

# Legendary Viking town unearthed

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The hidden centre of power for the first Danish kings may well have popped up from the soil in Northern Germany. Archaeologists have surprisingly found some 200 houses and piles of weapons.

Danish archaeologists believe they have found the remains of the fabled Viking town Silasthorp by the Schlei bay in northern Germany, near the Danish border.

According to texts from the 8th century, the town served as the centre of power for the first Scandinavian kings.

But historians have doubted whether Sliasthorp even existed. This doubt is now starting to falter, as archaeologists from Aarhus University are making one amazing discovery after the other in the German soil.

"This is huge. Wherever we dig, we find houses – we reckon there are around 200 of them," says Andres Dobat, a lecturer in prehistoric archaeology at Aarhus University.

"And the houses we have dug up so far were filled with finds: beads, jewellery, pieces of broken glass, axes, keys and arrowheads."

## One of the first Scandinavian towns

The finds support the archaeologists' interpretation that the town belonged to the Viking elite and functioned as a military strategic centre.

"Both Dannevirke and Hedeby – two of the world's largest monuments from the Viking Age – could be controlled from this place," says Dobat.

"We're still not fully aware of what significance this site has had. But our excavations have already given us a completely new perspective on many things, including the military organisation in the Viking Age and the nature of the first towns in Scandinavia."

## A strategic location

The first written sources for the history of Denmark – the Royal Frankish Annals from 804 – say that Sliasthorp played an important role in the Viking Age.

The aggressive Viking king Godfred, the text says, decided to turn the town into a military power centre near the border of the early Danish kingdom. At the start of the 9th century he arrived with his army to what was then a small settlement and turned it into a key strategic military location.

Strategically it was a clever choice of location:

- The long Dannevirke fortification was located only a few hundred metres to the south. So when there was a need for troop reinforcements at the border to the Carolingian Empire in Germany, they could easily step in from Sliasthorp.
- The town's numerous pit-houses could accommodate all of King Godfred's warriors. This enabled the king to strike back in case Jutland was attacked by Charlemagne (c. 742-814), who ruled what we now know as Germany. He headed a superpower, which had just conquered and forcibly Christianised all of Northern Germany and which could potentially occupy Jutland too.
- With its location by the Schlei bay, Viking ships could easily transport personnel, weapons and food to and from the town.

### **Sliasthorp was attacked by warriors**

It appears that King Godfred was wise to make preparations to defend himself in Southern Jutland. The archaeological finds back up the written sources, showing that the king's military power centre was later attacked.

"We have found the remains of a huge longhouse which was burned down at some point during the 10th century," says Dobat.

"The house was more than 30 metres long and nine metres wide, and in the remains of the pillars that once stood by the wall and the entrance, we found arrowheads and caltrops. This suggests that the house was attacked in a military conflict and burned down."

### **The king lived with the chief**

The attack took place long after King Godfred's death. But even if he had been alive, it's still unlikely that he witnessed the attack. Back then, kings were always on the go and rarely spent long periods at Sliasthorp.

As a consequence, the daily running of the town is likely to have been administered by the town chief, who lived in the lavish longhouse.

King Godfred and his men only lodged in Sliasthorp when they had business in the area.

### **Sliasthorp, a town for the elite**

The king wasn't the only one travelling in and out of the Viking town. The town's population figures fluctuated several times within the same year, depending on whether there was a need for craftsmen and soldiers in the area. Only a select group of the absolute elite Vikings lived in Sliasthorp over extended periods.

Based on the industrial design and the building style, Dobat reckons that a majority of the houses in the town were only used a few weeks a year. At times there were 100 people in the town; other times perhaps over 1,000.

"We are in pre-Christian times. So it's conceivable that people gathered in the houses when they had sacrificial feasts, political mass meetings, military training, or if something was going on at Dannevirke.

### **All the dirty business was in Hedeby**

Sliasthorp, which was the size of 14 football pitches, was much smaller than the nearby Hedeby, which spread over 50 football pitches.

“In the Viking Age, people spread out,” says Dobat. “Craftsmen, the marketplace and all the other dirty things were in one city. The elite – religious leaders and the military – had however withdrawn to another town. So the regional elite did not live in Hedeby. It was located some five kilometres away.

“Our studies have given us a completely new view on the anatomy of the very earliest cities. It differs greatly from what we see in the Middle Ages and today.”

### **An addition to Danish history**

The new find is no less interesting to a historian than to an archaeologist. Lasse A. C. Sonne, who holds a Phd in Viking history and is a lecturer at the Saxo Institute at the University of Copenhagen, is fascinated by the news:

“If Dobat has discovered at royal estate in that area it is of course interesting – not least if the town can be linked to Hedeby,” he says.

“From the Viking town of Birka, near Stockholm, Sweden, we know a similar model. There the great city lay isolated on one island, and on the neighbouring island was a royal estate from which the city could be governed.”

Historians and archaeologists have long debated whether it was merchants who founded cities in the Viking Ages, or whether it was the towns’ chiefs.

“If Dobat’s interpretation of the finds is correct, they – together with finds from Birka and others – paint a picture where chiefs were involved, and where large Viking cities didn’t just emerge out of the blue,” says Sonne.

### **Sliasthorp, a precursor of Hamburg**

And sure enough, the datings have revealed that Sliasthorp was built some 100 years before Hedeby.

So the newly discovered town may very well have been the place from which the merchant city of Hedeby was planned.

Andres Dobat believes this means that the entire urban development in the northern German/southern Denmark region began with Sliasthorp.

“This is common European history. We have actually found the origins of what we today call Hamburg,” says Dobat.

“When the Vikings built this town and Hedeby, they were a precursor of Schleswig, which in the early Middle Ages was the great trading city in the region. Schleswig, in turn, was the precursor of Lübeck, which today has given way to Hamburg. We’re digging at the roots of world economy.”

The excavation work is still being done. Since Dobat discovered the first objects with his metal detector in 2003, there have been two excavations – in 2010 and 2011.

Later this summer the team, which also consists of archaeologists from the universities of Harvard, Cambridge and Paris, will travel back to the exciting area near the town of Füsing, some 30 kilometres south of the Danish-German border.

(The box below this article describes how Dobat found the hidden Viking town.)

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 [The excavation work is mainly carried out by young archaeologists. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [8]

 [Caltrops are very unpleasant to step on, and that makes them a useful tool in wars ? and apparently they were used as early as in the Viking Age. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [9]

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Gallery images

 [A golden bracelet was the first thing Andres Dobat found with his metal detector. This became the start of a great archaeological adventure. \(Photo: Aarhus University\)](#) [11]

 [Despite his relatively young age, Andres Dobat is an experienced archaeologist. \(Photo: Aarhus University\)](#) [12]

 [Using geophysical tools, the archaeologists discovered pots and rocks hidden in the soil. But the tools were unable to detect the many beautiful glass beads, so they were a pleasant surprise to the archaeologists when they started digging. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [13]

 [The Viking town was strategically placed by the Schlei bay in Northern Germany. This made it easy to transport goods and crew to and from the town by ship. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [14]

 [The archaeologists also found axes. \(Foto: Aarhus Universitet\)](#) [15]

 [Parts of riding equipment and arrowheads also figure among the 500 metal finds. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [16]

 [The Vikings who lived in Sliasthorp believed in the god Thor. The proof is a Thor?s hammer amulet. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [17]

 [Large areas have been excavated. But there?s more digging work to be done, so a new excavation will start later this year. \(Photo: University of Aarhus\)](#) [18]

Fact box

King Godfred was king of the Danes from before 804 to around 810 – some 150 years before King Gorm the Old.

Godfred is the first Danish king who we know for sure existed. We know this from the Royal Frankish Annals, which was written by King Godfred’s enemies to the south – the Carolingians. The books detailed the power relations in and around the Carolingian Empire.

Godfred was in all likelihood not the only king in the area we today call Denmark. But we do know that loyal chiefs secured his power in Jutland and perhaps also southern Norway.

Fact box

‘Sliasthorp’ means ‘the estate – or the town – by the Schlei’

The new finds show that the town was used for around 300 years, roughly between the years 700 and 1,000.

The archaeologists have so far found more than 500 metal objects in the town, including jewellery, riding equipment and weapons, such as knives and arrowheads.

There are around 200 pit-houses on the site. These houses were used as seasonal residences. They also discovered a large longhouse and ten slightly smaller ones.

Fact box

It appears that the Dannevirke fortification was built by men who lived in Sliasthorp.

Archeological datings show that Sliasthorp and Dannevirke grew large in the same year. King Godfred probably rearmed the area to protect its military alliance in Scandinavia against the Carolingian threat from Germany.

This could indicate that Dannevirke and Sliasthorp were built to ensure a military unity – and not as a border like the ones we know today.

In the Viking Ages, the Norse kings didn't have clearly defined kingdoms. Rather, they were warriors and politicians, who managed to forge alliances between regional chiefs.

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Side story  
Side story

### **How Dobat discovered the hidden Viking town**

Back in 2003, Andres Dobat could only dream of the archaeological adventure that lay ahead of him.

He was a student at the University of Kiel in Germany, where he had a specific interest in the area around the Viking city of Hedeby by the Danish-German border. The young man found it odd that there weren't more Viking towns in the area.

He thought that perhaps the area hadn't been studied well enough. So that's what he set out to do.

- He consulted the archaeological archives and checked which areas in the regions his colleagues had previously made archaeological finds from the Viking Age. He then travelled to these areas with his metal detector.
- In a bay near the town of Füsing he found the jackpot when his metal detector discovered a gold bracelet.
- He had a feeling that there could be more to discover at that location. So he asked a colleague to fly him around the fields in the area. The soil is much more fertile in the places where the walls of the old Viking houses stood. So fertile in fact that corn in this area stays mature for longer than grains in surrounding areas. On photographs he took on the flight, the young archaeologist caught a glimpse of the outlines of houses in the cornfield near Füsing. He didn't doubt for a second that these were pit-houses. It was clear that the area harboured great archaeological treasures, but it was also clear that more sophisticated tests were needed to determine how big the houses were.
- Using geophysical measuring tools, archaeologists from the University of Kiel measured the magnetic field just above the surface in the area. The measurements showed that the soil contained over 100 pit-houses and numerous objects waiting to be excavated.

In 2010, Dobat received a grant from the Carlsberg Foundation to fund an excavation. Thanks to the great finds, the excavations were allowed to continue in 2011 and 2012.

[Niels Ebdrup](#) [27]  
Dann Vinther

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