

TAARNBY – A RURAL SETTLEMENT THROUGH 800 YEARS ON AMAGER, DENMARK

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In 1993-94 The Copenhagen District Museum Council excavated a farmstead at Taarnby, Amager, which lay in the path of a new motorway leading to the planned bridge between Denmark and Sweden. Although a rescue operation, the Taarnby excavation is the first comprehensive archaeological study of a Medieval farmstead since Axel Steensberg's pioneer work some 40 years ago (*Kristiansen 1994*).

Resources and economy

The village of Taarnby, placed on the western side of the island of Amager, had access to extensive meadowland ideal for cattle keeping. In the 17th century Amager counted as one of the areas with the largest number of cattle and it is to be presumed that there were a fair number in the Middle Ages (the period from the 11th to the 16th century in Denmark). Furthermore the shallow waters beyond the meadows provided good fishing resources. To the west 150 hectares of arable land existed until this century and the soil is of high quality (*Fig. 1*). The tilled land was not regularly laid out for fallow, but in principle was tilled and sown every year.

Copenhagen to the north and Dragør to the south rapidly absorbed any surplus agricultural products. In the 15th century Copenhagen was developing into Denmark's administrative center and capital city. Dragør was an important commercial center with respect to the rich herring commerce around the Sound. From the 12th century onwards, the king as well as the church had large interests in Taarnby. Bishop Absalon (A.D. 1201) owned both land and a home farm in Taarnby. According to the Roskilde Diocese's cadastre from 1370, the bishop's demesne at Taarnby formed the basis for the largest and most comprehensive of the diocese's estates.

The development of the farmstead

1350 sq.m of the 7500 sq.m large excavation consisted of a 1,2 m thick cultural layer. The excavation revealed the remains of the central part of a farmstead dating from the 12th to 18th century comprising 31 house remains and 15 wells. Furthermore the subsoil revealed the remains of 1400 structures. The dwelling- and outhouses are stationary within the cultural layer. 70 % of the excavated buildings can on the whole be classified as outhouses, but no stables/byres were found with certainty.

It is possible, thanks to datable artifacts and stratigraphy, to separate the various buildings and activity areas into several phases. Within these phases the principle outline of the farmstead's development and structural plan arrangement can be surmised.

In the 13th century the farmstead consisted of a succession of dwelling house and outhouse complexes. At one point this complex is demarcated by a croft-ditch.

In the 14th and 15th century the farmstead's close is expanded northwards, and the new northern boundary is then situated beyond the excavation limits. Moreover, during the same phase, the largest of all registered buildings (27 m long) was built as an angular building on the site. Later the farmstead resumes its previous size and as such can be archaeologically documented up to the 18th century.

Building techniques

At present we can follow a structural development in building technique starting with posthole buildings in the 12th century followed by buildings with a combination of post holes with or without stone edgings, post bearing stones, ground sills and uneven, diffuse small sillrows consisting of 10 to 30 cm large stones (*Fig. 2*). In the later Middle Ages sills of large (40-60 cm) and well placed stones are introduced. Post holes can figure as a part of the wall construction, but apart from the two houses registered in the subsoil, no buildings were found built only with earth dug posts. As a rule the walls were roof bearing, although we do have a few ambiguous ridge-post constructions. In a few cases extensions were registered.

The primitive timber-framed walls were of mud-and-wattle, and one of the buildings had turf-built walls. We could not substantiate the presence of stave- or bolehouses. Within one of the buildings we found burnt turf, probably the remains of the inner partial roofing. A few solitary fragments of painted window panes dating from the 13th century were found.

Artifacts

The finds were elicited as the result of stratigraphical excavation. As expected pottery and faunal remains dominated among the over 7000 artifacts although a broad spectrum of personal and everyday artifacts were to be found too. A 15th century well contained three well preserved planes with their wooden handles still intact and part of a plough. Most of the finds date from the Middle- and Late Middle Ages (13th-16th century).

Some 1600 litres of soil samples were collected and two pilot-projects on the archaeobotanical evidence and the fishbones have given promising results. The results of these analyses show a level of agricultural versatility, comprising a wide range of cultivated plants as well as the historically documented barley and oat (Robinson in *Kristiansen 1994*, 112). During the summer, the shallow waters off the coast were fished for herring by net or pound net (Enghoff in *Kristiansen 1994*, 106-109).

Most of the ca. 75 kg recovered pottery was locally produced. However there is a small percent of imported ware consisting of the characteristically decorated pitchers from Brügge in Flanders and Rouen in France as well as a fair amount of sheards of almost stoneware and stoneware from the Rhine area and northern Germany.

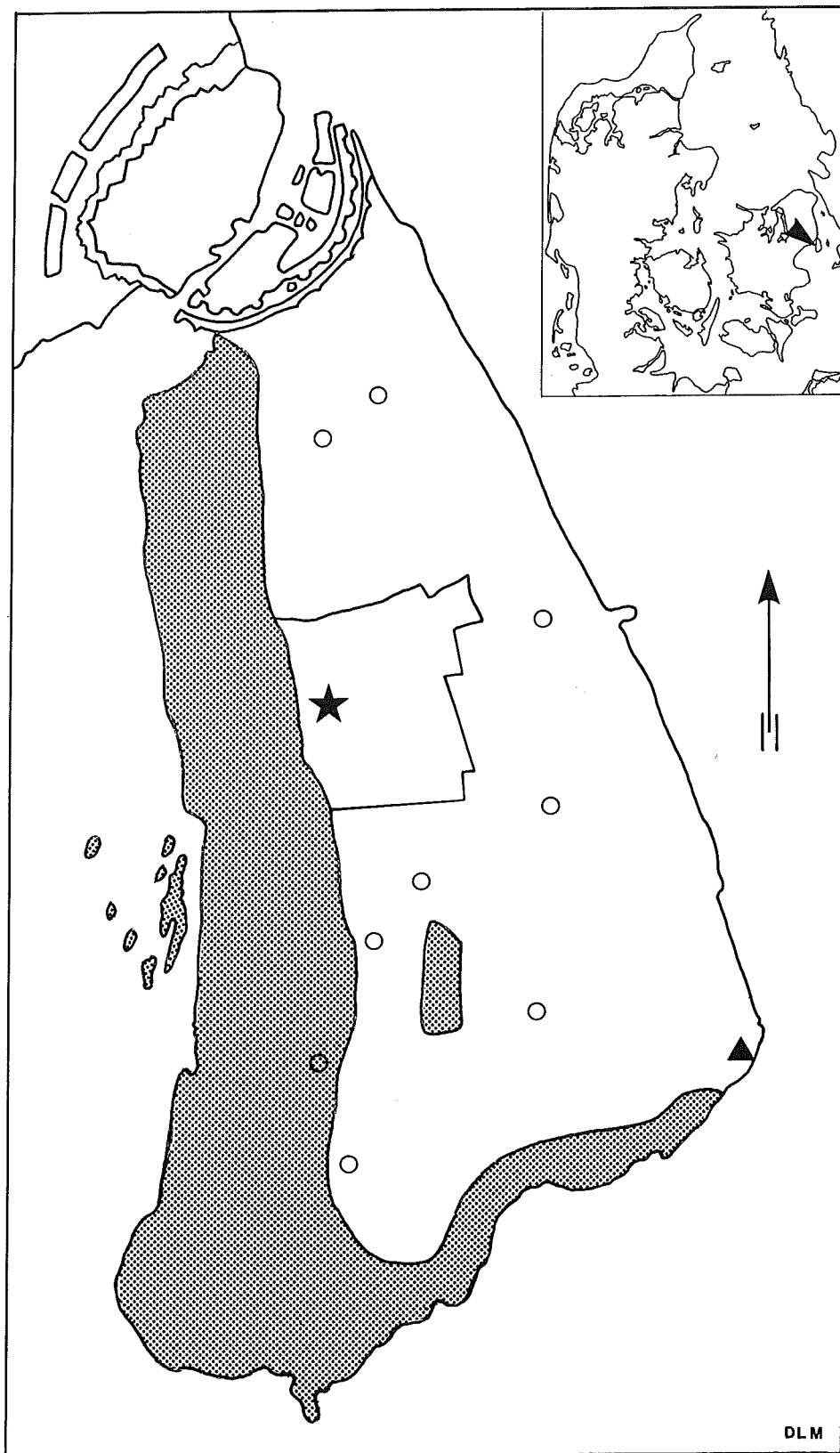


Fig. 1. The village of Taarnby on the island of Amager is marked by a star. The appurtenant meadows are grey. Circles represent other villages and settlements. Dragør by the Sound is represented by a triangle. To the north the outline of Denmark's capital city Copenhagen, as seen in the 17-18th century. Both Copenhagen and the island of Amager belonged to the diocese of Roskilde throughout most of the Middle Ages.

Taarnby - a village during regulations

Together with the evidence on holding regulations gleaned from the actual excavation, a retrospective historical analysis of the 17th-19th century village provides us with a possible illustration of the village's development (*Fig. 3*). We know that the 9th century Viking Age settlement lay east the village. During the Late Viking Age (11th century) the village was in all probability dominated by four large holdings surrounding a common village green (*Mahler 1995*). On the largest of these farmsteads, a stone church was built in the 12th century. Within the same time span, the village was reorganized, possibly to secure the necessary workforce for the very large home farm/estate mentioned in our introduction. The above mentioned dwelling and outhouse complex is our earliest archaeological evidence of the regulated single-row village established as a result in that period. In the 14th or early 15th century, the farmstead is again regulated, possibly as the result of the joining of two holdings. This regulation can be local. The farmstead is regulated once again, previous to 1682 when we have historical documentation on the size of the farmstead.

However additional archaeological investigation is required in order to prove our theories on the structural development of Taarnby village.



Fig. 2. View of the southern part of the excavation area 1994. The picture is taken from the village street towards west. The excavated area continues north, to the right of the picture. In the middle of the picture, a series of north-south dug ditches dating from the 12th century can be seen. The ditches cover several closes and demarcate the excavated farmstead close to the village street from the rest of the holding. Several 13th century building remains can be seen in the cultural layer. Clearest is the long, east-west built building, containing several rooms, to the right in the picture. Photo: Copenhagen District Museum Council.

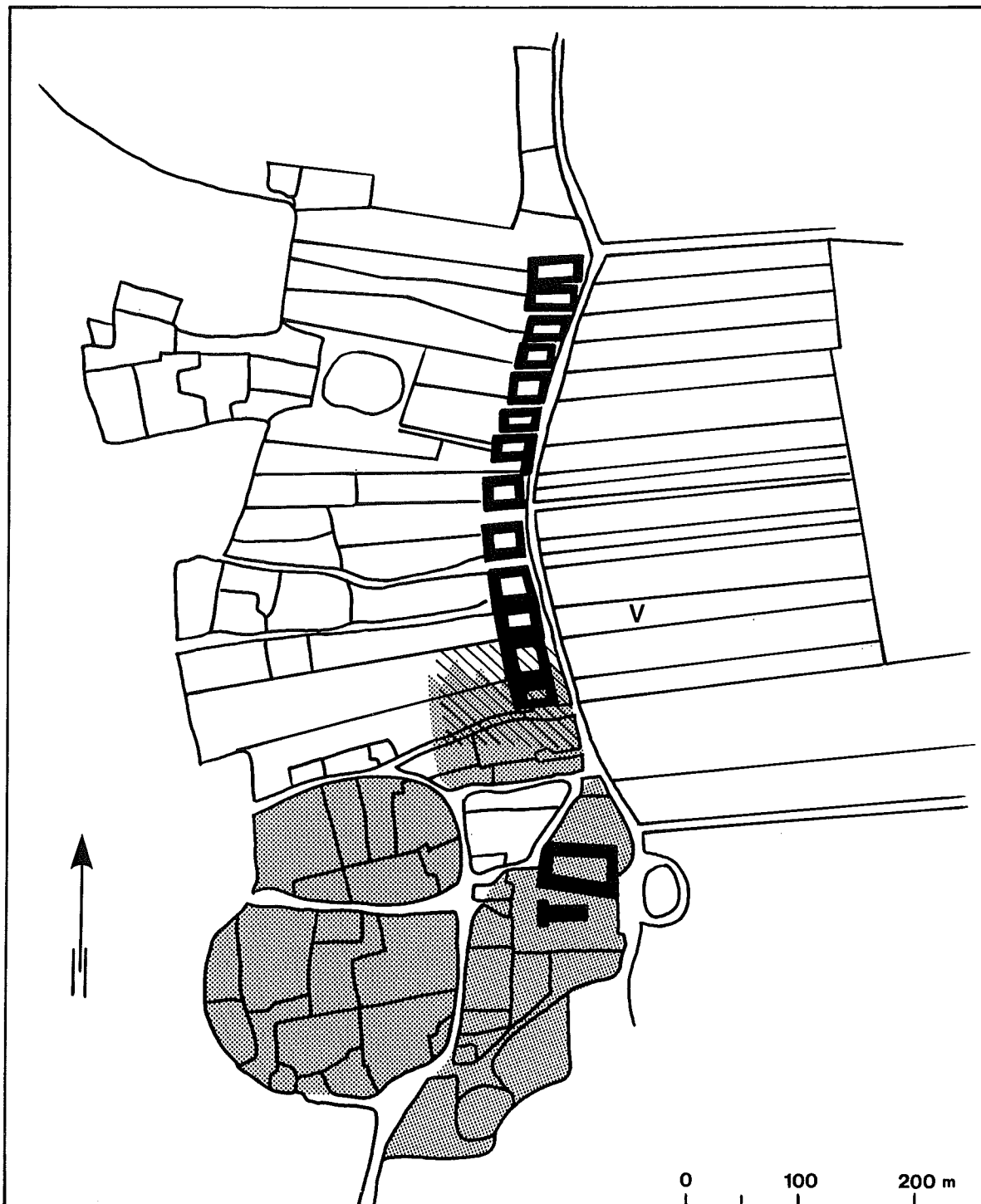


Fig. 3. Taarnby village in 1811 before the scattering of farms. Excavated area hatched. Both village structures are illustrated. At the bottom of the illustration we see the four oldest large holdings around a common village green. Above that the younger "rowed" village. The excavation area lies right between the two, and illustrates the transition between the two village structures and dates the regulation to the 12th century. East of the village street we can see the field holdings. V: Viking Age settlement, 9th century. DLM del. 1996 after Frandsen 1989.

References

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