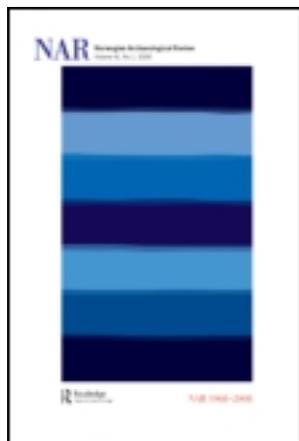


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Court Sites of Arctic Norway: Remains of Thing Sites and Representations of Political Consolidation Processes in the Northern Germanic World during the First Millennium AD?

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Comments on Inger Storli: ‘Court Sites of Arctic Norway: Remains of Thing Sites and Representations of Political Consolidation Processes in the Northern Germanic World during the First Millennium AD?’ (*Norwegian Archaeological Review 43(2)*)

ARE THE COURT SITES MULTI-PURPOSE MEETING PLACES?

STEFAN BRINK

The so-called court sites of western Norway are truly enigmatic. Many ingenious explanations have been proposed by many reputed scholars over decades. In this article Inger Storli returns to one of the more cherished ones, namely to see them in a legal context, and she suggests that they are to be understood as – ancient – *thing* sites.

Earlier interpretations are discussed, problematized and dismissed by Storli. The idea of them belonging to and controlled by nearby chieftains’ farms is obviously not well founded, and Storli can show that it is difficult to connect them to each other geographically. When discussing the defining of chieftain farms by using monumental grave mounds, one important reference is missing, which deals with this problem in an interesting way, namely Åke Hyenstrand’s thesis from 1979. A problem with this proposal of connecting the court sites to chieftains’ farms is also that the sizes of the ‘monumental grave mounds’,

defined so for northern Norway, is not particularly ‘monumental’, compared, e.g., to central Sweden and southern Norway.

Two observations which Storli makes in her analysis, and which probably are important, are that it is doubtful that court sites in northern Norway were in any way associated with farms at all (Storli 2010:134), an observation which is backed up by Asle Bruen Olsen’s (2005) analyses of court sites in western Norway. The other observation is that these court sites contain dwellings for humans, never for animals, and that there are no traces of remnants from a farming economy, no stables, cowsheds, etc. That they must have been only sporadically inhabited, hence not being permanent habitations, has been rather obvious in research for a long time. All this taken together indicates periodically used meeting places often strategically situated along the coast. But meetings for what purpose?

A vital problem with all research regarding the court sites is *chronology*. The archaeological and radiocarbon dating, known so far, indicates that they probably are to be dated to the period *c.* AD 200–500, hence with a majority to be found in the first half of the first millennium,

the Early Iron Age. Very few have a dating later than the Early Viking Age (cf. Storli 2010:131, 132, 139). Which leads us to the question, what do we know of a thing organization, or any legal society whatsoever, from Early Iron Age Scandinavia. Nothing, as far as I can see. It is interesting to speculate retrogressively, starting in the Early Middle Ages, on how a legal society might have functioned during the Late Viking Age, trying to connect to the legal society we find in our earliest provincial laws, what is told in the Old Icelandic literature and archaeological excavations (see Brink 2003a, 2003b, 2004a). However, a retrogressive analysis building on our earliest laws, trying to say something of legal society and law in the Late Viking Age or from the enactments in provincial laws, is a hazardous endeavour, and has been considered an impossible approach for decades since the 1960s. However, used carefully, asking questions possible to answer and with a source-critical cautiousness, it is, in my opinion, possible to do. The usage of Icelandic parallels, in the way law and the legal society are presented in the sagas, is also a problematic exercise, partly because of source-critical considerations, partly because the new Icelandic society certainly differed from the societies in Norway and Sweden during the Viking Age, which makes a comparison difficult. But, again, it is my opinion that such comparisons are possible, used carefully, and bearing in mind the different societies in early Scandinavia and Iceland. Archaeological excavations are important, but, again, most difficult. The reason is how to find out what to look for. What might be the physical remnants of a group of people meeting at a place for a couple of days once or twice a year? What if they used tents? If we find cooking pits, indications of tents, etc., how can we decide these are remnants from a thing site and not any assembly site of a non-legal nature? Again, however, there are in Iceland some really interesting excavations of obvious thing sites, and other sources, such as place names and early traditions, can perhaps help us in this task, as auxiliary sources. Hence, it is my opinion that law

and a legal society may be reconstructed to some degree for the Viking Age. But what about the Early Iron Age?

In an attempt to get a context for a legal society, where these court sites could fit, Storli makes two comparative analyses, namely with Tacitus' description in his *Germania* (AD 97) and with the 'free-state' Icelandic *goðorð*-institution (the Norwegianized terms *goder* and *godord* should not be used in a journal written in English directed to an international audience). But what can a description of some Germanic tribe(s) close to Limes in central Europe, filtered through the mind of a Roman author who has a programme and purpose in his writings, have to say of an Early Iron Age society in northern Norway? And is the Icelandic unique *goðorð*-institution – or what we know of it – a possible structure to compare with? Also, between the two comparative societal contexts there is around a millennium – one thousand years – and this fact ought to make one hesitate. Is this comparison hence impossible? No, it must be permissible to bring out these sources in this connection, since in principle they are the only ones we can consult. But, at the same time, one must admit the problems which arise and be extremely cautious. Furthermore, there is another early source which could be consulted, namely Rimbert's *Vita Ansgarii* and its description of a thing at Birka. To formulate a conclusion that the North Norwegian court sites may be interpreted as thing sites, which where 'regional representations of the development from tribal confederacies to an early kingdom' (Storli 2010:141), is for me a hypothesis which goes beyond what the sources may actually hint at.

But let us be somewhat more constructive. What do I personally think after having pondered over this problem with the court sites for more than two decades? One opening would be to highlight the aforementioned *Birka* on *Björkö* in Lake Mälaren, and all the *Björköy*, *Bjarköy*, *Björkö*, etc., and also the *Bjarkeyarrétr*, 'the law for a market place, a *kaupang* etc.', which probably emanates from Birka (see, e.g., Hagland & Sandnes 1997:xii).

We know that there have existed sites at strategic communicative sites in Viking Age Scandinavia, and similar sites must have been in existence in the Early Iron Age. At these sites many activities were certainly conducted, not only trade. We must assume that, apart from trading, playing games, settling social affairs, such as marriages, legal negotiations and settlements, etc., also took place at these sites, while many people were gathered there. Such a site is described in a famous episode in *Laxdæla saga* (1969:ch. 12–13, 3–64):

It so happened early next summer that King Hakon went on a naval expedition east to the Breen Isles [ON *Brenneyar*, Sw *Brännöarna*] for a royal assembly which, in accordance with the laws, had to be held every third summer to secure continuing peace in the realm; these meetings were conveyed by the Scandinavian kings to deal with matter of mutual concern. To attend them was considered a festive occasion, and people flocked to them from practically every known country.

Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson wanted to attend the assembly and launched his ship, since he had not been to see the king during the winter; and besides, it was an important trading market.

There were huge crowds at the assembly that year and there was a great deal of celebration, with drinking and games and every form of entertainment.

This kind of multi-purpose meeting place along the Scandinavian coasts must have been important during the whole of the first millennium, and probably also in the Middle Ages. I think the claim that the court sites along the Norwegian coast are specific thing sites is squeezing the source material too much, being too specific on the basis of the brittle source material we have. Instead, I would like to see them as this kind of *multi-purpose meeting place*, where obviously also thing negotiations could take place.

The Norwegian court sites are not unique as a coastal phenomenon in Scandinavia. We have similar sites along the Swedish coast,

which, however, are never termed *court sites* in research. In Sweden they have been given the imprecise term *tomtningar* (approx. building-plots) and very often we find nearby *båtlänningar* (landings), hence in a way equivalents to the Norwegian boathouses (Varenius 1978, Nilsson 1989, Lindström & Olofsson 1993, Norman 1993, Landin & Rönnby 2002:7–10). These *tomtningar* are rather under-researched and extremely difficult to date. The few attempts show a spread from the Early Iron Age up to the 16th and 17th centuries (Varenius 1978). They have different shapes: round, square, rectangular, but always in a cluster and often on shingle fields (*klapperstensfält*).

At Renskär in Töre parish in Västerbotten, Claes Varenius identified six *tomtningar* and five *båtlänningar*. If it is possible to date them via shore displacement, they are to be dated to the 16th century. Another site is at Hornslands udde, the easternmost place in the province of Hälsingland. These *tomtningar* and *båtlänningar* can in the same way be dated to two phases, one to the 3rd century AD, the other to the 8th century. Interesting in this Arctic Norwegian context is that the Hornslandet site has been given an ethnic interpretation, as being a seasonal station for the Sámi (Westberg 1964, Broadbent 2006:22). This phenomenon probably has a background in many coastal activities, such as seasonal habitations for fishermen and for seal-hunting, for small-scale trading and perhaps as stations and resting places along coastal routes. Perhaps also as assembly sites for communal activities, hence covering a wide definition of *multi-purpose meeting places*.

COURT SITES IN THE FAR NORTH OF NORWAY COMPARED WITH SIMILAR SITES IN THE SOUTH WEST

OLIVER GRIMM

Inger Storli is well known for her studies of the the so-called court sites in northern

Norway since the 1980s (1985, 1989, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2006). These studies not only consider various scholarly aspects, but also take a statistical approach in order to establish an empirical base for the investigation of the areas surrounding such sites. In addition, minor supplementary excavations were carried out. One might have the impression that she initially approached court sites as yet another indication of large farms or centres of power, but her research has moved further and further away from that original starting point.

Her well-written article in the *Norwegian Archaeological Review* with its clearly defined objectives is in some ways a summary in English of the thoughts and interpretations contained in her book on court sites (2006). She is of the opinion that the court sites in northern Norway served as thing locations and were not directly related to any large farms nearby. They happened, rather, to be situated among several farms that have yielded interesting archaeological finds. An overall analysis of court sites suggests a development in three steps: at first, until about the middle of the first millennium AD, there were quite a number of such sites; these were then reduced to just a few large sites until, finally, at the end of the first millennium AD, they were no longer in use. An Icelandic analogy equates this development with a process of political consolidation into a smaller number of chiefdoms, followed later by the overlordship of the powerful Håloyg dynasty and, finally, that of the Norwegian king.

This is probably the most advanced interpretation of court sites so far and a thorough and competent review would require an expert in the archaeology of northern Norway and the history of Iceland. The present author is an expert in neither, but would like to make several specific comments on Storli's paper, including some comparative considerations of northern and south-western court sites.

Some of those who took part in court site discussions are rarely named. In the very early days of court site investigations, Nicolay Nicolaysen briefly described one of the best pre-

served sites of this type in Norway: Dysjane on the Tu ridge in Jæren (Nicolaysen 1862–1866:300–301). He mentions the fact that local people called the remains (mainly pairs of parallel longitudinal mounds) *thingkredsen* (thing ring) but did not rule out an alternative interpretation of them as grave mounds. Nicolaysen's very short description raises the question of whether he knew that Hauge, located on the same hill, served as the *fjerdingsing* for Jæren, i.e. one of the four major things in Rogaland, and whether he might even have heard that Icelandic ruins were considered in the same way. Nicolaysen himself excavated at Dysjane in 1869, and was able to demonstrate that the longitudinal mounds, which are still clearly visible in the landscape, were the walls of collapsed buildings (Nicolaysen 1869:145, Kallhovd 1994:93–99).

The thing interpretation was very much in mind at the time when large-scale court site investigations were undertaken from the 1930s to the 1950s in northern and south-western Norway (cf. Storli's article). Furthermore, this interpretation was also mentioned in a book that, for understandable historical reasons, is rarely quoted in Norwegian archaeology (Sprockhoff 1945:57–61). Even Harald Egenæs Lund who, today, is associated with the military-barracks theory was open to other court site interpretations, e.g. as a forum for thing assemblies (Lund in an unpublished Tromsø manuscript; Storli 2006:143). It cannot come as a surprise to learn that during the period of New (Processual) Archaeology, which *inter alia* tried to identify social hierarchies from the archaeological evidence, the thing argument was close to being lost, although, for example, it was briefly mentioned in the influential article by Olav Sverre Johansen and Tom Søbstad on the assembly sites in northern Norway (1978:49). Finally, the thing interpretation came back into fashion and, indeed, has more support today than ever before; the present author started with a power-related approach but now accepts that position, too (Grimm & Stylegar 2004, in contrast to

Grimm 2010). From this perspective, the consideration of court sites as thing places might be termed a paradigmatic example of the scientific discourse 'spiral', which returns repeatedly to the same interpretations – but each time on a higher level (Näsman 1991:322).

A re-examination of the excavation records for court sites in south-western Norway (in particular Håvødl and Klauhauane) has shown that an early wooden structure phase (1st and 2nd centuries AD, mostly radiocarbon dated) can be distinguished from a later phase, which had buildings with stone outer walls that were in use until the 5th century, as indicated by early bucket-shaped pots in the uppermost cultural layers inside the buildings (Grimm 2010). The earliest court sites in northern Norway seem to date back to the 3rd century AD, i.e. contemporary with the later phase of those in the south west. The present author wonders whether there was an older phase in northern Norway, too. Harald Egenæs Lund's excavation plan of the assembly site at Bjarkøy, for example, shows 'sunken' hearths partly beneath the long walls of the court site (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:fig. 2). This is well known from similar sites in south-western Norway – where it is indicative of an initial court site phase.

In view of the most recent publications, it seems easy today to agree that court sites were thing places. But this may be too easy. Yet another, more colourful, facet of court site interpretation is 'multifunctionality', including their use as thing places. Suggestions to this effect have been made by Ottar Rønneseth, for example. At one point he stated that court sites had several uses: 'Ding, Markt, Kult und Wettkämpfe[n]' (Rønneseth 1966:23); but how can thing assemblies be linked with markets, religious rites and some sort of competitive sports? As far as a religious link is concerned, there are well-recorded instances on the Continent (e.g. Tacitus' *Germania*, ch.39, in connection with the Semnones tribe) and in northern Europe (e.g. Uppsala as the most eminent example) where thing assembly places were

also cult sites. As for the court sites, the central mound at Steigen yielded many unburnt teeth of horses, some still attached to the jaw bones, and Harald Egenæs Lund (1942) has related this bone material to the ritual slaughtering of horses. In addition, a building in the middle of the Klauhauane assembly site in Jæren (beneath a central mound, in fact) has recently been interpreted in religious terms, though this is far from being substantiated (Grimm & Pesch 2010). To turn to another suggested function, there are several Lek- place names associated with court sites (derived from Old Norse *leikr*, 'to play'): there are two cases in the north (Lund 1965:308) and one probable case in the south, Leikvang, near the somewhat dubious court site of Skjelbrei; on the other hand, this interpretation has to be disregarded in the case of Leksaren, as already stated by Magnus Olsen (Grimm 2010:134, 142). Remarkably, an Icelandic written source mentions a place called Leikskalavellir (game shed plains), where people indeed met to build some sort of shed for two weeks of games in the winter (*Saga of the Eyri People*, ch. 43). Consequently, it might be worthwhile to extend the range of court site interpretations again to include more than just the thing aspect, in which case it would be essential to collect all the written evidence that might be relevant to the interpretation of court sites.

Today, Borg is famous in North European settlement archaeology thanks to an excavation that was a pan-Scandinavian undertaking and the subsequent excellent publication (Munch *et al.* 2003). The publishers called Borg a 5th–10th-century 'chieftain's farm', mainly because of the famous longhouse with an 'internal hall' that yielded high-status finds of a general North European character. The present author, who is not an expert in the archaeology of northern Norway, feels that the results of the Borg excavation are somehow in conflict with Inger Storli's theory that the first millennium saw a process of gradual political consolidation in the north, and this includes the assumption

that neighbouring farms with particularly interesting finds indicate that their respective inhabitants were of the same rank.

Was Borg not, rather, a farm with no equivalent, given that the people on the neighbouring farms seem to have been of a certain rank, although it was obviously far from that of the inhabitants of Borg itself? And does Borg not signify stability from the 5th to the 10th century, without any sign of the process of political consolidation that is said to have increased from about AD 600 onwards?

Given the present source situation and the on-going scholarly discussions about court sites, the chances are probably better than ever of leaving the beaten, too regional, track and addressing the overall Norwegian picture instead. It is to be hoped that the middle Norwegian court sites will soon be made more accessible by new publications, as was the case with Skei just a few kilometres from Mære in northern Trøndelag (Stenvik 2001).

In addition, it might be worth attempting to transpose some of the interpretations. For example, the south-western court site by the name of Dysjane on the strategically located Tu ridge probably had its period of greatest importance prior to the foundation of a new centre of power on the hill at the very end of the Roman Period or in the Migration Period (cf. Magnus 1975, Rønneseth 1986, Kristoffersen 2000, 2006). But what would that mean? Did the more egalitarian court site organization end with the foundation of new centres of power? Was the thing held on the Tu ridge since the 5th century AD finally attended by so many people that the court site could no longer hold them? In the specific case of the Tu ridge, there is yet another possibility. Were those in power at Tu/Hauge from the 4th–5th century onwards ‘more equal than others’? Did they take command of the

assemblies in the late court site phase as well as those held on the ridge after the court site was no longer in use?

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THE HISTORIC AND SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF THING SITES

FRODE IVERSEN, HALLDIS HOBÆK AND MARIE ØDEGAARD

The Assembly Project (TAP) is an international collaborative project investigating assembly sites and the first systems of governance in Northern Europe AD 400–1500, funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA). We have read Professor Inger Storli’s article with enthusiasm, and would like to give a short comment on behalf of the Norwegian part of TAP. We believe the archaeological record in question holds a key to the understanding of thing organization in Northern Europe. The question is whether this potential is fully exploited in the work of Professor Storli.

Storli has supplied better dating of courtyard sites and also provided a more systematic and thorough overview of the North Norwegian material, both most welcome contributions. The interpretation of courtyard sites as thing sites is, as Storli herself points out, not new, but Storli puts more emphasis on this than researchers before her. Storli has previously published several articles and a book on the topic. So what are the new arguments? She emphasizes to a greater

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extent the Icelandic analogy, but is this enough? If courtyard sites really were thing sites, this opens up very interesting perspectives in relation to state formation processes in this part of Northern Europe. But this also requires a far more thorough analysis of the specific context courtyard sites were part of, and here we will object that Storli's utilization of local and regional historical sources is insufficient.

Storli argues that a reduction in the number of courtyard sites over time reflects a political centralization process in Hålogaland. Therefore, we were surprised to find that four known sites in Helgeland are missing in her material. This applies for Hov and Botnmoen in Dønna municipality, the large site Mo on Brønnøy and also the more dubious site at Alfheim in Bodø.

The remains of six houses are known from the site Mo, but a western row was probably removed during road construction (Binns 1988, Beverfjord & Binns 1994, ID 109138). The site was probably substantially larger than what has been detected, possibly with six houses in each row. External dimensions could be as much as 100 x 60 metres. Thus, the site is comparable to Steigen, Tjøtta and Bjarkøy in size. In 1992 dating samples were taken from the largest house (No. 2) and a nearby fire mound (*bålhaug*) (No. 5), both showing 8th and 9th century.

Hov and Botnmoen are located on each side of the island Løkta in Dønna municipality. In the Middle Ages the island was divided between two administrative areas, *skipreider*, and Dønna farm close by constituted a significant power centre. Six houses are known from Hov (ID 63852), but the site has probably been considerably larger, with perhaps 10 to 12 house foundations. Two C14 datings from the 'fire mounds' are dated to the 7th–9th century (Berglund 1995:300). We have less knowledge of the courtyard Botnmoen, but it probably consisted of 10 to 12 houses (ID 46548/16494). Eivind Havnø excavated Botnmoen in 1924, but believed it was a burial ground. He found two slate

whetstones (*skiferbryner*) in the upper layers (T13054) indicating the final phase, AD 700/800–1000. The last courtyard site, Alfheim in Bodø, is little known. Allegedly, it was located at Rishaugen on Ytre Hernes, c. 3km west of Bodø farm, but the site was not re-found during a later survey (ID 68259).

Sites that are insufficiently recorded are naturally complicated to work with, but to exclude them from the analysis is also problematic. The courtyard sites Alfheim and Botnmoen are totally missing from Storli's work, while Hov and Mo were commented on by Storli in 2006, but omitted due to uncertain datings (Storli 2006:68, 71). The centralization process that Storli interprets from the material presupposes a decrease in courtyard sites. Three of the four missing sites are dated to the Later Iron Age, and if they are included the picture changes significantly. This weakens Storli's argument regarding the consolidation process in the Later Iron Age, at least for Helgeland.

The question of consolidation/centralization also appears in relation to the courtyard site at Bjarkøy. Earlier this site was dated to AD 500–700 (Storli 2006:50–51), but in the present article (Storli 2010:fig. 10) the dating is drawn back to AD 200. This interpretation is somewhat problematic. The oldest dating is from a fireplace in house 1 (AD 230–530, sigma 1 except the last part of AD 400). The sample has an elevated likelihood in the decades around AD 500 on sigma 1 (OxCal). Thus, the dating of the site to AD 200 seems uncertain. Furthermore, this early dating means that Storli misses the opportunity to see a development where, for example, Åse was a precursor to Bjarkøy.

Another interesting aspect, that so far has received little attention, is the difference in size between houses on the same courtyard sites. Often the sides of the houses facing the yard are equally wide, while the length varies. An example is Bjarkøy. Here the houses vary between 7.5 and 11.3 metres in length, according to H.E. Lund's drawings. The differences are substantial, where the smallest

houses are 23 m² and the largest twice the size with 50 m². Thus, the houses are not as ‘egalitarian’ as often claimed, and this could have been utilized by Storli to a larger degree. However, that would to some degree have undermined her argument about the courtyard sites as assembly places for peers or equal men (Storli 2006:146).

The comparison between the courtyard sites in Norway and the Icelandic thing sites is interesting, and we agree that Icelandic material is to some degree relevant. However, Icelandic material is less thoroughly processed than North Norwegian, and there are also clear differences between courtyard sites in the two areas. One of the questions that comes to mind is why sites in Norway are so structured, while Icelandic sites are relatively irregular and disorderly in ground plan (Storli 2010:fig. 9). These differences are not discussed by Storli, and the questions become particularly pressing when one, like Storli, sees Norwegian courtyard sites as precursors of the ones in Iceland.

As already said, we agree with Storli that the material from Iceland is interesting for comparison, but Storli’s use of analogies seems to exclude a historical-archaeological approach – relevant historical sources from Norway and Hålogaland are not drawn upon at all in her analysis. The sites are compared only to saga material and analogies from Tacitus and the Icelandic Commonwealth, while the medieval laws *Gulatingssloven* and *Frostatingsloven* are omitted. This is surprising since *Gulatingssloven* is held to be a major inspiration for the Icelandic judicial system, and *Frostatingsloven* most probably encompassed Hålogaland. Historical sources providing information about the farms where the courtyard sites are located are not used nor is there a discussion of the administrative organization of Hålogaland in the medieval period. Even if all these sources must be used retrospectively, with the challenges that implies, they would – if used – probably shed light on important features in Storli’s material.

One example is the information in king Magnus Håkonson’s will that Hålogaland comprised 13 *skipreider* in 1277 (DN IV no. 3) and similarly in the older Law of Gulating (G 315). The system of *skipreider* encompassed most Norwegian coastal areas in the medieval period, and has its origin in the 10th century if not earlier (Bull 1920:50, Ersland & Holm 2000:42–53). The reconstruction of the *skipreider* in Hålogaland is somewhat uncertain, but Håvard D. Bratrein’s (1984) work provides a useful starting point. Furthermore, there are indications that the *skipreider* in Hålogaland could have been established on the basis of the so-called *þinghá*’s. *Fagrskinna* (ch. 12) describes how king Håkon the Good (c. 920–961) had cairns made on mountain tops (*veter*), so that warnings of foes or war (*harbud*) would take no more than seven days to be passed from the southernmost cairn to the northernmost *þinghá* in Hålogaland. The concept of the *þinghá* appears to have been retained longest in the Agder region, but was formerly known in all of Norway. It is also known from Icelandic sources (Steinnes 1974:53 with references). This material provides clues to the development of the administrative units in Hålogaland, possibly with connections to older territorial units. A consideration of courtyard sites in relation to these territories would have provided a very interesting framework for the analysis.

Nor is the size of the different courtyard sites in relation to possible judicial hierarchies considered by Storli. In the Middle Ages there were probably two or three levels in the thing system in Hålogaland – the main lawthing at Steigen, the 44 local things (*fjerdingsting*) and possibly also an uncertain number of *syssele*- or *fylkesting* (Iversen in prep). One example where possible levels of organization within the judicial system should be discussed is the courtyard sites of Bøstad and Leknes. The Leknes site has a total of 14–16 houses, compared to only four at Bøstad. The two sites are located close to each other and were probably in use at the

same time. Thus, this suggests functions at different levels, but when a geographical-administrative framework is lacking in the analysis any further postulates remain uncertain.

We also find Storli's interpretation of the centralization process in Hålogaland rather much a linear scheme of evolution. Storli argues that the development should be seen as a three-phased process where courtyard sites were regional manifestations of development from tribal confederations to early kingdoms. If this is the case, the question of who controlled the development from small courtyard sites/small areas to large sites/large areas becomes crucial. What, or rather who, were the driving forces in this development, and from which areas were the people who met at courtyard sites? Did women participate (as the material from courtyard sites in Rogaland seem to suggest), or were the sites meeting places for 'the best men' exclusively?

We are convinced that an approach considering the material in an historical-archaeological context, including investigation of the size/economic capacity of the farms and ownership structures in their surroundings, could have shed light on questions like these. Storli's interpretation of the abandonment of the smaller courtyard sites as representing a process of centralization is probably right, but the question is whether this development was initiated by strong political elites or by communal interests in developing larger law provinces.

Thus, we call for a broader reflection on what Iron Age thing sites actually were, and what functions the sites had. The identification of courtyard sites as thing sites focuses solely on political functions, while other important activities such as trade, cult and competitions (*leikr/skeið*) are known to be associated with thing in historical sources (e.g., Bugge 1918, Olsen 1926, Schledermann 1974, Skre 2007). The toponymic material

from courtyard sites in Hålogaland, though not discussed in the present article, hints at several such possible connections. The name *Bjarkøy* might indicate trading activities, and the names Hov (**Hof* n, a pre-Christian 'temple'), Åse (derived from *áss* m, God) and *leikr* in Leiknes close to the Tjøtta site, could perhaps be connected to cultic activities (see NG17). We support Storli's interpretation of courtyard sites as thing sites, but as such they were more than mere meeting places and had several functions in addition to the judicial and political. With these considerations, as well as the thing sites' location and functions within their territories and developing political-administrative structures respectively, the thing site material has a great potential to illuminate the processes that transformed volatile person-dependent power spheres into kingdoms and states.

COURT SITES, RING FORTS AND THE MAKING OF KINGDOMS

ULF NÄSMAN

In her recent paper in this journal, Inger Storli takes up a classic problem in Norwegian landscape archaeology of the first millennium AD, a problem as relevant in the wealthy south-west provinces as in the northern archipelago of Lofoten and Vesterålen. I am happy to have been given this opportunity to revert to the subject of court sites. Soon after we had finished the excavation of the ring fort at Eketorp (Öland, Sweden) in 1974, a first volume appeared in which Erik Wegraeus (1976) wrote an introduction on the Öland ring forts. At the end he mentioned the (superficial) resemblances between the Öland ring forts and the Norwegian court sites with reference to studies by Sigurd Grieg, Jan Petersen and Mårten Stenberger. As pointed out by Storli, scholars have always held widely different opinions about

the purpose of the court sites. Wegraeus mentioned four interpretations: the court sites were permanently inhabited villages, fortifications, thing sites and/or places of sacrifice (temples). Other interpretations have been put forward later on. The court sites were military barracks, plausibly used as bases for raiding in southern Scandinavia (e.g. Grimm & Stylegar 2004) or they served as bases for the exploitation of the natural resources of the north (Solberg 2000:114–123, Herschend 2007). Regardless of their function it has generally been assumed that local or regional chieftains were in command of the court sites.

Considering the great interest that the scholarly discussions reveal, evidence from high-quality excavations of court sites is surprisingly absent. Nevertheless, my impression from reading various papers and books on the subject since the 1970s is that the available evidence from excavated structures and small finds is remarkably poor. If you compare the finds from court sites to the material from contemporary settlements in South Scandinavia, it becomes obvious that court sites were not used for permanent settlement but only occasionally, but for what purpose? The quantity and quality of the material is far from what we find at elite residences and central places in South Scandinavia, and also in northern Norway as evinced by the excavations at Borg in Lofoten (Munch *et al.* 2003). The court sites have certainly not been residences of chieftains, as Storli also points out. That the artefacts are so few is astonishing considering the centuries-long continuity at many of the sites. Obviously their use did not leave many traces behind. This indicates to me that they were needed only occasionally, now and then over long periods. Careful stratigraphic excavation of undisturbed occupation layers could possibly contribute to a better understanding.

The only function that seems to be recorded with certainty in the houses of the court sites is a use as temporary dwelling,

probably during local and/or regional assemblies for some unknown purpose. No byres or workshops are recorded. Storli decides on the interpretation that court sites were thing places. From my vantage point at Eketorp ring fort this is interesting. Based on excavated evidence it has been suggested that the fort was continually used as a local thing site between its two separate phases as a fortified village during the 4th–7th centuries and as a garrison during the 12–13th centuries AD (Backe *et al.* 1993). Nevertheless, Storli's rejection of the interpretation of court sites as barracks used as temporary bases for raiding parties is in my opinion not convincing. Better arguments are needed.

There is a growing interest in studying Scandinavian thing sites during the first millennium AD. But so far very few substantial archaeological observations have been made, as illustrated by Storli's summary of recent research. The archaeology of thing sites is still in its infancy. Descriptions of thing sites still rest too heavily on place-names and High Medieval Icelandic sources (Brink 2008). An important element of thing assemblies was pagan cult (Hultgård 2008:215ff.). Thus it is a pity that Storli does not point out observations at some court sites that there was a mound at their centre, interpreted by some as a founder's grave, by others after excavation as a place of sacrificial depositions (Magnus & Myhre 1976:261ff.). The ritual element links the court sites to the residences of the elite as well as to other central places in South Scandinavia at which pagan cult was an important function (Fabech & Näsman in press).

In modern Swedish things are associated only with legislation and law courts. But in the first millennium AD they served also as the political arenas as emphasized by Storli. Consequently her continued discussion focuses on the role of court sites in the political development of the west Scandinavian littoral that today is a kingdom and a state, Norway. In order to understand the function of court sites as things Storli uses the Icelan-

dic thing organization as an analogy. She mentions a group of Icelandic chieftains called *goder*. She could have found further support for the relevance of the analogy in the Viking Age rune inscriptions in Denmark, which in a way give a more relevant description of the *gode*, who had a religious function but also served or ruled over a group of people (Moltke 1985 [1976], Sundqvist 2008). She refers to Sigurdsson's analysis of the development of the Icelandic *gode* institution in three stages of political change. The period of use of nine North Norwegian court sites is based on ¹⁴C datings, the details of which unfortunately are concealed. On this basis Storli subdivides them into two groups, one from the 3rd–6th centuries consisting of six smaller sites and another group of three larger sites that continued into the Viking Age. The two groups are related to the first and second phase of Icelandic development and the desertion of the court sites during the 9th or 10th century is interpreted as the third phase.

The period of court sites is a period preceding the making of a Norwegian kingdom. Consequently Storli continues her discussion into the political field. She refers to the lively debate about the transition from tribal societies to kingdoms ('from tribe to state') in Germany and Denmark. Traditionally, the making of the Scandinavian kingdoms is placed late in the Viking Age. But great progress in Scandinavian archaeology of the preceding Roman, Migration and Merovingian periods has changed the picture, and many scholars are now convinced that the process started long before the Viking Age. Storli applies her results to the three-tier model (tribes, tribal confederation, kingdom) that I have presented (Näsman 1999). Of course, the model is only a very rough sketch and it must not be regarded as a linear, one-way trajectory. Storli correctly emphasizes that development in different regions may

have taken different courses, but dares anyhow to consider the occurrence and abandonment of court sites as a representation of a development from tribes and tribal confederacies to an early kingdom in Norway. A similar view on social development is described for a more southerly part of west Norway on the basis of primarily rich grave mounds on Karmøy (Opedal 2010). I am convinced that collaboration between archaeologists along the long Norwegian coast could substantiate this story provided that the full potential of rich Norwegian archaeology is used.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND MAPPING IN THE IDENTIFICATION OF ASSEMBLY SITES

ALEXANDRA SANMARK

Inger Storli's article is a very interesting contribution to the study of assembly sites. Unlike most previous work in this field, her identification of assembly sites is not reliant on references in written sources or place-name evidence. In my view, this is the direction that assembly studies need to go in, in order to break new ground. Naturally there are complications associated with this approach, but there are also various problems with depending on place-names and written evidence. One particular drawback of the latter is that assemblies are clearly not just a feature of literate societies. Anthropological evidence shows that they are important tools for conflict resolution, the everyday functioning of society and long-term prevention of feuds and warfare, and they therefore tend to be present in all societies (Moore 2005). Assembly sites in, e.g., Norway are therefore most likely to have been present much further back in time than they have been documented. This applies to the use of individual sites for assembly meetings, as well as the

assembly phenomenon itself. The key question is whether patterns of administrative and social organization persist or change over the long term.

For several years Sarah Semple and I have explored the archaeology of assembly sites, with the aim of generating more knowledge and, if possible, accruing evidence for an ‘archaeological signature’ of such sites. Our approach has involved full-scale geophysical and topographical surveys with targeted trial-trenching. This method has so far been applied to five assembly sites in Sweden and the UK. The fieldwork has not, however, revealed a specific ‘assembly archaeology’, but instead highlighted the variations between sites (Sanmark & Semple 2008a, 2008b, 2010, in prep).

In addition, sites have also been interrogated within their landscape settings (in other words how they are situated in relation to natural and archaeological features) together with the elements and characteristics of the sites. This approach was adopted in my own work on district meeting-places in the county of Södermanland in Sweden, the results of which suggested that assemblies can be securely identified, with varying degrees of accuracy, by combining archaeological evidence, written sources (medieval and early modern), rune stones and topographical analysis (Sanmark 2009). In this way, and through previously published research, we have been able to study in detail the features of many different assembly sites and a list of ‘assembly characteristics’ has been compiled. A few examples of such characteristics include rune stones, standing stones, hearths/cooking pits, roads, water routes, ‘thing’ mounds and ‘thing’ booths (Brink 2004a, 2004b, Larsson 1997, 1998, Friðriksson 1994, Sanmark & Semple 2008a, 2008b, 2010, in prep, Sanmark 2009, 2010). It is important to note that not all identified assembly characteristics occur at every single site. What can be expected, however, is that sites located within the same region, as demonstrated for Iceland and parts of

Sweden, share a larger number of traits (Friðriksson 1994, Sanmark 2009, Sanmark & Semple 2008b, 2010) than do sites from entirely different regions. As our knowledge of the features and characteristics of assembly sites grows, so do our chances of being able to positively identify sites that are not ‘confirmed’ by the written record (cf. Sanmark 2010). Storli’s and A.B. Olsen’s (2005) proposals that the courtyard sites are thing sites are plausible and highly interesting. So far, their arguments have been based on excavations, exclusion of other suggested functions, comparative evidence and to some extent mapping of archaeological features in the wider area. In order to test this idea further, mapping and analyses involving a much greater number of variables would be beneficial and in this way their arguments could be strengthened or dismissed.

Storli’s discussion of the proximity between the courtyard sites and magnate farms and the possible link to the state-formation process is thought-provoking. Evidence from Sweden clearly shows that the administrative system and the thing sites were subject to various changes during the late Viking and the early medieval period. Such processes are also evident in other areas, such as Anglo-Saxon England. Here different scales of assembly were active within the 10th and 11th centuries: *witans* and major royal councils were held mainly at major royal estate centres, while shire and hundred assemblies were more frequently situated in the open air by prominent landmarks (see Loyn 1984:143–144 for short summary). These folkmoets, such as the well-known outdoor assembly at St Pauls, London, which met regularly on the prominent hill close to St Pauls, are argued by some to be survivors of older patterns of social organization and assembly (for St Pauls, see Loyn 1984:151; for arguments for the survival of pre-Christian meeting-sites, see Meaney 1995).

The relationship between thing sites and major farms is a crucial part of assembly

studies and a question that has not yet been satisfactorily addressed for Iceland and Scandinavia (but for Iceland, see Whitmore in prep), and Storli's contribution is therefore highly useful. I have briefly discussed this relationship for assembly sites in Greenland, where the two suggested sites lie very close to major farms. Judging by the evidence presented so far, this situation seems to be unlike that of Viking Age Iceland and Scandinavia. The reason for this appears to be the differences in societal structure. In Greenland, unlike the Viking homelands, there were a few powerful chieftains at the top of society and a rather homogeneous lower class (Vésteinsson 2010:147). The Norse Greenlandic chieftains may therefore have been in a more powerful situation, where they could more openly take charge of the assembly sites and a location close to their farm may not have been as problematic as in other areas.

The study of assembly sites is steadily increasing and, as a number of research projects in this field are on-going, more material will no doubt be forthcoming over the next few years. The Assembly Project funded by HERA, in which Sarah Semple and I take part, is just one of these (http://www.khm.uio.no/prosjekter/assembly_project/; see Iversen *et al.* above).

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW ON THE NORTH NORWEGIAN COURTYARD SITES

PRZEMYSŁAW URBAŃCZYK

The twenty years which have passed since I devoted a short text to these specific sites (Urbańczyk 1992:178ff.) provide a good perspective for the reconsideration of the topic. I can see changes but also continuities.

I was not surprised, although disappointed, to find that Inger Storli's article,

which sums up her book published in 2006, 'hardly represents an exception' from the unfortunate lack of interest in the processes which took place in the 'south' (Storli 2010:129). Typically, she did not explore the pan-Norwegian context, looking rather for more exotic parallels. This may be partly explained as a reaction to the attitude visible at central and south Norwegian universities where scholars do not bother to get acquainted with the differences and also similarities of the past processes which took place in the northernmost part of their country. (A hope for a change in this unfortunate situation may be seen in the Assembly Project (see Iversen *et al.* above)).

What has not changed during these twenty years is also the lack of solid factual foundation which would support convincing interpretations. We still have to deal with uncertain chronology and stratigraphy. Therefore, we are still left with speculations, which contradict each other as their authors cannot formulate any 'final' argument.

The author of the text under review focused on the political aspects of the problem. Potential positive results of this stress may be drawing more attention from historians to these important sites, which are apparently absent from the discussion on the formation process of the Norwegian state (cf. the most recent book by Sverre Bagge from 2010). However, serious involvement by historians in research on the subject is conditioned by our ability to offer a concise chronology, which would allow them to place the phenomenon within the framework of regional or even Continental processes.

And here is the weakest point of the argument presented because available data do not allow us to offer precise dating. Inger Storli's attempt to sort out the chronology is unconvincing. What she presents at Fig. 10 as the 'estimated function period of court sites' does not reflect chronological information

published in her own valuable book of 2006 (tables on pp. 51, 54f., 57, 59, 61, 63, 65, 67, 70).

Limited space here does not allow for the discussion of details but what is immediately apparent is the artificial character of the suggested establishment of all sites except one at c. AD 200, which suggests a well-coordinated pan-regional action. However, what has been published so far does not justify such a suggestion because available dates point to a broader period from AD 10 to AD 265 although indicating strongly pre-AD 200. Similarly uncertain are the termination periods which may be placed somewhere between AD 350 and AD 1030.

In addition, there are serious differences in the age of individual rooms/buildings at several sites. There are sites where approximate dates for particular structures differ by 500 or even more years (e.g. Bøstad and Tjøtta) while other sites show 200 and more years of discrepancy between various rooms/buildings. Only the partly preserved complex in Leknes shows a more or less uniform chronology for the preserved structures. Such discrepancies seriously question the continuity of the use of the sites.

Furthermore, individual buildings produced dates which suggest that they had been used for more than 350 years (tuft 5 in Åse), more than 400 years (tuft 3 in Bøstad) and almost 600 years (tuft 4 in Gimsøy). However, constructions as ‘fragile’ as the north Atlantic turf architecture could not be used for centuries, even with regular refurbishment/rebuilding. Therefore, the outstandingly late dates do not indicate continuous long-term use but ‘some secondary activities due to the symbolically perceived tradition attached generally to all sites connected to the ritual sphere’ (Urbańczyk 1992:182) or just accidental reuse of a site.

Dates available for several sites (Bjarkøy, Åse, Bø and Tjøtta) allow us to formulate a serious suggestion that some of the rooms/buildings there have never been in use at the same time and thus we might discuss not purposefully designed and momentarily built

complexes but rather rolling projects in which rooms/buildings were added to those built earlier. The regularity of the Bjarkøy, Åse and Bø courtyards speaks against such interpretation but the ‘chaotic’ outlay of Tjøtta makes it fully possible that it was not a compound but a series of houses built at different times in close proximity to each other. If this was the case, this site should be removed from our deliberations.

Still another chronological problem stems from the wrong tradition of treating all features at a given site as representing a complex evidence of one continuous function. Pits, pit-hearths and small mounds are intuitively included into one complex together with the specific architecture in question. This allowed researchers to more than double the lifespan of the Leknes site where pit 1 produced a date at least 250 years younger than the courtyard architecture itself. For some reason for Bjarkøy the date of the late Viking Age ‘mound’ was ignored.

To sum up the above discussion on dating: there is an urgent need for a more precise internal chronology of each site in question, which would surely help with the interpretation of the courtyard sites just as happened with the *stallotuffer*, so nicely analysed by Inger Storli (1994) and further discussed by other scholars (e.g. Hansen & Olsen 2004:93–103). Until precision is achieved for all the North Norwegian courtyard sites, we will be left with visions that span centuries and as such cannot be translated into reliable historical narrative.

The author has not convinced me that we are left only with ‘the suggestion that court sites are the remains of thing sites’ (Storli 2010:136). I may agree that ‘the North European Germanic tribes settled matters of political and legal concern at assemblies. . . which were held at regular times’ (Storli 2010:136). The same, however, may be said about the early medieval Slavs or, in general, about all tribal organizations for which assemblies are characteristic mechanisms of maintaining social order while avoiding too much concentration of political power.

It is good to be reminded that '[i]n Norse language, *Þhing* refers to assemblies of people with legislative and judicatory authority, similar to the assemblies described by Tacitus' but none of the sites analysed boasts a relevant toponym. Therefore, the author dismisses this comparison as being 'of minor importance' and abruptly turns the reader's attention 'to evidence from Iceland' (Storli 2010:137).

The reason behind that is that Iceland has thing sites which are physically and chronologically different but some of them have 'proper' names and are confirmed historically. Structural and chronological differences are left undiscussed and the author concentrates on the magic word *ting*. This drove her to compare evidence from very different historical contexts which provokes numerous questions.

Firstly, it is not commonly accepted that 'the political organization of Iceland was an attempt at recreating familiar conditions on new territory' (Storli 2010:137). The recent discussion offers a picture of a much more complex situation when 'this new society was a culturally diversified amalgam of women and men originating from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Lapland, Scotland and Ireland' (Ólafsson 2000:145). Originating from various cultures they formed a diversified community where being different from the majority was tolerated. Only once the oecumene was finally filled, and when it became necessary to order social relations within regional communities, did the original cultural tolerance, characteristic of the colonizing period 870–930 AD (*landnámsöld*) have to give way to the reordering of all social relations according to one model.

From such a perspective, the so much admired political organization of Iceland was not the result of some premeditated ideological programme but rather the necessary outcome of the need to find a specific and effective solution to sustain social order and to avoid devastating military conflicts. 'The medieval Icelandic "democracy" was not the

conscious product of anti-monarchic citizens but rather a necessary but clever response to the lack of a centralized monarchy' which could not be introduced for economic and socio-geographic reasons (Urbańczyk 2009: 153).

Second, chronology of the Icelandic thing sites is far from precise. Inferences based on the relation to various well-dated tephra layers allows us only to make a general assumption that some of those sites were initiated during the Viking Age. However, there is no chronology precise enough to determine the length of functioning of every site. Therefore, the far-reaching guesses of the regular diminution of the insular thing places have no solid chronological foundation.

Third, the beginnings of the two cases are divided by several centuries or maybe even 1000 years. And Iron Age Norwegian societies which built their courtyard sites during the 2nd century differed from the late Viking Age and medieval Icelanders because they functioned in different historical contexts. An Icelandic *goðord* was not a typical chiefdom and a *goði* did not function like an Iron Age chieftain. And in neither case is speaking of 'petty kingdoms' (Storli 2010:138, 140) convincing.

Before we engage in such easy generalizations, there is a need for a serious structural analysis. This would surely enrich the discussion which in the Storli's text is limited to one selected physical feature (location of several gable houses at one site) which serves as a basis for far-reaching conclusions. For example, the social approach to architecture could prove useful here because vernacular architecture 'has a vocabulary, grammar and syntax' (Samson 1990:8). Even if 'space is not an accidental by-product of architecture, it is the intention' (Scott 1990:152), '[b]uildings and settings are ways of ordering behaviour by placing it into discrete and distinguishable places and settings' (Sanders 1990:46). Architectural complexes are not accidental by-products but reflections of social structures. Also some aspects of the behaviour-

architecture relation – e.g. distancing mechanisms like personal space (Ciolek 1980) – may be employed in this kind of analysis. Such attempts may open a new field for interesting analyses which may shed more light on the societies who built and used Norwegian courtyard sites.

It is interesting that the semi-regular layout of the Icelandic thing places has a possible parallel only in Tjøtta which, therefore, may be potentially used for comparisons with the insular cases. Other North Norwegian sites are very different in their spatial designs. There are two open ‘comb’-like structures in Bøstad and Øysund. In Bø and Steigen the ‘combs’ are doubled to form a symmetrically arranged space with access by two entrances which determined a linear movement. In Åse, Leknes and Bjarkøy there are round complexes with single entrances, which purposely closed the inner yard and thus stressed the exclusiveness of activities which took place inside. Each of these three layouts organized the space of social interactions differently, which calls for explanation in social terms in which supra-local political organization is only one of several aspects to discuss.

To make the case even more difficult there are clear inner subdivisions of all complexes, which opens room for more detailed social interpretations (e.g. Urbańczyk 1992:184ff.). Another interesting feature of the sites discussed is the spatial orientation of their structures which seem to represent two distinct groups differently, referring to the cardinal cosmic directions that have strong symbolic connotations in all(?) cultures. Also the specific design of the gable houses/rooms, which are so unusual for the regional tradition identified at North Norwegian farms, is worth closer attention and interpretation. Finally, there is a visible concentration of the courtyard sites on both sides of Vestfjorden which may be paralleled by the South Norwegian concentration near Stavanger in

Rogaland. Each of these points should be approached in order to explore the full potential of the available information.

I agree that, despite all the above-mentioned problems, the courtyard sites may potentially be interpreted as an evidence for the political development of North Norway but I do not think that it happened ‘as in Iceland’ (Storli 2010:141) because different historical contexts require different explanations. Such contexts need a safe ground of hard arguments, not clever guesses like that ‘the political consolidation of the region had already been accomplished by the jarls of Hålogaland before AD 800’ (Storli 2010:139, 140). There are simply no sources to confirm such a speculation.

To sum up: I am not convinced by the argumentation presented by Inger Storli that the ‘thing site’ hypothesis remains the only explanatory alternative. It is surely a tempting and promising interpretation but it needs a much more detailed structural analysis and much better chronological foundation for every single room/building as well as extensive support from sophisticated laboratory analyses of stratigraphic sequences (e.g. thin sections, AMS dating, stable isotopes). The possibility of applying tephrochronology to refine the North Norwegian chronologies has been just tested (Balascio *et al.* 2011); the interpretation is unconvincing but the potential has been proven. Thus, the final answer is still ahead.

ÞING AND ASSEMBLIES IN NORWAY AND ICELAND

ORRI VÉSTEINSSON

The Norwegian courtyard sites are fascinating and my fascination only grew reading Inger Storli’s paper about them. In particular, her demonstration of the local context of these sites, how they are not directly associated with high status farms but nevertheless parts of agglomerations of supra-local sites, is an

extremely important result which is set to shape the course of debate on the political structure of pre-state Norway. Storli's interpretation is sensible, as far as it goes, but what she presents as a conclusion is to my mind more like a teaser, a tantalizing glimpse of what may be in store if her research is carried further along its logical course. It is, however, hardly constructive to complain about what has not been done yet, so here I will have to resort to methodological quibbles and raise a point about which I suspect we disagree. This is about cultural evolutionism, which seems to me to have influenced Storli's argument in two ways.

On the one hand, there is the idea that medieval Iceland can be studied as a relic of earlier, Iron Age conditions in Northern Europe. In archaeology this idea goes back to the work of Daniel Bruun (1928), but in history and philology much further (e.g. Maurer 1852). Underpinning it is the view that all human societies develop in the same direction but that they may do this at a different pace. The settlers of Iceland then brought with them a Late Iron Age culture, including traditions of government, which they preserved intact while their cousins back in Scandinavia hurtled towards statehood and modernity. If this is true, medieval Iceland can be used as a window on pre-Viking Age conditions in Scandinavia. A slightly more sophisticated formulation, of the sort Elman Service (1971) would have approved of, sees this not so much as a matter of cultural continuity but more as a function of the type of social organization. In this view, sociocultural evolution progresses from one stage to the next, from band to tribe, and from tribe to chiefdom, and from chiefdom to state. It is possible (and much practised) to disagree about exactly which labels to use and how to define them, and even more so where to place a particular society within this scheme, but to those of an evolutionary bent the scheme as such is not in question. Scholars who accept this formulation can disagree about whether to define Late Iron Age Norwegian society or the High Medieval Icelandic one as segmentary/tribal or as chiefdoms but they would easily be able to

agree that by, say, the 11th century Norway was exhibiting clear signs of emerging statehood, but that Iceland was not. If Icelandic society was still, say, a chiefdom while Norway had become a state it then seems reasonable to assume that lessons could be learned from the Icelandic case about when Norway had been a chiefdom society, especially as there are sources about the Icelandic case which are not available for the Norwegian one. This can seem all the more reasonable if the lessons being learned are based on a simplistic reading of the evidence and the scholarship pertaining to it. It is the bane of analogy that it is so very often applied by specialists in one sort of evidence who find analogues in other sorts of evidence of which they have only a superficial understanding and which they read through the glasses of their own knowledge. This has given analogy a bad name in archaeology, but it is not analogy as such which is at fault but rather the way it is applied (Wylie 2002:136–153).

Storli's treatment of the Icelandic evidence is an example of this. Using only two secondary sources she is able to portray the Icelandic evidence as straightforward and unproblematic, as a firm base against which to measure the apparently more perplexing Norwegian data. I will return to the particulars of the Icelandic evidence below, but for the moment it is sufficient to observe that there is an obvious and unnecessary flaw in the argument which stems from Storli's evolutionary perspective. This is her insistence on calling the courtyard sites *þing*. She wants to do this not only to suggest that these sites had primarily a judiciary function (which is a reasonable suggestion, to my mind more reasonable than most other proposals) but because she wants to suggest that these sites were analogous to the *þing* sites of medieval Iceland, not just in function but as representations of a certain stage in a sociopolitical development. That is where the flaw lies because the Icelandic *þing* sites share only some characteristics with the courtyard sites, but many with Norwegian *þing* sites which, for some reason, are not considered relevant

to the discussion of courtyard sites. The similarities between the Norwegian *þing* system (Andersen 1977:247–261) and the Icelandic one (Jóhannesson 1974: 74–83) are striking and obvious and looking at them through the lens of high and late medieval sources it becomes very difficult to view one of them as somehow an earlier representation of the other. Both served essentially similar functions in societies with an essentially similar political structure, especially towards the lower, local, end of the system. The fact that some of the Icelandic *þing* sites had structures (and archaeologists can be forgiven for fixating on this) is interesting but they are not intrinsic to the function, or sociopolitical significance, of *þing* sites. In other words, the fact that the courtyard sites and some Icelandic *þing* sites have structures is not primary evidence for either type of site being *þing*, because structures are in fact not a principal characteristic of such sites (e.g. Pantos & Semple 2004).

Associating the courtyard sites with *þing* is unnecessary for Storli's core argument and acts only as a distraction. In light of her own extensive research on North Norwegian courtyard sites it seems now to be safe to discard practically all other interpretations of these sites other than their being assembly sites. It can still be debated what sort of assemblies they represent, whether they were primarily judicial gatherings like the later *þing* or whether their function was more militaristic, feasting and amusement, ritualistic or even commercial, but whatever was the case it cannot be denied that these sites were supra-local. As such they imply geographical units and if those units could be reconstructed then it really would be possible to theorize about the political landscape of pre-Viking Age Norway. This brings me to the second way cultural evolutionism is evident in Storli's paper.

It shows in that the conclusions are really meaningful only within an evolutionary framework. They serve simply to select between different, predefined, evolutionary processes as if they were the only options. I do not think this is necessarily wrong, but

neither do I think it is very illuminating. My gripe with cultural evolutionism is that it leads to satisfaction with conclusions if they can be fitted into some evolutionary framework, but it does not stimulate further research, to understand in more concrete ways what was going on. In this instance it seems to me that the localities Storli presents have obvious affinities to the central areas Stefan Brink (1999) has explored in Southern Scandinavia and I have suggested (on much flimsier grounds) also existed in Iceland (Vésteinsson 2006). If the courtyard sites are elements in such regional foci then it becomes interesting and meaningful to analyse their incidence relative to other types of supra-local sites (rune stones, monumental grave mounds, etc.) and to theorize about the territories for which such agglomerations served as central areas. In other words there seems to be rich evidence capable of sustaining theories about the complexities of the political landscape and its development in pre-state Norway. A better understanding of these complexities would then allow an assessment of the relationship between the pre-state political structures and the *þing* system known from the historical period. Although this system has largely been neglected by archaeologists (no doubt for the good reason that *þing* sites are not represented by easily identifiable archaeological features) it was nevertheless rooted in the landscape and is therefore amenable to archaeological study. Defining this relationship is surely crucial to Storli's concerns: if there was a complete break between the political landscape represented by the courtyard sites and the later *þing* system then that would suggest that the establishment of the kingdom was associated with a root and branch restructuring of the political system.

Theoretically I think it *should* be possible to use the Icelandic *þing* system as an indication of what the Norwegian one might have looked like in the late 9th century. The problem is that there is no good evidence for the Icelandic *þing* system in the early 10th cen-

tury when we think it was established. What we have are 12th-century rationalizations by Ari fróði, the author of the chronicle *Íslendingbók*, and mainly 13th-century lawyers and saga writers (not to mention the rationalizations of 19th- to 21st-century historians – from Maurer (1852) to Karlsson (2004)) but not a single firm archaeological date allows us to state that any of the known *þing* sites is from the early 10th century. At Þingnes – the site Storli discusses – the structures are from between 871±2 and 1226 (see Friðriksson (1994:129–135) for doubts about the identification of this site as a *þing* site) and at Hegranes excavated structures post-date the H-1104 tephra. At Þingey a structure predates the H-1300 tephra (Friðriksson 2004, Friðriksson *et al.* 2005) while a structure at nearby Skuldaþingsey is built after ~940 but pre-dates the V-1477 tephra (Friðriksson *et al.* 2007:8–10). This does not disprove an early 10th-century start date for some or all of these sites but the lack of positive evidence is starting to erode confidence that they can be assumed to go that far back.

I would also like to point out that, while two Icelandic *þing* sites, at Árnes and

Leiðvöllur (the latter pictured in Olsen (2005:350)), have structures facing an open area, resembling the courtyard sites, most of them have linear arrangements like the ones at Hegranes and Skuldaþingsey, quite different from the courtyard sites. The remains exposed by Olsen (2005) at the courtyard site in Hjelle also suggest a much more intensive human presence than at the quite ephemeral Icelandic sites – which as a rule yield neither artefacts nor evidence for on-site cooking. Finally it is necessary to warn that there is an obvious lack of fit between the *þing* system as we know it from legal and historical sources on the one hand and the distribution of the archaeological sites on the other (Vésteinsson *et al.* 2004). I think this can be used to theorize about the origins and development of the political system in Iceland (Vésteinsson 2006, 2009) but it means that, if lessons are to be learned from any comparisons between the two systems, their complexities need to be acknowledged and accounted for.

This is not to discourage such comparisons. Indeed they are vital and Storli's paper illustrates well the potential for exciting new research in this field.

Reply to Comments from Stefan Brink, Oliver Grimm, Frode Iversen, Halldis Hobæk, Marie Ødegaard, Ulf Näsman, Alexandra Sanmark, Przemysław Urbańczyk and Orri Vésteinsson

INGER STORLI

I am grateful to the above-mentioned archaeologists for taking the time and effort to

comment on my article on the court sites of Arctic Norway and also to the editors of

NAR for calling for such a broad discussion on the subject. The comments include challenging correctives to my work as well as constructive proposals for taking the research on court sites further. However, I am pleased to note that my rejection of the alleged connection between court sites and farms has not been met with any objections. In my opinion this lack of connection should constitute the point of departure in all research in which court sites are included.

Stefan Brink is, of course, right in claiming that we know nothing of a legal society or thing organization from Early Iron Age Scandinavia. He nevertheless believes that a retrogressive analysis based on comparisons with Icelandic parallels and the sagas may provide some answers when used carefully and with source-critical cautiousness. However, in his opinion the suggestion that court sites along the Norwegian coast represent thing sites is squeezing the source material too much; instead, he suggests that court sites were ‘multi-purpose meeting places’, where thing negotiations took place alongside several other activities.

According to Brink, court sites are not unique as a coastal phenomenon in Scandinavia and he brings into the discussion some sites along the Swedish coast known as *tomtningar* (building plots) which he suggests also served as ‘multi-purpose meeting places’, including activities related to fishing and seal hunting. Similar sites are known along the south-east coast of Norway (Hol 2008). Despite my superficial knowledge of the sites, I find the comparison problematic. For example, *tomtningar* were used as late as the 16th and 17th centuries; they have no hearths (at least the ones on Norwegian territory) and provide space for only three or four persons (cf. Hol 2008:148). Court sites, on the other hand, are clearly restricted to the first millennium AD; the buildings contain several hearths and are estimated to provide space for up to 20 persons (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:51).

Concerning the function of court sites, however, I see no essential contrast between

my interpretation and the one suggested by Brink. The sites may well have been the arena for many different activities; it is merely a question of attributing certain activities more importance than others, and, in contrast to Brink, I have stressed the legal and political aspects of the sites. The interpretation is based on two assumptions: first, that the number of sites is reduced over time and, second, that the sites grow larger over time. The validity of these assumptions has been questioned by some of the commentators and will be further dealt with below; however, how could Brink explain the changes if the assumptions were true?

The recent work of Oliver Grimm (2010) on the South Norwegian court sites unfortunately escaped my attention during the printing process. Grimm draws attention to the fact that the excavation records for some of the court sites in south-western Norway show two chronologically different phases and wonders whether there might have been an older phase at court sites in North Norway too. It is difficult to give a plain answer to the question. At some sites, hearths beneath the walls are documented (see Sjøvold 1971:15–16), and some sites have yielded early radiocarbon determinations which are difficult to explain. It is a problem that the context details of the charcoal samples on which the determinations are based are not well known. This certainly applies to the few samples collected by Harald Egenæs Lund (cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1978), but may also be raised as an objection to the minor excavations, or merely test pits, carried out by later archaeologists, including my own investigations.

Grimm too brings into focus the possible multifunctional character of court sites, including the possible cultic aspects of the sites. He draws attention to a central mound at the Steigen court site which was investigated by Lund in the early 1940s, and which allegedly yielded many unburned teeth of horses, some still attached to the jaw bones. This is indeed an overstatement. In an unpublished report filed at Tromsø Museum,

Lund refers to a strongly levelled mound built of sand, which originally may have been a small mound, 5–7m wide and 0.5–0.75m high. This possible mound contained no traces of burial or fire but numerous bones similar to bones found in other mounds as well as in the floor layers of the buildings. According to the report, most of the bones originate from sheep or goat; only one single fragment originates from horse and this was found in a mound situated at the outer edge of the circle of buildings (unpublished report by Lund, cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1978:33). This is not to say that I disagree with the proposal that court sites may also represent cult sites, but the osteological material from Steigen represents no clear evidence for that.

I obviously have not been very precise in my references to Borg, which, as Grimm correctly states, seems to have had its days of glory from about AD 500 to 950. During these centuries, Borg most likely had no equivalents at the local level. Before AD 500, however, i.e. during the period of functioning of the court site, there is nothing conspicuous about the finds from Borg compared to other farms in the area. The trouble with Borg is – at least so far – that it has no equivalents at all in North Norway. Strangely enough, the place was practically a white spot on the archaeological map until the fragments of a Tating pitcher (cf. Holand 2003:203–206), until then unknown to the region, were picked up by the eager amateur archaeologist Kåre Ringstad during a solitary field walk in the early 1980s. Without the efforts of Ringstad it is in fact doubtful whether Borg would ever have been found (Johansen & Munch 2003:10). Thus, Borg may be unique in North Norway, but there may just as well be other, still undiscovered corresponding sites.

Frode Iversen, Halldis Hobæk and Marie Ødegaard wonder whether the potential of the archaeological record is fully exploited in my work and advertise among other things for four known sites which are missing in my presentation; Mo, Hov, Botnmoen and Alfheim. The two former were, as they point

out, omitted in my study due to uncertain dating. However, they refer to dating samples from one house foundation and one mound at Mo showing 8th and 9th centuries (Beverfjord & Binns 1994:19). ¹⁴C determination from single mounds hardly constitutes sufficient evidence for dating; however, I make note of the determination from the house foundation which should have been included in the study. Having missed relevant evidence is indeed annoying, but at the moment I do not quite see what impact the omitted evidence has on the main points in my interpretation.

As for the two other sites mentioned, the situation is somewhat different. According to the record, the alleged court site at Botnmoen gave way to a football ground in 1944. Twelve grave mounds, approximately 4m across and 0.4m high, had been recorded on the spot in 1924, but, after H.E. Lund's visit to the place in 1952, they were turned into the tale of a vanished court site with about 10 house foundations. Today, one house ground is reported nearby, surrounded by the dim outlines of other possible house foundations. This may be the remains of a court site, but then it may not. I have never seen any references to the site in published works and question its very existence.

The court site at Alfheim, Ytre Hernes in Bodø, is also highly dubious. It was recorded by H.E. Lund in 1950, but the site has never been commented on – probably not even seen – by other archaeologists. Lund himself seems to have had second thoughts about the site. In an unpublished report (Tromsø Museum archives) he describes the site as 'small and rather doubtful'. In a letter to *Forsvarets bygningstekninske avdeling* dated 10 August 1963 (copy filed at Tromsø Museum), he claims that a bigger court site of the Steigen type must have been situated at Hernes; for his own part, however, he has unfortunately not been able to confirm its existence.

It may be useful to bear in mind that H.E. Lund had very pretentious ideas about where

to find court sites (see Lund 1955, 1959, 1965), but, despite repeated visits and surveys, the results were often negative. I am convinced that, if there had been a court site in the Bodø area, Lund would have left solid documentation of it. Thus, I have a hunch that the court site at Alfheim is more wished for than real, and my senses about Botnmoen are the same.

A final remark to Iversen *et al.*: I am well acquainted with Bratrein's attempt at reconstructing the *skipreider* in Hålogaland (see Storli 1985:35–41). However, I chose a different approach this time. Some readers may find this to be a weak point in my study, but the participants in the Assembly Project will hopefully bring to light the full potential of retrospective analysis.

Ulf Näsman stresses the cultic aspects of thing assemblies and wonders why I have not focused on the mounds which in some instances are found at the centre of court sites. I am uncertain as to how typical such mounds really are; they are certainly not a typical feature at the North Norwegian court sites. Apart from a questionable central mound at Steigen, which is mentioned above, and an even more questionable central mound at the Bjarkøy court site (cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1978:14–15), no obvious central mound is recorded in the north. Näsman also asks for details about the ^{14}C determinations on which the suggested periods of use of the court sites are based. Leaving the details out in this article was simply a question of space. The evidence includes a total of 89 ^{14}C determinations, 80 from charcoal samples from house foundations and nine from mounds, all published and accessible in Storli (2006).

I have read the works of Alexandra Sanmark with great interest, including her works based on collaboration with Sarah Semple, and appreciate her comments very much. She particularly touches upon the relationship between thing sites and major farms. This was the very point of departure in the initial phase of my studies of court

sites some ten years ago, when it was still generally accepted that the court sites of the north were subordinate to chiefs' farms. However, visits to court sites in the north as well as to a number of court sites in middle and south-west Norway gave rise to a serious doubts as to whether this could be the case. Although we still have a way to go before we fully understand the true nature of court sites, archaeologists today seem to be drawing near a shared understanding of the sites as assembly sites.

According to Przemysław Urbańczyk, studies of court sites still depend on uncertain chronology and stratigraphy. This is indeed true. The investigation of court sites in North Norway is above all associated with Harald Egenæs Lund, who in the 1940s and early 1950s carried out excavations at the court sites at Tjøtta, Bjarkøy, Bø, Steigen and Leknes (see Johansen & Søbstad 1978). Lund himself identified the first three mentioned sites, whereas the two latter were already known. Apart from Tjøtta, the finds and documentation from the excavations were handed in to Tromsø Museum. However, while Lund carried out his field surveys and excavations with a lot of energy, the quality of his methods of documentation does not meet the requirements of modern archaeology. Thus, anyone who has tried to penetrate into the material has soon faced problems. In most cases the context for finds and charcoal samples is poorly documented and field reports as well as drafts of different kinds of writings occur in numerous versions. It is, in short, difficult to squeeze out additional evidence to that which is already published (Johansen & Søbstad 1978). This is a general problem since Lund left little of the sites for future investigations. At Leknes, Bø and Steigen practically all the interior of the houses was excavated and only parts of the walls were left untouched, and the court site at Bjarkøy was demolished soon after Lund had finished his excavations.

Urbańczyk also expresses reservations concerning the site layout as purposefully

designed. He argues that only the buildings at Leknes show more or less uniform chronology, whereas at other sites the age of individual rooms/buildings differs by 500 or even more years. In his opinion the dates available for several sites suggest that, rather than being purposefully designed and momentarily built complexes, the sites were 'rolling projects' in which rooms/buildings were added to those built earlier. I agree with Urbańczyk in that the evidence is not unambiguous, but I believe that this is an impression largely brought about by the lack of systematic dating. As mentioned above, this is unfortunately a situation which in most cases is irretrievable due to the state of the evidence. One exception is the court site at Åse where so far only minor investigations have been carried out (Sjøvold 1971, Storli 2001). The investigations include test pits and smaller excavations in the interior of all the visible house foundations, 14 altogether, which have yielded 43 ^{14}C radiocarbon determinations (Table 1). The fact that most of the determinations originate from test pits obviously raises some questions concerning their context, especially those related to the lower layers. Nevertheless, despite the uncertainty which always is associated with radiocarbon determinations, I maintain the view that the picture of the Åse court site in its final phase is that of rather synchronous use of the identified houses. This naturally applies for the structures visible today; possible structures from earlier phases which are hidden in deeper layers are quite another matter.

Urbańczyk agrees in that the court sites potentially may be interpreted as evidence for the political development of North Norway, but does not think that it happened 'as in Iceland' because different historical contexts require different explanations and such contexts need a safe ground of hard arguments, not clever guesses. I do not quite follow Urbańczyk in this respect. Surely, archaeological interpretations require safe grounds; however, without analogies and

what Urbańczyk refers to as 'clever guesses', archaeology would in my opinion be a rather dull discipline.

Orri Vésteinnsson has some problems with accepting my interpretation because he finds the evolutionary bend in the work too important. To be honest, I do not quite see where the disagreement lies. Vésteinnsson raises no objections to the suggestion that court sites primarily had a legal function; on the contrary, he finds it more reasonable than most other proposals. However, he claims that the Icelandic *hing* sites share only some characteristics with the court sites, but many with Norwegian medieval thing sites. This sounds a bit puzzling to me: so far, research on the Norwegian thing system has mainly been based on written sources; thus the exact location of the sites as well as their age and physical hallmarks are not well known. This is, as I understand it, among the main issues addressed by the Assembly Project (see Iversen *et al.* above). In the case of court sites the problem is reversed as the sites are indeed identified and the question is what purpose they served.

Vésteinnsson endorses the idea that the sites were supra-local and that as such they imply geographical units. This brings him on to what he perceives as another weak point in my paper: the missing focus on the relation between court sites and other types of supra-local sites such as rune stones, monumental grave mounds, etc., which would allow theorizing about territories and central areas. In a previous work (Storli 2006), incidentally referred to by several of the commentators, I have performed a wider study of the occurrence of monumental mounds as well as monumental boathouses (Storli 2006:79, 81) and their relation to court sites, but I find their potential to illuminate the problem limited. As for standing rune stones, the only one known in the whole region is the one at Gimsøy (see Storli 2010:133, fig 6).

Before bringing my reply to a close, I would like to pass a few remarks on my use of the term 'thing site' which, according to

Table 1. ^{14}C determinations from the Åse court site.

House no.	Lab-nr.	Uncalibrated	Calibrated 68.20%	Context
House 1	T-14386	1437 + 100 BP	AD 430–690	Top layer
	T-14387	1588 + 98 BP	AD 380–600	Upper middle layer
	T-14388	1681 + 77 BP	AD 240–440	Lower middle layer
	T-14389	1521 + 66 BP	AD 430–610	Bottom layer
House 2*	T-661		AD 330–490	Floor layer
House 3	T-14390	1697 + 68 BP	AD 250–430	Top layer
	T-14391	1661 + 60 BP	AD 250–530	Bottom layer
House 4	T-14392	1578 ± 66 BP	AD 410–560	Top layer
	T-14393	1600 ± 68 BP	AD 390–550	Upper middle layer
	T-14394	1578 ± 66 BP	AD 410–560	Lower middle layer
House 5	T-14395	1651 ± 83 BP	AD 260–540	Bottom layer
	T-14396	1336 ± 94 BP	AD 600–810	Top layer
	T-14397	1568 ± 78 BP	AD 410–600	Middle layer
	T-14398	1682 ± 78 BP	AD 240–440	Bottom layer
House 6	T-14399	1549 ± 63 BP	AD 430–600	Top layer
	T-14400	1616 ± 64 BP	AD 380–540	Upper middle layer
	T-14401	1592 ± 54 BP	AD 420–540	Lower middle layer
	T-14402	1814 ± 77 BP	AD 80–330	Bottom layer
House 7	T-14403	1532 ± 79 BP	AD 430–600	Top layer
	T-14404	1434 ± 80 BP	AD 530–680	Middle layer
	T-14405	1663 ± 82 BP	AD 250–540	Bottom layer
House 8	T-14406	1677 ± 50 BP	AD 260–430	Top layer
	T-14407	1510 ± 43 BP	AD 440–620	Upper middle layer
	T-14408	1655 ± 67 BP	AD 260–530	Middle layer
	T-14409	1637 ± 74 BP	AD 260–540	Lower middle layer
	T-14410	1798 ± 81 BP	AD 120–340	Bottom layer
House 9	T-14411	1659 ± 98 BP	AD 250–540	Top layer
	T-14412	1700 ± 64 BP	AD 250–420	Bottom layer
House 10	T-14413	1574 ± 80 BP	AD 410–600	Top layer
	T-14414	1595 ± 63 BP	AD 400–550	Bottom layer
House 11	T-14415	1632 ± 79 BP	AD 340–540	Top layer
	T-14416	1750 ± 68 BP	AD 210–400	Middle layer
	T-14417	1799 ± 80 BP	AD 120–340	Bottom layer
House 12	T-14418	1507 ± 90 BP	AD 430–640	Top layer
	T-14419	1678 ± 77 BP	AD 240–440	Upper middle layer
	T-14420	1709 ± 64 BP	AD 250–420	Middle layer
	T-14421	1694 ± 50 BP	AD 260–420	Lower middle layer
	T-14422	1568 ± 80 BP	AD 410–600	Bottom layer
House 13*	T-660	1690 ± 70 BP	AD 250–430	Floor layer
House 14	T-14424	1473 ± 80 BP	AD 440–660	Top layer
	T-14424	1553 ± 67 BP	AD 420–600	Upper middle layer
	T-14425	1417 ± 79 BP	AD 540–690	Lower middle layer
	T-14426	1472 ± 68 BP	AD 530–660	Bottom layer

Sources: after Storli (2006:54–55); *after Sjøvold (1971:25)

several commentators, rather obscures the fact that court sites may have been assembly sites with several functions. In my opinion, too, the sites may well have been multi-purpose meeting places. However, if legal and political aspects were subordinate to social and commercial activities, why were the sites so suddenly abandoned? Is it just a sheer accident that their close-down coincides with the establishment of the medieval kingdom?

Finally, comparing North Norwegian court sites with Icelandic thing sites is not the same as claiming that they are identical in every respect. In fact, Icelandic *þing* sites alone hardly constitute an adequate analogy for interpreting court sites; it is the role of the *þing* sites in the processes described by Sigurdsson (1993) which have caught my attention as a relevant analogy. I am fully aware of the fact that principal questions concerning the court sites remain unanswered, and I am confident that the growing interest in thing and assembly sites will generate new evidence as well as alternative interpretations.

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