

[The Pottery from the Early Medieval Trading Site and Cemetery at Groß Strömkendorf, Lkr. Nordwestmecklenburg](#)

Forschungen zu Groß Strömkendorf III

Bearbeitet von
Torbjörn Brorsson

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Groß Strömkendorf is situated approximately 7 km north of Wismar in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, on the shores of the Baltic Sea. The topography of the area is more or less flat and the village lies close to Wismar Bay, in the shadow of the island of Poel (*Fig. 1*). The area around the village conceals a very long history, containing archaeological finds from almost all prehistoric phases to the Early Medieval period.

Archaeological excavations during the 1980s and 1990s showed that, during the Early Medieval period, near today's village, there was a trading site with widespread connections in the Baltic area. The archaeological evidence clearly indicates that the trading site was settled during the 8th and early 9th century. During this period, the area was part of the territory of the Slavonic Obodrites, who have been in control of the whole western part of Mecklenburg. According to the find material, the site had been in close contact with Scandinavia, the Saxon and Frisian regions in today's lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein, as well as the Rhineland (Jöns 2000, 403). Several aspects of the archaeological artefacts and remains suggest that this site is identical with the *emporium veric*, mentioned in the Frankish annals of the early 9th century (id. 1998a, 131, with further references).

The finds and features discovered during the excavations show that the site was most likely part of some type of trading network. The importance of the site and its position in Northern Europe can be examined through studying different aspects of the excavations, e.g., the structures, metal finds, bones, glass, ceramics, botanical remains etc.

Detailed analyses and studies on the glass finds by A. Pöche (2005) and the animal bones by U. Schmölcke (2004) have already been published as monographs as the first two volumes of the Groß Strömkendorf-series in "Beiträge zur ur- und Frühgeschichte Mecklenburg-Vorpommerns". Further analyses, i.e., on the settlement structure, the graveyard, the amber finds, on the geological and environmental development have already been completed and are going to be published in the present series, "Frühmittelalterliche Archäologie zwischen Ostsee und Mittelmeer". So, this study on the pottery from Groß Strömkendorf has been a part of an interdisciplinary research project.

Both the trading site and the cemetery at Groß Strömkendorf are dated to the 8th and early part of the 9th century. Hence, Groß Strömkendorf can be classified as an Early Medieval site. According to the Danish and Swedish chronological systems, the site was founded during the Vendel Period or the Germanic Iron Age and was abandoned during the Early Viking Age. The site of Groß Strömkendorf is, like Ribe and Birka, of great relevance for the frequent discussions about the dating of the beginning of the Viking Age (Feveile / Jensen 2000, 19; Ambrosiani / Clarke 1998; summing up Svanberg 2003).

Pottery as an archaeological source

Pottery is often regarded as the most common archaeological artefact category from excavations. It is often "classified" as a mass material, which means it takes time to scrutinise it. On the other hand, pottery as an archaeological artefact contains a lot of important information. Ceramic material can be used to create a picture of the society and their contacts, and of course to put it into a chronological framework. Pottery was most likely used every day in the household for cooking, storage and other purposes. It can also be considered as an item that appears in all social structures of a society. This is in contrast to other artefact categories, e.g., gold or silver. These finds may only reflect one part of the population or some special events.

Different pottery types with unique base and rim shapes were most likely well designed for their function. Vessels with round bases were perhaps made for cooking on a hearth, such as a hanging vessel or "Kugeltopf". Vessels with flat bases were perhaps intended for storing purposes. The same applies for the shape of the rim. Some types are better suited for cooking while others are better for storage.

In all likelihood, people were accustomed to the various functions related to different vessels. Moreover, the shape and decoration and their importance as identity markers are another aspect that has to be considered. Their significance when choosing one vessel over the other should not be underestimated. Is it the type of ware or the shape and decoration that determines which vessel to use? For instance, there are coil-built vessel types from

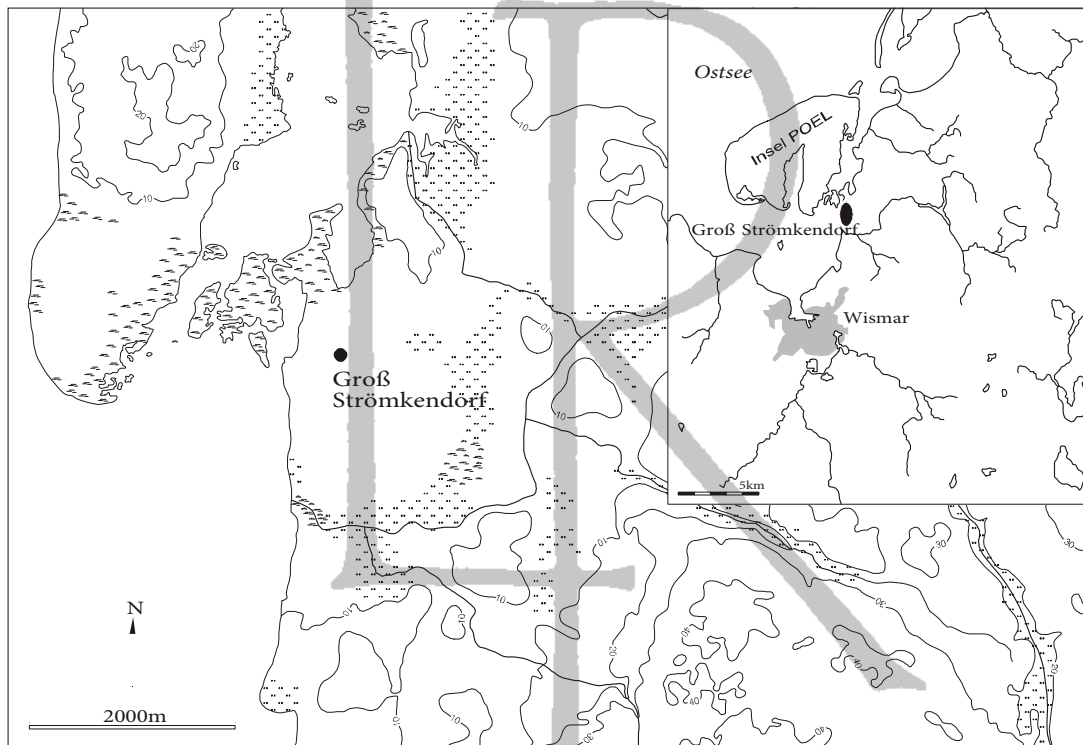


Fig. 1. Location of Grob Strömkendorf, Kr. Nordwestmecklenburg (Pöche 2005, Abb. 1).

Scandinavia as well as the Slavonic area that are of similar ware types (clay, temper in combination with firing technique). That means that the quality of the vessels is the same. Thus, from a practical point of view, they could easily be substituted by one another. Would then a Slavonic person use a Scandinavian vessel in her/his household, or is the tie to the cultural identity displayed in the shape and decoration too strong? The wheel-thrown vessels from Western Europe were of a new and to some extent better technology and, as such, seem to have been introduced as objects of status. The traditional hand-made pots were probably better suited as cooking vessels,

thus the imported vessels were likely used as containers or table ware for serving water, wine or beer. However, when an imported vessel is being introduced, this vessel is, in some aspects, most probably of a superior quality to the local ware.

The remains of wheel-thrown pottery are perhaps not the traces of people from Western Europe. The sherd material may instead indicate different trading routes within Europe, with the vessels produced in the Vorgebirge-Eifel area and transported to settlements, e.g., dorestad in the Netherlands, and then further to other trading sites in Northern Europe.

Historical background and archaeological evidence at Groß Strömkendorf

Historical background

The Royal Carolingian Annals, written in Latin at the beginning of the 9th century, say:

“Year 808 AD. On Godfred’s side stood during this campaign also the Slavonic people that is called the Wilzi, and in due of old hostility to their neighbours the Obodrites, they now peacefully had joined Godfred’s armies: When he returned to his own kingdom, the Wilzi also went home together with the plundered goods they had taken from the Obodrite people. But before Godfred returned he destroyed a trading place located next to the sea, the trading place was by the Danes called Reric. It was a place that had revealed a great deal of taxes to his kingdom. He brought the trading people with him, let his ships set anchor and came together with his people to Sliasthorp” (after Skovgaard-Petersen 1981, 29). From the Frankish Annals of 809 we know in addition that the Obodrite duke Draško was killed at Reric. After that event, Reric was not mentioned again in any contemporaneous written sources, so it likely was abandoned sometime at the beginning of the 9th century.

The location of Reric has been discussed by historians and archaeologists for a long time. First archaeological excavations, which aimed at locating Reric, were conducted in 1937 at a Slavonic hill fort at former Alt-Gaarz, about 14 km north of Groß Strömkendorf (summing up Jantzen / Schirren 1998, 71). These excavations were politically motivated because the national socialists wanted to change the town’s name to Reric. Although the archaeological material from this excavation dates mainly from the 10th century – so it is extremely unlikely that Alt-Gaarz was the same place as Reric – Alt Gaarz changed its name to Rerik in 1938.

In addition, it has been suggested by different scholars that Reric could have been identical with the Slavonic hill forts of Mecklenburg or Starigard/Oldenburg, or that it was situated near Lübeck (summing up Barford 2001, 168) (Fig. 2).

There are several written documents from the 8th and 9th century dealing with the political, economical and religious status of the different parts of Northern Europe. Most of these written sources are concerned with the expansion of the Carolingian Empire. However, there is also some information about the political system in the

southern Baltic region and about the Slavonic and Scandinavian peoples living there. Most of these documents were written by people affiliated with the Carolingians or others and not by people living in the region.

Due to these sources, we know that the political map of Northern Europe was complex when Reric was abandoned at the beginning of the 9th century. The area where Reric most likely was situated bordered on three different cultural areas: the Slavonic, the Carolingian and the Scandinavian (Fig. 3). The Carolingians, having ruled large parts of Western Europe for nearly 100 years, were then allied to a Slavonic tribe, the Obodrites. On the other side stood the Danish king Godfred, the Saxons, and the Slavonic tribe of the Wilzi. The conflicts in Northern Europe reached their climax during the reign of Charlemagne, between 768 and 814 (Brather 2001, 65).

All available information about the Baltic area with special focus on the Slavonic tribes has been compiled and interpreted by several archaeologists and historians. Some important studies are “Die Slawen in Deutschland” (Herrmann 1970), “The Early Slavs” (Barford 2001), “The Ancient Slavs: settlement & society” (Gjorda 1991), “Archäologie der westlichen Slawen” (Brather 2001) and “Die Welt der Wikinger” (Sawyer / Sawyer 2002).

Scandinavian historical research had a special focus on Vikings travelling westward and eastward. Their conquests and trading ventures took place from the late 8th century to the 11th century. The Swedish Vikings (“Svear”) from the Lake Mälaren region travelled eastward to present-day Russia and the Baltic countries. They followed the Russian rivers to the Byzantine Empire. Archaeological research and written sources suggest that the Vikings played an important role in the foundation of the Russian state (Oxenskiöld 1998; Brorsson 2001). This eastern expansion resulted in the foundation of East-Slavonic dominions. Staraja Ladoga and Rurikovo Gorodishche/Novgorod, in present-day Russia, were among the most important centres. The expeditions to the east seem to have been more or less friendly and peaceful.

The Danish Vikings were of vital importance for the political structure in northwestern Europe. The raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumberland in 793 is the first documented Viking attack ever that was followed by a great expansion by Danish Vikings. In



Fig. 2. Map of Northern Europe with the most important sites mentioned in the text.

1. Lindesfarne, 2. Dorestad, 3. Cologne, 4. Mainz, 5. Emden, 6. Kaupang, 7. Birka/Helgö, 8. Grobina, 9. Staraja Ladoga, 10. Ryurikovo Gorodishche, 11. Ribe, 12. Kosel, 13. Hedeby, 14. Elisenhof, 15. Scharstorf, 16. Starigard Oldenburg, 17. Hamburg, 18. Lübeck, 19. Groß Strömkendorf, 20. Rostock-Dierkow, 21. Mecklenburg, 22. Menzlin, 23. Szczecin, 24. Wolin, 25. Trelleborg (Slagelse), 26. Löddeköpinge, 27. Lund, 28. Bjärred, 29. Trelleborg (Scania), 30. Ystad, 31. Järrestad, 32. Åhus.

the following centuries, the Danes conquered and ruled a great part of the countries bordering the North Sea, including England. Norwegian Vikings colonised parts of Scotland, Ireland and northwestern England, Iceland and Greenland. The Viking Leif Eriksson reached as far as northern America.

According to the archaeological evidence, there can be no doubt that Scandinavians in these days also settled in the Slavonic areas, at the southern Baltic rim (summing up Jöns 2006; Jagodziński 2006). A ctual research on sites such as Ralswiek on Rügen, Rostock Dierkow at the border of the Warnow river, Menzlin at the Peene river as well as Truso in the estuary of the Vistula and of course Groß Strömkendorf in the Wismar Bay, have given clear evidence of families of Scandinavian origin living there.

The history of the Slavonic people and culture is also one of expansion. The great Slav expansion took place

much earlier than that of the Vikings, beginning already in the 6th century. It had its origin in the area north of the Carpathians in Eastern Europe. The Slavs moved to the south, as well as to the west and east. The expansion to the west stopped when they came in contact with the indigenous Germanic population and the Carolingian Empire. The river Elbe became an important frontier between the Slavonic population, the Saxons, and the Carolingians. During the late 7th century, the Slavonic expansion had reached as far as to the Baltic Sea coast, and for a long period the tribes were a potential military threat to the Carolingian Empire in the west. Some tribes within the West Slavonic community known from the written sources were the Obodrites, the Wilzi, the Ranese, the Wagrians, and the Pomeranians. The individual tribes had their own centres for administration and commercial purposes (Clarke / Ambrosiani 1993, 96; Müller-Wille 2002).

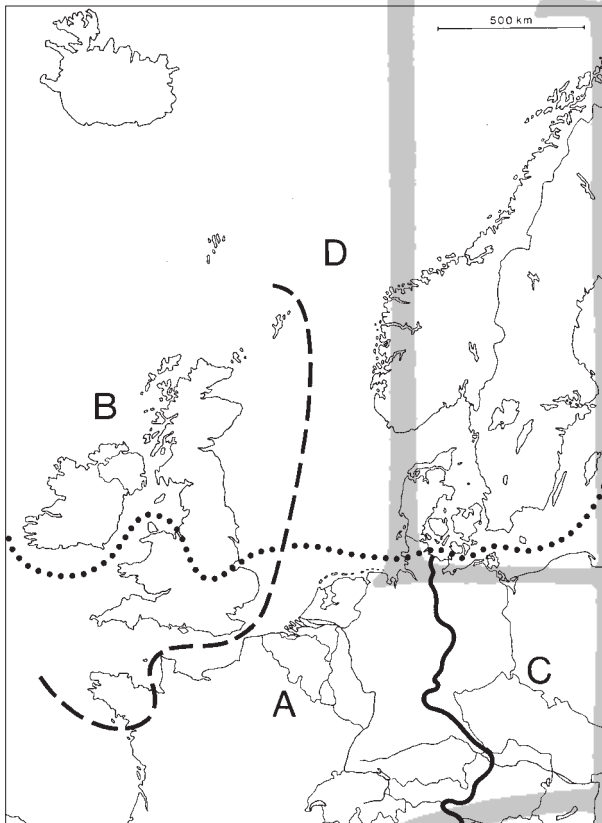


Fig. 3. Central, Western and Northern Europe. Sub-regions of Christianisation. A: Central and Western Europe; B: British Isles, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic (British, Irish, Pictish) domains; C: Eastern Central Europe, West Slavonic region; D: Northern Europe and Anglo-Scandinavian Britain (after Müller -Wille 1994, Fig. 2).

The involvement of different Slavonic tribes in the war between the Saxons and the Franks increased the Frankish interest in the Slavs. This was an important reason why the Franks in 789 invaded and conquered the Wilzi territory. During the 9th century, power centralised in the West Slavonic region under the strong influence of the Carolingian Empire (Barford 2001, 107).

Thanks to various written documents, of which the Royal Frankish Annals may be the most important, we know a lot about the contacts between the Carolingian Empire and the Slavs. However, there is only little information about the contacts within the West Slavonic tribes and about the contacts with northern Europe. The knowledge about the early Slavs' daily life, their burial traditions, social rankings etc. is even more limited (Brather 2004; Dulicicz 2006). The identity and ethnic origin of the Slavonic people is also an important issue.

The historical background of the political situation in northern Europe is not only important for the dis-

cussions on the possibility that the trading site of Groß Strömkendorf may be the site of the *emporium reric*. It also contains valuable information for the interpretation of the pottery material found. The pottery bears information about cultural origin, dating and further aspects, e.g., trade and contacts between different regions in Northern Europe. Combining this information with the historical sources may help to illustrate the political map in the region.

Archaeological evidence

In the middle of the 1950s, Schuldts published a study of the pottery from the Groß Strömkendorf site (Schuldt 1955), mainly concentrated on potsherds from the Funnel beaker culture and the Early Slavonic period in the region. The Sukow and Feldberg types dominated the Slavonic pottery inventory (Fig. 4). Since the 1930s, the site was well known to amateur archaeologists who had collected a large amount of archaeological material, dominated by bones and Slavonic potsherds (t ummuscheit 2003b, 208). During the 1960s and 1970s, minor archaeological efforts were made at Groß Strömkendorf. At the end of the 1980s, Frank Wietrzichowski started to excavate in the area and soon realised that the place most likely was a trading site (Wietrzichowski 1993). Dendrochronological samples and the pottery suggested that the site belonged to the 8th century. In light of these finds, the dendrochronological datings, and the Frankish annals, Wietrzichowski interpreted the place as the former *Reric* (ibid. 1993, 43 ff.).

New excavations at Groß Strömkendorf, conducted by Hauke Jöns, began in 1995 and continued until 1999. They were organised by the "Institut für ur- und Frühgeschichte der Universität Kiel" and the "Archäologisches Landesmuseum Mecklenburg-Vorpommern"; and funded by the "deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft" with the support of the state employment agency in Wismar (Jöns 1998b, 35). In connection with the archaeological excavations, geophysical investigations, analyses of aerial photographs as well as palaeobotanical, zoological and anthropological investigations were performed. A preliminary study on the new excavated ceramics from the second half of the 1990s was conducted by the author (Brorsson 2002b). The excavations were carried out each year between March and October or November (t ummuscheit 2003b, 11 ff.). The topsoil was removed by excavating machines until the virgin soil became visible. The discovered features were documented on a scale of 1:50 and stratigraphically excavated in levels of 0.10 m. The position of the finds was measured in x, y and z-coordinates. After washing, the finds were counted and divided into different artefact groups.

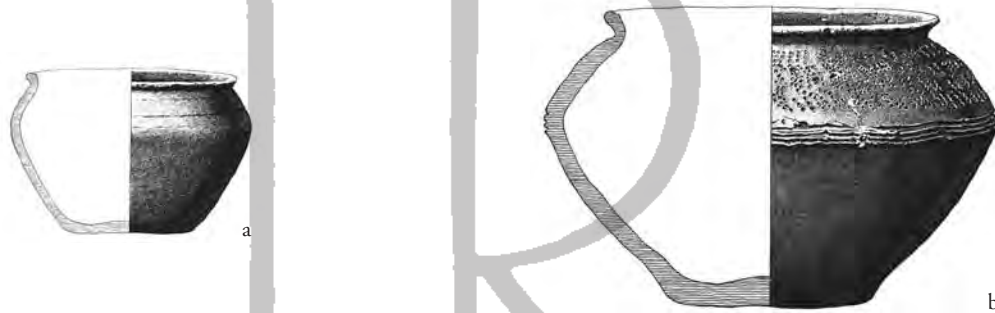


Fig. 4. Vessels of Sukow (a) and Feldberg (b) found at Groß Strömkendorf during excavations in 1955 (after Schuldt 1955, Abb. 117, 119a). Scale 1:4.

The outline and actual location of the trading place was confirmed early into the investigation. It was situated in a south-north direction along the shoreline (Fig. 5). The main excavated area was a narrow and long band, approximately 25 m wide and 550 m long, parallel to the coastline (excavation area No. 3). This area most likely constituted the core of the trading settlement. Another area (excavation area No. 17), approximately 50 m north-east of the first trench, comprised the cemetery and the oldest phase of the trading activity.

A considerable part of the trading site has been destroyed by sea-level fluctuations and by the effects of coastal erosion. Only about 10 % of the former trading site have been exposed so far. Ca. 40 % have to be regarded as destroyed by coastal erosion.

The excavated area consists of more than 1,000 features, comprising pit houses, wells, hearths, ditches, and different types of pits. In some areas, cultural layers were also excavated. The total number of pit houses is about 100, and there are ca. 85 constructions interpreted as wells. Approximately 30 of these wells contained waterlogged wood (Tummuscheit 2003b, 213).

The finds from the settlement are mostly of Slavonic origin, but a significant amount of the finds were imports. Apart from the pottery, lava querns from the Eifel region, sherds of funnel beakers made of glass, metal dress-fittings and weapons were also found, pointing towards a Carolingian and Saxon-Frisian origin. A large amount of objects came from Scandinavia. Some examples are whetstones from Norway or western Sweden, metal dress-fittings and a horse-shaped fibula dated to ca. 700 (Klingärtner / Jöns 2000). Finds of dirhams point to an Arabic contact. Other coins at Groß Strömkendorf are Frisian sceattas and Carolingian deniers.

Some of the identified crafts at Groß Strömkendorf are antler and bone working, most likely for the manu-

facture of combs. Glass working and objects of amber indicate that bead production took place at the settlement. Textile craft is represented by loom weights and spindle whorls. Metal work is attested by different types of slag, moulds and crucibles.

The pit houses and the wells are of great importance for the study of the pottery, since these types of constructions contain a large amount of ceramic finds and several wells are dated by dendrochronology.

Altogether, 95 samples of beech, oak, ash, pine and alder wood from 28 wells and one post have been dated by dendrochronology. The features are located in different areas of the excavation site, and the dates stretch mainly from the first half of the 8th century to 811 (App. 1). A few wells could only be dated to after 654 or 722 due to the fact that the tree bark is missing and thus the exact date can not be established. The majority of the structures date between 761 and 786. These datings are certainly an important contribution to the interpretation of the Groß Strömkendorf site, the features and the artefacts, and in this special case, the distribution of the pottery. However, the dating of the wood does not always reflect the year the feature was built and the pottery was deposited. The dendrochronological method dates the year when the tree was cut, but the timber could have been used a considerable number of years later. In addition, the pottery was most likely only deposited after the wells were abandoned (Tummuscheit 2003a). It is also likely that ceramics from structures, e.g., wells from 780 and 806, may have been deposited during the same year, since timber from different years could have been used in the same well. This is the result of the archaeological interpretation of the settlement structures.

The structure of the trading site has been analysed by Astrid Tummuscheit (2003a). In the study, Tummuscheit divided the settlement into three different

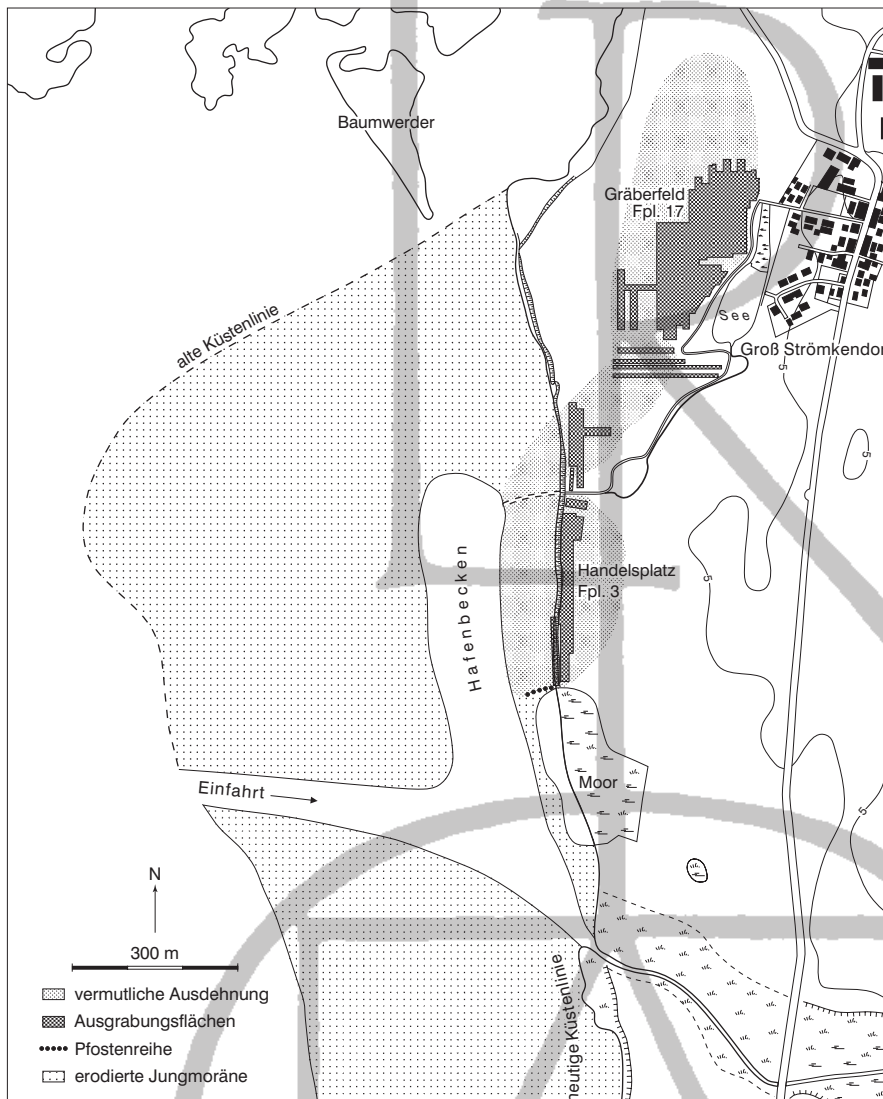


Fig. 5. The position of the trading site and cemetery at Groß Strömkendorf (after Jön s 2000).

phases. Each phase contained pit houses and wells. The construction of the pit houses was studied in detail, thus leading to a further division based on the number of posts, hearths, and the position of the structures. The oldest settlement phase was dated to the first half of the 8th century. It was located in the north-eastern part, in area No. 17, the same area where the cemetery was discovered (Fig. 6). The second phase, in the north of area No. 3, was dated to around 760. The last excavated phase was the southernmost part, dated from 780 until the end of the settlement at the beginning of the 9th century. According to the study of the settlement phases, the dating of the central area is uncertain. However, the dendrochronological datings and the study of the ceramics mainly indicate a quite late date.

A cemetery comprising more than 250 graves, dated from around the middle of the 8th century to the beginning of the 9th century, was exposed in the vicinity of

the settlement. The cemetery represents a great variety of burial customs, with different types of cremation and inhumation graves (Paddenber g 2000; Gerds in prep.). There are inhumation graves with and without vessels. A few graves contain wooden coffins. One possible chamber grave indicating a West European origin was found. The cremation graves were divided into urn graves, cremation pits, cremation layers, and cremation deposits. The urn graves contained cremated bones, and, on some occasions, human bones were also found outside the urn. Many of the urns were completely destroyed, making it sometimes impossible to determine the urn type. The cremation pits contained ashes, cremated human bones and in some cases grave goods. The cremation layers were layers with ashes and cremated human bones. The cremation deposits are classified as concentrations of cremated human bones without a certain grave pit. They were mostly deposited into open ditches of mounds,

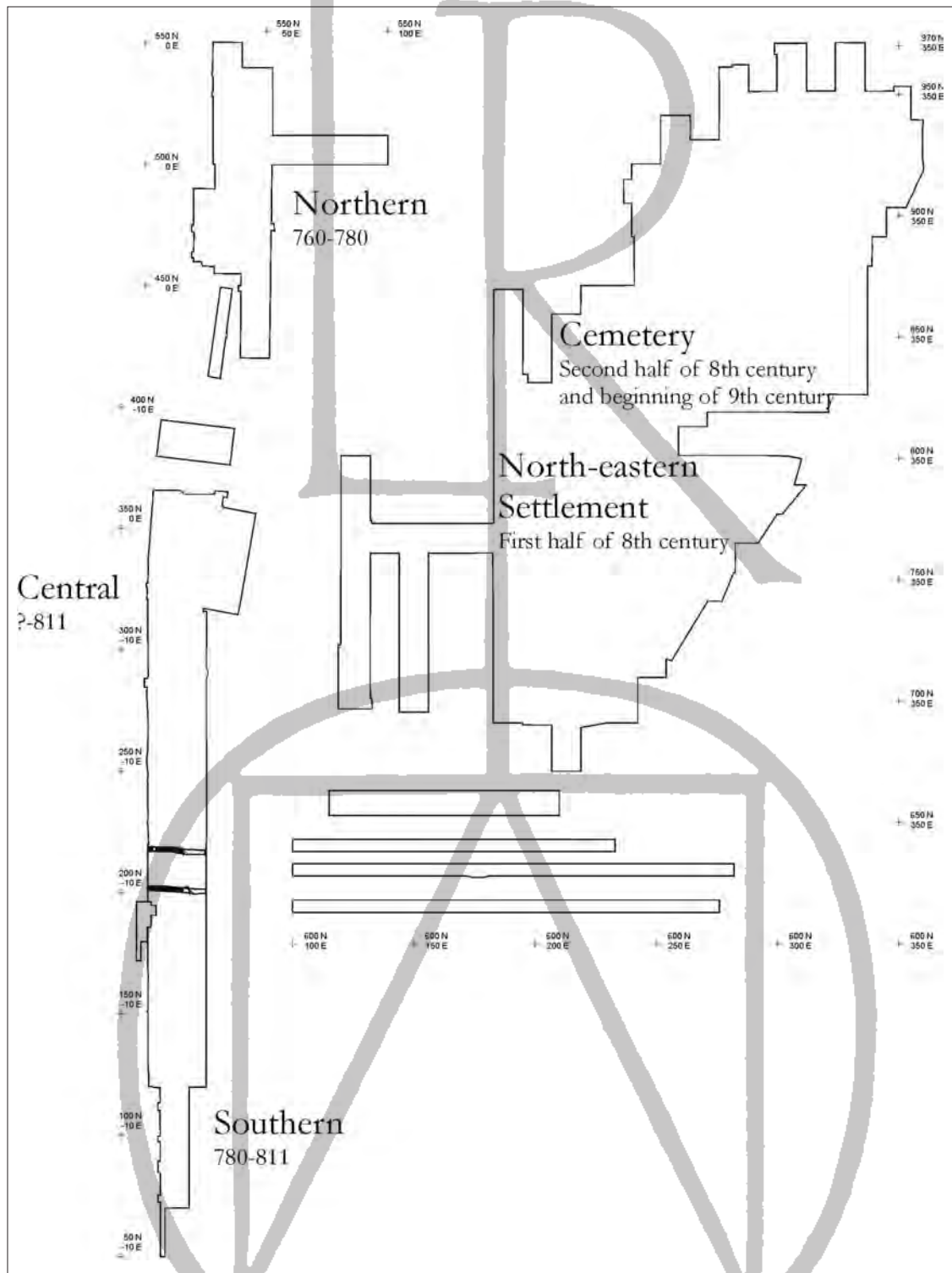


Fig. 6. Preliminary datings of the settlement phases and the cemetery at Groß Strömkendorf. The cemetery and north-eastern area is situated northeast of the northern area. See Fig. 5.

without any remains of a vessel or other grave goods. In addition, six boat graves and several animal graves were found. Some of the animal graves may be interpreted as sacrifices instead of graves (Jöns 1998b, 43). The boat graves are most likely connected to the Scandinavian population, since they were typical clinker-built Scandinavian vessels with iron rivets joining the overlapping planks (id. 1998a, 134). Some of the graves contained objects from different regions in Europe. The grave goods and the burial customs point towards contacts with the Frankish kingdom as well as with the Frisian, Scandinavian and Saxon settlement areas.

The cemetery is a significant contribution to the knowledge about the composition of the population of Groß Strömkendorf, being an important example of early urbanisation in the southern Baltic region. It is noteworthy that our information about the Slavs and their material culture as well as the hill forts is fairly good, whereas the knowledge concerning their rural settlements and burial customs is poor (Barford 2001, 199 ff.).

In 1999, aerial photographs of some kind of underwater cropmarks, in a distance of about 80 m from the sea-shore, were revealed. The filling of a roughly rectangular depression, 750 m long and 150 m wide, had enhanced the growth of water plants, showing as a dark anomaly on the photographs. This structure may be interpreted as the harbour basin of the settlement (Tummscheit 2003b, 212).

Aims and problems

The pottery from Groß Strömkendorf is essential for interpreting contacts in Northern Europe during the Early Medieval time. Traditional studies have put a focus on the shape of the vessels and the decoration, and these elements should also be integrated in the study of the ware.

But other aspects of the pottery, e.g. ware, morphology, manufacturing technique (including the choice of raw material) and vessel building technique allow a look beyond dating and cultural affiliation. For example, the clay and temper material may indicate whether different vessels were made in the same area. Still, such analyses must be combined with a typological and/or chronological study. In general, this approach to ceramic material is more and more accepted (Daim 2000).

Archaeology is a research subject where the scientists reconstruct history by combining small pieces of information from various sources. The same holds true for the pottery. We normally do not have the opportunity to investigate complete vessels. It is instead the small pieces of a vessel, the sherds that are our base material, which we must investigate and interpret. In this study, the ware is of the same significance as the vessel shape and decoration.

It is important to record the clearest attributes of the vessel, such as decoration or rim shape. In addition, the ware can be analysed, especially in the comparison of ware types from the Baltic region to those from Western Europe. However, since people travelled and brought along skills and/or objects, ceramics found may be copies from other regions, making the reconstruction of history rather difficult. The same source critical aspects apply for other analyses. Clays from, e.g., northern Germany and Poland, are geologically similar to those from Scandinavia, because the ice during the last Ice Age caused a mixture of the soil in the Baltic area. This has an effect on how to analyse pottery sherds. Since exact methods of pinpointing the origin of the vessels are currently missing, the analyses must be compared with other pottery studies. The investigation of the pottery material from Groß Strömkendorf includes a quantitative study. However, there are also some problems to this aspect. The deposition in the pits, the houses, the wells and even in the graves during the Viking Age may not have been deliberate. Additionally, a pit may contain unusual pottery types, for which it could be difficult to establish whether they are from different period or represent some kind of special function. Other activities, such as modern agriculture or the changing of the sea level, could also affect the study.

These are some of the basic conditions when dealing with archaeological material and especially pottery. However, the artefacts and features must be analysed and investigated to gain a trustworthy picture of the settlement, the society and the people that stand behind the archaeological material. In consideration of this background, the following topics will be studied:

1. The settlement structure is a vital problem. Can the pottery investigation add to the understanding of this problem?
2. Are the traders among those buried at the cemetery? If so, can an investigation of the grave pottery shed some light on this aspect?
3. What are the differences and similarities between the cemetery vessels and the trading site pottery?
4. To what extent are the ceramics at Groß Strömkendorf of local or foreign origin?
5. What kinds of Slavonic pottery were found at Groß Strömkendorf, and what are the similarities and differences between the different types?
6. Can the pottery contribute to the discussion concerning Groß Strömkendorf being ancient *Reric*, as mentioned in ancient written sources?