Feddersen Wierde and Vallhagar: a Contrast in Settlements

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THE aim of this article is to contrast two types of settlement typical of the late iron age in north-western Europe, to discuss the evidence produced by their excavation, and to assess the importance of external influence on their development.

During the past thirty years interest in iron-age settlements in north-western Europe has increased by leaps and bounds. The work of Gudmund Hatt in Jutland,[1] and of A. E. van Giffen in Holland[2] set a pattern for other investigations in these areas which was followed up in Scandinavia by the publication of M. Stenberger's *Öland under Äldre Järnåldern* (Stockholm, 1933). This awakening of interest has led to intensive excavation of iron-age habitation-sites in these areas and in north Germany, Norway, the British Isles, Iceland and Greenland. There is now in existence a body of material from excavated sites covering a period of some fifteen hundred years from the earliest known iron-age settlement in Denmark[3] to the Viking farms of the Atlantic islands.[4]

Excavation of settlement-sites should produce as clear a picture as possible of the social and economic conditions of the inhabitants. To do this, an extensive area should be investigated—preferably a whole settlement with its environs, such as the associated field-systems, trackways, sources of water supply and the contemporary cemetery. Two outstanding examples of total investigation are the excavations at Feddersen Wierde in the North Sea coastal marshes of Germany,[5] and Vallhagar on the Baltic island of Gotland.[6] These two sites typify the iron-age habitation-sites of their respective regions and they represent different developments in economy and settlement-form.

Feddersen Wierde was originally settled during the last half of the 1st century B.C., and was abandoned during the 5th century A.D. Vallhagar, on the other hand, was occupied during the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. Thus they belong to two different periods—the Roman iron age and the migration period—and comparison might seem to be unsuitable; but they are good examples of settlements developing along different lines, and they afford opportunities for a study

[1] *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, ser. 3, XVIII (1928), 219-260.

[2] *Germania*, XX (1936), 40-47.

[3] *Fortid og Nutid*, XI (1936), 130-136.

[4] M. Stenberger (ed.), *Forntida Gårda i Island* (Uppsala, 1943); *Meddelelser om Grønland*, LXXXIX, no. 1 (1941).

[5] *Germania*, XXXIX, nos. 1-2 (1961), 42-69.

[6] M. Stenberger (ed.), *Vallhagar, a Migration Period Settlement on Gotland/Sweden* (Copenhagen and Stockholm, 1955).

of environmental influence on all aspects of settlement-sites. This comparison is only useful if the sites themselves are typical of the settlements in their respective areas and periods, so the extent to which Feddersen Wierde and Vallhagar are representative of settlement-forms in iron-age Germany and migration-period Gotland must be examined.

Feddersen Wierde, near Bremerhaven, on the North Sea coast of Germany, is one of a series of prehistoric *Wurten* which extends along the marshy coastland from Schleswig-Holstein to Holland, and there is nothing on the surface to distinguish it from the rest of its group. These *Wurten* are man-made mounds built up gradually by superimposed occupation-layers, so that the settlements, which were originally situated on the natural ground-level, were slowly raised above the surrounding marshland and away from the dangers of the frequent incursions of the sea.[7] In this respect the *Wurten* form a clearly-defined group: the problem of their environment is identical in each case, for the houses had to be kept above water-level and a living had to be gained from land which was often impoverished by the high salt content of the flood water, so that the whole area developed a common form of agricultural economy. The settlements themselves, in view of the limitations imposed on them by the restricted areas of the mounds on which they were built, had little opportunity to develop along individual lines. Feddersen Wierde, therefore, which was not chosen for excavation because of any outstanding superficial features, is representative of the *Wurten* habitation-sites as a whole.

The reason for the choice of Vallhagar for complete investigation is clearly stated in the introduction to the publication: 'With its ruins of twenty-four buildings, its burial cairns and cemeteries, its well-preserved traces of ancient cultivation, its fenced roads leading into the village, its wells and much else besides, it was an ideal excavation objective.'[8] The reasons point to no individual characteristics apart from its burial cairns and cemeteries, but show all the features which constitute a typical Gotlandic migration-period settlement. Vallhagar lies in an area geographically and geologically similar to that of the other iron-age settlements on Gotland:[9] conditions for agriculture are identical, the buildings are of the same form and vary only in number, Vallhagar being the largest settlement of this type yet found in the north. In every respect save size Vallhagar typifies the migration-period settlements of Gotland and can thus be taken as representative of a general phenomenon.

Although separated both in place and time, a common feature unites Feddersen Wierde and Vallhagar within the north-western European iron-age tradition—the rectangular house-type used exclusively at both sites. This type of house occurs all over north-western Europe throughout the iron age: it is a rectangular building with its roof supported by a double row of posts which divide the interior into a nave and two aisles. The walls are built of wattle-and-daub, turf, stone, or turf and stone, the choice of material being determined by the geographical and geological conditions of the different areas. The turf-walled houses of

[7] *Germania*, xxxv (1957), 280.
[8] *Op. cit.* in note 6, introduction.
[9] *Id.*, pp. 55-56.

Jutland and the stone-walled houses of Norway,[10] for example, reflect the different materials available in the two areas.[11] The interior of the building is usually divided into dwelling-quarters at one end and animal-quarters at the other; but the internal division of the buildings varies more greatly than the basic rectangular form, and it appears that the byre area developed in regions where the climate was too harsh to allow cattle to graze outside during the whole year. Vallhagar and Feddersen Wierde illustrate this: at Feddersen Wierde the dwelling+byre form is the primary type of building, but at Vallhagar it is disputable whether any of the dwellings possessed animal-quarters[12] and this reflects the fact that Gotland, favoured by its island position, experienced weather mild enough to enable cattle to remain outside for most, if not all, of the year.[13]

FEDDERSEN WIERDE

The buildings at Feddersen Wierde are of the typical dwelling+byre form, and they change little except in size throughout the successive settlement-levels (FIG. 1). Within the wattle walls two rows of wooden posts carried the roof beams, the outer ends of which were supported by vertical posts a little outside the walls. The dwelling-quarters, with a hearth in the centre, were at one end, and the animal-quarters at the other, separated by a transverse wall with a central doorway. Each side aisle of the byre is divided into stalls by wattle partitions running between the inner posts and the walls, and on either side of the central aisle or *Stallgang* is a drain lined with rushes. Two animals could stand in each stall, and some buildings could house as many as thirty-two. Beside each house lies a structure represented by three rows of three posts, the complex measuring about 3 by 4·5 metres. These are reconstructed as granaries, similar ones being known from Einswarden[14] and from the later site of Warendorf in Westphalia.[15] The two types of buildings imply an economy based on stock-breeding and arable farming. In the later periods of occupation the byres become much smaller in comparison with the dwelling-quarters, signifying a smaller dependence on stock-breeding as a means of livelihood. By level III (1st to 2nd century A.D.) the stalls in some cases show no traces of dung and are interpreted not as cattle stalls but as workrooms for craftsmen. It is, therefore, possible that arable farming was taking precedence over cattle-breeding and that handicrafts were assuming an importance greater than in the earlier periods.

[10] S. Erixon (ed.), *Nordisk Kultur*, XVII, *Byggnadskultur* (Stockholm, 1952), pp. 71-108.

[11] A. Hagen, *Studier i Jernalderens Gardssamfunn* (Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter, IV, Oslo, 1953), p. 375.

[12] That the buildings were of the dwelling+byre type is uncertain, although the belief is generally held that they were. Compared with the evidence for dwelling+byre buildings in north Germany and Jutland, that at Vallhagar is very slight. The difference in floor covering at each end of the buildings is negligible. A concentration of finds at one end of the building certainly implies that the two ends were used for different purposes, but there is no reason to think that one end was used for housing cattle. The hearth lies in the centre of the building, there is no transverse partition wall, and there are no remains of stall partitions. It is much more likely that one end of the building was used as living-quarters, the other as a working area.

[13] *Op. cit.* in note 6, p. 23.

[14] *Probleme der Küstenforschung im südlichen Nordseegebiet*, VI (1957), 49-120.

[15] *Germania*, XXXII (1954), 189-213.

The relative importance of trade and agriculture as economic factors in the community is indicated, at least partially, by the small finds. The large number of unfinished products of leather, bone and wood shows the importance of handicrafts, and their concentration in particular areas[16] implies that such work was confined to certain parts of the settlement. Whether craftsmen were a separate, self-sufficient class, or craftsman and farmer combined, will be discussed later under social organization; what we are dealing with here is the possible importance of foreign trade. Feddersen Wierde is well situated for foreign contacts. There is a navigable

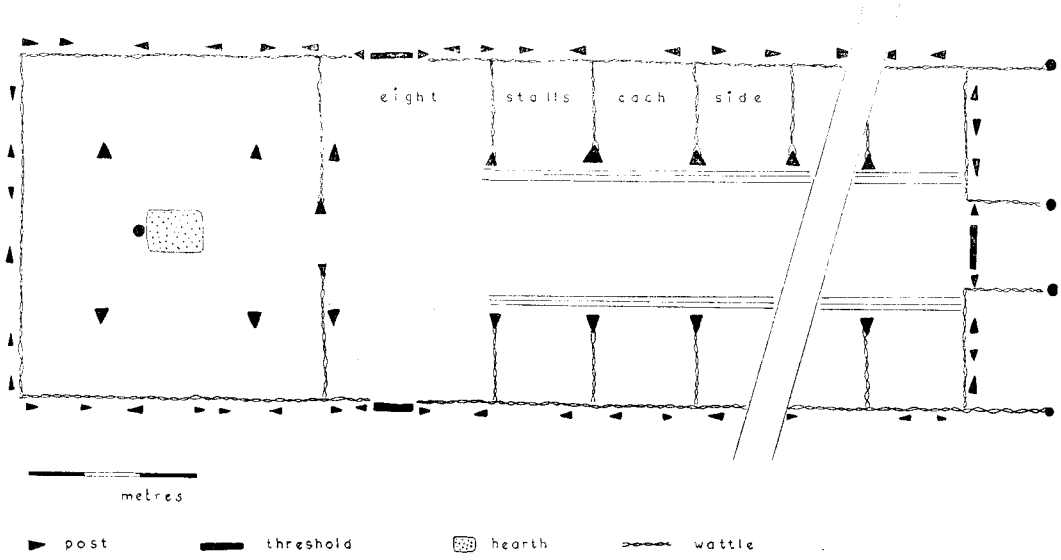

FIG. 1
FEDDERSEN WIERDE, GERMANY
Ground-plan of house (p. 3)

waterway connecting the site with the *Geest*, the higher, drier land of the interior along which a trade route runs from north to south. At the time of its foundation Feddersen Wierde was an island, with a small bay serving as a harbour, so that foreign contacts could also have been obtained by sea. Numerous Roman imports (Samian ware, glass, fibulae), first in evidence in level II (1st century A.D.), indicate foreign contacts, although it is uncertain whether these imports are the results of organized trade. There is no clue to the medium of exchange used in trade with the Roman world (perhaps it was perishable goods such as leather or grain) and it is conceivable that Feddersen Wierde was an intermediary point on a trade route from north to south. The native pottery forms, which show affinities with Roman iron-age ware from the *Geest*, Holland and Jutland,[17] are further confirmation of Feddersen Wierde's external contacts.

The social organization at Feddersen Wierde is a matter for speculation.

[16] *Op. cit.* in note 7, pl. 7.
[17] *Id.*, p. 135.

Conclusions can only be drawn from the size and organization of buildings, and, to a lesser extent, the distribution of small finds. Throughout all the earlier levels of occupation (until level V, 2nd to 3rd centuries A.D.) each building was separated from its neighbour by a fence or ditch, thus forming an independent unit consisting of a farmhouse and granary within a yard of limited area. In some levels there is one particularly extensive farmyard containing one large and several subsidiary buildings. The smaller buildings were equipped, like the larger, with byre and dwelling-quarters, but the complex possessed only one granary, associated with the large building. This implies that the inhabitants of the smaller buildings were dependent on those of the larger. Possibly the houses belonged to farm labourers, owning a few cattle, but economically dependent on the large farm which controlled the store of grain. Alternatively, they could represent dwellings of an extended family group, a whole 'clan' living within a single enclosure. Whatever the explanation, it is clear that the inhabitants of the large house were the wealthiest in the village, and that there were divisions between these wealthy inhabitants, those who occupied smaller but independent farms, and those living in small dwellings within the enclosure of the largest farm. Different sizes of building may imply social stratification, but it must be stressed that postulating social structure within prehistoric societies is essentially subjective and all that can legitimately be said is that differences in wealth among inhabitants may signify social divisions.

It is also impossible to determine whether craftsmen formed an independent class not relying on agriculture to supplement their living. The concentration of worked and unfinished goods, sometimes associated with small dwellings containing only a few small stalls but situated within a large enclosure, suggests that handicrafts were carried on in specific areas and by certain sections of the community. Although Childe says, 'Metal-workers and potters who use the wheel are admitted to be probably specialists, and a few other crafts may be recognized in urban agglomerations. In other preliterate societies we shall probably be justified in refusing to assume full-time specialists',[18] Feddersen Wierde appears to have possessed specialized craftsmen-classes among its population. Feddersen Wierde gives the impression of being a highly organized settlement with some form of class system, and probably with craftsmen who were full-time specialists.

Environmental conditions influenced both the form and the economy of Feddersen Wierde. The origin of the *Wurt* itself was the result of the frequent incursions of the North Sea, which constantly threatened the settlement and made it impossible for the inhabitants to occupy sites on the natural ground-level. The superimposition of settlement-layers led to the gradual formation of a mound, and the limited area raised above flood-level necessitated a planned layout so that the required number of buildings could be contained within the space available. This resulted in a radial arrangement of buildings around a central open area. From the centre of the site narrow tracks or paths radiated like the spokes of a wheel, with the dwellings lying parallel to them. The buildings were entirely constructed of wood, the only building material which was readily available.

[18] V. G. Childe, *Social Evolution* (London, 1951), p. 63.

Arable farming must have suffered considerable disadvantages from the heavy, wet, clay soils of the surrounding land, and its importance in relation to stock-breeding is shown by the small size of the granaries in comparison with the large byres. Fodder from water-meadows must have been plentiful. Trade was stimulated of necessity by the lack of metal ores in the vicinity, and the situation of the site made foreign contacts comparatively easy.

From this brief summary of the social, economic and environmental conditions of Feddersen Wierde it appears that life there was mainly dependent on stock-breeding and considerably less concerned with arable farming, but the general tendency for animal-quarters to become smaller during the life of the settlement points to a gradual decrease in the importance of stock-breeding. From level II onwards Roman imports featured largely, suggesting the importance of trade, even if it is difficult to assess exactly how it was organized. Throughout most periods of occupation each building was fenced off from its neighbours, although in the later levels, when the buildings generally decrease in size, this system was abandoned. In certain periods some form of social stratification is indicated by complexes consisting of one large and several smaller farms all within a single large enclosure. In all, it seems that Feddersen Wierde was a highly organized settlement exhibiting signs of proto-urbanization, and displaying none of the rural conservatism which characterizes the village of Vallhagar.

VALLHAGAR

Economically, Vallhagar was dependent on agriculture, and the layout of the village is that of a typical agricultural community. The dwellings with their associated outbuildings are arranged within fields whose boundaries are defined by *vastar*, walls constructed of the stones from field clearance (FIG. 2). These field-boundaries delimit roughly square areas, and in some cases two parallel walls form narrow drove-ways for cattle. Such drove-ways indicate the importance of stock-breeding, as do the large numbers of animal bones (of cow, horse, sheep and pig) found within the settlement. If it were necessary for animals to be kept indoors during the winter they were probably kept in some of the outbuildings belonging to each dwelling-house. The amount of grain found within the dwellings themselves indicates that it was stored there, not in specially constructed granaries, although building 5 has been interpreted as a drying shed for grain. The only other outhouse with a specialized function is the bakehouse, building 6; it contained an oven of limestone slabs and clay, and flat sandstone discs on which bread was baked.

The buildings themselves are of the typical tripartite form, with walls of stone and rubble ; they are characterized by a long hearth roughly in the centre and sometimes by a difference in the composition of the floor at each end.

Evidence for trade is much slighter than at Feddersen Wierde; a very much worn denarius from the reign of M. Aurelius in building 23, fragments of two glass beakers in buildings 2 and 16, and some Roman beads are all the imports that were discovered. In spite of this scarcity of evidence it is obvious that some trade with the outside world must have taken place, and this must be stressed; metals

and salt are two important raw materials lacking on Gotland and, therefore, necessary imports, and numerous hoards of Roman coins show that Gotland was a lively trading centre during the migration period.[19] But the paucity of finds

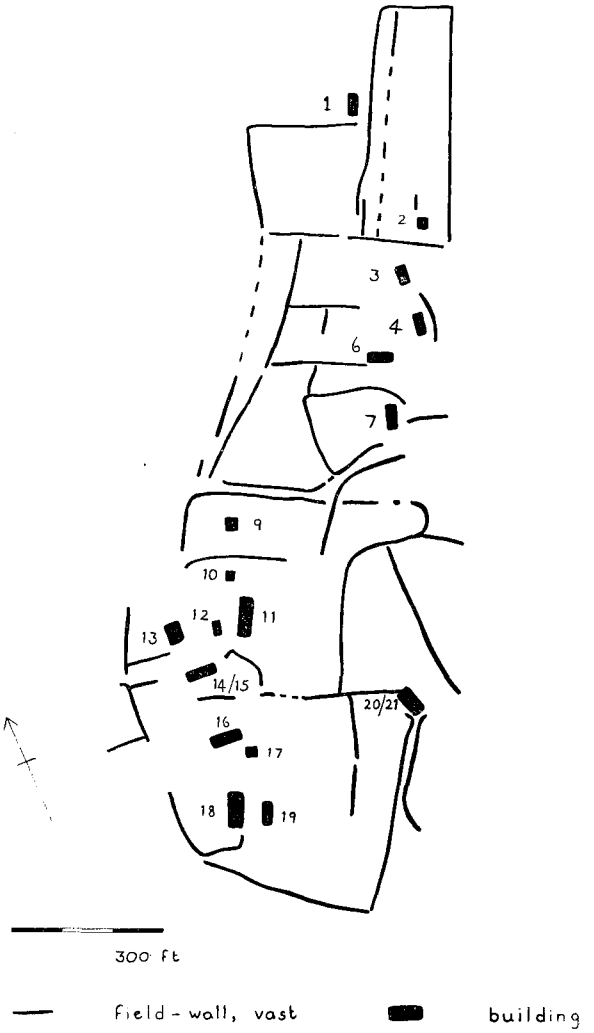

FIG. 2
VALLHAGAR, GOTLAND, SWEDEN
Plan of the settlement (p. 6)
(*After* Stenberger, *op. cit.* in note 6, map 1, *by courtesy*)

from all the excavated migration-period sites on Gotland, including Vallhagar, shows that trade was not the most important feature of the village economy.[20]

As the settlement was occupied by farmers, not tradesmen, it is perhaps

[19] B. Nerman, *Die Volkerwanderungszeit Gotlands* (Stockholm, 1935), p. 59, pl. 61.

[20] *Op. cit.* in note 6, pp. 863-976.

possible that the wants of the villagers were supplied by periodic visits from itinerant pedlars who carried necessities such as salt and metals. The hoard of tools found submerged in the bog at Mästermyr on Gotland[21] shows that there were travelling craftsmen or tinkers in the Viking period, and it is probable that a similar form of commerce existed in an earlier period.

The layout of Vallhagar suggests that its society was organized on a family basis. Each farm was presumably run by a family unit, and during the two centuries of occupation the size of the community did not increase appreciably. Except in occasional examples, for instance building 14/15, it is difficult to ascertain different periods of construction, although it is sometimes obvious that the buildings themselves have been altered. For instance, building 18 was twice extended at its southern end, and building 2 seems at one time to have been a rectangular dwelling-house, later rebuilt in the form of an almost square outbuilding. The extension of building 18 at its southern end indicates that a larger area was needed as a working space, not necessarily that an increase in the number of inhabitants demanded a larger living area. The change of building 2 from dwelling to outhouse indicates a smaller population, unless the occupants moved thence to another dwelling-house such as building 1, which is reasonably close. From the lack of stratigraphy at the site it is impossible to postulate variations in the size of population throughout its history, but analogy with other rural communities suggests that the level of population at Vallhagar remained static during its occupation.

The two buildings of specialized use (p. 6) provoke a question concerning the social organization of the village. Both are situated in the northern part of the settlement, between dwellings 1 and 7. The problem is whether these useful buildings were communally owned, or whether they were the property of one farm which profited from making them available to the other inhabitants. As they are the only buildings of this type in Vallhagar they must have been used by the whole community for the essential jobs of drying grain and meat, and for baking bread. If they were the private property of a single farm it must be concluded that the particular farm was, at least in this way, richer than the rest, and so a form of social division may be said to have been in existence. Unfortunately, speculation on this point cannot be confirmed by excavation.

Although at first sight environmental influence on the settlement-form and economy of Vallhagar appears to be neglible, there are some aspects in which the site has been modified by external conditions. The settlement is isolated from its neighbours by the encircling forest and bog, therefore a high degree of self-sufficiency was demanded of the inhabitants. Metal ores and salt, however, are not found in the area, so trade developed to obtain them. The village is situated in an area where the basal limestone lies very close to the surface, covered only by a thin layer of light soil inadequate for intensive crop-raising, so that the economy must have relied primarily on stock-breeding, provisions for fodder and grazing being provided by the forest, which contained both deciduous and coniferous trees. The outcrops of limestone produce suitable building material, so that,

[21] *Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Årsbok*, 1936-8, p. ccvii.

without exception, the migration-period buildings of Vallhagar are constructed of stone.

The evidence produced by the excavation of Vallhagar suggests that it was a conservative, rural community which expanded very little during the several centuries of its occupation. The layout of the village implies that its inhabitants were a group of farming families, each with its dwelling-house, outbuildings and several enclosed fields within the area of the village itself. There is no evidence of specialization in any craft; probably the families were capable of supplying their own needs, except perhaps in the way of smelting and metal-working. The scarcity of imported goods indicates little contact with the outside world although certain necessities must have been imported. The many Roman coin-hoards deposited in Gotland during the migration period indicate that it must have been an important exchange point, but the question of which inhabitants participated in trade remains unsolved. The finds from Vallhagar show that the population was not primarily one of traders, and this is confirmed by the other excavated sites on the island. Were the inhabitants really as impoverished as the finds from their buildings indicate, or is it possible that their graves might produce objects more in keeping with our knowledge of the wealth of Gotland during its 'golden age', the migration period? The cemetery contemporary with the occupation of Vallhagar has not been discovered, so at present we have only the picture of Vallhagar produced by the excavation of the settlement itself.

CONCLUSION

These brief descriptions of Feddersen Wierde and Vallhagar illustrate two iron-age settlements which developed in very different ways. One of the most striking differences is that of settlement-form. As a result of its position on the limited area of a *Wurt*, Feddersen Wierde developed a layout which made maximum use of the space available; the radial arrangement of buildings around an open space suggests that some form of organized planning lay behind it. Some of the present-day villages along the North Sea coast of Germany are situated on *Wurten* and the buildings are arranged in an identical manner, with several concentric circles of houses around an open 'village green'.[22] The persistence of this plan indicates that it satisfactorily fulfilled its function. On the other hand, environment imposed no strict limitations on the layout of Vallhagar and the village displays the straggling aspect of an agricultural community. Settlement-plan had a direct bearing on the development of society in both sites. Feddersen Wierde, with its inhabitants living in close proximity to one another, exhibits the germs of a town; the population increased throughout its occupation, there was some form of social stratification and a considerable emphasis on handicrafts and trade, with, perhaps, a class of full-time specialist craftsmen. Vallhagar, however, shows no development; each farm remained an independent unit, self-sufficient but with some interdependence (represented by the drying-shed and the bakehouse). There is no suggestion of a distinction between farmer and craftsman. Throughout the centuries of its occupation Vallhagar shows no signs of being capable of

[22] W. Radig, *Die Siedlungstypen in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1955), p. 95.

expansion into a more dynamic community. It was essentially a rural society, with a static population and an unchanging economy.

The two settlements owe their dissimilarity of development, at least in part, to their geographical position. At Feddersen Wierde, the fact that a large and expanding population was forced to inhabit a limited area must have resulted in the emergence of some form of corporate spirit, giving cohesion to the site and the inhabitants. Its proximity to, and ease of communication with, the Roman Empire led to participation in trade to an extent unknown in rural communities. Vallhagar, on the other hand, remained a group of independent farmsteads with no signs of planning, and no indication that it ever became a more closely knit community. With virtually no limitations on the extent of the settlement area, the buildings are fairly widely scattered with few signs of nucleation, and the comparative isolation of the site did not facilitate trade. This is one of the most important instances of environmental influence on settlements.

Thus these two habitation-sites of late iron-age date illustrate the way in which settlement responded to external conditions. As mentioned above (p. 1) these sites are, as far as is known from present evidence, characteristic of their areas and periods, so they may be taken to represent the different development of iron-age sites in north Germany and Gotland.

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