

Trade and centrality between the Rhine and the Limfjord around 500 AD. The beachmarket on the Northfrisian island Amrum and its context

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Abstract

A recently discovered site on the island Amrum in North Friesland, Germany, can be interpreted as a landing-place and seasonal beach market, which was prepared with a layer of white sand and parcelled out with ditches and clay walls. The black occupation-layer of the market area contained most of the finds. Frankish glass beaker sherds from this layer show that Amrum was connected with the sites Dankirke and Dejbjerg at the west coast of Jutland, where wealthy rulers stored prestigious drinking-glasses in their houses. All three places were part of a coastal trade-route, which connected the Rhine with the Limfjord.

Along this trade route, there are some regions with a high potential of centrality (indicated through gold finds, theophoric place-names and topography), e.g. the Elbe-Weser-triangle or the western mouth of the Limfjord. Further research in these areas might be fruitful for our knowledge about landing-places connected with trade and exchange. It must be taken into account though, that storm-floods and erosion took their toll on these exposed places.

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Introduction

Coastal trade-places and centrality are one of the current tasks being studied mainly in Scandinavian archaeology (Jensen & Watt 1993; Larsson & Hårdh 1998; Dickinson & Griffiths 1999). Differing opinions exist about whether protected harbours and provisions were available for overnight stops of long-distance traders from the south, or if rather a handing-over of goods from one regional ruler to the next in a step-by-step trade took place (Lund Hansen 1987, 1990; Näsman 1990; 1991; Böhme 2001: 487).

Lundeborg on the Danish island Fyn proves that specialized trade-places existed in the North already from the 3rd century onwards (Thomsen *et al.* 1993), and its setting-up is thought to have been inspired by similar places at the southern coast of the Northern Sea (Ulriksen 1998:271). But only Bentumersiel at the lower Ems can be named for this area (Brandt 1977; Carnap-Bornheim 1999:20). This lack of information makes it a challenge to find other trade- and landing-places along the Northern Sea coastline (Böhme 2001:484).

The beachmarket on Amrum

Luckily, a landingplace could be detected and examined on the Northfrisian island Amrum¹ (Fig. 1). Here, in two dune valleys, storms uncovered occupation-layers underneath the medieval dunes. The archaeological structures found in the larger valley are a black occupation-layer, several ditches and clay walls which presumably marked out plots, two sunken-huts and a four-posted granary (Fig. 2). As the cross-section revealed, the original surface was prepared with a layer of white beach-sand and then used extensively, thus accumulating the occupation-layer which contained the majority of finds (Fig. 3). In the other, much smaller dune valley, the occupation-layer was not separated from the subsoil; in addition some ditches and pits occurred. Lots of decorated potsherds, some broken bronze brooches and other scrap metal, glass beads and some 20 glass beaker sherds, amber and implements of stone as well as iron slag and heat-protection shields for the bellows of the smith, represent the collection of finds from the two dune valleys (Figs. 4-5).

For the evaluation of the finds, a study by Carlsson (1988) provides a useful tool. The number of certain finds from some Scandinavian trade places was divided by the duration of use and the size of the excavated areas (Carlsson 1988:Fig.1); Thomsen later added the data from Lundeborg (1994:Fig. 8). A comparison with the finds from Amrum gives a surprisingly positive result, which has to be interpreted with care though, due to the small total number of finds (Fig. 6).

In my opinion, the finds and structures from Amrum can be seen as remains of a seasonal beach market, where imported goods like glass beakers from the Rhineland were traded and local goods were produced (iron-

smithing, bronze-casting?). The activities can be dated by the pottery and the Frankish glass sherds from around 400 to around 500 AD.

Related settlements

Related to Amrum are the sites Dankirke and Dejbjerg at the west coast of Jutland to the north. Remains of houses were excavated there, which contained large amounts of Frankish glass sherds and glass beads (Thorvildsen 1984; Lund Hansen 1984; Egeberg Hansen 1996; 2000). In Dejbjerg, a possible landing-place could be located by some coins on a sand-barrier, cutting off the Ringkøbing Fjord from the open sea, near Sønder Haurvig (Egeberg Hansen 1996:232). The landing-place of Dankirke is thought to lie south of the settlement at the presumed old coastline (Jensen 1991:77). Egeberg Hansen (1993) connected Dejbjerg and Dankirke to a glass-trade-route from the Rhine along the westcoast of Jutland to Norway, and Amrum fits well into this model. Dankirke and Dejbjerg represent the living-places of regional rulers, who gained symbols of status through participation in the coastal trade, and who stored their wealth in their houses which later burned down, whereas the site on Amrum represent the seasonal landing-places directly at the coast, on which items were accidentally deposited or thrown away.

The trade route between the Rhine and the Limfjord

Theophoric place-names, deposits of bracteates and golden arm- and neckrings as well as Roman and Frankish imported luxury goods can indicate the seats of elites, where both religious and secular power was centered (Fonnesbech-Sandberg 1991; Hedeager 1991;

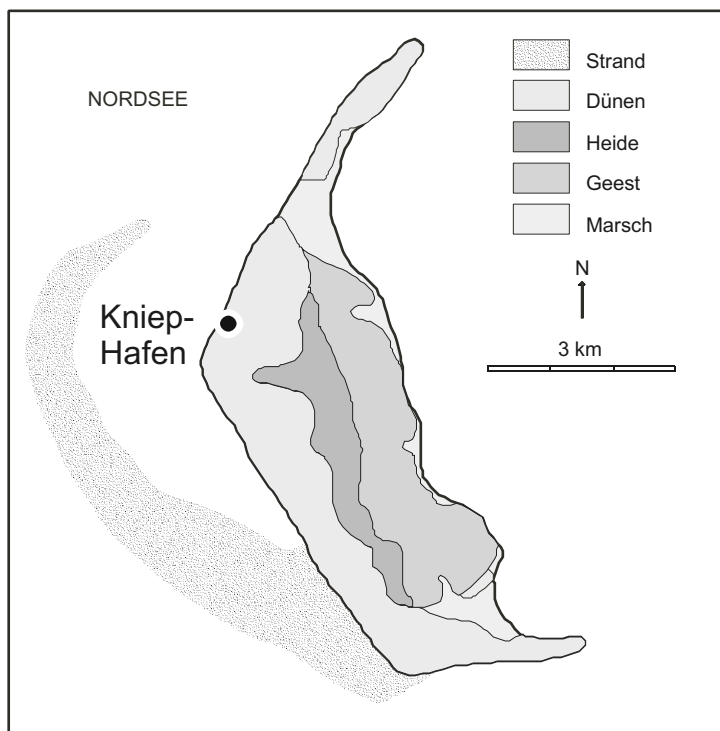


Fig. 1. Island Amrum, North Friesland. Location of the beachmarket from around 500 AD (dot) and the historical natural harbour (Müller 1937:Fig.3).

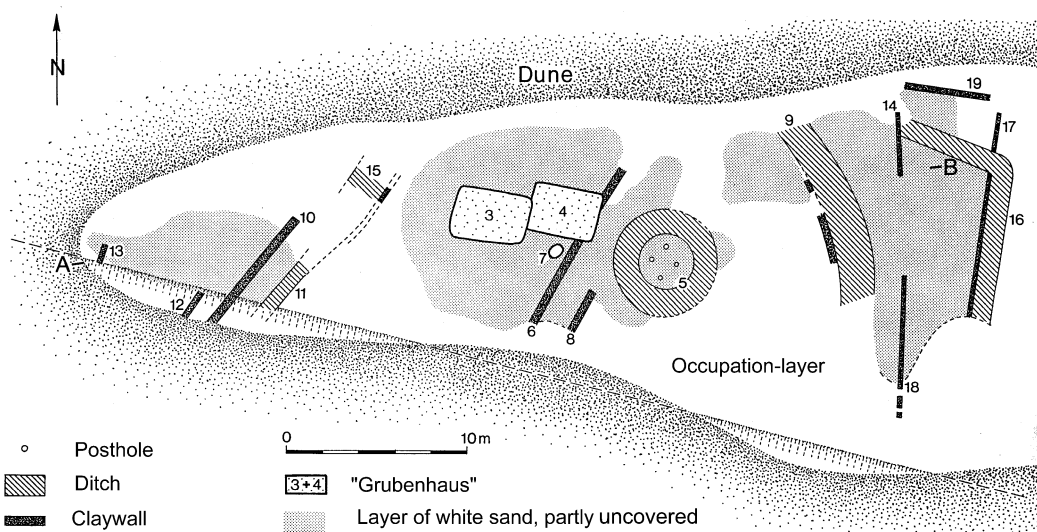


Fig. 2. Plan of the beachmarket structures in the large dune valley, island Amrum, North Friesland.

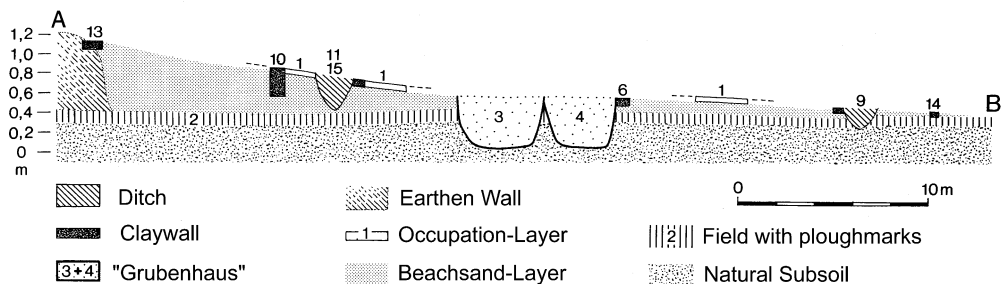


Fig. 3. Generalized and five times raised-in-height stratigraphy of the beachmarket area, island Amrum, North Friesland. See A – B on fig. 2 for location.

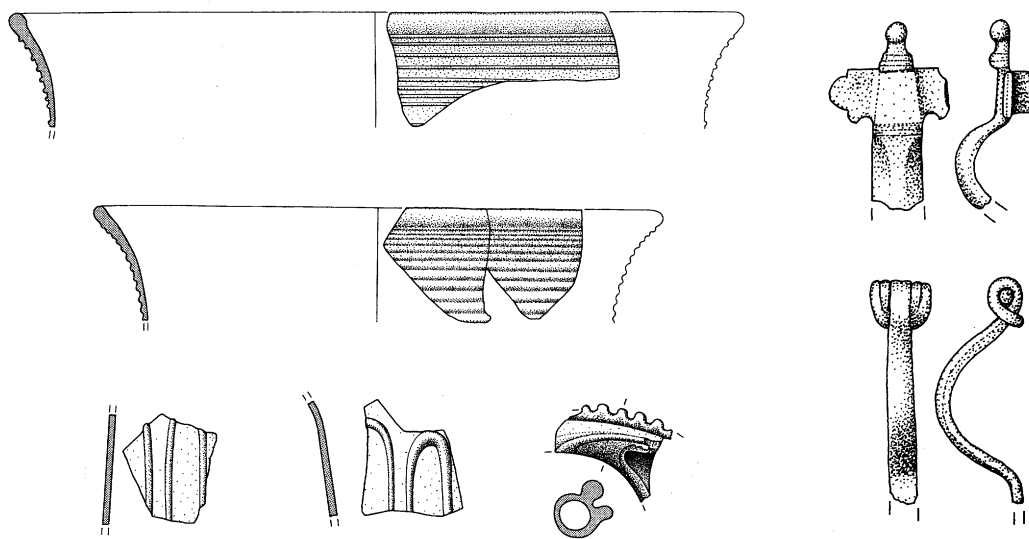


Fig. 4. Frankish glass sherds and fragmented bronze brooches from the beachmarket, island Amrum, North Friesland. Scale approx. 1:1.5.

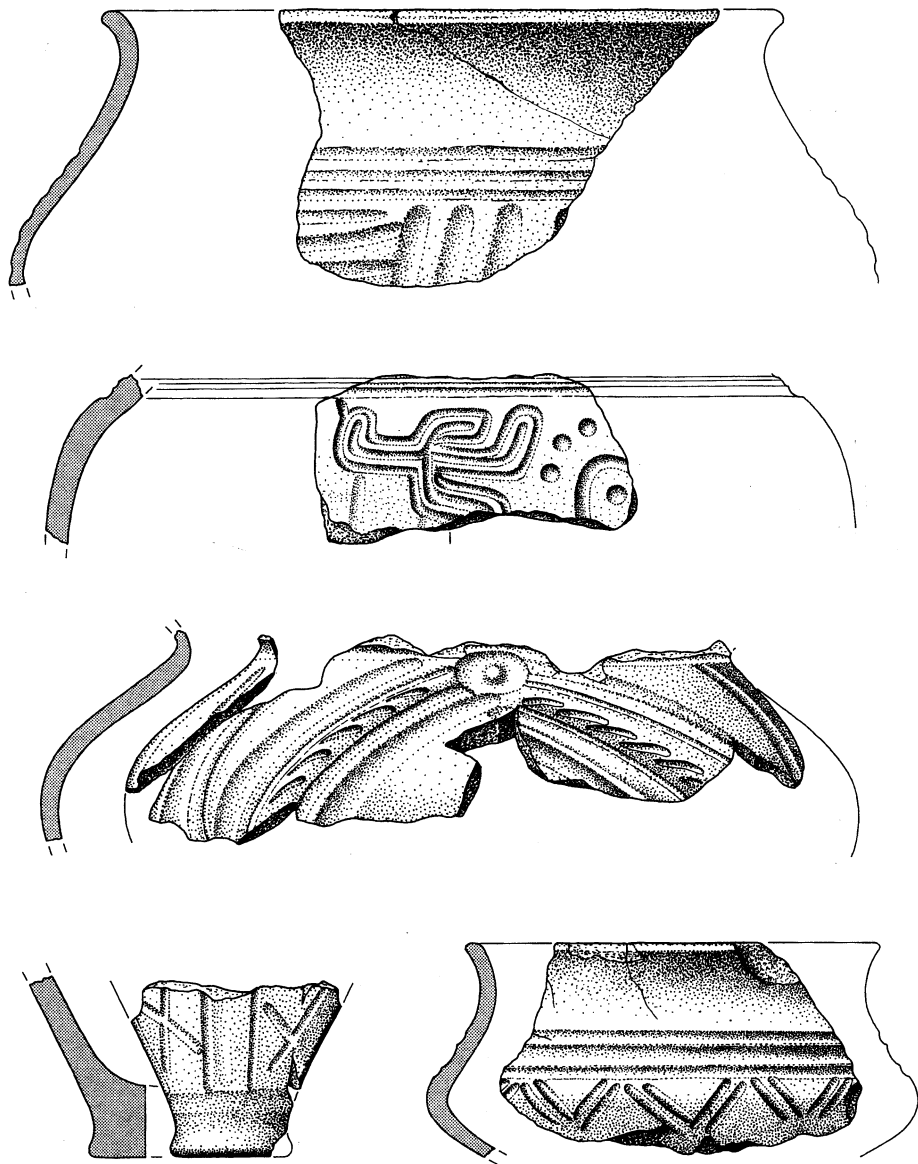


Fig. 5. Potsherds from the occupation-layer and the sunken huts (Grubenhäuser) of the beachmarket, island Amrum, North Friesland. Scale 1:2.

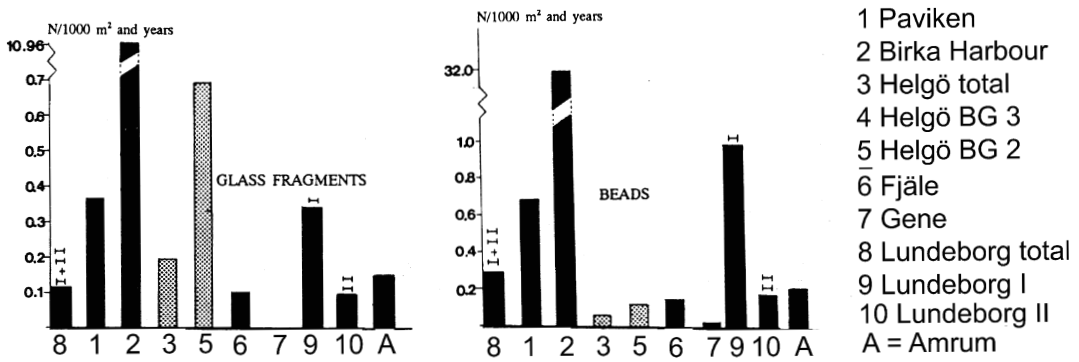


Fig. 6. Amount of finds from the beachmarket on Amrum compared with some Scandinavian tradeplaces. Data after Carlsson (1988) and Thomsen (1994).

Ringtved 1991:65 pp.). The named indicators are used in the following to locate areas with a high potential for centrality and the connected landing-places between the Rhine and the Limfjord (Fig. 7).

From the northern coast of the Netherlands the site Wijndaldum in the region Westergo is known, where Roman and Frankish imports were discovered in settlement excavations. The finds show that this central place took part in the long-distance trade and exchange (Gerrets 1999). From the area around Wijndaldum some bracteates are known (Munksgaard 1978:Fig. 109), and also the rest of the “Terp region” in the northern Netherlands is rich in finds of gold and silver (Knol 1993:222).

Roman imports occurred also in a settlement near Leer at the mouth of the River Ems in Germany (Bärenfänger 1999). Through several bracteates and a golden necklace, the area around Sievern in the Elbe-Weser-triangle is marked as the seat of a Saxon elite (Berger 1991; Hauck 1970). The triangle revealed many Roman and Frankish imports from settlements, graves and hoards (Schön 1999). Frankish glasses in graves further up the rivers were presumably passed on via the Elbe-Weser-triangle (Thieme 2000). The island Helgo-

land (=holy island) might have belonged to the same sphere of influence, as is indicated by the theophoric place-name and a golden bracelet (Laur 2001:163 p.; Ahrens 1966:Fig. 112).

A hoard of golden ring-money is a single indication for trade on the peninsula Eiderstedt (Müller-Wille 1986). The named site on Amrum lies at the outer island rim of the Northfrisian wadden sea, whereas the findspot of the famous golden horns, Gallehus, lies not far away near the sheltered mainland coast in southernmost Denmark (Jørgensen & Vang Petersen 1998: 182 p.). These extraordinary cult objects weighed at least 6.9 kg and seem to represent a powerful elite (Hedeager 1991:Fig. 1).

Next to the north follows Dankirke, south of Ribe (see above). North of Ribe, in the area of Darum/Skonager, a trade route crossing the Jutland peninsula was proposed due to the locality of several bracteates (Hauck 1988:200). Near the Ringkøbing Fjord, a good natural harbour, lay the settlement of Dejbjerg (see above). Further north, at the western mouth of the Limfjord, an area was located with a high potential for centrality and trade, as is indicated by topography, finds and place-

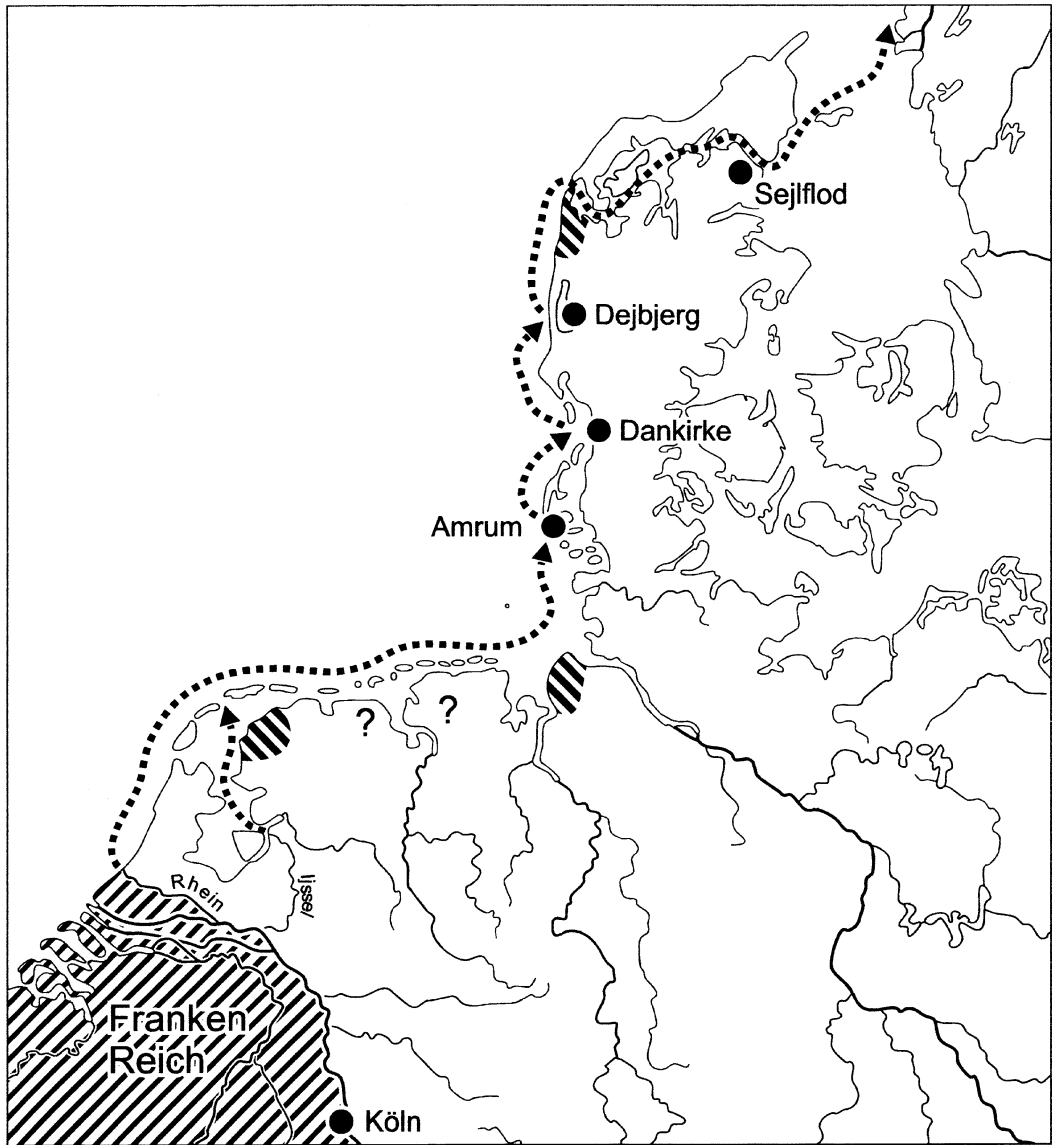


Fig. 7. The traderoute between Rhine and Limfjord around 500 AD. Hatched: areas with high potential of centrality.

names (Fabech & Ringtved 1993). Several Roman finds occurred along the shores further inside the fjord (Lund Hansen 1987). Following the Limfjord to the east, settlements like Bejsebakken are marked by rich metal finds (Ringtved 1999:Fig. 6), but also theophoric placenames indicate centrality (Grønnegaard 2000). Late-Roman and early Frankish glass

beakers from graves in Sejflod and Gudumlund are signs of an elite, which is identifiable also through golden rings, bracteates and place-names (Nielsen 1994:334 pp., 2000:18 p.). Amongst the grave goods of Sejflod were an equal-arm brooch and a pot, which were obviously produced in the Elbe-Weser-triangle and thus might also represent the transfer of

ideas and people (Ringtved 1991:56).

All in all, a coastal trade route between the Rhine and the Limfjord can be described with the named places as stepping-stones. Areas with strong indications for centrality like Westergo, the Elbe-Weser-triangle or the western mouth of the Limfjord were presumably the backbone of this longdistance traderoute.

Ships

We do not know, which types of ships were used around 500 AD along the Northern sea coast. Saxon raiders, according to written sources, used sailing-ships in the Channel at the end of the 5th cent. (Bill et al. 1997:49 p.). It seems likely, therefore, that sailing-boats with their crews, using the advantages of combined sailing and rowing to master the difficult tidal waters, found their way up to the Limfjord. The regular distances of approximately 70 km between Amrum, Dankirke and Dejbjerg might thus represent day-trips with such sailing-boats. But this is only guessing, as we are just starting to get a more detailed picture of the coastal trade around the Northern sea in the migration period.

Note

¹ For details see: Segsneider, M., Fränkisches-Glas im Dünensand – ein Strandmarkt des 5. Jh. auf der nordfriesischen Insel Amrum und die völkerwanderungszeitliche Handelsroute zwischen Rhein und Limfjord. *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 1/2002.

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