# Helena Hamerow
## *Early Medieval settlements in Northwest Europe, c. AD 400-900: The social aspects of settlement layout*

# Early Medieval settlements in Northwest Europe, c. AD 400-900: The social aspects of settlement layout[1]

Helena Hamerow

ABSTRACT

This paper considers how the changing layout of settlements between c. 400-900 in the region between southern Scandinavia and the Netherlands reflects important socio-economic developments. These changes can be observed both at the level of the individual farmstead, and within settlements as a whole. «Rules» for the layout out of farmsteads and villages become particularly pronounced in the eighth and ninth centuries, suggesting that social roles may have become more circumscribed as the structure of rural production altered with the emergence of the Carolingian and Scandinavian hegemonies.

KEY WORDS: Houses, farmsteads, villages, settlement layout, North Sea zone.

It is now well established that the layout and composition of settlements are not shaped purely by socio-economic forces. Settlement layout also reflects values, norms and practices, so changes in layout, as well as similarities in layout between settlements, take on added importance. Spatial order in a settlement reflects and regulates social relations; it provides, quite literally, «a framework for living». Ideally therefore, we should seek to interpret early medieval settlement layouts in terms of kinship structure, household composition, marriage and inheritance patterns, and so on. In practice, unfortunately, this is impossible for a period which, at least in the regions bordering the North Sea, is at best «proto-historic» (Fig. 1). Given the limitations of the archaeological record, it is inevitable that interpretations tend to emphasize economic systems and power structures and so the following discussion will focus primarily on these issues.

## SETTLEMENT LAYOUT DEFINED

Before considering broad developments in the evolution of the farmstead and developments in the layout of settlements as a whole, the question the of how we define settlement layout needs to be addressed. The household was the basic unit of agricultural production in northwest Europe from the Roman Iron Age to the Carolingian and Viking periods. The economic importance of the household is underscored by the fact that, in many cases, each lay within its own enclosure and had its own storage facilities.[2] Any evaluation of settlement structure should therefore have as its fundamental criterion the relationship between household units. In very broad terms, these units were articulated in one of the following ways: aligned along a road or trackway («row settlements»); arranged in a rough «chequerboard», again along trackways («perpendicular settlements»); as clusters of buildings lying together without any obvious organizing principle («poly-focal settlements»); grouped around a single focal point («grouped settlements»).[3] This classification can be applied reasonably successfully for the whole North Sea Zone, apart from early Anglo-Saxon England, where most if not all settlements of the fifth and sixth centuries were essentially poly-focal. What, if anything, these forms mean in social terms, is a question which will be touched upon later. First, the development of the farmstead, the building block of all these settlements, requires examination.

## THE FARMSTEAD

Archaeological data of exceptionally high quality are required in order to trace the

---

[2] Early Anglo-Saxon England is unusual in this respect. See Reynolds, this volume.

[3] This basic scheme was first proposed for the Dutch province of Drenthe (Waterbolk 1991).

«lifecycle» of an individual farmstead (see Holst 1997). Such a lifecycle might include changes in the size and location of the farmhouse, alterations to or complete re-buildings of structures, changes in grain storage capacity, and so on. A few settlements have yielded data of sufficiently fine resolution to enable such developments to be traced, and these suggest that farmsteads in this period were arranged according to certain norms. Such norms are most clearly apparent in settlements with a large number of contemporary farmsteads, and so this discussion is inevitably restricted to a small number of extensively excavated sites.

Beginning with Denmark, the Migration Period farmsteads in central Jutland had in general at least two entrances: a small «pedestrian» entrance (c 1m wide), and a larger entrance (c 2-3m wide) for wheeled vehicles (Fig. 2; Hvass 1986, 531; Hvass 1988, fig. 3). During the fourth to seventh centuries, most farmyards were heavily built up along the inner edge of the enclosure with granaries; in many cases, buildings were incorporated into the enclosure in such a way that the farmyard could be entered not only through a gate, but also by passing through a building. The central area of the yard was left relatively open.

In the eighth and ninth centuries a still more uniform farmyard layout began to appear, as seen at Vorbasse (Hvass 1988). The main houses in each enclosed farmstead were *c.* 30m long and were located within the farmyards rather than being incorporated into the enclosure fence. Smaller houses and granaries lay around the edges of the yards. Groups of *Grubenhäuser* were positioned between the main longhouse and the road. The potential storage capacity of individual farmsteads appears to have been greater than in earlier phases, a point to which I will return at the end of my paper.

The first phase of occupation at Gasselte, in the central Netherlands was broadly contemporary with the Viking Age phase at Vorbasse (Fig. 3). The main ninth-century farmhouses lay oriented centrally within the farmyard, with barns and sheds around the edges, groups of *Grubenhäuser* lying to the east of the main house, and a north-south aligned barn at the back of the yard, away from the road. Although several re-buildings took place, these adhered to relatively strict rules and the layout of each farmstead displays a marked uniformity (Waterbolk and Harsema 1979).

At Dalem in northwest Germany, farmsteads dating to the seventh and eighth centuries were arranged with the farmhouse more or less central within the enclosure (Fig. 4). Barns and granaries were set some distance away from the main farmhouse. *Grubenhäuser*, several of which served as textile workshops, lay to the west of the main house (Zimmermann 1991).

## SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

It is not possible to claim that the settlement forms mentioned at the beginning of this paper – row settlements, perpendicular settlements, poly-focal settlements, and so on – «evolved» in a linear fashion. It can, however, be argued that in general, a less flexible, increasingly normative use of space is in many cases apparent in the layout of both individual farmsteads and of whole settlements from the eighth century onwards. We see this, for example, in the greater dimensional coherence of the buildings, boundaries and layout of Viking age Vorbasse compared to its predecessors. We also see it when comparing the relatively tightly regulated plan of Dalem with its poly-focal Migration Period predecessor at Flogeln (Fig. 5).

This trend towards a more planned, even regulated layout is also apparent much further south, in the central Netherlands, where the mostly small, dispersed hamlets of the fourth and fifth centuries had in many cases been replaced by villages arranged along perpendicular trackways by the eighth century, as at Kootwijk (Fig. 6), or along a road as at Gasselte (Fig. 7), layouts which persisted into the modern period.

Ethnographic analogies suggest that planned and standardized settlement layouts tend to reflect increasingly controlled and circumscribed social roles (Brück 2000). A link has also been made by some scholars between this trend towards planned and regulated village layouts and the emergence of the Carolingian and Scandinavian hegemonies, an idea which will be returned to in the conclusion to this paper.

As already observed, archaeology is unlikely to yield direct evidence of the underlying determinants of settlement structure – patterns of inheritance and landholding, kinship structures, and so on. Careful analysis of settlement plans can, however, suggest some of these causes. It

appears, for example, that the distance between dwellings in some settlements was more regular than in others; this is particularly striking at Gasselte and Dalem and is suggestive of some form of assessment. Another remarkable feature of row and perpendicular villages is the stability in the number of farmsteads over many generations, even when the community moved to a new site. The length of the rows and the number of farmsteads generally varied little; there is rarely evidence for old plots being subdivided or for new plots being added onto the ends of existing rows. At Gasselte, the number of farmsteads remained unchanged throughout the ninth to twelfth centuries. The suggestion that such stable plots represent legally constituted properties is strengthened by the fact that at both Gasselte and Odoorn, nineteenth-century cadastral maps show a striking coincidence between the modern field boundaries and those which defined the Carolingian farmsteads (Figs. 7, 8).

It would be reckless to generalize on the basis of such a small number of examples, but if the patterns tentatively identified here are substantiated by further excavation, we will be closer to understanding the different socio-spatial strategies adopted by early medieval communities. For example, evidence for subdivision of farmsteads or growth in the number of farms could indicate the introduction of some form of partible inheritance. Long-term stability in the number of farms, on the other hand, presumably reflects other rules governing the inheritance of properties, as well as constraints on newcomers settling in a village.

## STRUCTURE AND STATUS

Interpretations of early medieval settlements often betray an urge to make the archaeological evidence fit with the kind of society evoked by early medieval law codes. In particular, a distinction is often made between the settlements of ordinary farmers and those of «lords». Yet it should not simply be assumed that legal status or disparities in wealth were necessarily reflected in the size of houses or farmsteads. The number of stalls for cattle in longhouses, for example, has sometimes been used as a measure of wealth and status. There is, however, a strong correlation between the length of the byre and the size of the living room.

The implication is that larger longhouses were designed to accommodate larger, non-nuclear households. It may be, of course, that only leading families could expand in this way, as only they had access to the material capital necessary to support a larger household. Nevertheless, the proposition that large houses reflect rich or high-status households is difficult to substantiate archaeologically; at Kootwijk, for example, there was no discernible difference in the proportion of imported pottery (one likely measure of wealth) between large and small houses (Heidinga 1987, 39). A simple equation cannot therefore be drawn between the size of farmyards, or the size and number of buildings they contained, and the wealth or social status of the household. Caution needs to be exercised therefore before designating larger-than-average farmsteads as *Herrenhöfe*, or lord's farmsteads.

## CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw from this rather patchy evidence? Settlement archaeology, when viewed in toto, points to what has been dubbed «the long eighth century», namely the period from *c.* 680-830, as a turning point, not only in terms of settlement structure, but also in the organization of landed production and exchange (something which lies outside the scope of such a brief paper; see Hansen and Wickham 2000). By *c.* 800, settlements in the North Sea zone were configured in ways that were markedly different from their Migration Period predecessors. The longhouse had, in most regions, undergone a radical transformation or been given up altogether; settlements were increasingly planned and bounded; farming and craft activities, as well as the circulation of goods, showed signs of a wide-ranging reorganization; and powerful families had stamped an increasingly separate group identity onto the landscape as they established distinctive settlements and buried their dead in new burial grounds. While the very nature of the archaeological evidence does not permit us to point with certainty to the specific causes behind these changes, the emergence of kingship in northwest Europe provides the backdrop against which they can best be understood.

The development of early states – specifically in Denmark and England – and the northward

expansion of Frankish colonial activities required both increased production and the mobilization of agrarian resources into an increasingly centralized political system. Indeed, a growing emphasis on surplus extraction must lie behind many of the changes we can see in the plant and animal remains of this period as well as in the greater size and storage capacities of at least some farmsteads. This is strikingly illustrated by comparing the grain-storage capacities of farmsteads in two settlements in the province of Drenthe in the northern part of the Netherlands. At Odoorn, occupied during the sixth to ninth centuries, the buildings occupied a total floor area of, on average, c 100 square metres per farmyard, while at Gasselte, during the ninth and tenth centuries, the floor area was up to 5x greater (a similar increase in grain storage capacity seems to be apparent at Vorbasse; see above). The excavator has calculated, given the greater height of the Gasselte buildings, that the increased volume of all the buildings together would have been c 10 x greater (Waterbolk 1973). These changes suggest a shift away from essentially (though never entirely) self-sufficient communities, whose economies involved reciprocal exchange and the circulation of prestigious goods, towards an economy based on the redistribution of surplus, and trade of commodities via regional networks.

Intensification of production, especially arable production, would have brought with it important social changes, stemming in part from the need for the labour force to be in closer contact and to coordinate its activities. These changes would have contributed to and been shaped by changes in the structure of settlements. Indeed, given the important role of the house in the reproduction of social relationships, the change from farmsteads in which several functions were combined under the single roof of the longhouse, to ones containing a variety of buildings serving different functions, takes on a new significance. The more bounded, measured and defined use of space within settlements may in part reflect the increasingly firm grip exerted by local landowners on the land and the people who worked it. It is also likely, however, to reflect more closely defined social roles and relationships, such as an increased concern with marriage patterns and rights of inheritance. Seen in this way, the more uniform layouts of farmsteads apparent by the eighth and ninth centuries can be seen as a response to changes in power structures within households and communities, as well as to wider economic and political developments.

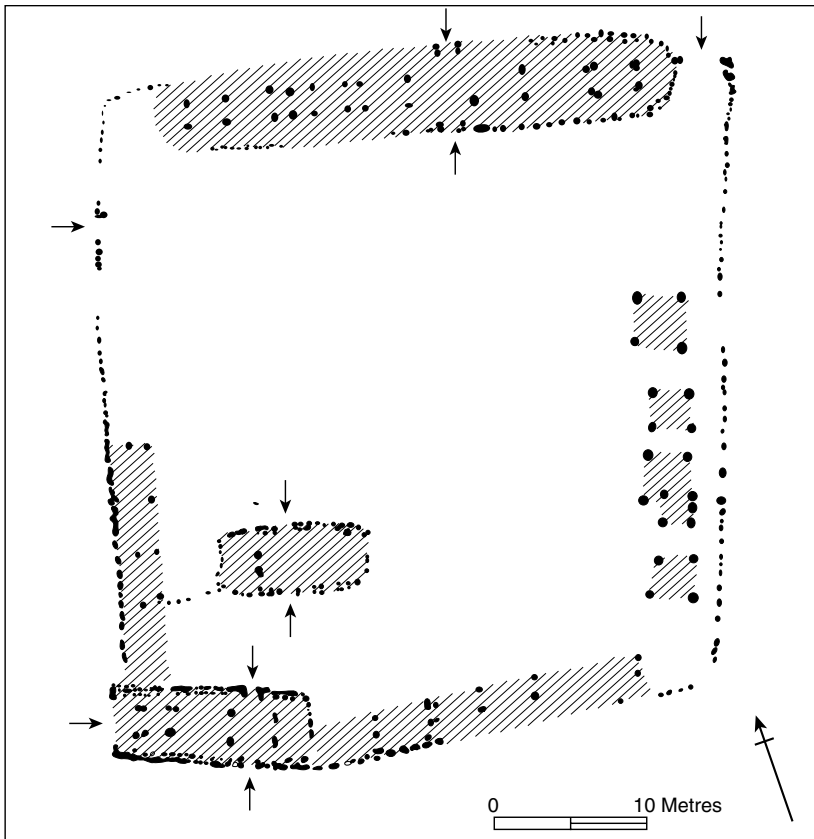**Fig. 1.** Location map of the main sites mentioned in the text.

**Fig. 2.** A farmstead from Nørre Snede. After Hansen 1987, fig. 11.



Principal buildings

Barns

Wells

**Fig. 3.** The early medieval settlement at Gasselte, Phase 1. After Waterbolk and Harsema 1979, Plan VI.

**Fig. 4.** Plan of the settlement of Dalem. After Zimmermman 1991, Abb. 2.
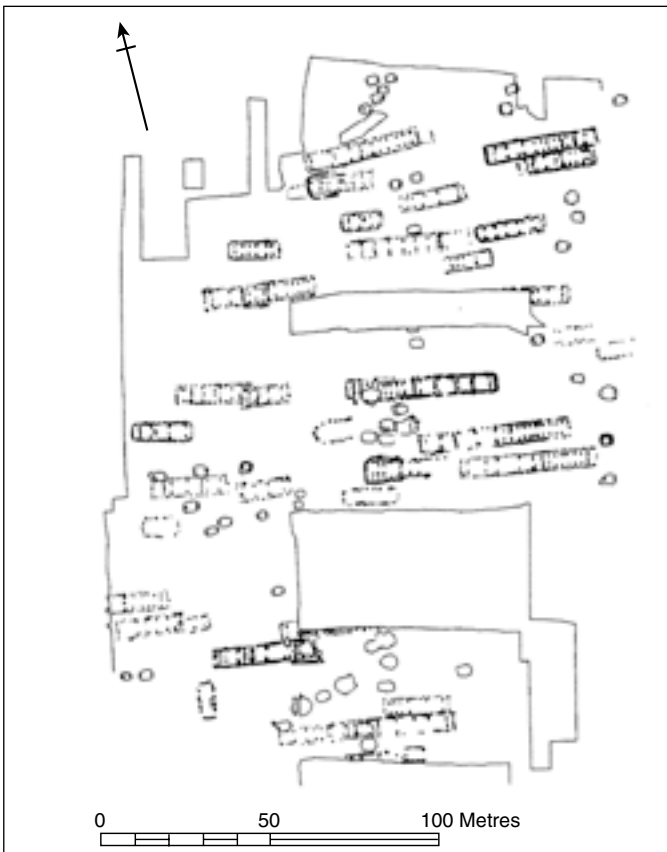
**Fig. 5.** Plan of the fifth- and sixth-century buildings at Flögeln. With kind permission of Dr. W. H. Zimmermman.
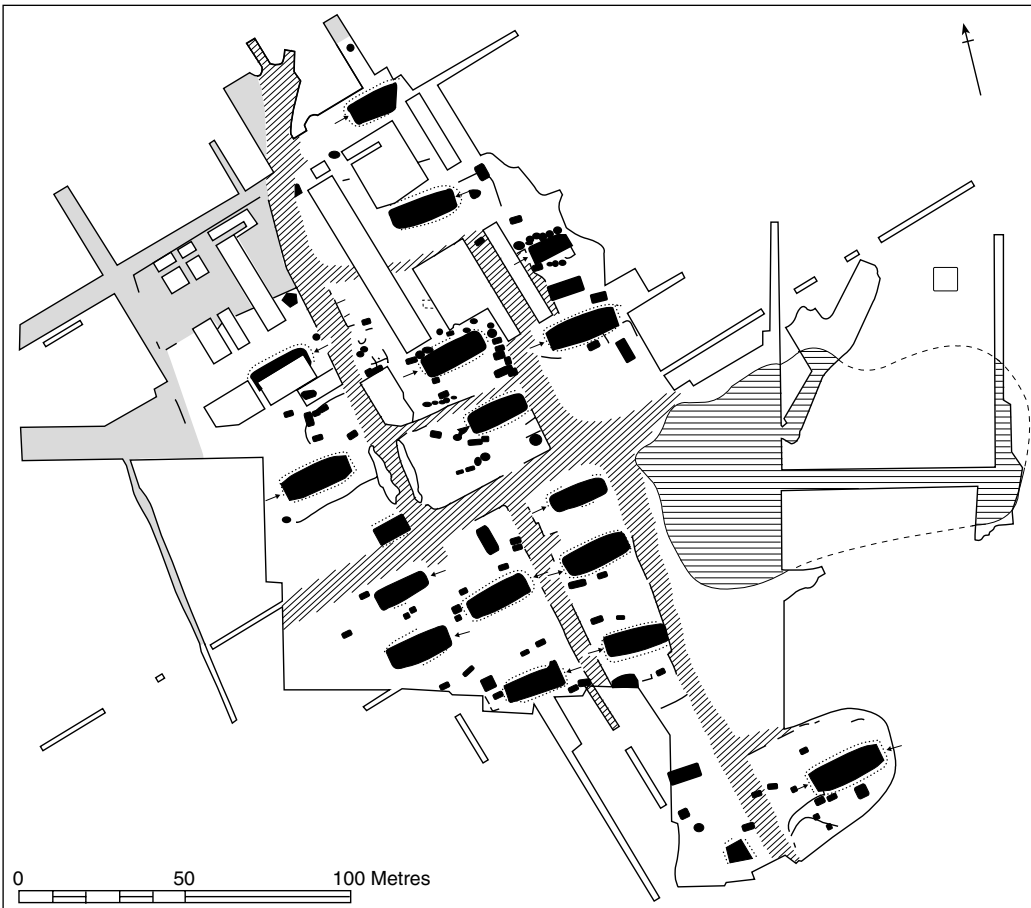


**Fig. 6.** Plan of Phase 2A at Kootwijk. After Heidinga 1987.

**Fig. 7.** Gasselte: the excavated village in relation to the nineteenth-century cadastral map. After Waterbolk 1991, Abb. 34.
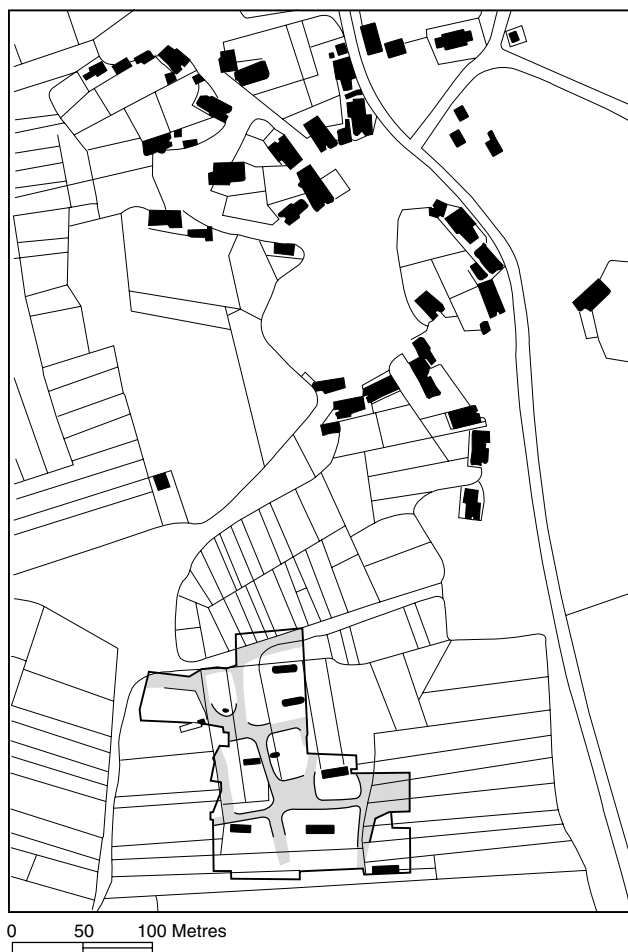


**Fig. 8.** Odoorn: the excavated village in relation to the nineteenth-century cadastral map. After Waterbolk 1991, Abb. 35.

REFERENCES

BRÜCK, J. 2000. «Settlement, landscape and social identity: the early-middle Bronze Age transition in Wessex, Sussex and the Thames valley». *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 19 (3): 273-300.

HAMEROW, H. 2002. *Early Medieval Settlements. The Archaeology of Rural Communities in North-West Europe 400-900.* Oxford: OUP.

HANSEN, T. E. 1987, «Die Eisenzeitliche Siedlung bei N¿rre Snede, Mitteljütland», *Acta Archaeologica* 58: 171-200.

HANSEN, L. and WICKHAM, C. 2000, *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand.* Leiden/Boston/Cologne: Brill.

HEIDINGA, H. A. 1987, *Medieval Settlement and Economy North of the Lower Rhine*, Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum.

HOLST, M. 1997. «The dynamic of the iron age village: a technique for the relative-chronological analysis of area-excavated iron age settlements», *Journal of Danish Archaeology* 13: 95-119.

HVASS, S. 1986, «Vorbasse: eine Dorfsiedlung während des 1. Jahrtausends n. Chr. in Mitteljütland, Dänemark», *Bericht der römisch-germanischen Kommission* 67: 529-42.

HVASS, S. 1988, «The status of the Iron Age settlement in Denmark», in M. Bierma, O. Harsema and W. van Zeist (eds), *Archeologie en Landschaap*, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, pp. 97-132.

WATERBOLK, H. T. 1973, «Odoorn im frühen Mittelalter: Bericht der Grabung 1966», *Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Niedersachsen* 8: 25-89.

WATERBOLK, H. T. 1991a, «Das mittelalterliche Siedlungswesen in Drenthe: Versuch einer Synthese aus archäologischer Sicht» in H. W. Böhme (ed.), *Siedlungen und Landesausbau zur Salierzeit Teil 1: in den nördlichen Landschaften des Reiches*, Sigmaringen: Thorbecke Verlag, pp. 47-108

WATERBOLK, H. T. and O. HARSEMA 1979, «Medieval farmsteads in Gasselte (Province of Drenthe)», *Palaeohistoria* 21: 228-65.

ZIMMERMANN, W.H. 1991, «Die früh- bis hochmittelalterliche Wüstung Dalem, Gem. Langen-Neuenwalde, Kr. Cuxhaven», in H. W. Böhme (ed.), *Siedlungen und Landesausbau zur Salierzeit Teil 1: in den nördlichen Landschaften des Reiches*, Sigmaringen: Thorbecke Verlag, pp. 37-46.

ZIMMERMANN, W. H. 1992a, *Die Siedlungen des 1. bis 6. Jh. n. Christus von Flögeln-Eekhöltjen, Niedersachsen: Die Bauformen und ihre Funktionen. Probleme der Küstenforschung im Südlichen Nordseegebiet* Bd.19, Hildesheim: Verlag August Lax.