**Norwegian Archaeological Review**
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713926118

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Online publication date: 06 August 2010

**To cite this Article** Storli, Inger(2000) "Barbarians' of the North: Reflections on the Establishment of Courtyard Sites in North Norway', Norwegian Archaeological Review, 33: 2, 81 — 103
**To link to this Article: DOI:** 10.1080/002936500423466
**URL:** http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/002936500423466

ARTICLE Norwegian Archaeological Review, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2000

# ‘Barbarians’ of the North: Reflections on the Establishment of Courtyard Sites in North Norway

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‘Courtyard sites’ consist of house grounds which are normally situated around an oval, semicircular or horseshoe-shaped yard. A total of 22 courtyard sites are known in Norway, 11 of which are located in North Norway. Radiocarbon analyses from several of these sites point to the 3rd century as the ‘establishment period’. According to the author, the establishment of the sites was related to the emergence of a new social élite based on land ownership, and to the integration of this élite into the Nordic–Germanic world.



## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is a group of Iron Age sites, which are frequently referred to as ‘courtyard sites’. These somewhat enigmatic sites consist of a collection of house grounds that are usually situated around an oval, semi-circular or horseshoe-shaped courtyard, and with the inner end wall often opening up into the courtyard. Courtyard sites were previously held to be sites that are exclusive to Southwest and North Norway, but a few sites have been discovered in other parts of Norway, and today the total number of known sites is as many as 22 (cf. Kallhovd 1994:9–10). Eleven of these sites are situated in North Norway, while 7 are situated in Southwest and Mid-Norway (Fig. 1).

As early as the 19th century, archaeologists recognized some of the sites as prehistoric remains. However, the walls of the houses were erroneously perceived as long barrows (Nicolaysen 1866:300–301, 1870: 144–146, 1885:109, Bendixen 1880:60–71, Nicolaissen 1885:16, 1891:5,) and it did not become clear until the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, when the sites were ‘re-discovered’ and excavations carried out, that the sites actually consisted of house grounds (Havnø 1931, Petersen 1936:59–79, 1938:151–158, 1952, Lund 1942). In Mid-Norway, a collection of long barrows was reinterpreted as a courtyard site as late as 1987 (Stenvik 1988).

The number of houses on each site varies considerably. In Southwest Norway, the largest site consists of 17 houses, whereas the smallest one only has 5. In North Norway, there is a similar variation (cf. Figs. 2–4). Sixteen houses have been identified at the largest site, and only 4 at the two smallest sites (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:9–56, Wik 1985:248–252, Skauen 1995).

The courtyard sites have been subject to a series of different interpretations. Some archaeologists have suggested that the sites represent rural settlements, or villages, while others have argued that they were built for religious, judicial, or defensive purposes,

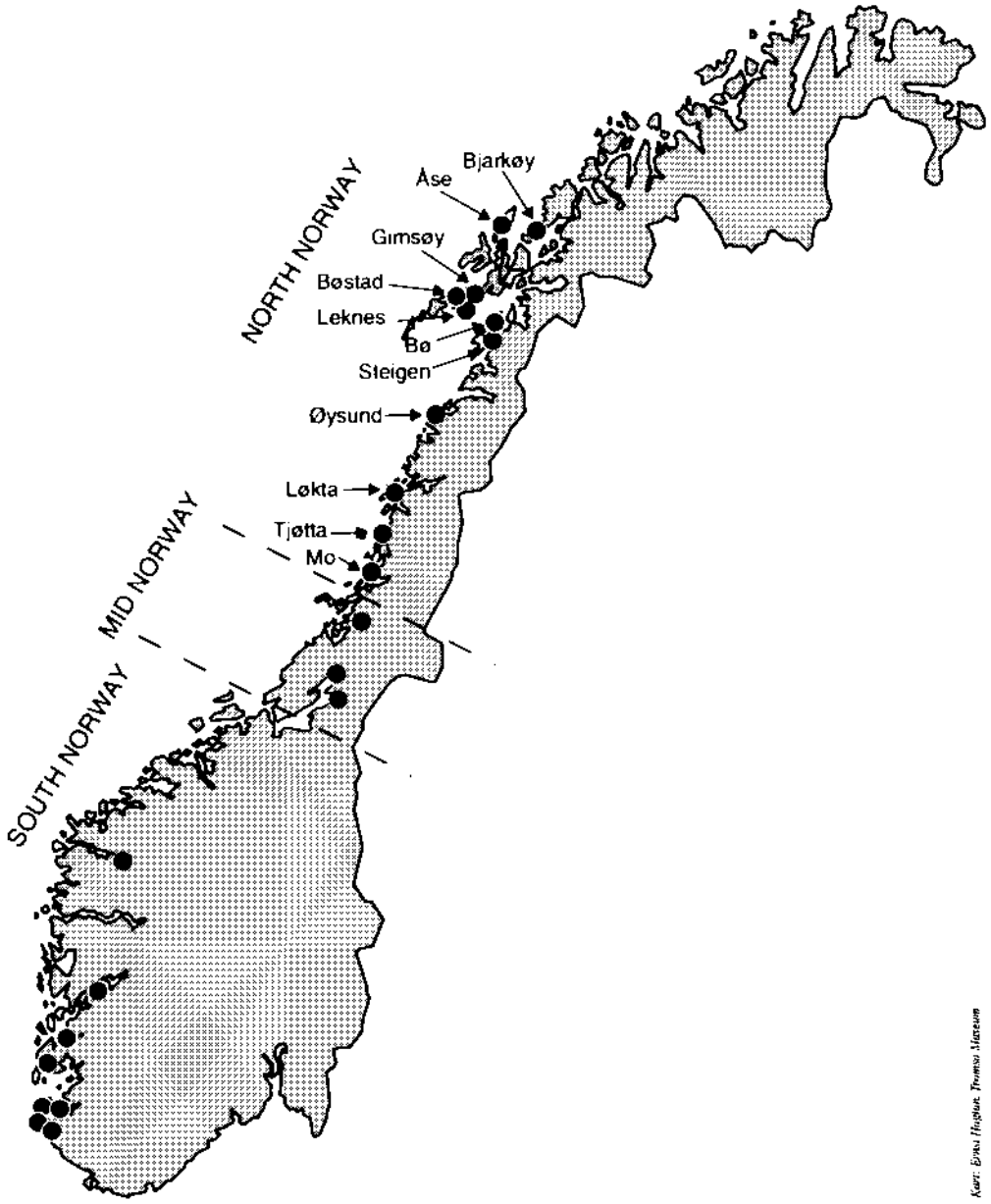


Fig. 1. *Courtyard sites in Norway (after K. Kallhovd 1994:10).*

that they were market places, or that they were barracks for the chieftains' men. (cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1978:49–51, Kallhovd 1994:11). For the Rogaland sites, the 'village hypothesis' prevailed for a long time, while the 'barrack hypothesis' was the prevailing one for the northern sites. The discrepancy between the two interpretations seems to have been based on problems concerning the age of the sites. The Rogaland sites were thought to have been inhabited during the Roman Period, i.e. from the period BC/AD until AD 400, and the abandonment of the sites was believed to be re-

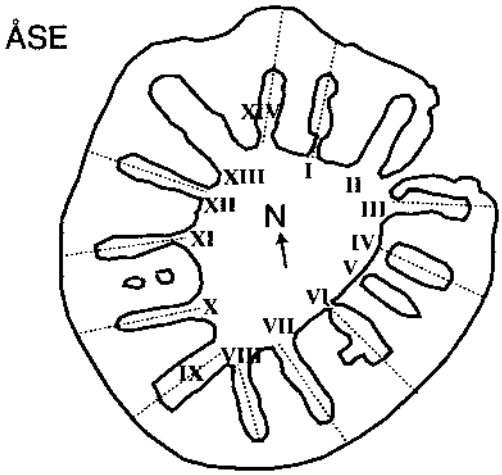


Fig. 2. *The Åse site (after Th. Sjøvold 1971:7).*

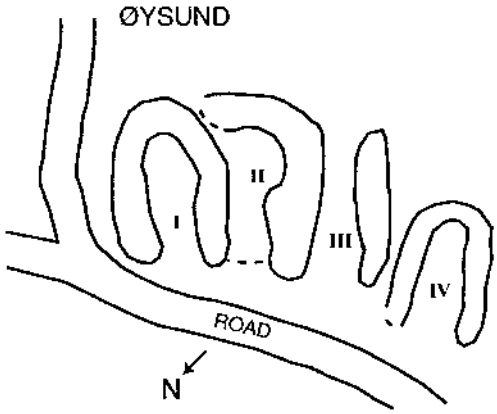


Fig. 4. *The Øysund site (after I. Skauen 1995).*

lated to a restructuring of the rural settlement in Southwest Norway, resulting in the establishment of individual farmsteads (Møllerop 1957, 1971, Magnus & Myhre 1976:263, 265, 315, Myhre 1978:236).

Whereas the southwest Norwegian sites basically have been considered as a Roman Period phenomenon, it has been argued that the North Norwegian sites yield archaeological material from a longer span of the Iron Age, i.e. from the Roman Period to throughout the Viking Period (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:47). The interpretation of the courtyard sites as barracks for the chieftains' men is based on the fact that several of the sites are situated close to farms which in historic sources are referred to as chieftains' farms (Lund 1965, Johansen & Søbstad 1978, Herteig 1988).

A change of interpretation has taken place during the past decade. It has, for one thing, been suggested that the southwestern sites, too, were associated with a chieftain type of organization (Løken 1992, Lillehammer 1994:154–155). The view that these sites were abandoned in ca. AD 400 has also been challenged, and it is argued that at least one of the sites contains archaeological material from the beginning of the 7th century (Kallhovd 1994). However, this does not mean that there is now a consensus in the interpretation of the sites of the South compared with those of the North. On the contrary, a dissertation from 1995 launched the idea that the courtyard sites of North Norway were not barracks for the chieftains' men after all, but that they were in fact the chieftains' own farms (Berglund 1994, 1995). This interpretation is based on the results of excavations at the courtyard site at Tjøtta and of the historically known farm that is situated nearby. According to Berglund (1995:48–49), the excavations indicate that the abandonment of the former took place along with the establishment of the latter. This, she claims, simply indicates that the farm was moved early in the Middle

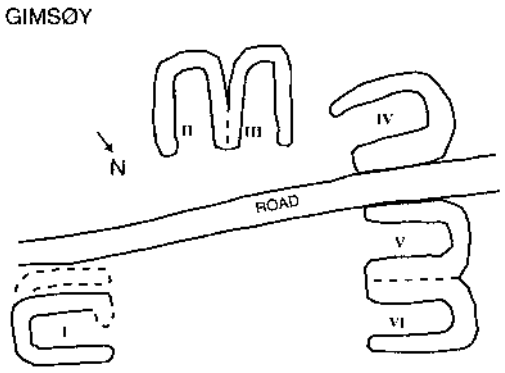


Fig. 3. *The Gimsøy site (after O. S. Johansen & T. Søbstad 1978:45).*

Ages, during the 11th century AD. The reason for moving the farm is thought to be a shore displacement during the Iron Age which increased the distance between the courtyard site and the sea, and thus led to a deterioration of the landing conditions for ships. The displacement had also made available new tracts of good arable land (Berglund 1994:38, 1995:342–344).

This is the somewhat confusing point of departure for this study. As we have seen, the interpretation of the North Norwegian sites has been based on the fact that some of the sites are situated near historically known chieftains' farms. Consequently, other indications of chieftains' centres have been searched for, such as large boathouses and monumental graves, and two or more of these phenomena appearing together are held to be a fairly safe indication of chieftains' centres (Storli 1985, 1989, Wik 1985, Berglund 1995). This may well be true when dealing with the Viking Period, i.e. the final stage of the North Norwegian courtyard sites. But is it likely that the role of the courtyard sites was the same in their initial stage? And when exactly were the sites established?

The aim of this study is to provide a basis for interpreting the courtyard sites in their initial stage. Very little has been done in this field of study, and progress first of all presupposes clarification of when the sites were established. Second, progress presupposes a study of the sites in a local, as well as in a Scandinavian, and indeed North European context.

## THE COURTYARD SITES OF NORTH NORWAY

There are 11 known courtyard sites in North Norway. Starting with the northernmost one, these are located at Bjarkøy, Åse, Bøstad, Leknes, Gimsøy, Bø, Steigen, Øysund, Løkta, Tjøtta and Mo (Fig. 1). No excavations have been carried out at Løkta and Mo (cf. Wik 1985:251, 255, Berglund 1994:37, 1995:300, 335–339), and for this reason, these sites will not be further dealt with here.

The available radiocarbon determinations were carried out over a relatively long period, and in order to make them more comparable, they have been re-calibrated according to Stuiver & Kra's (1986) calibration program. Several sites have determinations to the early as well as to the late part of the Iron Age, but since our concern is with their initial stage, only the earliest determinations are included in this review.

### *Bjarkøy*

The courtyard site at Bjarkøy was discovered and excavated by H. E. Lund during the years 1950–1953. Unfortunately, Lund himself never got as far as publishing the material, but a fairly comprehensive presentation is worked out by Johansen & Søbstad (1978). The site consisted of 16 house grounds, which were organized around an oval yard, and around the houses there was a large number of small mounds with depressions in the centre. Lund concentrated his investigations to the interior of the houses. The rooms were 9–10 m long and 3–4 m wide. Hearths and postholes were found at different levels, indicating several habitation phases. Archaeological objects were not abundant, but among the identifiable ones there were nails and rivets, knives and arrowheads, all made of iron. There were also a few whetstones, a single potsherd, and a single glass bead. In addition, the finds included iron fragments, a few animal bones and some lumps of slag. The objects point to the Early as well as to the Late Iron Age. This is also the case with the radiocarbon determinations that span 800 years, from ca. AD 200–1000 (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:13, 17, 47).

There are two early determinations from two different houses at the site. The earliest one (T-2067) lies within the period between AD 250 and 530, whereas the other one (T-1940) lies between AD 340 and 550. The

number of artefacts supporting these early determinations is not overwhelming; in fact, a quartzite whetstone of a type generally belonging to the 5th and 6th centuries and fragments of a bucket-shaped vessel from the 4th or 5th century from a third house constitute the earliest datable objects (cf. Sjøvold 1962:193, 209, Johansen & Søbstad 1978:47).

*Åse*

This site consists of 14 house grounds, organized in a circle (Fig. 2). The site was discovered by archaeologists in 1946, and in 1948 and 1949 two of the houses were excavated (Sjøvold 1971). The houses were approximately the same size as those at Bjarkøy, and both houses had two hearths. Finds were sparse and included a knife, some rivets, a bow-shaped piece of iron, a few lumps of slag, and a collection of unidentifiable iron fragments. None of these objects give any reliable indication of the age of the site. The bow-shaped piece of iron may be the bow of a fibula from the Roman Period (ibid.:22,24), but this interpretation is uncertain. However, from one of the houses (house XIII) there is a determination to AD 250–420 (T-660) (Sjøvold 1971:25). Moreover, underneath this house, Sjøvold observed structures which he interpreted as traces of an even earlier building (ibid.:20–21). Preliminary results from excavations at Åse in 1999 (Storli 1999) support this observation, as charcoal from the bottom layer in a couple of houses has yielded determinations to ca. AD 130–340. The project is not yet closed, and final results will be published in a later work.

*Bøstad*

At Bøstad, only four house grounds are identified, but the uneven surface may hide a couple of other houses (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:44). The only investigation carried out at the spot is a small test-pit in the middle of one of the houses. The pit yielded a sample of charcoal, suggesting a connection with a fireplace. Radiocarbon analysis of the charcoal suggests a determination to AD 130–330 (T-6436). (Larssen n.d.a)

*Leknes*

In the 1880s, the peat walls at the Leknes site were misinterpreted as long barrows, and a couple of them were excavated without the mistake being noticed (Nicolaissen 1885, 1891). In the excavation report the site is described as a collection of graves consisting of 15 to 16 long barrows organized in a circle (Nicolaissen 1885:16). By the time H. E. Lund realized that what had been perceived as long barrows was in fact a collection of house grounds, the site had become severely damaged, and only four of the houses remained. However, on the basis of Nicolaissen's report and local informants, Lund suggested that the site had consisted of around 14 houses organized in a similar way as the Bjarkøy and Åse sites (cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1978:39, 41).

In 1951 Lund excavated the four remaining houses. The floors were measured to be 7.5–10 m long and 3.5–4 m wide. Here, too, the houses had several hearths, some of them at different levels, indicating multiple habitation and building phases. Even Nicolaissen had observed thick layers of charcoal under the walls that he excavated as early as 1884. However, his excavation hardly yielded any finds at all. Nicolaissen (1891:5) found a single iron rivet, and apart from some charcoal samples, Lund's only finds were a whetstone of quartzite and a fragment of a bucket-shaped vessel from the Late Roman or Migration Period, i.e. ca. AD 300–500. However, the lack of finds is compensated to some extent by radiocarbon determinations. Three of the houses yielded determinations to the second and third centuries; AD 120–340 (T-444), AD 130–340 (T-1937), and AD 140–380 (T-1938). (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:38–42)

*Gimsøy*

The Gimsøy site consists of six or seven

houses forming a horseshoe-shaped yard (Fig. 3). The houses, which were discovered in 1968, appear to be smaller than those at some of the other sites, measuring only 6.5 × 3 m (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:44). Here, too, only a small test-pit has been dug in one of the houses (Larssen n.d.b). Charcoal from the pit has been dated to AD 250–400 (T-6438).

*Bø*

H. E. Lund surveyed the site for the first time, in 1950. Lund reported 11 houses in 1950. Maps worked out during his excavations a couple of years later depict 12 houses, but a survey in 1977 identified only 9 houses. Thus, the exact number of houses at the site is uncertain. The houses were ca. 7 × 3.5 m. Some of them contained several hearths while in others hearths were not identified. The excavation yielded few finds, only a few pieces of pottery, a couple of glass beads and some fragments of a whetstone.

Unfortunately, none of the houses at the site have been dated on the basis of radiocarbon analysis, and the only artefacts indicating an early dating are potsherds, which could have been either part of a bucket-shaped pot from AD 350–550 or from a type of undecorated pot from the 3rd century (Sjøvold 1962:196, 198). However, there are some early radiocarbon determinations from two 'fire-mounds' at the site. We do not know the nature of these mounds, but the idea that they are cremation burials has been rejected. One of these mounds dates from as early as 120 BC–AD 130 (T-44), and the other one is dated from AD 210 to 600 (T-45) (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:34–38).

*Steigen*

The Steigen, or Vollmoen site has been known to archaeologists since 1926. This site was excavated in 1941 and 1942 by H. E. Lund. The site is quite similar to the Bjarkøy site and consists of 16 houses. The floors are 9–13 m long and 3–4 m wide. All the houses had several hearths, and according to the excavation report, hearths were found at two or three different levels (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:29). The finds were fairly numerous and include a chape, fragmentary iron knives, fragmentary whetstones, beads of different materials, fragments of soapstone vessels, a strike-a-light, a bronze spiral, part of a silver rod, and finally a small iron ring. The chape is dated to the Viking Period, as is also the strike-a-light and the soapstone sherds. (Sjøvold 1974:74, Johansen & Søbstad 1978:30–33)

None of these objects can be dated to the early part of the Iron Age. In fact, all the datable artefacts are related to the Late Iron Age, i.e. after AD 600. In addition, a sample of charcoal from one of the houses was dated to the 9th century, whereas two other houses and a mound were dated to ca. AD 500 (Johansen & Søbstad 1978:47–48). The artefacts as well as the radiocarbon determinations from Steigen seem to be of a much later date than the material from the sites referred to above, and for this reason, Steigen will be excluded from the following discussion.

*Øysund*

The Øysund site consists of only four house grounds (Fig. 4) (Wik 1985:248, 250–253, Berglund 1994:35–36; 1995:311–313, Skauen 1995). There has been some uncertainty about the interpretation of this site as a courtyard site. Berglund (1995:335) chooses not to consider it as such, although she argues for a chieftain's centre at the farm (ibid.:311–312). Still, three factors support an interpretation of Øysund as a courtyard site. First, the Øysund site is similar to the Bøstad site. Second, these sites are not unique, as there are other sites with few houses elsewhere in North, as well as in Southwest Norway. Finally, and a matter to which I shall return later, the location of the site at some distance from the farm site is

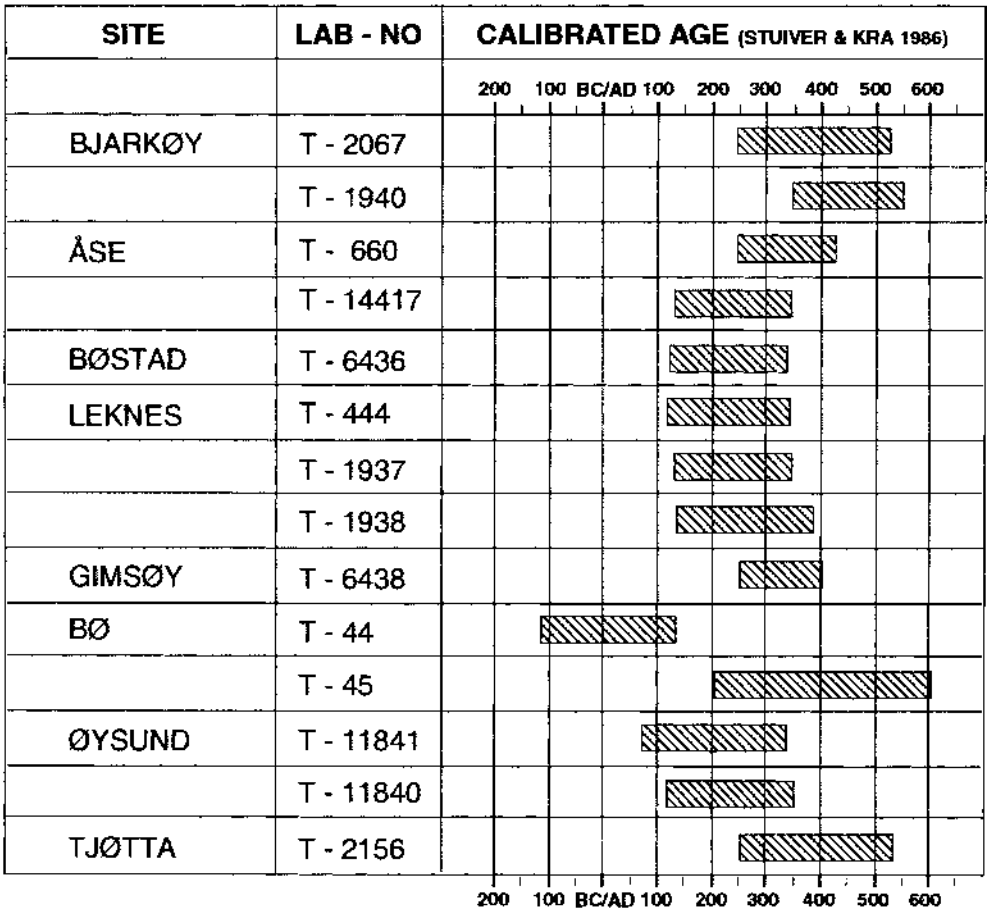


Fig. 5. *Radiocarbon determinations from courtyard sites in North Norway (after Johansen & Søbstad 1978, Larssen n.d.a and n.d.b, Skauen 1995, Storli 1999, Wik 1983).*

an important characteristic of courtyard sites.

In 1994, a ditch was dug through one of the houses (Skauen 1995). Among the few finds there was an ornamented sherd probably belonging to a bucket-shaped vessel from the period AD 350–550. Two charcoal samples each yielded earlier dates, one to AD 80–330 (T-11841), and the other to AD 120–340 (T-11840). The determinations refer to two stratigraphically separated charcoal layers within the house.

*Tjøtta*

The houses at the courtyard site at Tjøtta are somewhat irregularly organized around an open yard. Excavations carried out during the 1950s and 1970s (cf. Wik 1983) did not confirm the exact number of houses, but there are at least 10 or 12. Also, a large number of mounds, about 25 altogether, are found within as well as outside the circle of houses. The houses are ca. 9–13 m long and ca. 3–4.5 m wide, and postholes and fireplaces found at different levels in some of the houses indicate rebuilding at least twice (ibid.:18, 112, 118–132, 155).

As with the courtyard sites referred to above, finds were few and include knives, whetstones, and a couple of insignificant items. However, the earliest radiocarbon determinations are to AD 260–530 (T-2156).

*Summary*
The artefact material from the courtyard sites is limited and does not point beyond the 4th or 5th centuries. However, radiocarbon analyses of charcoal from several sites have yielded determinations spanning from the middle of the second to the middle of the 4th century (Fig. 5). Although the material is fragmentary and further excavations may change the picture, the evidence at hand indicates that the 3rd century should be considered as the principal establishment period of the North Norwegian courtyard sites.

## BURIALS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN LATE ROMAN SOCIETY

Compared to the number of Late Iron Age graves in North Norway, the number of graves from the Early Iron Age is not great (Sjøvold 1962, 1974), and graves unambiguously dated to the Roman Period amount to no more than 52 in all (Sjøvold 1962, Johansen 1982b:113–114). Nevertheless, considering the very few grave finds affiliated to the Nordic Bronze Age and the complete absence of graves dated to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (cf. Bakka 1976, Støren Binns 1985, Jørgensen 1986), the material is still relatively abundant. All the grave finds — with one exception — are published in detail by Th. Sjøvold (1962), and the following analysis is based entirely on this work. The exception, which happens to be the only burial dated to the 1st century AD, is published by O. S. Johansen (Johansen 1982b).

Only one of the 52 burials is dated to the 1st century AD, and this is also the case with the 2nd century. Two burials, actually originating from the same cairn, are dated to the 3rd century, whereas the bulk of the material, 48 burials altogether, is dated to the 4th century. The following analysis is based on these 4th-century graves. This may represent a methodological problem as the courtyard sites probably were established during the 3rd century. On the other hand, the growth in grave material succeeding the establishment of the sites may be significant for their interpretation.

On the basis of the grave inventory, Sjøvold (1962:120–133) has classified slightly more than half of the graves according to sex; 23 burials are classified as clearly or probably female — some of them quite rich — whereas only 10 are classified as male. This may also be relevant to the analysis, and will be discussed later. At this point, however, I shall concentrate on the content of the graves, which, it is hoped, can give some information on roles and ranks in 4th-century North Norway.

Archaeologists disagree on the importance of mortuary practices in social studies. On the basis of ethnographic studies, it has been argued that there is a connection between the complexity of burial customs and the complexity of social organization, although not necessarily the other way around (Binford 1972:235). This view has been criticized by archaeologists who claim that mortuary rituals are expressions of ideology, and that burials can therefore mask rather than reflect social inequalities (Shanks & Tilley 1982:152). A third view, which is adopted here, claims that although burials are not direct reflections of social structures, they render information about self-perception (cf. Cassel 1998:30). Burials are, on the one hand, perceived as religious acts which intend to provide a good start in a ‘new life’ for the deceased, and on the other hand as a means for the descendants to confirm, reproduce and strengthen social positions (ibid., cf. Bourdieu 1990:131).

The most conspicuous objects of the period are no doubt Roman imports and gold, and although the North Norwegian graves contain nothing comparable to the richest chieftains’ graves of South Norway or South Scandinavia, (cf. Sjøvold 1962:231, Magnus & Myhre 1976:291–299, Resi 1986, Hansen 1987, Hedeager 1990:55–70, 103–123, Fabech & Ringtved 1991, Lillehammer 1994:152–183, Cassel 1998:42–59), objects

Fig. 6. *Prestigious imports found in North Norwegian graves (photo: Mari Hildung/Tromsø University Museum).*

which are normally referred to as prestigious objects are found in 24, i.e. nearly half of the graves. Only one grave contained a glass vessel, but nine graves contained gold finger rings. Beads in varying numbers are found in 14 graves, and although the provenance of beads is difficult to decide, beads — especially the polychrome and gold-covered ones — are regarded as Roman imports (cf. Sjøvold 1962:17, Magnus & Myhre 1976: 337–338, Schaumann-Lönnqvist 1991:77). Although it is questionable whether silver objects like finger-rings and fibulas should be regarded as Roman imports, they are certainly not produced locally, and I therefore include nine finger rings and five fibulas among the imported prestigious imports.

We do not know how these objects reached our area; they may have come directly from the Continent, or they may have passed through several hands on their way northwards. At this point, however, this is not important. What is important is the fact that the population of North Norway had access to objects which circulated among the social élite of South Scandinavia as early as AD 300, or even earlier (Fig. 6). Some time ago, Thorleif Sjøvold (1962:231, 233) and Wenche Slomann (1959:19–20) pointed to the fact that there is no great time-lag between the arrival of 'fashions' in North Norway and the more central Nordic–Germanic areas, and they argue that this indicates that North Norway was an integral part of the North European Iron Age culture. For this reason, I will apply studies of Danish material (Hedeager 1990) as reference for the interpretation of the North Norwegian grave material.

In the Danish material, imports and gold are often found in well-equipped graves, i.e. graves with a high number of different types of objects. However, Hedeager (ibid:115–116) has demonstrated that the higher frequency of prestigious objects in the graves, usually such objects also occur in graves with a low number of artefact types. She interprets this as evidence of a social élite who controlled access to luxury items; the more this élite succeeded in accumulating, the more they distributed to the groups lower in rank (ibid.).

The majority of the North Norwegian graves — 40 altogether — contain 4 or fewer artefact types, whereas 12 graves contain 5 or more types. The highest score is 12 different types of objects (Sjøvold 1962:120–133). Prestigious objects are found in 8 of the 12 graves containing 5 object types or more, and among these 8 objects, 7 yielded more than one type of prestigious object (Table 1). Moreover, prestigious objects are found in 16 of the 40 graves containing 4 or fewer artefact types. Thus, the distribution pattern of prestigious items in North Norwegian graves demonstrates certain similarities to the Danish pattern, which, according to Hedeager, indicates the presence of a social élite who controlled access to prestigious objects, and who distributed these objects to groups lower in rank.

Hedeager (1990:118–141) differentiates between three groups of weapon graves. Group I consists of graves containing sword, shield and spear, and graves belonging to this group are normally accompanied by imports and/or gold. Group II consists of graves containing sword and shield, sword

Table 1. *North Norwegian Roman Period graves containing prestige objects, and the total number of artefact types accompanying them (after Sjøvold 1962:120–133).*

| Location | Glass vessel | Gold ring | Silver ring | Silver fibula/needle | Beads | No. of artefact types |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gjesfjord | | | 1 | 1 | 47 | 4 |
| Alsøy | | | | | 61 | 6 |
| Glein | | 1 | 2 | | | 4 |
| Øysund | | | 1 | | 38 | 3 |
| Øysund | | | | | 'Several' | 4 |
| Bertnes | | 1 | | | | 4 |
| Ljønes | | 1 | | | | 1 |
| Bø | | | | 1 | | 1 |
| Bø | | 1 | | | | 7 |
| Skarstad | | 1 | 1 | | 186 | 8 |
| Hol | | | | | 68 | 1 |
| Fleines | | 1 | | | 32 | 2 |
| Føre | 1 | | | | | 12 |
| Ramberg | | | | 1 | | 2 |
| Steine | | | | | 1 | 6 |
| Svinøykalven | | 1 | | | | 3 |
| Svinøykalven | | | | 1 | | 2 |
| Svinøya | | | | | 3 | 4 |
| Svinøya | | | 2 | | | 4 |
| Svinøya | | 1 | 2 | | 45 | 4 |
| Sommerøy | | | | | 35 | 6 |
| Sommerøy | | | | | 73 | 4 |
| Stave | | | | | 'A few' | 5 |
| Åse | | 1 | | 1 | 'Several' | 5 |

and spear or shield and spear, whereas Group III consists of graves containing shield, spear or sword. In Hedeager's view, these groups indicate a hierarchical military structure corresponding to the social hierarchy.

The Roman Period graves of North Norway comprise a total of eight weapon graves, which apparently can be classified according to the same scheme (Table 2). Three of these correspond to Hedeager's Group I, two correspond to Group II, and three correspond to Group III. Some of the graves contain arrows in addition to the finds mentioned above, and although these are quite rare in Roman Period graves, Danish bog finds indicate that they were part of the standard equipment (Slomann 1959:14). None of the graves belonging to Group III contained any of the prestigious objects mentioned above, whereas one of the Group I graves and one of the Group II graves contained one gold finger ring each (cf. Slomann 1959, Sjøvold 1962:122–123). The material is too limited to draw any statistical conclusions, but again the correspondence with Danish material is striking.

Although there are differences between the North Norwegian and Danish material, especially regarding the amount and quality of prestigious objects, there are indeed similarities, and in my opinion, there is a basis for interpreting the North Norwegian material according to a South Scandinavian analogy. Although we should be careful not to overstretch the analogy, the grave material

Table 2. *North Norwegian Roman Period weapon graves. (After Sjøvold 1962:120–133).*

| Location | Sword | Spear | Shield | Prestigious object | Weapon grave group | Century |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Øysund | 1 | 1 | | | II | 4th |
| Bertnes | 1 | 2 | | Gold finger ring | II | 4th |
| Bø | 1 | 2 | 1 | Gold finger ring | I | 3rd |
| Steigen | 1 | 2 | 1 | | I | 4th |
| Miklebostad | 1 | | | | III | 4th |
| Føre | 1 | 2 | 1 | | III | 4th |
| Føre | | | 1 | | I | 4th |
| Elgsnes | 1 | | | | III | 4th |

from the 4th century certainly indicates a hierarchical social organization led by a social and military élite which was integrated in Late Roman Period culture at a Nordic level.

## ROMAN PERIOD SETTLEMENT AND ECONOMY

Farming is the hallmark of the Nordic Iron Age settlement of North Norway, and hardly any Iron Age farms are known north of what is recognized as the northern limit of grain growing. The fur trade was previously considered the economic basis for the Iron Age élite, but archaeological studies have demonstrated that the richest graves are located in areas which — according to North Norwegian standards — offer optimal conditions for agriculture. Thus, arable land is believed to have played an important part in the formation of the social élite of the region (Storli 1985, 1989).

The background of the farming population has been a matter of primary interest to archaeologists studying the Iron Age settlement of North Norway. This interest is related to the fact that North Norway is populated by two culturally and ethnically different groups, the Sami and the Norwegians (cf. Storli 1986, 1993), and a main issue has been which of these should be regarded as indigenous to North Norway. For a long time the predominant view was that North Norway was originally populated by the ancestors of the Sami, and that the farmers had migrated to the region from Southwest Norway during the Late Roman and Early Migration Periods (e.g. Sjøvold 1962:233–240).

During the 1970s, several archaeologists criticized the concept of immigration as an explanatory model for cultural change (Magnus & Myhre 1972, Rolfsen 1973). During the same period, several works on pollen analysis indicated farming activities in North Norway as early as the Late Neolithic (Vorren 1975, Johansen 1979a, Vorren & Johansen 1981, summarized in Johansen 1990:3), while finds of cereals and animal bones yielded certain evidence of cultivation and animal husbandry in the Bronze Age (Johansen 1979b:109, 1990:5). This made way for the view that the ethnic and cultural dualism of North Scandinavia is a result of prehistoric internal processes (Odner 1983, 1985).

This idea prevailed until 1990, when it was suggested that the farming population of North Norway originates from two separate waves of immigration (Johansen 1990). The first wave is said to have taken place during the Late Neolithic, consisting of small groups of people from areas further south on the Norwegian coast bringing with them the knowledge of farming. At this early stage, however, farming is believed to have been of a rather symbolic character within an economy predominantly based on

hunting and fishing. The second wave is said to have taken place during the Bronze Age, when new groups set out from Southwest Norway to settle in the north, this time bringing with them a fully developed farming economy and a hierarchical social organization (ibid:19–23, 55).

Questions concerning the roots of the North Norwegian farming population are of minor concern to us at this stage of the investigation. Of more immediate interest are questions concerning the character of the farming settlements at the time when the first courtyard sites were established. To avoid misunderstandings as to questions concerning ethnic relations, I should add that general references to Early Iron Age or Roman Period material refer to the Nordic farming population.

The Iron Age settlement comprises individual farmsteads, whereas the farm itself usually consists of a long house, a varying number of burial mounds or cairns, and often one or more boathouses. The peat-covered walls of the long houses have left visible remains in the landscape.

As noted above, pollen analysis and archaeological investigations indicate that farming in North Norway certainly date back to the Bronze Age, and perhaps even back to the Late Neolithic. However, very little is known about the way the earliest farming settlements of North Norway were organized. Pollen analysis and radiocarbon determinations indicate that many of the Iron Age farms may have been cleared as early as ca. 200 BC-AD 1 (Johansen 1982a:56, 1982b:148), but there are no physical traces of farmhouses earlier than ca. AD 200 (Storm Munch 1965, Støren Binns 1978, 1983, Johansen 1979b, 1982a, 1982b, 1990, Bratrein 1995). Thus, archaeologists have turned to pollen analysis to grasp the development between the last centuries BC and the first centuries AD. A pollen diagram from Bøstad (Johansen & Vorren 1986:743) displays a marked decrease in forest vegetation and a corresponding increase in grass and herb vegetation during this period, and although modest, *hordeum*, i.e. barley, becomes a more visible element in the pollen diagram. Another diagram from Bø (Moltu 1988:42) shows a similar development of forest and herb vegetation, and together with the pollen diagram from Bøstad, it indicates an expansion in agricultural activities. It has been suggested that this farming expansion represents the final breakthrough of agriculture in North Norway (Johansen 1990:56).

Summing up, there are indications of a considerable agricultural expansion during the first centuries AD comprising an increase in farming activities as well as the establishment of farms of the Iron Age type. As settlements from the Pre-Roman Iron Age and the Bronze Age are practically unknown to us, we do not know whether this expansion was due to a population increase, or to structural changes in settlement and land distribution patterns.

Looking beyond our area of study, change is the characterizing feature for settlements all over Scandinavia during this period. In the southern parts of Norway, new land was cleared and a large number of farms were established ca. AD 200 (Lillehammer 1994:156–158, Skre 1998:213, 240–245). The courtyard sites of Southwest Norway were previously perceived as villages, but, as noted above, this interpretation has lost sway. However, excavations during the 1980s and 1990s have brought to light a real prehistoric village, Forsand, which was occupied from the Bronze Age and throughout the Migration Period, i.e. until ca. AD 600 (Løken 1992:57–58). Several changes and displacements of the village settlement took place during this long period of occupation, but from ca. AD 200, i.e. contemporaneously with the general expansion of the farming settlement, the location of each village unit, or farm, appears to have become more permanent. This is interpreted as an indication of social changes caused by the emergence of a social élite and a shortage of land (ibid.:61, 65–66, 1991:9).

Although several of the houses at Forsand are dated to the Bronze Age and Pre-Roman Iron Age, little is known about the general nature of the settlements from these periods. Recent excavations have uncovered structures suggesting a settlement in Mid-Norway similar to the one at Forsand (Grønnesby 1999), but so far there is no confirmed parallel to Forsand in Norway. In Denmark, however, several Iron Age villages have been investigated, and the villages of Hodde and Vorbasse are frequently referred to as examples of comprehensive changes taking place during the 3rd and 4th centuries. These changes seem to imply the abolishment of the traditional field system at the outskirts of the village in favour of permanent fields within fenced-in areas surrounding each farm (Hedeager 1990:173–174, Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:118). Hedeager (1990:174, 1976) interprets this as indications of a land severance which contributed to the constitution of the Iron Age farm as an independent economic unit, and in her opinion, similar processes took place in Norway as well as in Sweden ca. AD 200–300.

Gotland is another region where changes are observed during the Roman Period. The most conspicuous change is the introduction of houses with stone foundations and stone fences in ca. AD 200. The prevailing idea is that these are new structures representing a change in agricultural practice or land ownership, but this view is criticized by Kerstin Cassel (1998). She claims that what is new, is the use of stone as building material instead of wood. In her opinion, this change should be associated with a desire to leave permanent marks on the landscape in order to emphasize traditional values and social organization, and to build oneself into the future. In short, Cassel interprets the introduction of stone as building material as a strategy in creating a link between the past and the future in order to prevent change (ibid.:100–104, 192–195).

As for Northern Sweden, excavations of an Iron Age farm at Gene in North Sweden indicate that permanent farming settlements were established in the region ca. AD 100–200 (Ramqvist 1983). Ramqvist interprets this as a response to socioeconomic changes taking place in Scandinavia *vis-á-vis* the Roman Empire (1983:193–188, 202–203).

To sum up: Change is the characterizing feature for Roman Period settlements throughout Scandinavia. In Southwest Norway and Denmark, changes in farm and village structures have been interpreted as indications of land severance and establishment of individual farms, and although Cassel disagrees, changes in the material from Gotland allow similar interpretations. In other regions of Scandinavia, a comprehensive agricultural expansion took place and a large number of new farms were cleared, and this expansion, too, could at least partly be the result of settlement changes in connection with land severance.

Although one should be careful with generalizing, this teaches us that there are indeed as many parallels to South Scandinavia in the Roman Period settlement material of North Norway as there are in grave material. The idea that the observed changes in agricultural settlements could indicate a process of land severance and the constitution of the farm as an independent economic unit, is, in my opinion, a credible explanation for the observed changes in our material, too. The earliest physical traces of farmhouses, ca. AD 200, may indicate the beginning of this process in our area. As mentioned above, earlier studies have demonstrated a connection between rich farms and good arable land (Storli 1985, 1989). Thus, the outcome of the process seems to be the formation of an élite based on private ownership to land.

## BARBARIANS OF THE NORTH

The archaeological material from North Norway indicates a remarkable concurrence of events during the 3rd and 4th centuries AD that cannot be accidental. Although the sequence of events is still unclear, the estab-

lishment of courtyard sites and individual farms, and the formation of a hierarchical social organization must be interrelated processes.

As noted above, the sudden growth in archaeological material related to the Scandinavian Iron Age culture during the Late Roman Period was previously regarded as the result of immigration from Southwest Norway. Although archaeologists no longer defend this position, alternative explanations are still missing. It has already been demonstrated that similar changes in archaeological material are documented throughout Scandinavia during the period in question. I therefore suggest that the explanation must be sought in the general social and political development within the Nordic–Germanic area.

During the first centuries AD, most of Western and North Western Europe had become subordinate to Roman rule. Tens of thousands of soldiers, legionaries, officers and government officials had settled in areas along the Limes and in Britain, and Germanic tribes were inevitably subject to Roman influence. The population of South Scandinavia had made close contact with the Romans as early as AD 4, when the Roman fleet rounded the northern point of Jutland (Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:19).

Literary sources demonstrate that the Romans had geographical knowledge of the world outside their Empire, including Scandinavia. Tacitus, for example, writes about the 'Suiones' — the Swedes — and even of people and countries beyond their land (Tacitus 1997:92–93). Although the lack of reference to trade relations between the Romans and the Germanic population makes it difficult to estimate the importance and volume of the trade, written sources mention slaves, colourings, amber, goose-down, hams, furs, cattle and women's long, fair hair as commodities that were highly appreciated by the Romans (cf. Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:91).

The Romans controlled foreign access to their markets, and by means of a restrictive trade policy and generous gift giving, Germanic leaders beyond the Limes were made important allies. A grave at Hoby on the island of Lolland in Eastern Denmark, which contained some of the most exquisite objects ever found in the grave of a Germanic leader, is held as an example of such an alliance between a Germanic leader and a Roman legate (Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:13–16). Several sites in this area are outstanding in Early Roman Period finds, and the Gudme/Lundeborg area on the neighbouring island is believed to have played a central part in the mediation of Roman imports to other parts of Scandinavia (Hedeager 1990:204, Thomsen 1991:25–31, Thrane 1991:259:266).

Concentrations of Roman imports in Southeast Norway, i.e. at Store-Dal and Hunn, indicate that this area, too, played a major part in the import and distribution of such objects during the Early Roman Period (Magnus & Myhre 1976:323–327, Resi 1986, Lillehammer 1994:179–180). However, as the Rhine became increasingly important as a trade route throughout the Roman Period, a constantly bigger share of imported objects found its way directly to Western Norway (Magnus & Myhre 1976:327–334). It is during this same period that the changes in our region allegedly took place. This, together with the similarities in archaeological material from North and Southwest Norway — and indeed the remaining Scandinavian area (cf. Gjessing 1939:42, Sjøvold 1962:233–240) — indicates that from this point on, the development of North Norway was closely related to the development of the Nordic–Germanic cultural area, at least at the level of the social élite.

The Romans referred to Germanic tribes as 'Barbarians'. According to Tacitus, the term 'Germania' originally referred to a tribe that had crossed the Rhine and occupied land areas south of the river, and that later passed on their name to other tribes,

who started calling themselves by the name (Tacitus, 1997:66). This is a much-disputed section in Tacitus's account of the Germanic tribes. Nevertheless, scholars have referred to this phenomenon as a process of 'Germanization' among the different tribes north of the Empire (cf. Odner 1983:115–117, Skre 1998:10–11), and indeed, the conformity of the archaeological material in this whole region combined with the information passed on by Tacitus tends to lead to such an interpretation (cf. Randsborg 1991:73–79).

It has been argued that the tribal constellations of the Roman Period should not be perceived as ethnic groups, but as unions of war (Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:308–309). This is consistent with the view of ethnic groups presented by Siân Jones (1997). She questions the very existence of ethnic groups as coherent, monolithic entities, and argues instead that particular ethnic identities and the representations of the past associated with them are produced in specific sociohistorical contexts characterized by relations of power (1997:126, 143). Questions concerning ethnicity and the relationship between ethnic groups and material culture are particularly difficult for archaeologists, and cannot be dealt with adequately within the limits of this work. Nevertheless, I think that the perspectives presented above constitute a basis on which the Roman Period material of North Norway could be meaningfully interpreted.

Within the economic systems of the kind dominating the Roman Period societies of Scandinavia, control of prestige goods means control of the social and political organization. This presupposes a system of alliances, and for this reason the prestige goods system is inherently expansive, but unstable, and characterized by conflicts (cf. Odner 1973, 1983:85–86, Hedeager 1990: 91–92, Cassel 1998:162). According to Tacitus, the Germanic tribes obtained conspicuous objects through warfare and plunders (Tacitus:72), and although there are critical voices to the idea that the Scandinavian Roman Period society was based on the ideology of warfare (Cassel 1998:177–178), there is support in the archaeological material for those who maintain that this was the case (Odner 1973, 1983, Fabech 1989:94, Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:117, Ilkjær 1991). The Danish bog finds, which were earlier interpreted as accumulated local small sacrifices, are now regarded as evidence of regular warfare and war plunderings, and according to recent research, the attacking forces came from the Scandinavian mainland, north of Scania (Ilkjær 1991:281)

In accordance with the view presented above, it has been suggested that powerful warriors from Southwest Norway were raiding Denmark from ca. AD 200 onwards (Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:87–89, 102–111, 297, Lillehammer 1994:187, Sandvig 1998). I suggest that in the search for new allies, the prosperous chiefs of Southwest Norway turned to North Norway. The fact that the northerners had access to raw materials such as eiderdown, walrus tusks, hides and furs, which were highly valued by the population of the south — even by the Romans — may in fact have made them valued allies.

There are finds of South Scandinavian origin in North Norway even from the preceding periods (cf. Jørgensen 1986:68), but the nature of the contact with the south is difficult to estimate. In my opinion, the archaeological material indicates that North Norway became fully integrated into the Nordic/Germanic cultural area during the Late Roman Period; they became 'Barbarians' of the north, adopting the institutions of the southern regions such as a hierarchical social organization, economically independent farms and courtyard sites.

The Scandinavian Sagas describe close relationships between the chiefs of North and Southwest Norway during the Viking Period, and these relations may have been the result of alliances that were already established in the Roman Period. Wife exchange was an important aspect of such alliances (cf. Hedeager & Tvarnø 1991:308),

and the relatively high number of rich female burials from the Roman Period indeed indicates such relations.

The increased integration of North Norway into the Nordic–Germanic cultural area indicates that the leaders of the region became involved in what Colin Renfrew (1996) denotes as *peer polity interaction.* According to Renfrew, the term designates the full range of interchanges — such as imitation, competition, warfare, and exchange of goods — taking place between autonomous sociopolitical units that are situated beside or close to each other or in some cases further apart. One of the results of such interaction is increased flow in the exchange of goods. Moreover, in peer polities that are not highly organized internally, we can expect intensification of production and development of hierarchical structures (ibid.:114, 126). As demonstrated above, this is exactly what we can read from the archaeological material from North Norway during the period in question.

## A 3RD CENTURY CASE

When did the process start? The different find categories tend to pull in slightly different directions; courtyard sites and individual farms point to the beginning of the 3rd century, whereas the grave material points to the 4th. I now present a case that may contribute toward clarifying the situation during the establishment period of courtyard sites.

The case takes us to Bø, to the only burial monument that is known in North Norway from the 3rd century, more precisely from the middle of the century. The grave was found in a cairn only 30–40 m from the courtyard site, and contained two burials, one male and one female. We shall concentrate upon the former, which is a grave belonging to weapon grave Group I (Slomann 1959) (cf. Table 2). The grave contained a remarkably complete set of weapons — sword, shield, two spearheads, two, possibly three arrowheads — together with a gold finger ring, a belt and a pottery vessel. The sword is a spatha, with details that are known from South Scandinavian graves as well as from the Danish bog finds. The shield, too, has details known from other parts of Scandinavia. What makes this shield particularly interesting, however, is the fact that it carried traces of red and blue paint. This is, according to Slomann (ibid.:16, 22–23), the first example in Norway of a painted shield. According to Tacitus, such shields were customary among Germanic tribes (Tacitus 1997:67). The spears, too, are of a type quite common in other parts of Scandinavia, and from the Danish bog finds arrows are known as a part of the weapon set. Furthermore, the gold ring is of a type that is well known in Norway as well as elsewhere in South Scandinavia (Slomann, op. cit.:13–14).

This male from Bø bore the hallmarks of a Germanic leader — a 'Barbarian' of the north. Thus, his grave indicates that the formation of the élite may have taken place already in the 3rd century, together with the establishment of courtyard sites and individual farms. Consequently, the 3rd century should be considered as the main period of integration and change.

## ON THE ESTABLISHMENT AND FUNCTION OF COURTYARD SITES

As already noted, the courtyard sites of North Norway were previously interpreted as a function of chiefs' centres, and according to the distribution maps (Figs. 7–9), there is a connection between the sites and the social and military élite. However, the maps say nothing about the nature of this relationship, nor about the kind of leadership that was practised.

Different kinds of political leadership have been suggested for different parts of Scandinavia. Lotte Hedeager and Per Ramquist have suggested that archaic kingdoms already existed in Scandinavia in the Late Roman Period (Hedeager 1990:201–204,

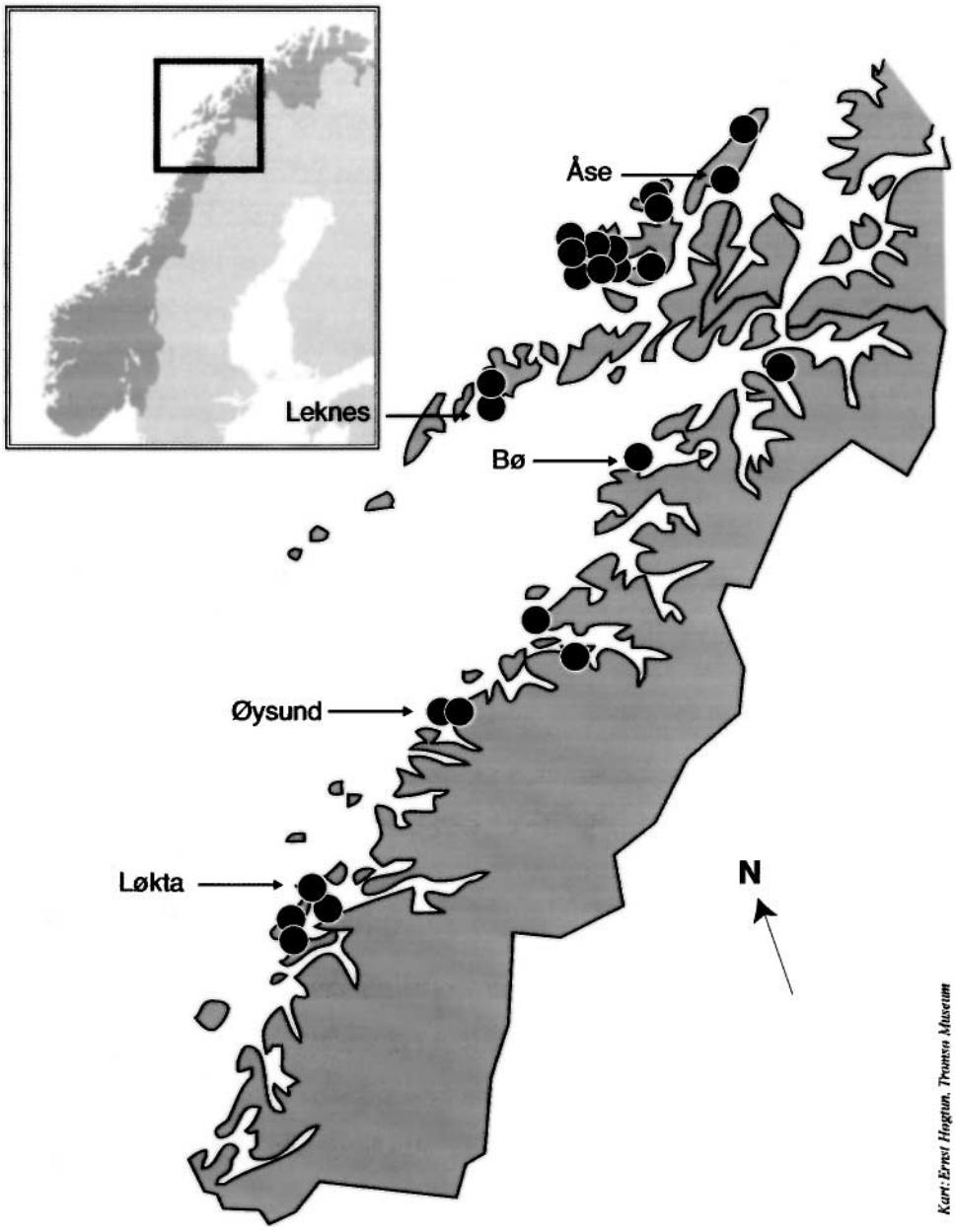


Fig. 7. *Graves containing gold, silver, glass vessels or beads.*

Ramqvist 1991:305–306), and according to Ramqvist, this includes North Norway, where the northernmost 'kingdom' is held to be centred in the Lofoten area (Ramquist, ibid.). Kerstin Cassel criticizes the idea that centralized powers in the shape of archaic kingdoms should exist this early and claims that this was certainly not the case in Gotland (1998:155–162). Her alternative is the idea of a 'small-scale' social organization constituted by local groups in which leadership depended on the success in recruiting

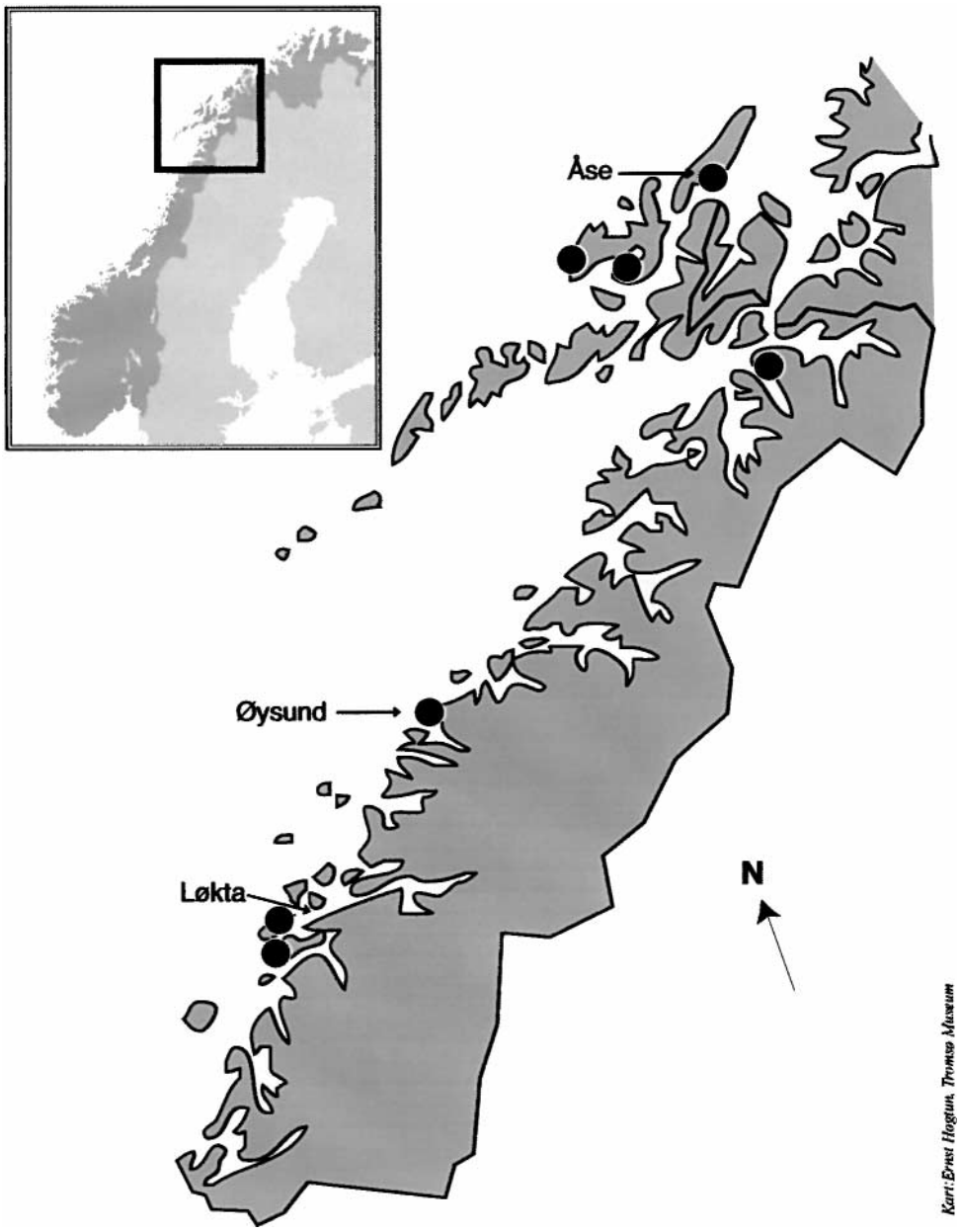


Fig. 8. *Graves containing combinations of gold, silver, glass vessels and beads.*

supporters, and where power had to be negotiated repeatedly (ibid.:162).

In North Norway there is undoubtedly a connection between courtyard sites and farms belonging to the élite. However, courtyard sites are often situated in areas where several farms have yielded conspicuous finds (cf. Fig. 10). This is a point that has been stressed in earlier studies (Storli 1985, 1989). Another important detail is the fact that courtyard sites are usually situated on marginal land, often in bog areas and at

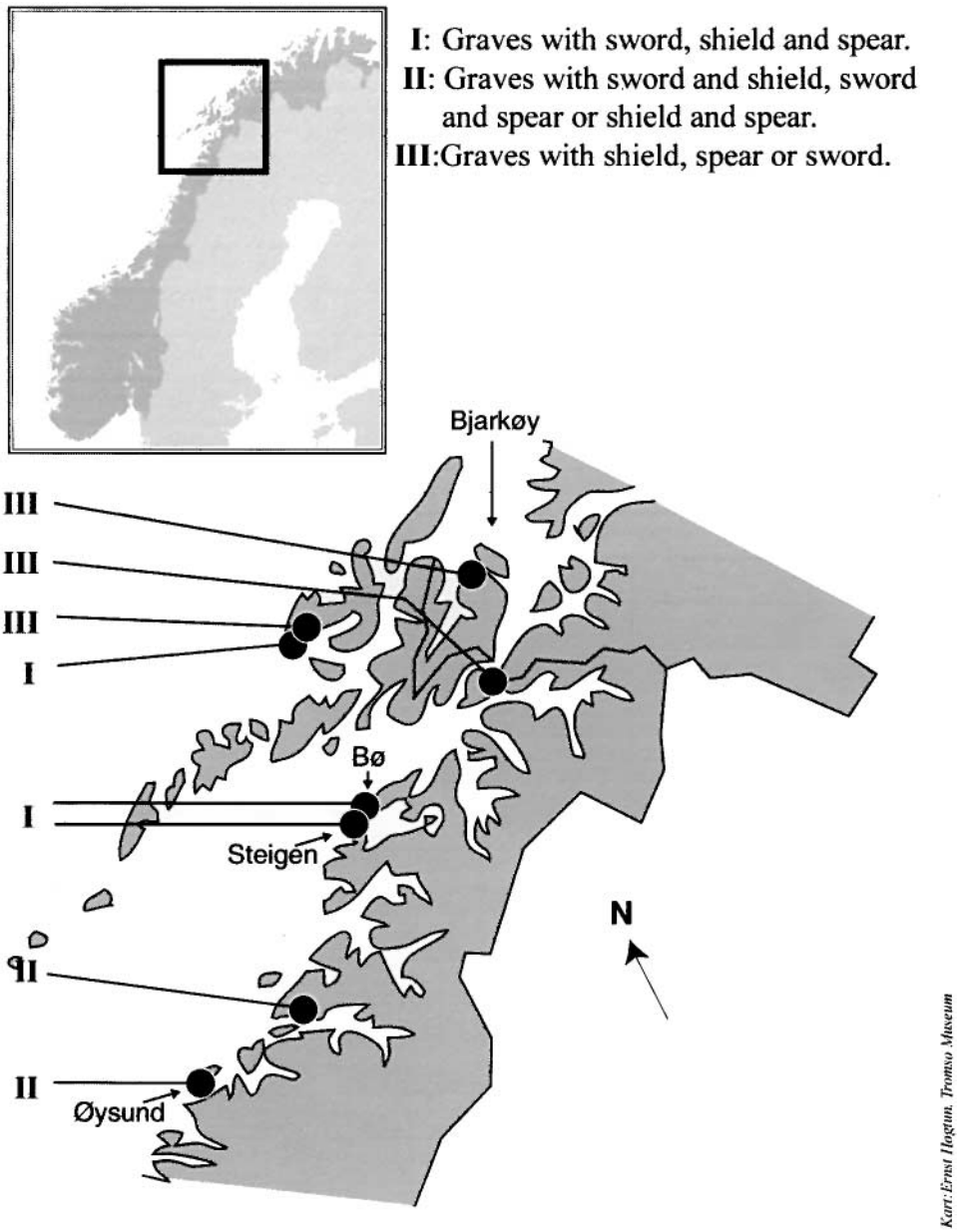


Fig. 9. *Weapon graves.*

some distance — several kilometres is not unusual — from the nearest farm site (cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1978).

These observations indicate that we should exercise care when pointing out 'chieftains' farms' by relating courtyard sites to particular farms, at least in their initial phase. The sites could either have been an important arena for peer polity interaction (cf. Renfrew 1996:137), or, and more likely, they express the need for meeting places on 'neutral' ground where members

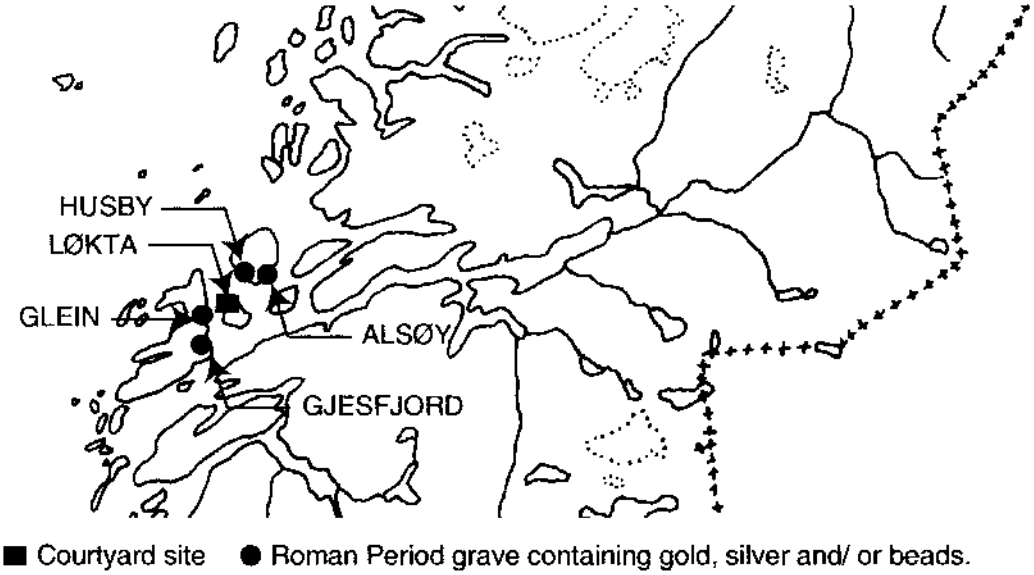


Fig. 10. *Courtyard sites are often surrounded by several farms yielding conspicuous finds.*

of the local élité — the landowning aristocracy — gathered for political, ceremonial and religious activities.

In my opinion, there is no basis for claiming the existence of 'archaic kingdoms' in North Norway during the Roman Period. Courtyard sites situated on neutral ground may in fact have been an efficient way of preventing the development of permanent political centres. The location of courtyard sites as well as the archaeological material associated with them indicates the kind of 'small-scale' social organizations suggested by Cassel (1998:162).

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