Assembly Organisation and State Formation.
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Published in:
Journal of Medieval Archaeology
Publication date:
2009

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Administrative Organisation and State Formation: A Case Study of Assembly Sites in Södermanland, Sweden

By ALEXANDRA SANMARK

THIS IS THE first multi-disciplinary study of Swedish local thing (assembly) sites of the Viking Age through to the late Middle Ages. Previous studies ignored the larger body of evidence, producing models that are too generalising and often one-dimensional. A systematic overview of the location, features and landscape characteristics of things in the county of Södermanland enables exploration of wider questions, such as the development of the thing organisation and the beginnings of state formation in Sweden. This suggests late-Viking thing sites, mainly created in 11th century, are Christian sites, established by local magnates in response to the growing central power. The similarities and conformity of sites, together with a reorganisation of the defensive systems from inland lakes to coastal areas, suggest there was a sense of growing unity and unification within Sweden at this time.

Viking-Age things were the public assemblies of the free men and functioned as both parliaments and courts. There were things at different levels of society — local, regional and supra-regional — and meetings were held at regular intervals as well as on an ad hoc basis when the need arose. The significance of these things for the functioning of Viking society is under-appreciated, with feuding seen as the most common way of regulating society and solving conflicts. Certainly feuding is a regular theme in the sagas, perhaps because it serves as an exciting literary theme, but the things’ role as arenas for conflict resolution, marriage alliances, power display, honour and inheritance settlements, etc also comes across very clearly.

In the Viking Age (AD 790–1050) and until the mid-13th century, local farmers seem to have been rather influential at the things, with authority increasing according to wealth. As the central royal power grew stronger the king and his allies took control over the assemblies and, as part of this process, the things lost most of their political role. In the later Middle Ages they mainly functioned as courts.

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2 Widows and sole unmarried daughters could attend the meetings if they wished (Sanmark 2006; Foote and Wilson 1974, 372–86; Norr and Sanmark 2008).
4 This is evidenced in the lack of work on the thing institution. For feuding, see eg Byock 1982.
5 See eg Morris and Magnússon 1891a and b; Bayerschmidt and Hollander 1955.
6 Bagge 2001; Sanmark 2006.
7 Sanmark 2006, with references.
For the purposes of this study, I have visited all assembly sites and produced maps in ArcGIS of Viking and high-/late-medieval (henceforth later medieval) Södermanland, based on the digitised Sites and Monuments Record (Foromshk). The GIS, in combination with documentary and place-name evidence, has been employed to find the location and setting of the later medieval thing sites for each hundred, as well as potential Viking-Age predecessors. The GIS has been particularly beneficial for detailed studies of the relationships between sites and for reconstructing water levels at different points in time.

The framework of the analysis is the hundred organisation, which appears to have been formed by the 10th and 11th centuries. Despite the many changes this organisation must have gone through before firmly establishing its boundaries, it is clearly relevant to the study of both Viking and later thing sites. Comparisons between 17th-century maps and late-medieval documentary evidence have only revealed a small number of discrepancies between the hundred boundaries of these different periods.

I chose to study Södermanland as it had an interesting place in the developing Swedish kingdom, located in the southern part of land of the Swedes (svear) and bordering to the land of the götar, i.e., more-or-less between the two areas competing for overall power. Södermanland linked to the province of Uppland and its major centres such as Gamla Uppsala, Birka and Sigtuna, via Lake Mälaren in particular. This major lake also served as a link with other svea provinces as well as important trade routes from the northern parts of Sweden.

This article will consider the following questions regarding assemblies and their role within society:

- How stable was the Viking and later medieval thing organisation? Did thing sites move over time?
- How did the spread of Christianity and the formation of the Swedish kingdom affect the assembly sites and the thing organisation?
- What characterised the things sites in terms of features and locations?
- Did religious and cultic aspects influence the characteristics of the sites?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Most previous research on Swedish thing sites has focused on the written evidence. Between the 1920s and 1940s scholars concerned themselves with

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8 All references to Södermanland are to the modern county, unless specifically stated. Modern Sweden divides into 24 administrative units called län (counties). First introduced in the 17th century, the current divisions in essence reflect the reorganisation of 1810. The län should not be confused with the landskap (provinces), which represent an older division (Engström 1993, 95 and 551) seen, for example, in the medieval provincial laws.

9 The hundreds were districts for judicial proceedings, administration and warfare. For the sake of simplicity, the term 'hundred' has been used in this article for the Swedish terms hundare and härad. Hundare was originally used in Svealand, while härad was used in Götaland. From the 14th century, härad became more and more common and was eventually adopted across Sweden (Hafström 1961; 1962). A hundred is larger than a parish and in Södermanland there is an average of ten parishes per hundred.


11 Cf Hellberg 1942, 127–8; Strandberg 1972, 89.

12 The land of the Swedes (svear) and the land of the götar are today represented by the regions of Svealand and Götaland (Foote and Wilson 1974, 25–7).

13 For an overview of previous research into assembly sites in northern Europe, see Sanmark and Semple 2006a and forthcoming a.
productive lists of thing sites in various provinces based on late-medieval documents. These works are useful but provide little or no discussion on the exact location or features of thing sites. More recently, Mats G Larsson and Stefan Brink have demonstrated the usefulness of cross-disciplinary research for the study of thing sites. Larsson concluded that Swedish assembly sites often had a number of typical features: ‘large mounds, a concentration of rune-stones and a close connection with crossings between roads by land or water’. Brink argued that a rune-stone, a thing mound and an ancient road (often the royal Eriksgata) lined by standing stones ‘constituted a Viking Age thing assembly site or — to be more circumspect — were essential elements that constituted a Viking Age thing assembly site’.

While providing new food for thought, there are a number of problems associated with these models. First, they derive from a limited number of thing sites and, second, it is unlikely that all the elements identified by Brink were ‘essential’ for Viking-Age assemblies as they are not all present at every site and poor preservation alone cannot explain their absence. Third, both models are rather static, as they do not take any dimension of time into account and ignore changes to the sites over time.

Brink argued for long-term continuity of assembly sites, seemingly at least from the Migration period (AD 400–550) through to the Viking Age. According to Brink, the reason for this was the sites’ strong links to the past and the ancestors through burials and cultic activities. Recent archaeological fieldwork demonstrates that this kind of continuity may exist at some sites, but is not a general pattern. Aspa Löt, previously seen as a site with a very long biography, instead appears to be a new creation in the late 10th or the 11th century. Due to changes in the balance of power, this emergence of new thing sites may have been a rather frequent phenomenon in the Viking Age.

Brink also stated that, despite the changes that must have taken place in legal procedures between the Viking period and the later Middle Ages, ‘the physical assembly site showed continuity — people continued to assemble on the thing site. The structure survived, but the content changed’. This statement only fits some sites. As will be shown below, there are several examples of sites with a long biography that were abandoned during the later Middle Ages in favour of sites in more suitable locations.

Thing sites created in the later Middle Ages were in some cases moved to other sites at a later point in time. Previous scholars have used Swedish provincial laws to argue for the continuity of sites during this period. Several of the provincial laws state that there could only be one thing site per hundred.

14 Eg Nordén 1938; Turén 1939; Wildt 1926 and 1931; Ahlberg 1946a and b; see, however, Lindqvist 1927, 43–4. Alexander Bugge has carried out a similar study of the eastern part of Norway (1920).
15 Larsson 1997 and 1998; Brink 2004a and b.
16 Larsson 1998, 61f.
17 Brink 2004a, 206. The Eriksgata was the route that, according to Swedish medieval provincial laws, a newly elected king must travel in order be accepted or rejected as king by the people of the different provinces of the kingdom (Hasselberg 1959, 22–7).
18 Arkel’s thing site in Uppland is one such example (Sanmark and Semple forthcoming b).
20 Sanmark 2004; Sanmark and Semple forthcoming a.
21 Brink 2004a, 215.
Documents from the 14th and 15th centuries often claim to have been issued at ‘the correct thing site’ of a particular hundred and the use of this expression has been seen to suggest that thing sites remained in the same place for a long time and that their locations were commonly known.\(^{22}\) Documentary evidence from several different provinces, however, shows that some sites were moved several times during the later Middle Ages.\(^{23}\) A further indication of the relative instability of the thing organisation and of the absence of a general pattern of direct continuity between Viking and later assembly sites is the documented use of temporary thing sites.\(^{24}\)

**THING SITES IN SÖDERMANLAND**

The county of Södermanland contained nine hundreds in the late Middle Ages (Fig 1; see later case studies). In order to identify these sites in the landscape, I used all the available sources. Late-medieval documents at times provide the name of local thing sites, as exemplified by a 14th-century document from Uppland issued at ‘Lagunda thing on the correct day and at the correct thing

\(^{22}\) Holmbäck and Wessén 1940, 218–19; Ahlberg 1946a, 97; Turén 1939, 6–7; Wildte 1926, 219–20. Most of the documented thing sites discussed in this article have been named as the correct thing site of the hundred. Ahlberg 1946a, 97–8.

\(^{23}\) Ahlberg 1946a; Turén 1939, 6–7; Wildte 1931.

\(^{24}\) See eg Strandberg 1972, 90–1.
site’. This type of information might provide an idea of where the site was located, but rarely anything more detailed. Local traditions preserved in later sources can at times be helpful in locating assembly sites. The references to ‘ancient thing sites’ found in the 17th-century account *Rannsakningarna* are usually the most valuable. I have also considered other traditions, such as those related in Harald Otto Indebetou’s *Södermanlands minnen*.

A number of place-name elements refer to thing sites, such as the obvious Old Norse þing. Many place-names include this element, such as Tingvalla (Sweden), Dingwall (Highland, Scotland) and Tingwall (Orkney Islands, Scotland). The best-known example is probably Thingvellir, the site of the Althing in Iceland. The second element of this name, vellir/valla, is derived from Old Norse vóllr, which means field. These place-names are rather interesting as they often refer to a piece of land adapted for a common purpose. Apart from Tingvalla we also find kyrkvall (‘church field’) and marknadsvall (‘market field’). In some cases thing sites can be traced through the name of the hundred, eg through names that include the element åker (‘field’), which has been seen to refer to the name of the hundred’s meeting place. Hundred names not traceable back to old settlements may also refer to things. At times, we can employ archaeological remains characteristic of thing sites to give a closer identification of sites. The next section discusses the most frequently occurring features.

**Characteristics of Thing Sites**

Burials dating from the Scandinavian Iron Age (500 BC–AD 1050, henceforth Iron Age), and at times also the Bronze Age (1800–500 BC), often form part of, or were located close to, assembly sites. In this study burials, whatever their function for the moot, will be used as indicators of Bronze-Age and Iron-Age activity. As archaeologists have excavated relatively few cemeteries in rural Sweden, approximate dates must come from external characteristics of burials and whole cemeteries. I have also examined the presence and characteristics of other monuments at the thing sites: standing stones, rune-stones and ship settings. Rune-stones at thing sites characteristically include unusually large stones and inscriptions suggesting a local family tried to claim supremacy over the site.

Another common trait of assembly sites is a location close to communication routes, not surprisingly, as good accessibility must have been vital. A particularly...
frequent location seems to have been on the convergence of land and water routes. This pattern is clearly visible at sites outside Södermanland. A rather typical example is Folklandstingstad in Uppland, which was located close to a ford where a rune-stone and 12 standing stones once stood. Other examples are Anundshög in Västmanland and Gamla Uppsala in Uppland.

Navigable water routes would have been more important during the Iron Age than in the later Middle Ages when falling water levels meant that previously passable watercourses gradually silted up. This apparently caused many new roads to be constructed in the 11th century, as indicated by the large number of rune-stones referring to bridge building. Strict regulations regarding the maintenance of roads and bridges in the 13th- and 14th-century provincial laws indicate that land routes had clearly become crucial for travel.

Scholars have developed various methods to provide approximate dates for the origin of roads in Sweden. Fords constitute one of the key elements, as roads are often formed between suitable fording places, and place-names (such as Vadsbro [‘the bridge by the ford’], väg, ed, drag and bor) can sometimes at least provide a terminus post quem for fords and roads. Other means of dating are rune-stones (especially those referring to a bridge/ford) as well as ritually deposited artefacts. Most studies of this kind have demonstrated a high correspondence between early-modern roads and the Viking and later medieval ones.

Examining old water levels can determine when the areas where the thing sites are located emerged from the sea and became available for use: a terminus post quem for the establishment of the thing sites. General dates for the provinces around Lake Mälaren suggest that in the early to mid-Bronze Age (1500–1000 BC) water levels lay around the 20-m mark. By the start of the Roman Iron Age (AD 1) the water had fallen to c 10 m above sea level, while around AD 1000 the water levels lay around 3.5–4 m. Land located below the 5-m mark seems to have been dry enough for activities such as cultivation by the high Middle Ages.

Finally, there is the location of the sites in relation to the hundred. Many scholars have argued that thing sites often lay in the middle of the hundreds. Thorsten Andersson, on the other hand, suggested that good communications were at times more important for the choice of thing site than a central location in the hundred.

The degree of certainty for the identifications of the documented Södermanland assemblies varies between the sites. Most certainty attaches to those with archaeological features and place-name evidence, most strikingly seen at

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37 Brink 2004a; Larsson 1998, 641.
40 Water routes — navigable or not — however retained some importance during the winters as roads then often became impassable (Ambrosiani 1987, 14–15; Schück 1933, 230).
41 Mannerfelt 1936, 25–6; Schück 1933, 239–40; Enghoff 1938, 27–9; for Södermanland, see Holmbäck and Wessén 1940, 127–8.
46 See eg Larsson 1998, 641; Ahlberg 1946a, 100.
Aspa löt, Kjula ås and Kolhöga. The same can be said for thing sites located by churches, such as Vadsbro (Oppunda), Stigtomta and Överselö. The assembly sites identified with the least degree of certainty are those with no visible archaeological remains, where identifications are so far solely reliant on place-names. Examples of such sites include Fagrahed, Vadsbro (Daga), Kälslöt and Eldasund.

The instability of the thing organisation (see below) suggests surviving documentary sources do not mention all the assembly sites that once existed. Such sites would presently be very difficult to locate, as there are very few þing place-names in Södermanland. There are, however, other place-name elements connected to thing sites, such as löt: Aspa löt, Kälslöt and Eldasunds löt. But this type of place-name is not significant enough to be used as a sole indicator of assemblies. Identifications based on archaeological features only would also be difficult as there is as yet no known archaeological signature for such sites.

CASE STUDIES

ÖSTERREKARNE HUNDRED

Documents from 1381 onwards alternately referred to the thing site in Österrekarne hundred as Kjula ås and Fagrahed. This has led to a number of different interpretations, of which the most likely seems to be that the prehistoric thing site was located at Kjula ås and that, before 1381, meetings moved to Fagrahed (Fig 2). By 1596 thing meetings had been moved again, this time to Kjula thing cottage/parish cottage. This building, located only 1.4 km north of the Kjula thing site, is marked on 17th- and 18th-century maps.

The Kjula ås site is well known and regarded as a model thing site. Here there is a large burial complex with at least 140 registered monuments dating back to the Roman Iron Age (AD 1–400) (Fig 3). In this cemetery there is a large mound that, according to Rannsakningarna, was called the ‘Thing mound’ (Tingh-höge). At the foot of this mound an unusually large rune-stone was erected in the first half of the

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48 Löt in the same way as vellir/valla denotes level or dry land, suitable for assemblies (Lindqvist 1918, 1–3; Ahlberg 1946a, 100; Stähl 1966, 161).
49 This name is presumably derived from rek, which refers either to the ridge or a canyon by Eskilstuna and the name is therefore interpreted as referring to ‘the ridge in the east’ (cf Västerrekarne below) (Hedwall 1927, 10–11). Österrekarne hundred was at times also called ‘Kjula hundred’ (Hellquist 1922, 155; Styffe 1911, 296).
50 Ahlberg 1946a, 121; Styffe 1911, 296.
51 Vikstrand 2001, 343; Olle Ahlberg argued that the thing site was located by Fagraås and that this site was referred to by two different names (1946a, 98), while M G Larsson is of the opinion that the meetings alternated between Kjulaås and Fagrahed (1997, 24–5).
52 Parish cottages seem to have started appearing at the end of the 16th/beginning of the 17th century and were used, for example, for meetings of the people of the parishes, but often served a number of different purposes, such as meetings of the thing. Magnus Collmar has argued that the expressions ‘thing cottage’ (tingsstuga) ‘parish cottage’ (sockenstuga), and the ‘parish clerk’s cottage’ (klockarstuga) used in reference to thing meetings, all denoted the same building (Collmar 1953, 14).
53 Schnell 1949, 23; Collmar 1953, 13; Ahlberg 1946a, 104, 121; Larsson 1997, 24–5. A further connection with the oldest site at Kjula ås has been suggested by Larsson who pointed out that on a map from 1705 a cottage appears next to the ‘thing mound’ together with an alm-box. This cottage may well have been for the poor, but Larsson suggested that it may indicate that a building for the thing meetings once stood in the same place, as seems to have been the case at Anundshög (Larsson 1997, 25).
54 Brink 2004a; 2004b, 310–11.
11th-century by ‘Alrikr, Sigriðr’s son’. Close to the rune-stone are the remains of a presumed ship setting.

The non-medieval character of Kjula ås is strengthened by the many place-names with their origins in the Scandinavian Iron Age, such as Karby, Vi and Viby, located in the vicinity. The site lies between 25 and 10 m above sea level, meaning that this area would have become available for use during the Bronze Age and the Roman Iron Age.

This site had excellent communications. In the Viking Age, it was located only a few hundred metres from Lake Mälaren, and the ridge road and another road lined by standing stones met at the site. The latter connected to the Eriksgata south of Kjula ås and royal connections are further stressed by the place-name Kungshållet (‘the king’s stopping place’) close to the ‘Thing mound’.

The late-medieval thing site Fagrahed was presumably located c 6 km south of Kjula ås, where the place-names Fagerås, Tingstorp, Lilla Tingstorp and Tingsheden lie. The character of the place-names in this area strengthens the proposed date of this site. Fagrahed’s location on the southern tip of the Kjula ridge can presumably explain why the site continued to be referred to as Kjula ås. This suggestion is further

58 Larsson 1997, 18.
59 At this time the old Kaljården formed part of Lake Mälaren (Larsson 1997, 18–19; Schnell 1972, 13–14; Styffe 1911, 274). The ridge road is most likely the older of the two and provided good connections particularly with the southern parts of the hundred. The other road runs in an east-westerly direction and presumably dates from the late Scandinavian Iron Age (AD 550–1050) as new land emerged to the west of the site in this period (Anon 1979, 106–7; Larsson 1997, 18–19).
60 Ahlberg 1946b, 42; Mannerfelt 1936, 43; Vikstrand 2001, 343.
supported by the occasional occurrence of the name Kjula ås uppå Fagrahed (Kjula ås upon Fagrahed).

As suggested by Larsson, a settlement shift seems to have caused the move to Fagrahed.\textsuperscript{62} The distribution of prehistoric burials and rune-stones within the hundred (see Fig 16) supports this idea as the majority lie in the most northern part of the hundred, no more than around 10 km from the site and so within relatively easy walking distance. In the late Middle Ages, at least as far back as is documented, Österrekarne was a very large district that was split into two hundreds after the end of the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{63} During the later Middle Ages the thing site at Kjula ås was therefore in a very peripheral location in relation to the whole district. Indeed, the southernmost areas were located up to 50 km from the thing site, which would have constituted more than a day’s walk.\textsuperscript{64} It therefore seems likely that another Viking-Age thing site must have existed in the southern parts of the late-medieval hundred.

Evidence suggests that after the 1580s, when Österrekarne split into two hundreds, thing meetings again occurred in Kjula, rather than Fagrahed.\textsuperscript{65} This suggests that the

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} The name of the new, post-medieval hundred was Villättinge.
\textsuperscript{64} Cf Claëson 1987, 67.
\textsuperscript{65} Hellberg 1942, 127–8; Hellberg 1985, 398. The first document issued at Kjula parish cottage dates from 1595, while the first document from Villättinge hundred dates from 1579. The thing site of Villättinge hundred is first named in a document from 1595 (Ahlberg 1946a, 121; Walukiewicz 1985, 420).
tradition of holding thing meetings in Kjula was still strong enough to attract thing meetings in the 16th century, when the chance arose.

Kjula ås is clearly a site with a very long biography, which was enhanced in the 11th century by the erection of the rune-stone and most probably also the standing stones, presumably to mark the site as a thing site under the power of Alarik’s family. Without excavation, we do not know when its use for assemblies began. Two options therefore remain: either Alarik and his family created an assembly site at a place with suitable connotations for their claim, or assemblies may have been held at Kjula ås for centuries and this tradition was simply taken over by Alarik’s family.

**Rönö Hundred**

According to documentary sources, *Aspolöt* was the thing site of Rönö hundred from 1302. A rune-stone dated to c. 980–1010 with the inscription ‘this stone stands after Öpir at the thing site’ demonstrates its earlier origins. By 1600 thing meetings were held at Väsby gård (Fig 4).67

At Aspa there is a mound that, according to *Rannsakningarna*, was called the ‘Thing mound’. There are also three other rune-stones and three standing stones, which together formed a road and bridge monument leading up to the thing mound (Fig 5).68

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**FIG 4**

The location of of Aspa Löt, Rönö hundred. *Map by A Sanmark.*

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66 The name Rönö (*raunika*) may derive from old Swedish *rauninger*, i.e. ‘the district with its moot at Rönö’ (Strandberg 2001–2, 42). The prefix *raun* ‘stone bottom’ presumably refers to a rocky outcrop close to the thing site (Holmberg 1969, 221–2). This rock was presumably not the focus of the thing site, but may have served as a marker for the site. Around Aspa there are many such rocks and it is therefore difficult to establish which one the name could be referring to.

67 Larsson 1997, 66–7; Ahlberg 1946a, 120; Brate and Wessén 1924–36, Sö 137; Indebetou 1877, 37, 152.

68 Schnell and Ståhle 1938, 39; Brate and Wessén 1924–36, Sö 141, 138; Jansson 1948, Sö Fv1948; 289; Indebetou 1877, 395–6. A fifth rune-stone that is now lost was also standing at the site (Schnell and Ståhle 1938, 38; Brate and Wessén 1924–36, Sö 136).
Aspa lies within a rather flat valley, in the bottom of which is Lake Ludgosjön. The wetlands associated with the lake today still reach almost all the way to the mound. Until the 15th century, the communications via water routes were good, as Ludgosjön then extended through to the southern parts of the hundred.69 The road network around the site also provided excellent connections. The erected rune-stones demonstrate that the road existed at least by the 11th century, enabling the northern and southern parts of the hundred to access Aspa. This road was part of the medieval Eriksgata.70 Another road just north of the thing mound connects the site with the most eastern parts of Rönö hundred.71

Two families seem to have erected the bridge/road monument, possibly fighting about power over the thing site, or perhaps sharing it.72 The monuments on the northern side of the stream were presumably all erected by the family of Ragnfriðr and Slóði, who resided 9 km further north in Axala,73 while the stones on the southern side belong to the family of Tyra and Ópir, who lived by Viby south of Aspa.74

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69 Indebetou 1877, 395–6.
70 Brink 2004b, 309; Mannerfelt 1936, 45.
71 Anon 1979, 106–7.
72 Larsson 1997, 68.
Fieldwork indicates that the mound at Aspa has no associated funerary archaeology and trial trenching close to the barrow did not provide any finds or associated features. This seems to be a ‘clean’ site, without any long-term cultic activities. Another such example is Arkel’s thing in the area around Lake Vallentunasjön in Uppland. Sanmark 2004; Sanmark and Semple 2008a and forthcoming a. Runic inscriptions at Arkel’s thing site imply the intentional construction of a thing site by aristocratic individuals in memory of their father with no documented graves on or around the site. Therefore, the sons made no use of ancient monuments and did not bury their father Ulf at the site, although they did dedicate the site to his memory. Ulf’s grave more plausibly is by his family home in Skålhamra, some kilometres away from the thing site, as indicated by a rune-stone dedicated to the memory of the same Ulf, who ‘lived in Skålhamarr’. This rune-stone expresses a very strong Christian sentiment, suggesting that the family was Christian and may therefore not have experienced the need for a thing site with connections to their ancestral past.

This example has particular significance for understanding the genesis of assembly at Aspa and the creation of the thing site. Although dedicated to Öpir, his family seems to have resided several kilometres south of the thing site, Larsson 1997, 68 and this is a far more likely location for his burial. This is indicated by another rune-stone dedicated to Öpir’s memory, decorated with a cross, Snædal Brink and Strid 1982, 235, Sö Fv1982; 235. suggesting that at least Öpir’s descendants had adopted the Christian religion. There is no reason why the thing site at Aspa was not an entirely new complex of monuments, like Arkel’s thing site. A plausible suggestion is that Öpir built the site and that is why the rune-stone commemorating his death mentions it.

Aspa is c 10–25 m above sea level and this area therefore emerged during the Bronze Age and the Roman Iron Age. The grave types in the surrounding burial grounds mostly post-date AD 550, Larsson 1997, 63–5. which suggests that there was relatively little activity here before that time. This further supports the idea that the thing site was created in the late Scandinavian Iron Age for other reasons than its strong links with the past. Aspa’s position in the middle of the hundred may support this conclusion. Also here, a sense of continuity was kept as Väsby gård, the location of the 17th-century assemblies, was situated only c 10 km south of Aspa.

**Oppunda Hundred**

According to charters from 1358, 1443 and 1447, the thing meetings for Oppunda hundred were held at Vadsbro. C G Styffe stated that the 1358 charter was issued ‘at the thing by Vadsbro church’ and by 1586 thing meetings had been moved to Lerbo parish cottage and vicarage. Ahlberg 1946a, 104 and 120; Styffe 1911, 282.

Oppunda was one of the largest hundreds in the province and Vadsbro was located in its south-eastern corner. Documentary evidence demonstrates that also the parishes of Flen, Forsa and Årdala belonged to Oppunda hundred until the 16th century (Hellberg 1985, 399; Styffe 1911, 282), ie the hundred was slightly larger than in the 17th century.
been a particularly suitable location for thing meetings. The communication routes by
the church were good, as is normally the case with churches.

The next thing site, Lerbo, was 8 km west of Vadsbro and again in a better location
in relation to the whole hundred. Only c 12 km from Bjudby (Fig 6), a degree of con-
tinuity stretching back into the past seems to have been present in the popular mind,
as even early modern sources show an awareness of Bjudby as an assembly site.

Some of these sources describe the site in some detail and locate it to ‘Bjudby
home field’ (Bjudby hemhage), on a thin strip of land between the lakes Långhalsen
and Vadsbrosjön. This site appears to have been rather striking in the 11th century as
there were two rune-stones, 12 standing stones, two ship settings and a large burial
mound (called the ‘Thing mound’). Today the only remaining feature is a rune-stone
as the second one now stands c 400 m from the site. The same man erected these
rune-stones in honour of various family members and also a third one some 750 m to
the north.

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83 Anon 1979, 106–7.
84 The concentration of administrative power in this area is also demonstrated by the medieval manor of
Lagmansö, first mentioned in 1336. This name derives from the personal name or appellative Laghman (lawman,
ie a judge) and island/peninsula, and presumably refers to the person who built the manor or who owned
the land. Lagmansö may have been the home of the lawman for the whole province (Ståhle 1948, 111; Lundgren
et al 1892–1934, 164; Ahlberg 1946b, 47; Indebetou 1877, 25).
85 Larsson 1997, 92; Schnell and Ståhle 1938, 13–14.
86 This mound seems to have contained a burial. On taking gravel from the mound in 1748 ‘the usual
pagan burials remains’ were found (Brate and Wessén 1924–36, 40). This is significant as thing mounds are not
necessarily burial mounds (Sanmark and Semple forthcoming a).
87 Schnell and Ståhle 1938, 13–14; Brate and Wessén 1924–36, Sö 54, 55 and 360; Larsson 1997, 91–5. Sö 54
was found and re-erected in the 19th century. All three stones were erected by a man named Borsteinn and
have been dated to first half of the 11th century. Sö 54 and 55 belong to style group Pr2, while Sö 360 is seen
as style group RAK (Gräslund 1994, 126; Larsson 1997, 95; SRD).
The rune-stone at the presumed thing site in Bjudby home field is particularly noteworthy as the three stone-raisers are *landburniR mænn*, i.e. ‘men born to landed property’.\(^88\) We must see this claim to the land as a clear statement of power also over the thing site. The two rune-stones once erected at the site are unusually large with elaborate carvings and Larsson compares them to the rune-stones at Kjula ås and Anundshög. The large burial mound, ‘King Blacke’s mound’, located in the eastern part of Bjudby, further indicates the power of the local family.\(^89\)

Just as Vadsbro, Bjudby is situated in the south-eastern corner of the hundred. The land routes that pass the site do, however, provide rather good connections with the rest of the district. There is a crossroads c. 100 m north of the site where two roads meet, one running N–S and the other E–W.\(^90\) Lake Långhalsen provided a good water route for those living in the south-eastern parts of the hundred. Old maps demonstrate that at least until the 17th-century lakes Långhalsen and Vadsbrosjön were connected, and it was therefore possible to reach the thing site also from the area immediately north-west of Bjudby.\(^91\) The choice of Bjudby as assembly site is borne out by the

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\(^{88}\) Brate and Wessén 1924, Sö 54, 40–1; SRD; Larsson 1997, 95–6. The interpretation of this phrase has been debated (Larsson 1997, 95 and Brate and Wessén 1924–36, 40–1).

\(^{89}\) Larsson 1997, 91, 93, 95.

\(^{90}\) Larsson 1997, 90; Schnell and Ståhle 1938, 13; Anon 1979, 106–7.

\(^{91}\) Remains of a bridge/ford dating at least from the later Middle Ages have been recorded c. 170 m from today’s shore (Fornsök: Bettna 348:1 and 348:2). In the Viking Age a bridge/ferry across the water for those people travelling to Bjudby from the south may have existed.
distribution of rune-stones and prehistoric burials. As seen on Figure 16, most of these are concentrated within a 20 km radius from Bjudby. The journey to the thing site would, however, still have been long, up to 50 km for those living in the western parts of the hundred, and it can therefore be suggested that an assembly site existed in these parts at least by the late Iron Age. The move to Lerbo in the late Middle Ages meant that thing meetings were now more central.

The Bjudby thing site is located just above 25 m above sea level, and this area therefore emerged before the Bronze Age. The burials in the area span from the Bronze Age and the early Scandinavian Iron Age (500 BC–AD 550) to the late Iron Age, when most of the burials were constructed. A settlement with its centre between Bjudby and Blacksta seems to have begun at the latest around the end of the early Iron Age. It is clear that the site was enhanced in the first half of the 11th century; its location in the south-eastern corner of the hundred suggests that the site has origins far back in time, before or in the early stages of the hundred organisation.

**HÖLEBO HUNDRED**

The earliest reference to a thing meeting in Hölebo hundred dates from 1400 when meetings were held at ‘Käslöt’. By 1596 meetings had been moved to Vagnhärads parish cottage and by 1640 meetings were held at Åby inn, c 600 m east of Vagnhärads church (Fig 8).

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**Fig 8**

Thing sites in Hölebo hundred. *Map by A Sanmark.*

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93 This name derives from a settlement name (Andersson 1965, 50–1).
94 Ahlberg 1946a, 120; Skog 1999, 10.
The place-name Kåslöt does not survive in any records, but a document from 1496 specifying the location as ‘Kåslöt by Nora’ helps identify the thing site. Nora is a farm located c. 2.5 km north-east of modern Vagnhärad in western Södermanland. Burial evidence suggests settlement of the area around the farm since the early Iron Age, although the majority of burials seem to date from the late Iron Age. Place-names and settlement remains indicate that there were several farms here in the later Middle Ages.

The farm and the burial grounds are located on a small hill within a very wide flat-bottomed valley (Fig 9), in the middle of which is Lake Norasjön. It is difficult to pinpoint the location of the assembly site but the most likely place is somewhere on the same height as the burials, not too close to the farm. The base of the valley is an

![Fig 9](https://example.com/figure9.jpg)

Nora: the bottom of the valley where the rune-stone bridge was presumably located, Lake Norasjön on the right. *Photograph by A Sanmark.*

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93 Ahlberg 1946a, 98. Sune Lindqvist suggested that another possible location for the thing site may have been a place 3 km north-west of Vagnhärad, where the names Källsvreten and Löten are found. This is possible as the site has some of the typical traits of a thing site. It would however be rather unlikely that medieval thing meetings occurred at two different places named Kåslöt, located only 7.5 km from each other (Lindqvist 1927, 43).

96 Cf Ambrosiani 1964, 55–84. There are two burial grounds at Nora with a total of c. 47 identified graves (Fornsök: Trosa-Vagnhärad 34:1, 41:2 and 41:2).

97 According to af Schmidt, the name Nora appeared in 13th-century sources in its plural form *Norer,* which suggested that there were several farms in the village. From 1331 only the singular was used. Settlement remains are recorded as medieval or later (Fornsök: Trosa-Vagnhärad 333:1; af Schmidt 1936, 112).
unlikely location for thing meetings as it is below the 5 m level and would therefore have been too marshy in the Viking Age.

Nora was an excellent place in terms of communications. A road ran across the valley and by at least the 11th century there was a bridge, evidenced by the runic inscription ‘Ingimarr and Arnvé had this stone raised and the bridge made . . .’. Three other rune-stones come from the area, some or all of which may have served as markers for the bridge/road or the assembly site. This road connects to another road sporadically marked by rune-stones that is called Tjuvestigen, deriving from þiuðstigr, ie the ‘folk road’ or ‘people’s road’. The possibilities to access the site via water routes would also have been good in the early Iron Age as Lake Norasjön then formed part of the sea. The location of the assembly site within the hundred seems logical in relation to the distribution of rune-stones and prehistoric burials. The majority is located within 7 km from Nora.

The reason why the site was not moved, for example to a church, in the later Middle Ages may be that its location was rather good in relation to the rest of Hölebo hundred. Nora is more or less in the middle of the hundred and the combination of land and water routes meant that it was easily accessible from all parts of the district. The characteristics of this site suggest that it is more like Aspa than, for example, Kjula ås in terms of continuity. The low-lying valley is unlikely to have held many more graves, although cultivation may have destroyed some. Nora could well be a site constructed in the Viking Age, which could perhaps also explain the site’s central location in the hundred, in the same way as Aspa.

DAGA HUNDRED

According to a document from 1401, the thing site for Daga hundred was Vadsbro (Fig 10). The likely thing site is by a contemporary croft named Vadsbro torp, next to a stream connecting the two lakes Storsjön and Frösjön; the hundred name Daga derives from dave ‘low-lying dell, little pool’, strengthening the case for later medieval and perhaps also Viking-Age thing meetings here. The area to the east and north-east of the croft seems to have been the most suitable for assemblies, as this is a flat valley leading down to Lake Frösjön, resembling the layout of Nora and Aspa (Fig 11). The largest part of the valley is at the 5–10 m level and must therefore have emerged during the Roman Iron Age, while the remaining part lies 10–15 m above sea level.

The site’s exact location is difficult to pinpoint in a heavily ploughed valley, although in the immediate vicinity there is a small burial ground with about ten graves, presumably dating from the late Iron Age.

The name Vadsbro, as well as old maps, demonstrate that land and water routes converged here at least by the late Middle Ages. The latter were extremely important, as Frösjön links into a water system that constitutes a main thoroughfare through

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98 Brate and Wessén 1924–36, So 30; Anon 1979, 19, 106–7. This stone belongs to style group Fp and has been dated to c 1015–50 (Gräslund 1994, 126). The wording ‘made this bridge’ does not necessarily imply that this was the first bridge at this site. At Gullbron in Uppland an 11th-century rune-stone reads ‘Ulfr’s heirs in Lindes have raised these stones and made the bridge . . .’, but several old bridges have been excavated, the oldest one dating from the Bronze Age.

99 Brate and Wessén 1924–36, So 28, 29 and 30.

100 Möberg 1938, 246; Lindqvist 1927, 43; Brate and Wessén 1924–36, So 34 and 35; Anon 1979, 19, 106–7.

101 Trosa and Vagnhärad churches, which are c 3 km from the site, both date from the 13th century (Schnell 1965).

102 SOFI; Ahlberg 1946a, 97–98, 120.

103 Immediately to the west of Vadsbro, there is a marshy area which previously formed Lake Norrtunajón. This is therefore a highly unlikely location for the thing site (Strandberg 1972, 95–104).

104 Fornsök: Kattnäs 2:1. According to Indebetou there was a standing stone north of the croft, possibly the stone recorded 400 m north of Vadsbro torp (Fornsök: Kattnäs 1:1; Indebetou 1877, 162). There is one rune-stone at Kattnäs church and one at Frustuna church (Brate and Wessén 1924–36, So 16 and 10).

105 Ahlberg 1946a, 97–98, 120; Anon 1979, 106–7. Södertuna manor located by Frösjön was named Vad (ford) in the Middle Ages (Vikstrand 2001, 67).
Södermanland, through which the population in the main settlement districts of the hundred could reach Vadsbro (see Fig 16). This location probably explains why Vadsbro was used/continued to be used despite being on the edges of the hundred. The Tuna place-names in the area suggest that activities took place here at least from the late Iron Age, and the thing site is likely to have its roots in the Viking Age or even earlier.

Probably the shift from water to land travel caused the thing to move by 1591 to Gåsinge parish cottage, c 5.5 km to the north-west. The move seems to have been rather gradual, as some thing meetings were already held around Gåsinge church in the late Middle Ages. Examples include a thing held by King Magnus Eriksson in 1345 and a ‘lawman’s thing’ held in 1485. It is, however, significant that on these occasions, the documents do not state that meetings were at the ‘correct thing site’ of the hundred. It therefore seems clear that, despite the regulations in the provincial laws, the population at times arranged meetings where it was most convenient. This seems to have happened rather often with the ‘lawmen’s thing’, as these men travelled round the whole province and therefore organised meetings at sites that were the most suitable for their ongoing journey.

King Magnus may have held his thing at Ljunga c 1.5 km north-west of Gåsinge church (Fig 10) where local tradition accords the place-name Kungsgatsbacken with being a place for meetings with the kings travelling the Eriksgata. Therefore, communications

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106 Cf Strandberg 1972, 89–90. Gryt parish is the exception, but it is important to note that parts of this parish belonged to Österrekarne hundred (Strandberg 1972, 89).
108 Ahlberg 1946a, 120; Styffe 1911, 285.
109 Almquist 1954, 11; Strandberg 1972, 90–1; Indebetou 1877, 492.
110 Strandberg 1972, 90–1; Indebetou 1877, 162; Elgqvist 1947, 41; Schück 1949. Compare how the place-names Kungsbacken, Kungsgölen and Kungsmaden lie in the middle of the forest Holaveden where the people of Småland met the king on his Eriksgata (Elgqvist 1947, 41; Kjellén 1889, 32).
also seems to have driven the choice of site for these meetings. In the vicinity is Valla; a combination of names containing *ljung* (heather) and *Valla* sometimes occur close to thing sites. Another such example is *Ljungating* outside Linköping, the althing for the province of Östergötland.\(^{111}\)

**Jönåker’s Hundred**

There are a number of different references to thing meetings in Jönåker’s hundred. Documents from 1384 and 1413 refer to Stigtomta thing, while a document from 1391 refers to a thing meeting ‘by the church’. A third document (AD 1496) names the thing *Stegetomta Malm*. Stigtomtamalmen is still the name for the forest located c 1.5 km southeast of Stigtomta church. By 1596 the location for the thing meetings had been moved to Stigtomta parish cottage next to the church (Fig 12).\(^{112}\)

The open area between the church and the forest, separated from the church by a stream, is the most likely location for the late-medieval assembly site. Hellberg suggests an alternative location at Tingsgrindarna (‘the Thing Gates’), situated in the forest

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\(^{111}\) Wessén 1921b, 89–90; Hellquist 1980, 582. Another possible such example is Linga, Öknebo hundred, Södermanland, which according to local traditions was a thing site for meetings with a king named Granmar. The characteristics of the site, together with the large standing stones and the rune-stones, suggest that it could be a thing site, although the king seems to be legendary (Larsson 1997, 27–32; Indebetou 1877, 10, 125).

\(^{112}\) Ahlberg 1946a, 99, 120; Anon 1991, 12.
However, this name seems to be rather recent in origin and is most likely a reference to a presumed execution cemetery found in the late 19th century.114 The name of the hundred makes Jönåker a more likely ‘original’ thing site than Stigtomta. The existence of this older site is suggested by the -åker element in the hundred name and by the absence of an old settlement named Jönåker.115 Scholars suggest, on the basis of a 19th-century report, that the site was located by a farm named Fada, close to Tuna church, south-east of Stigtomta (Fig 12). The name Fada contains the word *fabō (fence), which has been seen to refer to the sacred enclosure (vébōnd) that according to written sources were erected at thing sites. But the most likely interpretation is that it denotes a ‘fence’ used for fishing.116 According to Indebetou, a number of standing stones and stone settings stood close to the church,117 although none now survives. The stream, Kilaån, and a road pass close to the presumed site. The features and characteristics of this site therefore fit those of an assembly site but, as this applies to a great number of sites, this in itself is not enough.

However, further evidence suggests that the thing site was by Kilaån, if not exactly by Fada, then somewhere along a 6-km stretch between Tuna and Lunda churches. Studies of old water levels demonstrate that in the early Iron Age today’s Kilaån constituted the only navigable route through the hundred, which would make this a

114 SOFI.
115 Vikstrand 2001, 375; Pellijeff 1961, 140; Lindqvist 1918, 3. The modern settlement of Jönåker has taken its name from the hundred.
116 Sahlgren 1960, 179; Strandberg 1998, 9; Nordén 1943, 158; Moberg 1990, 94. See Brink 2004a, 205, for a discussion of the vébōnd.
117 Indebetou 1877, 128.
most likely location for a thing site. As seen on Figure 16, many burials and rune-stones are located along this stretch of water, and the *Eriksgata* that ran alongside the water towards Lunda further highlights the significance of this area. A location closer to Lunda church is possible as a farm named Valla, recorded from the 14th century onwards, was located 1.5 km south-east of the church.118 If the argument outlined here is accepted, a kind of continuity between sites would apply also in this hundred, as the distance between the Viking and the later medieval thing site would only have been c. 8 km.

**Selebo Hundred**

Between 1358 and 1486 documents alternately refer to the thing meetings of Selebo hundred as Kolhöga and Överselö church. By 1598 thing meetings had been moved to Toresund parish cottage, c. 10 km south-east of Överselö church (Fig 13).120

It seems clear that Kolhöga is the name of a thing site with its roots in the early Iron Age and that Överselö church took the role as the hundred thing site in the late Middle Ages. Another suggestion is that the later meetings may have alternated between Kolhöga and the church. It is, however, more likely that name Kolhöga was kept, although meetings were held at the new site, as was presumably the case with Kjula ås and Fagrahed. This idea is strengthened by the documents stating that meetings held under both names took place at 'the correct thing site' of the hundred.121 This should

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*Fig 13*

Thing sites in Selebo hundred. *Map by A Sanmark.*
be compared to the temporary thing sites in Daga hundred, which were not described in these terms.\textsuperscript{122} The Kolhöga place-name and hence location of the thing is lost. Commonly located by scholars on the southern part of the island of Selaön by the sound Kolsumtet,\textsuperscript{123} the interpretation of a cryptic runic inscription was used to support this, ‘... Eyjulfr made this Assembly-place in the east. Özurr cut the runes. Ginna made the Assembly-place in the west’.\textsuperscript{124} A more plausible, recent interpretation reads ‘... Eyjulfr did it at the autumn thing, killed Assur. He avenged the deceit in the west...’.\textsuperscript{125} Although the reference to the thing site is therefore no longer credible, the inscription may still bear some relevance to the thing site as this is one of the only two known references to thing meetings in runic inscriptions.\textsuperscript{126}

The reinterpretation of another rune-stone that stands together with two others in a large burial ground on Selaön, 3 km north-west of Kolsumtet throws new light on the location of Kolhöga: Ðorðbjörn raised this stone in memory of Óspaki, his father. He owned Kolhaugr.\textsuperscript{127} Larsson argues that the settlement Kolhaugr extended to the north of this rune-stone and that the thing site was located in the burial ground, as this location ‘has some of the typical features which seem to characterise many of the other known thing-places in Sweden’.\textsuperscript{128} The burial ground is indeed interesting, as it comprised 130 small mounds with two pairs of large mounds at each end. There were also a number of ship settings and other stone settings. This cemetery seems to date back to the early Iron Age.\textsuperscript{129} Kolhöga fits the picture of a thing site also in terms of communication, as it is located very close to the strait connecting Selaön with mainland Södermanland. Its location between the 5–10-m mark means that it would have been very close to the water in the Viking Age. A road sporadically marked by rune-stones connects the site with the other parts of the island. On the mainland, this road splits into two, leading to both the eastern and the western parts of the hundred.\textsuperscript{130} We should also note that Kolhöga’s neighbouring settlement was called Valla and a village situated c 2.5 km further north, recorded from 1285, was named Ljunga.\textsuperscript{131}

The statement that Óspaki owned Kolhaugr needs further consideration.\textsuperscript{132} The magnate Jarlabanke’s rune-stone in Täby (Uppland) claims he made a thing site and owned Täby and the whole hundred.\textsuperscript{133} Scholars agree that ‘own’ can be used both to express judicial ownership, eg over a hundred as well as personal ownership of a farm.\textsuperscript{134} In the light of this, it seems plausible that Óspaki’s son with this inscription claimed his ownership not only of the settlement of Kolhöga, but also the overlordship of the thing site.

The burials in this cemetery seem to date mostly from the late Iron Age. The surrounding cemeteries date from the early and late Iron Ages, so in terms of biography the site is similar to Kjula ås, although with a slightly shorter lifespan. Óspaki’s son may therefore have either created or enhanced the thing site.

The distribution map (see Fig 16) demonstrates that Kolhöga was rather suitable as an assembly site, at least in relation to recorded burials and rune-stones in the

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{122} Strandberg 1972, 90.
    \item \textsuperscript{123} See eg Elgqvist 1947, 40–1; Ahlberg 1946a, 99.
    \item \textsuperscript{124} Brate and Wessén 1924–36, So 196; SRD.
    \item \textsuperscript{125} Källström 2006, 110.
    \item \textsuperscript{126} SRD. The other known inscription reads ‘Gnúpa had this stone raised in memory of Gulleifr, his brother. He met his end in the east at the Assembly’ (SRD: So 33).
    \item \textsuperscript{127} Brate and Wessén 1924–36, So 202, 203, 376; Larsson 1998, 639–41. Previously, the last word had been interpreted as *Klavi, which was seen to refer to Klahammar located c 2 km from the rune-stone (Brate and Wessén 1924–36).
    \item \textsuperscript{128} Larsson 1998, 639–41.
    \item \textsuperscript{129} Larsson 1997, 33–4; 1998, 639–41.
    \item \textsuperscript{130} Anon 1979, 106–7.
    \item \textsuperscript{131} SOFI; Wessén 1921a; 1921b, 89–90.
    \item \textsuperscript{132} Ítti Kolhaug. SRD: So 202.
    \item \textsuperscript{133} Hann ítti enn Tábý allan . . . ok ínn ítti alt huð/n/dari þetta. SRD: U 212.
    \item \textsuperscript{134} Gustavsson and Selinge 1988, 34–49.
\end{itemize}
hundred. The most distant settlements of the hundred were located not more than 12 km from the site. The move to Toresund at the end of the 16th century firmly placed the assemblies in the middle of the hundred.

VÄSTERREKARNE HUNDRED

According to a document from 1346, the thing site in Västerrekarne hundred was Tumbo ås (Tumbo ridge). In 1382 a thing meeting was held by Tumbo church and in 1471 the site was referred to as Tumbo thing. By 1609 thing meetings had been moved to Tumbo parish cottage, close to the church (Fig 14).

Tumbo is located more or less in the north-eastern corner of the hundred and may therefore seem an odd location for a thing site. There are, however, many possible reasons to choose it. First, the communications with the rest of the hundred were excellent as the ridge road, which ran southwards across the hundred, met at Tumbo a road running E–W through the district. The water routes also meant that Tumbo was easy to reach from the northern parts of the hundred. Tumbo was also a central place in the late Iron Age, with an important role in trade. Its location was supreme as the ridge crosses Mälaren at the narrowest strait (Kvicksund), and goods such as iron and fur were transported this way from Västmanland and areas further

![Map of Tumbo ås, Västerrekarne hundred. Map by A Sanmark.](image-url)

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135 This name is interpreted as referring to ‘the ridge in the west’ (cf Österrekarne above) (Hedwall 1927, 10–11). This name as referring to ‘the ridge in the west’ (cf Österrekarne above)

136 Ahlberg 1946a, 121; Indebetou 1877, 404.

137 The medieval hundred was larger than the modern one as the parishes of Torpa, Kung Karls and Säterbo are now in located in the province of Västmanland (Hellberg 1942, 126–8; Damell and Ericsson 2000, 184).

138 Anon 1979, 106–7; Hellberg 1942, 97.
north. The significance of Tumbo in the late Iron Age is further indicated by the tuna-element in the name and the presence of a royal manor (Husaby) c 1 km north-east of Tumbo church. There are huge burial grounds in the area, totalling nearly 1000 graves.\(^{139}\)

A large stone barrier erected across the ridge at the entry to one of the large burial grounds demonstrates the significance of the ridge for travel and trade.\(^{140}\) The barrier has a 2 m-wide opening and may have served as a fortification or a tolling station.\(^{141}\) In the early to late Iron Ages this barrier would have been located only 100-200 m from the strait. The choice of holding thing meetings at Tumbo may therefore have been the result of Tumbo’s characteristics as a natural meeting point. The site may seem rather peripheral in relation to the rest of the hundred but, as demonstrated by Figure 16, most prehistoric burials and rune-stones are situated a maximum of 20 km away from the thing site, ie less than a day’s walk.

The most likely location of the later medieval thing is just south of the church where the ridge road meets the road running E–W.\(^{142}\) In terms of location this site would have been very typical, as apart from the junction of two land routes, Lake Mälaren would also have been close. The area to the north of the church is only between 5-10 m above sea level and would, in varying degrees, have consisted of inlets and wetlands in the Viking and later Middle Ages. If a shift took place over time, any Viking-Age thing site is likely to have been located rather close to the later one, but perhaps slightly further north along the ridge.\(^{143}\)

As there are several rune-stones at Tumbo church, one or several of these may have marked the thing site and/or the road/bridge leading to the site across the wetlands.\(^{144}\) Four stones are of particular interest, since they are all in the same style and presumably made by the same carver.\(^{145}\) Two different families erected these stones and we may have a situation similar to that seen at Aspa, where two families seem to have been struggling to gain power over the assembly site, or perhaps sharing it. Judging from the large number of burials and place-names indicating centrality, the origin of this assembly presumably goes very far back in time, but without further evidence no firm conclusions can be drawn.

ÅKER’S HUNDRED\(^{146}\)

According to documents from 1383 to 1442, Åker’s thing site was Eldasund, while in 1422 the site was known as Eldasunds Löt. The sound Eldasundet is today a stream named Eldsundsån. By 1596, thing meetings had moved to Eldasund thing cottage.\(^{147}\)

Scholars have suggested that the ‘correct thing site’ of the hundred must have been located by the farms named Eldsund (Fig 15).\(^{148}\) In fact, a charter dated 1336 locates Eldasunds Löt ‘between Eldsund and the town [Strängnäs]’.\(^{149}\) Eldsundsån is

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\(^{139}\) Lindeberg 2000, 7–11; Moberg 1949, 127; Andersson 1968, 107; Hellberg 1942, 97; Holmberg 1969, 207–8. Tumbo contains old Tuna and derives from Tūnbo (see eg Hellberg 1942, 99; Moberg 1949, 127; Andersson 1968, 107).

\(^{140}\) Fornsök: Tumbo 10:1.

\(^{141}\) Lindeberg 2000, 9–10.

\(^{142}\) Cf Hellberg 1942, 99; Damell and Ericsson 2000, 184. None of these articles contain any reasons for the suggestions.

\(^{143}\) Nordberg (1971, 10) suggested that the thing site was located by modern Hällby, 5.5 km south-west of Tumbo church, but provides no supporting evidence.


\(^{146}\) Sometimes also called Ellasund’s hundred (Lindqvist 1918, 2, 4).

\(^{147}\) Indebetou 1877, 410; Ahlberg 1946a, 121.

\(^{148}\) Elgqvist 1947, 102; Ahlberg 1946a, 99.

\(^{149}\) Herlitz 1927, 24–5.
situated c. 1 km west of Strängnäs and just east of this lie the two, admittedly late, place-names Tingstuhöjden and Tingsborg. Below Tingstuhöjden there is a flat area where we find Lötbacken and Lötgärdet. This area lies below the 5-m level, which means that it may have been used as a thing site at least from the high Middle Ages. Use of the area for military activities means any traces of the thing site are difficult to find. It is difficult to establish whether Viking-Age thing meetings also occurred in this area. There are a number of cemeteries within a 1–2 km radius of the site. Any earlier site is likely to be by one of these burial grounds, perhaps by the farms named Eldsund. The site is, however, clearly different from the long-lived sites such as Kjula and Kolhöga. Possibly this assembly site is a rather late construction with its roots in the 11th or 12th century. The absence of burials and rune-stones within the immediate area of the thing site, despite major roads and other modern developments in the area, supports this idea (see Fig 16).

The communications at Lötgärdet would have been excellent. Eldasundet was navigable until the 18th century, and formed a major water route that connected the islands in the north to the rest of the hundred. Apart from Eldasundet, there were also significant land routes. The roads from the northern, western and eastern parts of the hundred met at Lötgärdet. In this field there was, at least by the 16th century, a ferry crossing connecting the area with the north-western parts of the hundred. Those living in the southern parts of the hundred could reach the thing site by Strängnäs in the east. The assembly site would therefore have been in a prime location for the population of the hundred, which may explain why the thing site did not move very far

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150 Indebetou 1877, 73–4, 108.
151 Styffe 1911, 273; Anon 1979, 106–7.
in the 16th century, as the thing cottage presumably was located on one of the farms on other side of the sound, c 1 km from Eldasunds Löt.\textsuperscript{152}

**DISCUSSION**

This overview demonstrates that previous models of assembly sites are too simplistic. Instead of a general pattern of long-term continuity at the same sites, it is clear that hundred meeting places often moved several times in order to fit in with the demands of the time. In no case did a site move more than 10 km from the oldest site identified within the hundred. A strong correlation between Iron-Age burials and 11th-century rune-stones has been established (Fig. 16), which at times explains why thing sites are located in rather peripheral areas in relation to the later medieval hundreds. The outdoor thing sites remained in use to the end of the 16th century when meetings tended to be moved to the so-called ‘thing cottages’, and it is therefore clear that the tradition of holding outdoor assemblies carried on until the end of the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{152} Cf Ahlberg 1946a, 103. Sune Lindqvist suggests the existence of an alternative, earlier or contemporary, thing site. This is supposed to have been located further north by Fogdo church by a hill called Tingsbacken with a sacrificial well by Landa in Fogdö. There is no support for this in any documentary sources (Elgqvist 1947, 102–3; Lindqvist 1921; Callissendorff 1989, 6; Ahlberg 1946a). According to Indebetou remains of a monastery could be seen at this site, but there is no reference to a thing site (Indebetou 1877, 74, 191). Larsson (1931, 18) argues that Tingsbacken is a very late name deriving from Ingsbacken.

\textsuperscript{153} As has been shown above, some things moved to churches from the older sites with Iron-Age origins. In these cases the documents state that the meetings were held by the church so there is no indication that meetings had moved inside churches at that time (Ahlberg 1946a and b).
This study also highlights the need for further fieldwork, particularly to obtain dating evidence. This could potentially be derived from features, such as booths or cooking pits or rather more ephemeral archaeology identified at other sites, such as the re-cutting of ditches, repair of mounds and temporary hearths. Such evidence would be particularly useful for sites such as Kjula ås, which clearly has a long biography as a cemetery but the period of its use as an assembly site is unknown. Identifying which of the sites recognised only from later medieval sources have Vikings origins would shed new light on the formation of the thing organisation.

The strongest pattern that emerges in Södermanland is that six out of nine thing place-names refer to communication routes and that this is more common than those denoting a level field for assemblies, which is what earlier scholars paid most attention to. Vadsbro, which appears in two hundreds, denotes ‘the bridge by the ford’. Eldasund refers to a strait and Stigtomta derives from the plural of Old Swedish stigher (road) and refers to a crossroads. Similar connotations appear in the names Kjula ås and Tumbo ås as they both refer to ridges, used as roads long before historic times.

All nine sites are located very close to a fording point where a major land route crosses a water route, and at some sites there are several roads. Thing sites occupied for a long period may naturally have attracted further roads over time. Ahlberg argued that a location in the middle of the hundred was more important in early times, since communication routes were then rather ‘undeveloped’. The results of this study suggest rather the opposite, ie that it did not matter that sites were in rather peripheral locations as long as the communications were good. In the early stages, water routes must have been more significant than land routes. Over time, as the road network improved, thing sites gradually moved to more inland sites, closer to the middle of the hundred.

The fords may, however, also have had a symbolic function, particularly related to the thing meetings. Stanza 29 of the eddic poem Grímnismál supports this:

\[
\text{Körmt and Örmt,} \\
\text{and the Kerlaugs twain:} \\
\text{these Thor must wade each day,} \\
\text{when he to council goes} \\
\text{at Þegdrasíl’s ash;} \\
\text{for the As-bridge} \\
\text{is all on fire,} \\
\text{the holy waters boil.}
\]

This suggests that the entering of a thing site involved the ritual crossing of ‘holy waters’. Looking at other pieces of evidence this crossing seems to have had both

154 Sanmark and Semple forthcoming a; Reynolds forthcoming.
155 Cf Ahlberg 1946a, 100.
156 Strandberg 1985, 414; Sahlgren 1910–12, 99; Indebetou 1877, 123.
157 Hellberg 1983, 46.
158 Anon 1979, 106–7; In Kjula ås, the element Kjula also refers to the ridge (Hellquist 1922, 155).
159 Ahlberg 1946a, 100.
160 Eddic poems are rather difficult to date as the extant verses were written down in Christian times, mostly during the 13th century. Even if only composed in the 12th and 13th centuries, the verses may reflect at least parts of Scandinavian pre-Christian society and mythology (Meulengracht Sørensen 1991; Holtsmark 1958).
161 Larrington 1996, 56.
One suggestion, based on Norse mythology, is that watercourses symbolised the boundary between the worlds of the dead and the living. The layout of settlements and cemeteries where a stream often divides the two may reflect this. The watercourses close to thing sites may also have carried this meaning.

Some scholars have argued that rune-stone bridges are a Christian version of the crossing to the world of the dead (i.e., paradise) and that they therefore are Christian places. The existence of rune-stones in pagan burial grounds around which the burials seem to be Christian supports transitions of this kind. One option is that cemeteries were ‘consecrated’ by the raising of rune-stones with crosses. In this context, it is important to note that all late 10th-/11th-century rune-stones appear to be Christian. This applies not only to those with Christian messages in the text and/or ornamentation, but also to those without such explicit messages. Altogether, it seems that thing sites were Christianised by the erection of rune-stones and that the legal proceedings were therefore carried out under Christian forms.

The special status applied to thing sites in the earliest Norwegian laws indicates that the perception of things as sacred sites continued in some way also in Christian times. Several chapters deal with the special rules that applied at three particular places: in church, at the thing site and at a feast. The Frostathing Law stated that ‘in three places, in church, at a thing, and at a merrymaking all men shall be equally sacred in their persons, but nowhere else does a man incur outlawry on account of the place’ [my emphasis]. Therefore, if someone killed a bailiff in one of these three places the guilty person would be outlawed. By contrast, the punishment for the same crime in any other place was a fine of 15 marks. The punishment for killing or wounding a slave in these places was also more severe than what was usual.

Altogether, these regulations are interesting as the Christians seem to have adapted the pre-Christian cultic significance of the feast and the thing, and the laws therefore place these sites alongside the churches. This further strengthens the idea that thing sites had been Christianised. In order to apply the special regulations it must be clear when a person had entered the site. This suggests that the watercourses by the thing sites may also have served as ritual boundaries to the sites in both pre-Christian and Christian times.

163 Their names also show the significance of watercourses and lakes in terms of cultic connections. A particularly striking example is Junebäcken in Västergötland, a name thought to denote ‘the eternal stream’ and therefore interpreted as referring to a sacred watercourse. The place-name Jonäker in Södermanland derives from a stream with a similar name (Vikstrand 2001, 375–9). An example from Denmark is Lake Tisso, i.e., the lake of the god Þýrr (Lund forthcoming).
165 Gräslund 1996, 31–33; Williams 1996.
166 The Law of the Frostathing (FL) IV:58.
167 FL IV:61. According to the Law of the Gulathing, if someone was killed at the thing site, the guilty party could be executed on the spot. This was one of the very few cases when immediate execution was allowed. Exceptions include murder committed in front of a crowd or on a ship and burglars caught red-handed. For a discussion of these regulations, see Sanmark 2006.
168 FL IV:57; II:10.
170 The recently excavated remains of a 200-m long row of standing stones/posts at Anundshög may also have served this purpose (Sanmark and Semple 2008b).
compares to the description of the *Eriksgata* in the law of Uppland that highlights the significance of river crossings. This is most likely a fossilised tradition with roots in the pre-Christian era. According to this law, representatives of the local population should meet the king when he entered each new province and escort him to the local assembly site where he should be accepted/rejected as the new king, after which ceremony he should be taken to the boundary of the next province where another handover would take place. Studies of place-names and maps have demonstrated that all seven handover points mentioned in the law were located on river or lake crossings.\(^{171}\)

In this context, the combination of the place-names Ljunga and Valla found near assembly sites suggests that sites were surrounded by heaths and fields, i.e., man-made settings.\(^{172}\) The presence of particular types of land may therefore have served as ‘road signs’, indicating to the travellers that the assembly site was nearby. The areas covered by heather were generally dry, with meagre soil, which suggests assemblies were located away from the farms and the best agricultural land. This is further supported by the frequent location of thing sites in wetland areas.

Notably, late-medieval thing sites such as Vadsbro (Oppunda), Stigtomta and Fagrahed also lie close to watercourses.\(^{173}\) These are, however, significantly smaller than those present at the older sites, and therefore not necessarily navigable. A location next to a river or a stream is rather common for churches and by itself may not be so indicative. The continued location of late-medieval thing sites close to streams as well as the rune-stone bridges and descriptions of the *Eriksgata* do, however, suggest a continued significance of a ford close to the site, for other reasons than communication. It is also important to keep in mind that other sites were located at water routes that were silting up and losing their significance as communication routes.

The strong pattern of 11th-century enhancement of thing sites with, for example rune-stones and standing stones, suggests a changing situation in a society where connections between the different areas were strong. Christian royal power was now in the process of establishing itself. The first known Christian king committed to spreading Christianity in Sweden was Olof Skötkonung (c 990–1022) who, according to legend, was baptised in c AD 1000. His powerbase was in the province of Västergötland but he gradually extended his power northwards, for example to the newly founded Christian town of Sigtuna in Uppland. ‘The Svea kingdom’ in the 11th century can be described as a confederation, which was gradually moving towards something more stable, a federation. A number of royal farms (*husabyar*) held the growing kingdom together.\(^{174}\)

The thing sites created in the 11th century were presumably not the result of a royal decree, but were power statements in response to the growing

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\(^{171}\) Sanmark and Semple forthcoming a.


\(^{173}\) At Tumbo a small inlet passed the church and crossed the ridge way in the Viking Age and later. It is difficult to determine whether this would have been navigable at this time.

central power. Many earlier scholars have shown that some, but not all, Iron-Age magnate families became members of the later aristocracy. Larsson’s research in Södermanland clearly demonstrates that a power struggle was taking place at the end of the Viking Age between the expanding royal power and the local magnates. The magnates were losing this battle and their power was therefore declining. It therefore seems most likely that local magnate families felt threatened and established/enhanced sites in order to be recognised as figures of power and influence. We should see these sites as Christian and ‘modern’, a part of the new society. A few hundred years later the magnates had been replaced by royal officials (länsmän) who were required by law to hold thing meetings at the ‘correct thing site’ of the hundred.

One of the rune-stones at Aspa bridge, dated to c 1015–50, is rather significant in this context: ‘Ástríðr had these monuments made in memory of Ónundr and Ragnvaldr, her son. (They) died in Denmark, were powerful in Rauningi and the ablest in Sweden [Sveþiuðu]. This is the earliest reference to ‘Sweden’ in a Swedish source and is particularly important considering that the stone is located next to a thing site in the growing Svea kingdom and along the Eriksgata. The king would pass the site on his Eriksgata; this rune-stone, together with the new thing site, may have been a way of showing local power and/or allegiance to him. Another interesting part of the inscription is Rauningi (ie Rönö), as it suggests that a territory with this name existed at this time, even if it was not the same as the documented hundred. The stone’s location next to the assembly site strengthens the idea that the name does indeed refer to an administrative district.

As stated above, Brink argued that the reason for the common characteristics of the thing sites and their long continuity was their use as places for ‘divine communication’ — the burial mounds were used to legitimate power and receive sanction from ancestors. According to Brink, this legitimisation must have been highly important in Viking-Age oral culture. Travelling through the provinces around Lake Mälaren one can see many sites that would have been suitable as thing sites or which could have been enhanced as such sites if the need had arisen. As has been pointed out by many scholars, the combination of burial grounds, rune-stones and bridges/fords occurs frequently. Which of these sites came to be used/continued to be used as thing sites therefore seems to have been decided by the new geography of power rather than how sacred a site was. Anthropologists have demonstrated that myths in oral societies are continuously changing in order to legitimise the place of the current leader at the top of the hierarchy. A similar situation seems to have applied to the Swedish landscape in the 11th century.

175 Larsson 1997, 9 with references.
176 Larsson 1997, 181.
177 Holmback and Wessén 1940, 218–19; Larsson 1997, 183.
178 Jansson 1948, Sö Fv1948; 289; SRD. This rune-stone belongs to the style group ‘bird’s-eye-view’ (Gräslund 1994, 126).
179 Strandberg 2001–2, 42.
182 See eg Firth 1984; Van Baaren 1984.
Further evidence that thing sites were the result of local, rather than royal, action comes from a comparison between the locations of the royal manors (husabyar) and thing sites. Larsson has demonstrated that husabyar were also located near water routes. The difference is that these water routes were major lakes, such as Lake Mälaren, which were definitely navigable. Presumably these sites were therefore used for the ledung fleets.\(^{183}\) Only at Tumbo is there a close connection between a thing site and a husaby. The general lack of this connection supports the idea that the creation of thing sites was not the result of a royal command.

The lack of a connection between thing sites and defensive structures again strengthens this. In the Viking Age, defensive structures were not located inland but rather along outer coastlines, as evidenced, for example, in the off-shore barriers and other connected features, eg in the Stockholm archipelago.\(^{184}\) It is therefore clear that a move had taken place away from the hillforts of the early Iron Age, which were mostly located by inland lakes.\(^{185}\) This further strengthens the image of a kingdom in formation at this time. It also suggests that external enemies were a greater threat and that a sense of growing unity and unification was the case within.

**CONCLUSION**

Changes in administrative organisation in the late 10th and 11th century were the result of interaction between the growing Christian royal power and local magnate families paying allegiance or demonstrating their opposition to the king through the new Christian thing sites. The similarities between the thing sites may not be the result of a royal decree but rather magnate families following a ‘fashion’ or trend. As indicated by runic inscriptions, the setting up of a thing site, and therefore probably also ruling it, must have been an important power statement in this time of political and religious change.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof Christian Keller, Dr Sarah Semple and Dr Andrew Reynolds for fruitful discussions on various topics included in this paper. Dr Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonsson and Dr Per Vikstrand have been helpful in providing references and advice. I would also like to thank the participants in the Medieval Archaeology Seminar in Oxford and the Cambridge Medieval Archaeology Group for their constructive criticism. The research for this has been generously supported by a grant awarded by Sven och Dagmar Saléns stiftelse, Sweden.

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\(^{183}\) Ledung was a naval military organisation first mentioned in the medieval provincial laws, but presumably dates back to the Viking Age (Larsson 1987, 46–66; Damell 1993).


\(^{185}\) Olausson 1995, 145–6. These hillforts had virtually disappeared by the 6th century (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2006, 49).
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186 The alphabetical order including the Scandinavian and Icelandic characters is: Aábcdðeéfghiíjklmnoópqrstuúüvwxyzþåäæöø.
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annd Arånäs. Om ortnamnsförleder av 
typen Gælta- “galtarnas”, Namn och Bygd 
71, 40–95.

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Abbreviations

FV Fornvännen
SOFI Database of Place-names. Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research, Uppsala: <www2.sofi.se/SOFIU/topo1951/_cdweb/index.htm> [last accessed 4 February 2009]
SRD Scandinavian Runic-text Database, ie Samnordisk runtextdatabas <www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm> [last accessed 3 February 2009]
Sö Södermanland
U Uppland
Résumé

Organisation des things et formation de l’État. Une étude de cas des sites des things dans le comté de Södermanland à l’âge des Vikings et au Moyen Âge
par Alexandra Sanmark


Zusammenfassung

Thing-Organisation und Staatsgründung. Eine Fallstudie von Thing-Stätten im Södermanland der Wikingerzeit und des Mittelalters
von Alexandra Sanmark


Riassunto

Organizzazione dei thing e formazione dello stato. Uno studio di caso dei siti dei thing nel Södermanland in epoca medievale e vichinga
di Alexandra Sanmark

Questo è il primo studio interdisciplinare dei siti dei thing (assemblee) locali della Svezia dal periodo vichingo fino al tardo Medioevo. Gli studi precedenti non hanno tenuto conto del più ampio insieme di prove e hanno fornito modelli troppo generali e spesso unidimensionali. Una panoramica sistematica dell’ubicazione, delle caratteristiche e dei tipi di paesaggio che contraddistinguono i thing nella contea del Södermanland permette di indagare su questioni più ampie, quali l’evoluzione dell’organizzazione dei thing e le origini della formazione dello stato in Svezia. Questo porta a concludere che i siti dei thing alla fine del periodo vichingo, sorti principalmente nell’XI secolo, erano siti cristiani, fondati da notabili locali per rispondere al crescente potere centrale. Le somiglianze e la conformità dei siti, insieme alla riorganizzazione dei sistemi difensivi dai laghi interni fino alle zone costiere, dimostrano che in Svezia in questo periodo esisteva un crescente senso di unità e di unificazione.