land that lay directly to the manor and which was run by the lord is called *reserve* in French, *demesne* in English, and *Salland* in German. It was not uncommon that around 20 % of the total estate was run as demesne by the lord, but this varied of course. Subordinated settlements are called *manses* or *tenures* in French. The villains held their own rented land, and had various forms of labour duties for their lord, and first and foremost working his land in spring, summer and fall (*noctes, jornales, dagsverk*). The village was the primary settlement-unit for the dependent peasants, but single farms also occurred. Probably the duties were graded by social status, age and gender. The slaves did the heaviest work of course. The dependent peasants – villains, borders and slaves – made up the *familia* of the lord (Rösener 1995, 15).

The various parties involved in such a social and territorial system had both advantages and disadvantages of the relationship. The leader had the greatest advantages, but the peasants gained the lords protection (*mondebour, traust*). The Lord dominated many aspects of life. The largest influence the lord had over unfree slaves and peasants at his own demesne and the least over free people who had their own properties within his district. Some of them could even «go where they wanted» with their land, as it sometimes is stated in the Domesday book. They could simply shift lord if they wished (Stenton 1971).

## ROYAL VILLAS

Royal villas are mentioned in written sources from the 6<sup>th</sup> century in northern Europe. The fine for killing a Roman at a royal villa was 300 schilling, according to *Lex Salica* – codified in 507 by the Frankish King Clodwig. If the Roman did not work at the royal villa but was a landowner, the fine was 100 schilling. The murder of a free born Frank or German was punished with a fine of 200 schilling (page 96). The people (*familia*) associated with royal villa seem to have been under special royal protection, as is also known later.

In Scandinavia, royal villa are first mentioned in skaldic poetry around 900 AD (*Utstein in Haraldskvadet*) and in narrative sources recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In England the «Germanic term» *cyninga tun* (*Villa Regalis*) is known from around 600 AD (Sawyer 1983). Domesday Book constitutes a central source. It provides an overview of land ownership and 13500 settlements in the reign of King Edward (1066). Around 270 royal villas (demesne) are recorded in this source in 1066 (Hill 1984). With the exception of England, there are no preserved systematic records of royal land in any kingdom in northern Europe before the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Norwegian and Swedish cadastres and tax-lists are rather late, dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Denmark the cadastre of King Valdemar from 1230s constitutes a key source to the Danish royal land at the time.

However, some written sources illuminate the principal organization of royal villas earlier. We shall briefly look into one such example. It concerns the royal villa *Friemersheim* 80 kilometres north of Aachen in Germany. Charlemagne granted this estate to a bishop (Hildigrim of Châlons-sur-Marne) who passed it on to an important monastery, Verden (St. Liudger). The source describes a royal villa system as it seems to have been at the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Franz 1967, 111–115). The total estate consisted of 18 named units or villages. Three of them had demesne run by the lord, spread over 5 different areas. There were 121 villians at this estate. They were probably heads of their own households. 30 of these were located at the highest ranked farm, Friemersheim. They paid annual fees (cencus) of grain four times a year (and three chickens and ten eggs), and had to do seven weeks annual work for the lord. This was concentrated to early spring,

summer and fall. The lord provided food and drink when they worked his land. There would have been 500–600 people with villians status at this estate, including men, women and children (4–5 persons per household).

There were also slaves and cottars with heavy labour dues on the lords land (*servi cottidiani*) (Dollinger 1982, 150). From other villa-systems it is known that a third of the labours were unfree, and in our example, this number would perhaps add up to around 300 individuals. In addition there were people who had administrative or special functions (*judices*). This was the Meier (*maioris*), the forest keeper (*forestarii*), the horse keeper (*poledrarii*), the cellar master (*cellerarii*), the sheriff (*decani*), the customs officer (*telonarii*) and others. They held their settlements as fiefs (*beneficium*) from the lord, but some also paid taxes to the lord (CV: 10). The top authority of the Villa-system was the judge (*judex*). He should also make sure that skilled craftsmen were available within his territory (Ministry), as stated in the *Capitulare de Villis* (CV), such as blacksmiths, gold- and silversmiths, shoemakers, wagonmakers, shieldsmakers, fishermen, falcon-catchers, soapmakers, brewers, bakers and net-makers (CV: 45). All together the villa-system of Frimersheim could have comprised around 1000 people.

The famous *Capitulare de Villis* from around 800 contains 70 chapters with detailed provisions for how royal villas within the Carolingian empire should be organized (Gareis 1893; Dopsch 1916; Metz 1954; Fois Ennas 1981). It expresses a royal ideal that was tried implemented in reality. It is a unique source for those who would like to study the normative aspects of the villa-system in great detail. The Scandinavian provincial laws – especially the law of the Gulathing in western Norway give detailed descriptions of the tasks, power and authority of the leaders of royal villas (*årmenn* and *lendmenn*) (Iversen 2007; 2008a; 2008b).

## THE DIFFICULT RANKING OF ROYAL VILLAS

The highest ranked royal residence in the Carolingian empire, is referred to as a *palatioo*. This simply means an extraordinary splendid building – a palace. Elsewhere in northern Europe, it is difficult to separate out the foremost royal villas in such a direct way. We have to use other

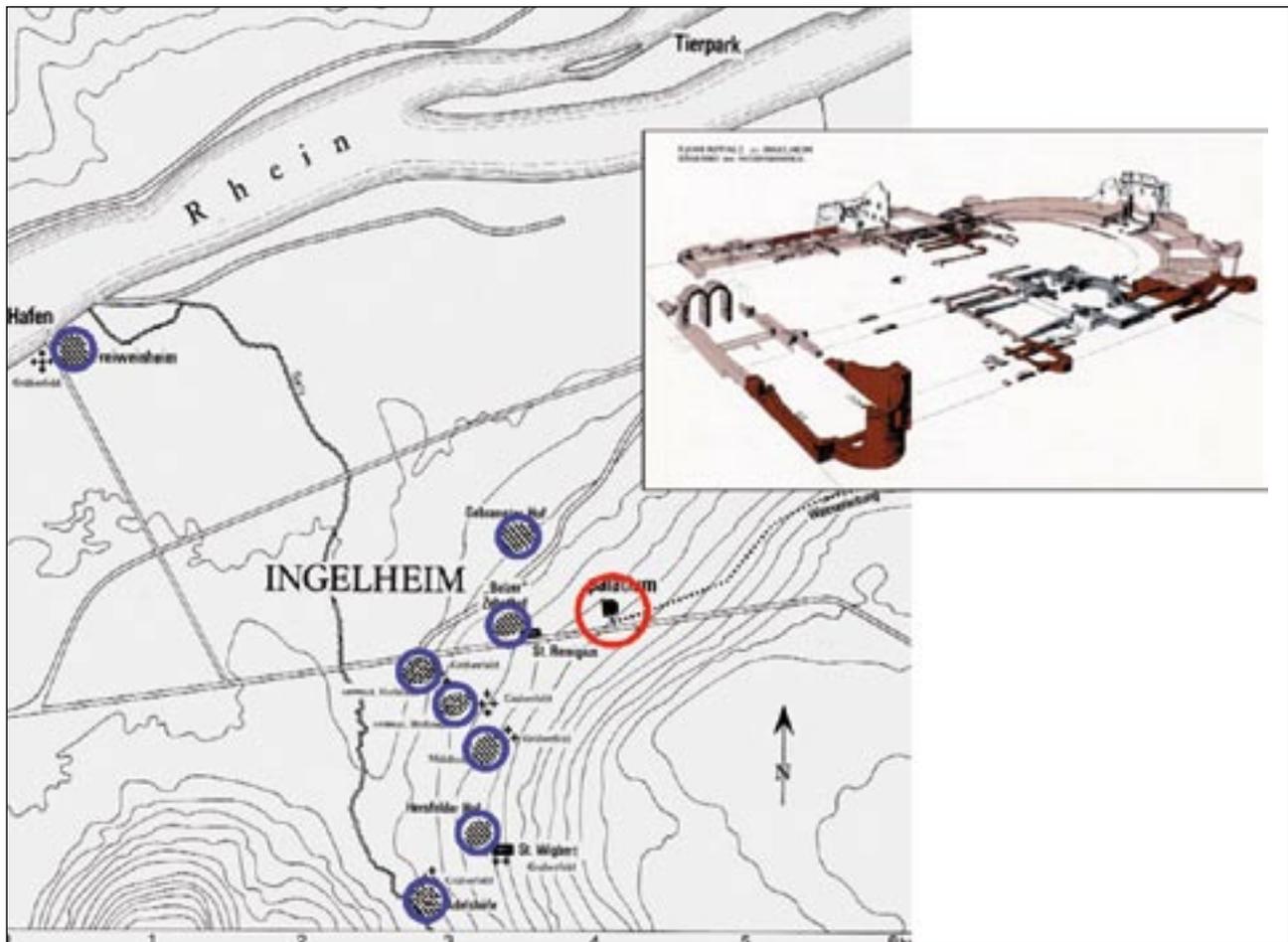


Fig. 2. The Carolingian villa-system. Ingelheim, Germany, 9<sup>th</sup> century. After Konrad Weidemann 1975.

archaeological and historical criteria to get a grip on the position of the royal villa within the royal estate system.

In the exploration of the Carolingian royal estate, it is customary to distinguish between *Pfalzes*, *Villas* and *Fiskalgut* (Fiscus) (Renoux 2001 with references). The German historian Thomas Zotz has provided a comprehensive and critical discussion of the terms *Pfalz* and *Villa* (Zotz 1991 with references). The term villa seems to describe a functional production unit with dependent settlements (Zotz 1992, 193f.). *Pfalzes* had both practical and symbolic functions, and manifested the kingdom physically in the landscape (Renoux 2001, 56). *Pfalzes* probably distinguished themselves from other royal villas of lower rank by their splendid buildings, characterized by a great hall (aula), a church (ecclesia), as well as private royal quarters. The regulation «De ordine palatii» from around 800 gives a detailed picture of the internal organization of the Pfalz, where also the

queen's important role as Pfalz-manager is recognized (Dopsch 1916). Also in Scandinavia a distinction between 1st and 2nd ranked royal villas seems relevant. The so-called Huseby-farms appear to be such second-ranked royal centres in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but I will not comment this in further detail now.

#### ROYAL VILLAS AND PALACES. LARGE SCALE SPATIAL ORGANISATION

Three royal core areas in the Carolingian empire can be separated out, based on the spatial distribution of royal villas referred in written-sources as a palace (Fig. 3). I have separated out areas where two or more Palaces are located closer than forty kilometres, or approximately a day's trip for the king and his followers. I have identified 10 palaces in *Area 1* (Düren, Elsloo a.d. Maas, Herstal, Manderfeld, Schüller, Theux, Tumbas, Aachen, Zülpich and

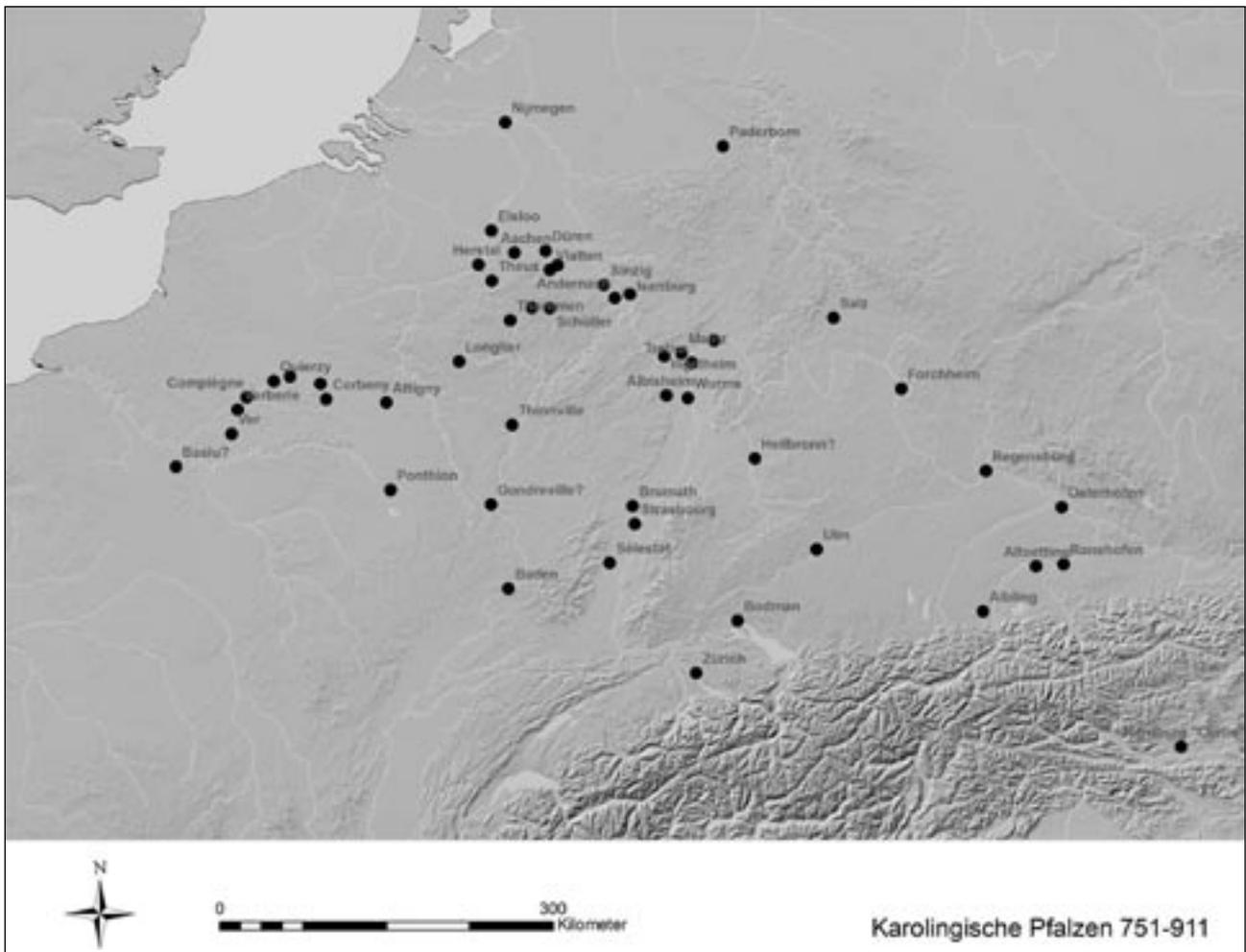


Fig. 3. The distribution of Carolingian royal villas referred in written-sources as «palatium».

Vlatten). *Area 2* has 6 Palaces (Frankfurt, Ingelheim, Mainz, Trebur, Worms and Albisheim). *Area 3* has 7 Pfalzes (Ver, Verbiere, Servais, Cobeny, Compiègne, Quierzy and Samoussy). I consider these to be the most important royal areas in the Carolingian period. They fit in remarkable well with the three main kingdoms after the division of the Carolingian empire in 843: (1) The Kingdom of Charles the Bald (840–77) in the west, (2) The Kingdom of Emperor Lothar (840–55) in the middle, and (3) The Kingdom of Louis the German (840–76) east of the Rhine, including the dioceses of Mainz, Worms and Speyer.

Also in England it is possible to prove such royal core areas in some of the kingdoms. I will here only give an example from Kent (Brooks 1989; Yorke 1990; Brookes 2007). Kent is listed in the Tribal Hidage and had its own royal house in 7<sup>th</sup> century. Kent has natural borders against Sussex in the west, and meets the sea in south and

east. Only six pre-conquest royal villas are known in Kent before 1016. In addition, Dartford, near the river Thames, is listed as a royal villa in Domesday book in 1066. With the exception of Aylesford and Dartford, royal assemblies were held at all villas in Kent in the period from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the early 10<sup>th</sup> century (696–924). The royal villas in Kent controlled all the major route ways. *Wye* and *Aylesford* lay on crossroads and controlled traffic to and from Sussex. *Aylesford* controlled two key routes; the navigable river Medway and the Roman road from Rochester. *Faversham* and *Milton* are located at important crossroads near the coast and controlled the traffic into the country. Together with Bapchild they also controlled the Roman road Watling Street between Canterbury and London.

Milton Regis was the most important royal villa in Kent, and among the largest farms in England. Nearly 400 households were connected to Milton

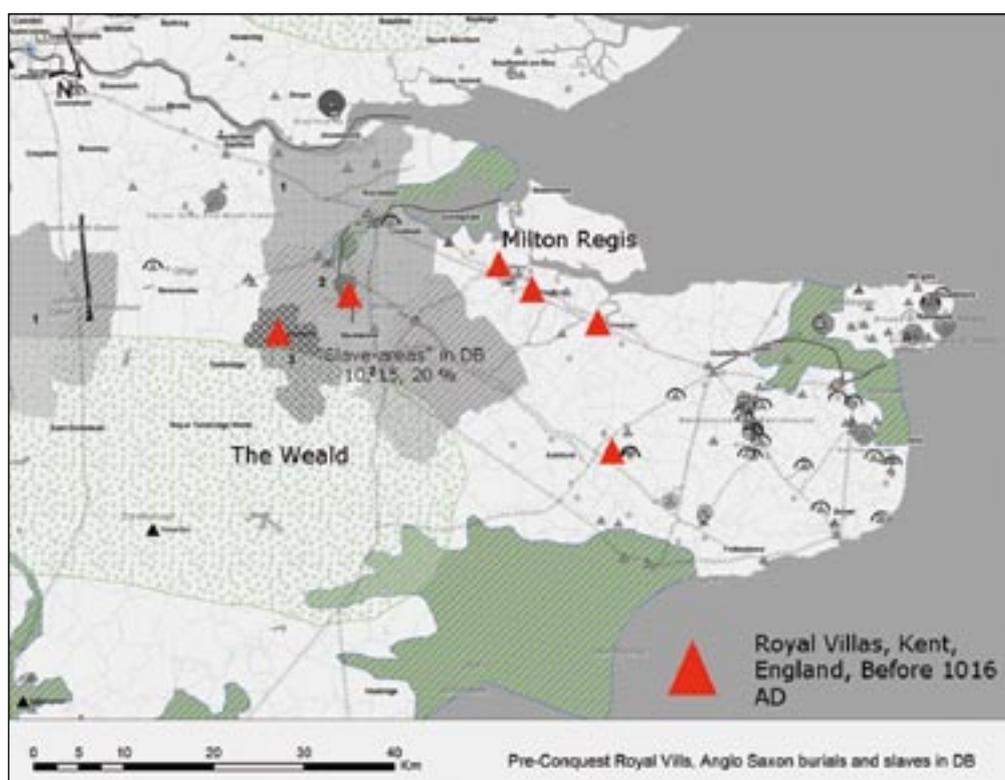


Fig. 4. The distribution of royal villas in Kent.

Regis in 1066. Many of them were located at subordinated settlement not mentioned in Domesday book but counted under their parent estate. Milton Regis was 42 times larger than an average Domesday village in Kent.<sup>1</sup> There was probably a market (toll) at Milton Regis, in addition to 6 mills, 27 salt pans and 32 fisheries. «The men of the Weald» – who probably lived at unmentioned subordinated settlements in the large forest in the west – the Weald – had escort service and cartage dues, transporting people and goods back and forth to Milton Regis. There were most likely quarries and extensive production of iron and timber in the Weald in the period 450–1380 as K. P. Witney argues. This production seems to have been closely associated with the royal villas in Kent (Witney 1976).

Although I have found such royal core areas both in Sweden and Denmark, I will only give a last example from western Norway. Literary sources – mainly Icelandic Sagas – make it possible to identify 30 royal villas in Norway before 1150 (denoted as *stórbú*, *konungsatseta*, *konungsbú*, *konungsgarðr*, *konungsetr* or *hovedbol* (demesne)). At least 15 of them were located along the coastline of Western Norway. I have

identified a royal core area in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries along the coast in the present county of Hordaland (F. Iversen 2008a with references). The king did not only control the sea as an important route way («leiden»), but also the extensive marine resources. Several large fishing villages in western Norway have been archaeologically investigated, and were in use from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Several of these fishing villages were connected to royal villas in 11 and 12, for instance the important Herdla in Hordaland. Several fishing villages were abandoned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the royal rural villa-systems were broken up. My study substantiates that such royal villa-system in western Norway could include around 30–50 single farms. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries this system was gradually broken up and replaced by a system of large over-regional estates with a dispersed property structure. The royal land along the coast was donated new royal and ecclesiastical institutions, mainly in the town of Bergen, the bishop, monasteries, and churches. This again stimulated further ecclesiastical property accumulation, also in the inner parts of western Norway, where the king traditionally had less power.

### WHICH ROYAL VILLAS HAVE BEEN ARCHAEOLOGICALLY EXCAVATED?

The Swedish archaeologist Johan Callmer pointed out in 2002 that archaeological excavations in England and on the continent had not been carried out on such a scale that it was possible to reconstruct the settlement patterns around a manor or a palace (Callmer 2002, 111). The picture has not changed much since 2002. The archaeological focus has been, and still is, the manor or the Pfalz of the lord.

According to the German archaeologist Günther Binding, 15 Pfalzes from the period 765–1025 has been excavated in present Germany (Binding 1996, 59–197). The investigations range from small, to more extensive fieldwork. It applies to Aachen, Ingelheim am Rhein, Nimwegen, Frankfurt am Main, Paderborn, Zurich, Bodman, Broich in Mülheim and der Ruhr, Duisburg, Magdeburg, Grone, Pöhlde, Werla and Tilleda.

Of 128 known royal villas in the Carolingian period about 10 are archaeologically known (Samson

1995, 106ff). And in reality it is only for Aachen, Ingelheim, Paderborn, Frankfurt, and perhaps also Samoussy that we have a more substantial archaeological knowledge. Paderborn in old Saxony seems to be the best published Carolingian Pfalz in Germany. Here it is possible to follow the different phases of the royal villa (Fenske *et al.* 2001).

In England two Anglo-Saxon royal villas stand out in terms of excavations: *Ad Gefrin*, or *Yeaverling*, in Northumbria, excavated by Brian Hope-Taylor between 1952 and 1962 (Hope-Taylor 1977), and Cheddar in Somerset excavated by Philip Rahtz in the 1960s (Rahtz *et al.* 1979). Yeaverling was a major royal centre in the Anglian kingdom of Bernicia, and later Northumbria, and seems to have had administrative and ceremonial functions which involved the collection of renders provided by the surrounding peasant communities. However, we know hardly anything about contemporary dependent settlements. The royal palace at Cheddar is known to have existed from the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century when it was granted to the Dean and Chapter of Wells.

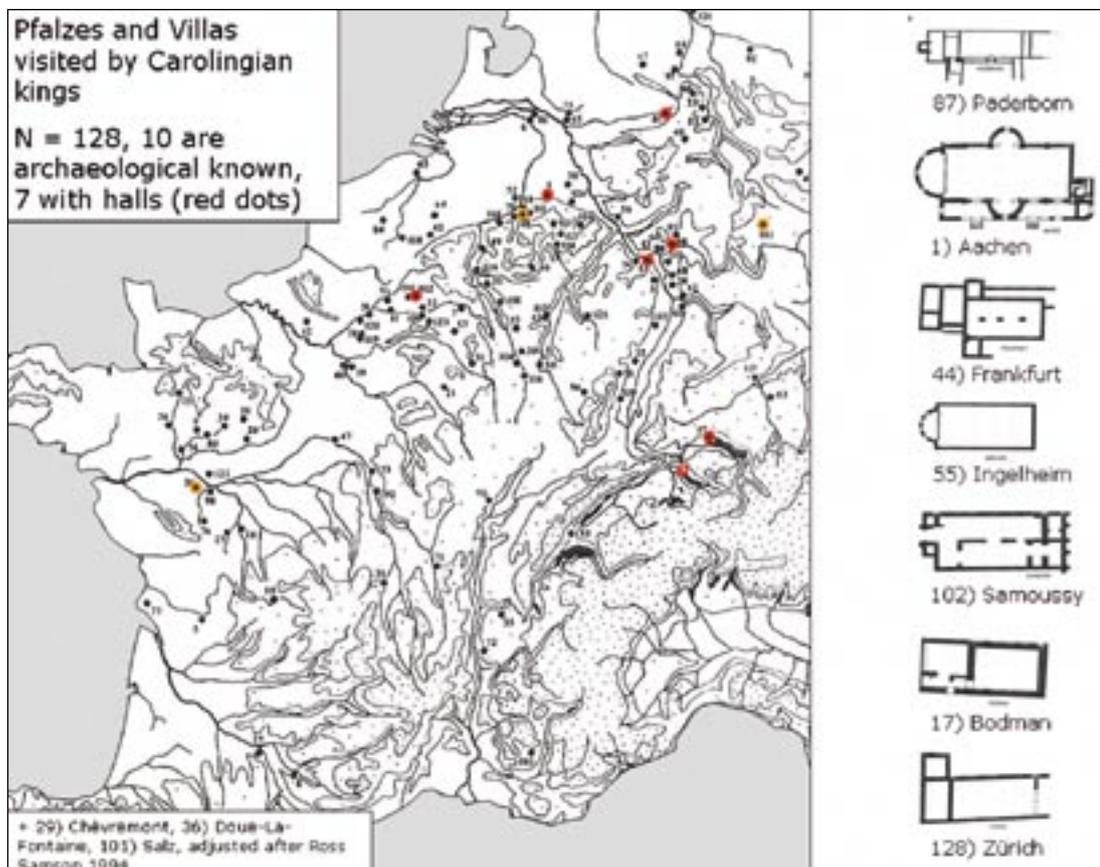


Fig. 5. Archaeologically known Pfalzes and villas from the Carolingian period. Adjusted after Samson 1995.

In Scandinavia a number of large timber halls from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries have been found (Løken 2001, 81). The hall is defined by its special location and at least one large room with only a few posts. There should be no traces of cooking and crafts activities in the fire-places. The archaeological finds from the hall should stand out from those from ordinary farm houses (Herschend 1993; Løken 2001). Items that can be attributed to cultic activities, such as gold-foil figures, are often found in the Scandinavian halls. A hall could be a separate building (*sal*), or integrated into an even larger building, such as the famous hall at Borg in Lofoten dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Halls seems to have been an important part of the exercise of aristocratic and royal power (Herschend 1997; Hedeager 2001; 2002). However, only a few of the known halls in Scandinavia can be linked to later known royal villas.

Halls have also been excavated at Helgö, Uppåkra and Slöinge in Sweden (Herschend 1995; Lundqvist 1996; Larsson 2002) and on Tissø, Lejre and Gudme in Denmark. The two latter may be royal halls (Larsen 1994; Jørgensen 1998; Sørensen 1994). The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen, has recently started a project excavating the royal villa at Jelling on Zealand (Fig. 6). There are also minor excavations annually in *Old Uppsala* – one of the most prominent royal villas in Uppland in Sweden (Ljungkvist 2006).



**Fig. 6.** The royal villa Jelling on Zealand, Denmark.  
Photo: unknown.

In Norway, we know of halls at Borg in Lofoten (Munch 1991), Hovde in South-Trøndelag (Grønnesby 1999), Forsand in Rogaland (Løken 2001), Huseby in Tjølling in Vestfold (Skre and Stylegar 2004) and in Veien in Buskerud (Martens and Gustafson 2001, 17). Yet, none of these can be linked to royal centres mention in written sources.

On a possible royal villa, near Lillehammer (Åker), the main farmstead has been investigated. It shows continuity of settlement from AD 200 until today (Pilø 2005).

In April 2009, the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo will start a large excavation of the royal villa Avaldsnes at Karmøy in Norway. Avaldsnes was one of the most important royal villas in western Norway until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century Avaldsnes belonged to the Viking king who allegedly united Norway, Harold Hairfair. The project will be led by the archaeologist Dagfinn Skre. We do not know how far back in time we should expect royal power in this area. We hope to prove archaeological changes in the settlement structure, which may indicate the rise of royal power in western Norway.

#### THE CENTRAL FUNCTIONS OF ROYAL VILLAS

Clearly, the royal villas in northern Europe had a spectre of legal, economic, religious and cultural functions. These would of course vary depending on the royal villa and how high it ranked, and factors such as size and location. Control of route ways over land, sea and rivers were extremely important to the king.

The Scandinavian royal villas are assumed to be caputs or nuclei of estates, managed by a bailiff (Norw. *årmann*), and surrounded by small settlements farmed by some kind of depended peasants. In Hordaland in western Norway, I have analysed a corpus of land registers, tax-lists, and other written evidence for nearly 500 farms surrounding four manors (Seim, Alrekstad, Fitjar and Gjerde), and compared this information with the spatial distribution of more than 800 prehistoric burial mounds and graves in the same areas (Iversen 2008a). As a supplement, I have also carried out minor archaeological excavations at nine of the farms within their estates (at Gjerde), in order to get more accurate dating of the cultivation and the settlements. The study substantiates that the king's manors were surrounded by dependent settlements, probably farmed by bondmen who worked the king's land. My reconstruction of such manorial systems is mainly based on identification of clusters of later known ecclesiastical property close to these manors. By comparing these patterns with the

spatial distribution of pagan burial mounds, I have been able to identify older elements belonging to a former royal manorial system. The methodological framework is based on both written and archaeological evidence, using prehistoric burial mounds as indicators of land rights and social stratification, connected with freeholders and allodial rights (Taranger 1913; 1934; Ringstad 1991; Zachrisson 1994; Skre 1997; 1998).<sup>2</sup>

All this could imply that the presence of prehistoric mounds signifies allodial land, a premise I have utilised in my study. The character and the conception of such property, should, of course, be discussed more closely, in terms of differentiated and non-absolute ownership, as Tore Iversen (2001) has suggested. The diversity in the archaeological material should also be taken into consideration. However, the dichotomy presence/absence of mounds seems to pair well with ownership of freeholders/non-freeholders, documented in younger land-registers.

Close to the royal villa Seim I have for instance identified five ecclesiastical clusters of property, each consisting of at least three farms, belonging the bishop and different monasteries in medieval town of Bergen. These clusters constitute a large coherent area of property of at least 24 farms, and may indicate a former royal estate (Table 1; Fig. 7).

The distribution of burial mounds supports this view. They are mainly located outside the area

of the reconstructed estate, except the main farm, Seim, and probably in areas where freeholders possessed property (Table 2, Fig. 7).

Inspired by the conception of multiple estates, as described by Glanville Jones (1976), I have looked closer on the place-names in the area of the estates close to the manors, as possible indicators of tributes or dues paid in kind to the manor (cf. Faith 1997, 47f). It is a striking feature that place-names connected with animals and secondary products are well represented within the area of the reconstructed estates, most significantly around Seim (Fig. 7). This toponymic material may, of course, only indicate the resources available at the royal manors. I find it, however, more likely that they also reflect dues the peasants paid in kind to the king, as there is an over representation of such names close to the manors.

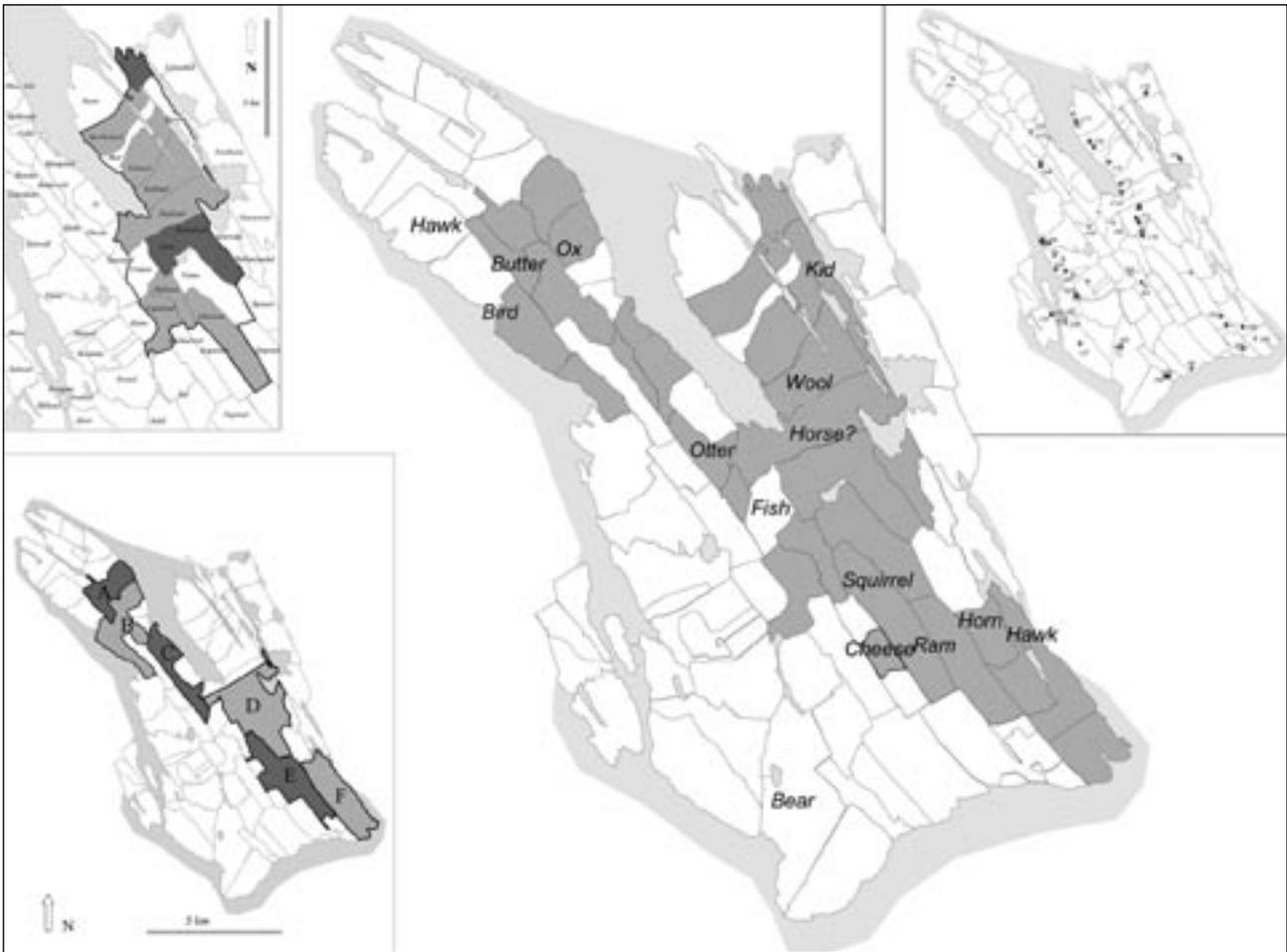
Most of the royal villas had legal and military central functions within their territories. In Scandinavia this was enforced within administrative areas called «sysler», which consisted of so-called «skipreider» and «hundreds». A *skipreide* was the area responsible of providing a warship with a crew and equipment. In England such territories were called «shire» and the smaller ones, «hundreds». In Kent the so-called «laith» consisted of several hundreds (Brookes 2007). In Germany, the largest units were the *Gaus*, but the smaller unit, «the hundred» existed also.

Cluster	Owner	Gained	Number of farms	Rent, 1647 (butter)
A	Munkeliv	Between 1180–1328	3	5,5
B	Bishop	Before 1590	4	7,5
C	Munkeliv (Jonsklosteret)	Before 1558	4	6,1
D	Rømer (Noble)	Before 1490	4	11,1
E	Bishop	Before 1590	4	4,9
F	Kannikgods	After 1330–60	5	7,9
<b>Sum</b>			<b>24</b>	<b>43</b>

**Table 1.** Clusters of property close to Seim.

Area	Number of farms	Farms with prehistoric graves	Number of graves
Demesne (Seim/Votno/Hopland) (except the «landfarms»)	3	2 (66%)	9
Estate	22	3 (14%)	5
Farms outside the estate (cluster A–F)	59	29 (49%)	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>71</b>

**Table 2.** Prehistoric graves in the area of Seim in Hordaland.



**Fig. 7.** The royal villa Seim, Nordhordland, Norway. Top left: the reconstructed demesne of Seim, bottom left: the reconstructed estate of Seim, based on clusters of property (table 1), top right: the distribution of prehistoric graves and mound near by Seim (table 2), and in the middle – farms with names connected with animals and secondary products – perhaps reflecting dues the peasants paid in kind to the king.

The royal villas administrative and military functions were probably quite similar to such functions at any aristocratic centres. In the areas where the king did not have direct control, he had to renounce parts of the revenue from fines and taxes to allies, who in principle should deliver military benefits and secure the area for the king. It would naturally be in the king's interest to control directly as large areas as possible. Strong royal power rested upon strong, direct geographic control.

Several large assemblies in the Carolingian empire were held at the Pfalzes. Of 146 assemblies mentioned in *Regesta Imperii* during the Carolingian period (743–903), 105 were held at 22 of 50 identified Pfalzes in my study area. Most assemblies were held in Aachen (21), Worms (16), Regensburg (9), Frankfurt (7), Ingelheim (5) and Nimvegen (5). Similar patterns occur in England,

where we know of large assemblies at 60 out of the 150 pre-conquest royal villas (Sawyer 1983). Tamworth in the Kingdom of Mercia stand out with 12 assemblies (in the period 675–857), and Bath, Cirencester, Southampton and Amesbury had four assemblies each (in the period 796–1020). A similar picture should be expected in Scandinavia, but the sources here are far more limited. However, at all the royal villas I know in Norway, place names indicate so-called thing sites where assemblies might have taken place.

#### THE END OF THE ROYAL VILLA SYSTEM

The so-called *Auflösung des Villikations system* has long been a key issue in the German debate (Verhulst 1995 with references). The term *in palatio*

seems to be replaced by the terms *Castrum* and *Domus* in the West-Frankish area in the reign of King Philip Augustus (1180–1223) (Renoux 2002, 67), and the terms *Urbs* and *Civita* in east Frankia in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. This seems to indicate a shift in the representation of the power in the landscape, where fortified towns became increasingly important as new royal strongholds.

In England, it is likely that the royal villa system was downsized and more or less disappeared in the 11<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Scandinavia such changes can be identified as well. The build-up of a network of castles in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries seems to have been related to the «downsizing» of the royal rural villas. In Sweden, the kings built more than 20 such castles in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in Norway 7 or 8. They gradually replaced rural royal villas as royal centres. Royal power rested now in a greater extent on tax revenues and less on direct control over land and people.

## CONCLUSION

The degree of control of land and social groups in early Middle Ages is today an important research topic, both in Scandinavia, England and Germany. It is not unproblematic to compare villa-systems directly between Christian western Europe and pagan Scandinavia. There were other institutions and structures of society, and different dynamics related to the political processes.

Unlike previous research it is now argued that large parts of the population in early medieval society were unfree peasants, who were dependent on their lords. The processes of state formation and the growth of the church changed this. In the High Middle Ages the system of royal villas was gradually broken up and replaced by a system of large over regional estates with a dispersed property structure, and with their institutional basis in towns. The disappearance of such manors and estates might therefore be a long-term process, which took place at different points in time in northern Europe.

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- <sup>1</sup> An average village = 4.77 pound (Darby 1977, 359).
- <sup>2</sup> The spatial distribution of mounds gives an important indication of prehistoric property rights in western Norway. Law texts, diplomas, sagas, and rune stones support this view. In 1316, the Norwegian law expected the allodial farmers to account for their ancestors back to *haughs ok till heiðni* (mounds and pagan times) when land and inheritance were disputed (NgL III, 121). Claims of odel could be put forward by referring to ancestors buried in mounds, in an oral society (Taranger 1934, 125). A simultaneous term, *haugóðalsmaðr*, appears in the legislation of Magnus the lawmender in 1274 (L VII 16, cf. Tarangers comment 1915, 107). A few cases even illustrate this in practice (cf. AM 22b; DN II, nr. 694; DN III, 122; DN X nr. 257). The age and Christian influence on the law of odel is, however, much debated (Norseng 1991; Gelting 2000). The «five generation rule» stated in the provincial law of Gulathing, to achieve odel, is, however, also found in two Swedish rune stones from the 11th century (Brink 2002, 103f.), and the oral character of this part of the law implies considerable age (cf. Helle 2001, 40).