

# The development of rural house types in the old Danish region 800-1500 A.D.

Die Entwicklung von Bauernhaustypen im alten Dänemark (800-1500 n. Chr.)

Développement des types des maisons rurales dans la région danoise ancienne 800-1500 après J.-Ch.

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## Introduction

The main part of this article is part of my master-degree made nearly 10 years ago at the University of Aarhus (Skov 1992; 1994, 139-162). At that time there were 171 localities from 800-1200 A.D. with remains of more or less well-defined rural houses in the old Danish region, which then included Scania, Halland and Blekinge in Southern Sweden and Schleswig in

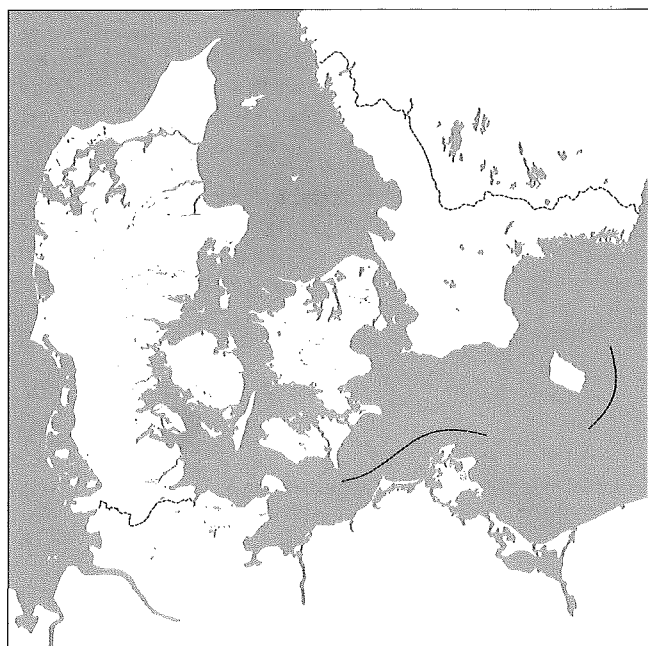


Fig. 1. Viking Age and Medieval Denmark covered parts of southern Sweden and northern Germany.

northern Germany. Figure 1 shows medieval Denmark. The number of localities with rural house remains has grown to between 200 and 300 localities from the old Danish region, mainly because of new excavations, but of course the fact that the period has been extended with 300 years also matters.

## Dating and definition of the house types

In most cases the dating of the buildings has been made by the archaeologist who excavated the specific site. The datings are especially related to the dating of the finds in and around the houses. Especially

pottery and coins have often given a rather narrow dating frame. In rare cases well-preserved wood has made a dendrochronology dating possible. In other cases C-14 dating has been used. Of course local relations between postholes etc. have also been used for dating.

The definition of the house types mentioned in this article can seem rather simplified, but this has been necessary in order to make the picture as clear as possible. I am fully aware of the fact that some of the types of houses mentioned are not independent types but merely a variation of main types.

## The development of different house types

Based on the many finds it is possible to determine the development of the different house types. Figure 2 shows the demarcation of time with respect to the different house types.

House material from the early Viking Age consists almost entirely of three-aisled longhouses and pit houses, while in the middle and late Viking Age series of new house types and construction trends are introduced: houses with outer support posts along the walls ("Trelleborg-houses"), single-aisled houses where the walls alone bear the roof, houses with

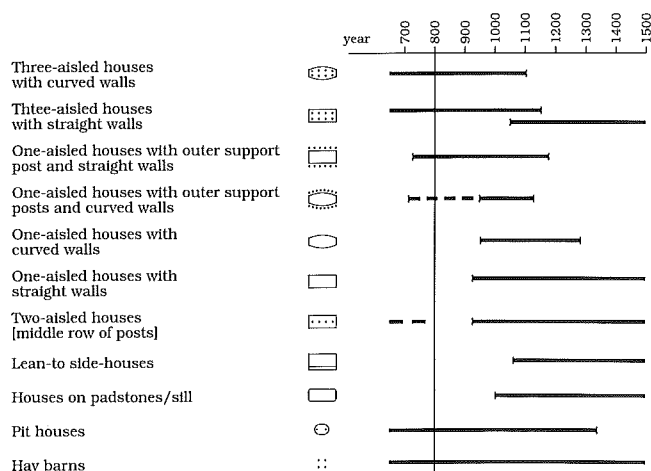


Fig. 2. This figure shows the demarcation of time with respect to the different house types present in the old Danish region 800-1500 A.D.

projections and houses with padstones/sill also show up. Especially timber-framed houses and similar types seem to be connected to padstones (Rensbro 2002). There is a rise of central-pillar houses (two-aisled houses). These again begin to emerge in the early Middle Age.

The following diagrams (fig. 3-11) show numbers of localities in which different house types are represented in blocks of 25 years. Long lasting houses will therefore be represented in more blocks. Frequently, the diagrams give the cases an impression of the rise and fall of specific house-constructions. Note that

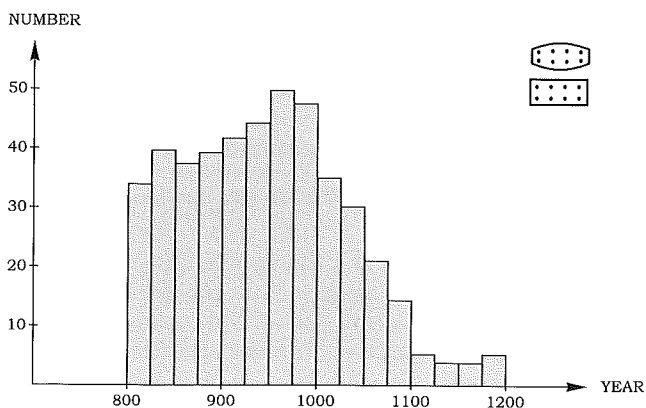


Fig. 3. Number of localities with three-aisled houses in the old Danish region.

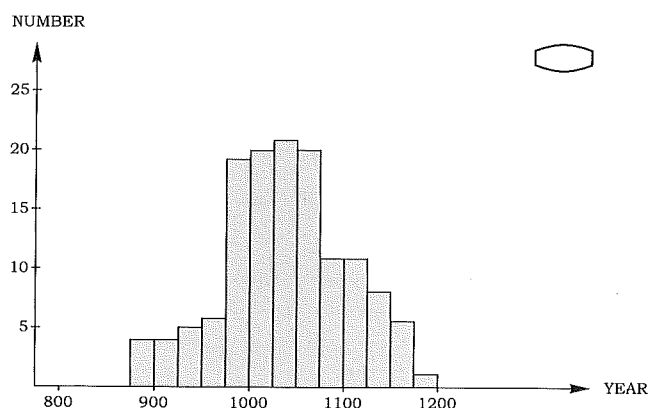


Fig. 6. Number of localities with one-aisled houses with curved walls in the old Danish region.

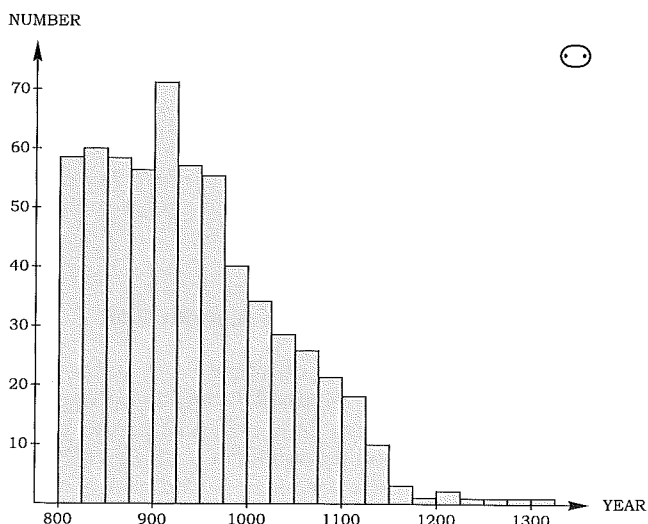


Fig. 4. Number of localities with pit houses in the old Danish region.

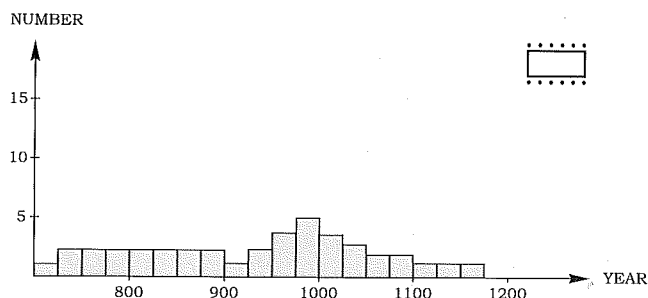


Fig. 7. Number of localities with one-aisled houses with outer support posts and straight walls.

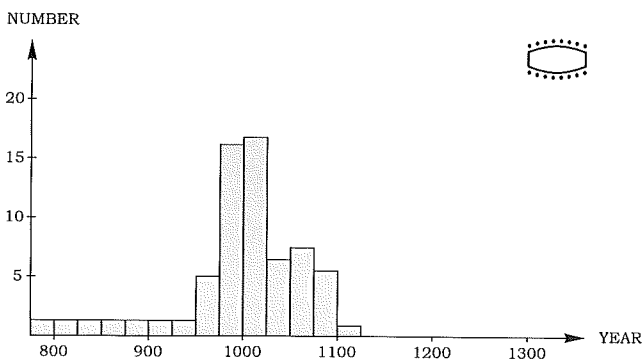


Fig. 5. Number of localities with one-aisled houses with outer support posts and curved walls.

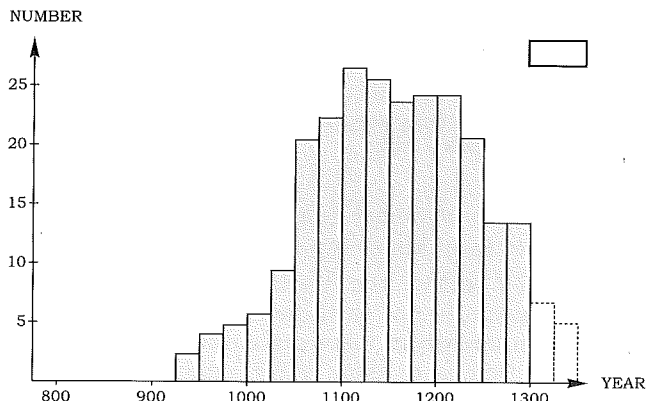
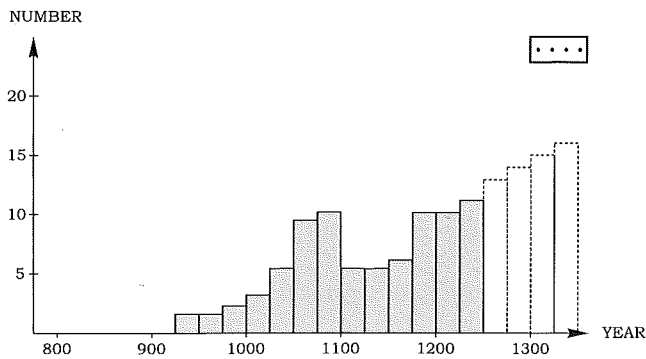
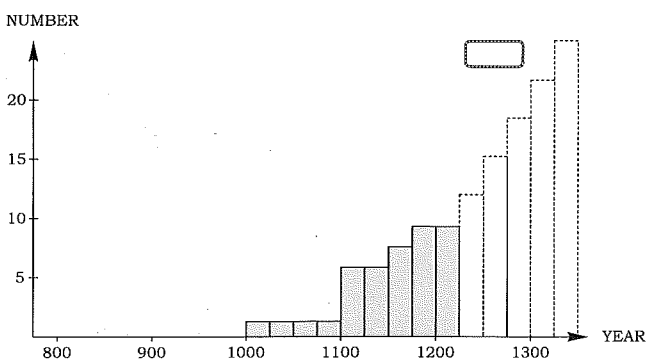


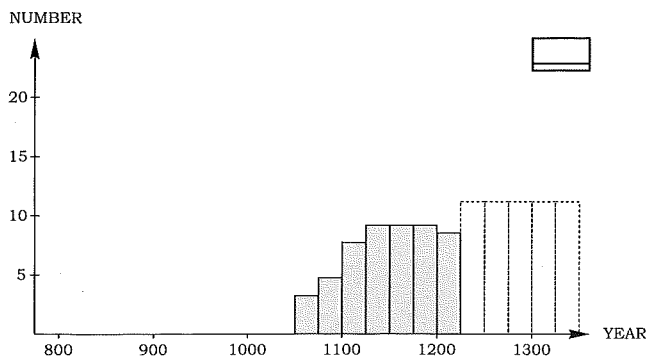
Fig. 8. Number of localities with one-aisled houses with straight walls in the old Danish region. The dotted line suggests the development if all material since 1992 was looked over.



**Fig. 9.** Number of localities with two-aisled houses (middle row of posts) in the old Danish region. The dotted line suggests the development if all material since 1992 was looked over.



**Fig. 11.** Number of localities with houses on padstones/sill in the old Danish region. Dotted line suggests the development if all material since 1992 was looked over.

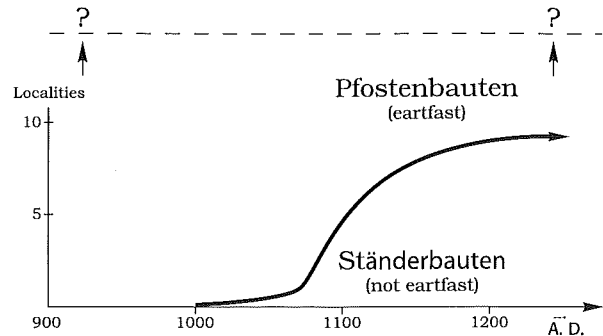


**Fig. 10.** Number of localities with lean-to side-houses in the old Danish region. Dotted line suggests the development if all material since 1992 was looked over.

some of the mentioned types of rural houses are variations of main house types.

Figure 12 shows the transition from earth-fast (Pfostenbauten) to not earth-fast vertical post houses (Ständerbauten) which takes place during the Medieval Period in Denmark (Skov 1994, 143; Zimmermann 1998, 119). This development probably defines the advance of the timber-framed house.

There is much to suggest that especially Southwest-Jutland was a region of innovation for the new house



**Fig. 12.** This figure shows the transition from earth fast (Pfostenbau) to not earth fast vertical post houses (Ständerbau) which took place during the Medieval period in the old Danish region.

types that appeared in the Viking Age (800-1050 A.D.). This should be seen against the background of the close contacts, which this part of the country had with the Carolingian Kingdom and Friesland.

### The material of the houses

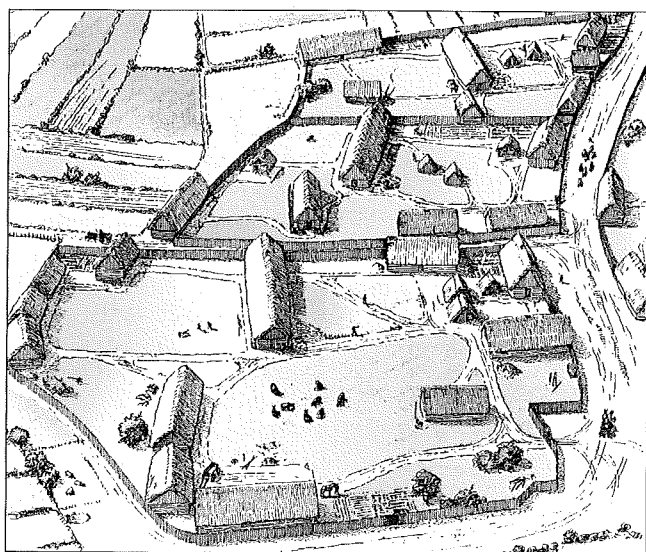
The walls of the houses were either made by wattle-and-daub or by wooden planks. In West- and North-west-Jutland walls of turf were used in a combination with wooden planks. The roof material was straw, reed or wooden roofing shingle. Regional variants as heather and seaweed are known from West-Jutland and the island Læsø. Tile as roof material was probably only present on the main buildings on larger estates, castles, monasteries, churches and in urban milieu in the late Middle Ages.

### An example of the layout of a farm unit

In some cases the layout of whole farm units from the Viking Age and early Medieval time has been excavated. These layouts show how different house types easily could be combined on one farm unit (fig. 13). The case shown here is from Vorbasse in Jutland and the situation is from early Viking Age (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century). The drawing above shows the whole layout of the village Vorbasse (Roesdahl 1989, 114). Fences surround each of the seven farms which consist of three-aisled mainhouses, stables, pit houses and wells. The drawing below shows how the southern part of Vorbasse might have looked in the same period (Birkebæk 1983, 38). In principle the layout of the Medieval Danish farm is not very different from the example from the early Viking Age. The buildings of the farm are situated on the croft which has often been marked by a fence. There is a tendency that the unit gets smaller between the early Viking age and the Medieval period. Still, the types of houses change as shown on figure 2.

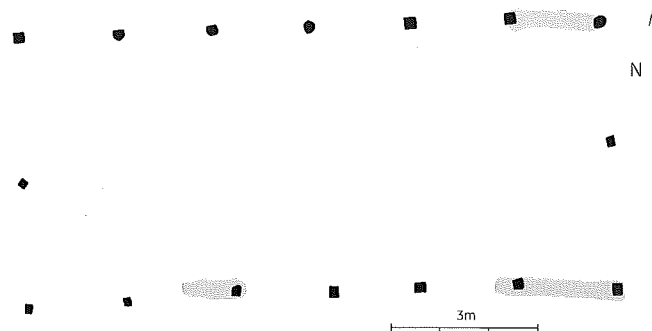
### Unique timber-framed house from 1396

Finally a quite unique timber-framed house, from Gammel Moesgård near Århus, with all posts pointed and rammed deeply into the ground with a pile-driver

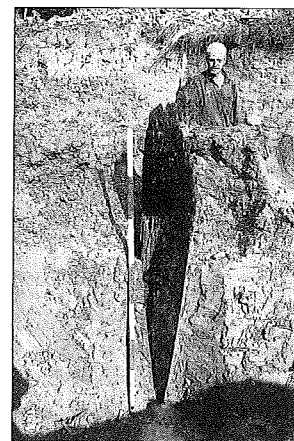


**Fig. 13.** The layout of the village Vorbasse in Jutland (above). Fences divide the village into seven farms. The reconstruction drawing of the southern part of the village clearly shows that each farm consists of different types of buildings (below).

should be mentioned (Skov 2000; 2001, 822-828). All posts were of oak tree and the dendrochronology tells us that the wood was cut in the winter 1395/96, and this indicates that the building was erected in 1396. The posts were driven 2.4 m down into the clayey subsoil. The layout of the 12.20 m long and 5.50 m wide building is not special if one only looks at the surface (fig. 14). What is special and unique is the fact that the wall posts are rammed so deeply into the firm subsoil. This indicates that the building was in two storeys, as this effort would be totally unnecessary for a house



**Fig. 14.** Ground plan of the main building of Gammel Moesgård, dated 1396. All wall posts in the multi-storey house were rammed down to 2.4 m into the clayey subsoil. The grey part indicates the remnants of the wall groove for the sill. Drawings: J. Kirkeby, Photo: H. Skov.



with just one storey. The systematism in the layout of the wall posts indicates a timber-framed building. This building was probably the manor house of a small estate. Apart from an unpublished case from Zealand, the Gammel Moesgård house is unique.

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