

Dagfinn Skre

1 Rethinking Avaldsnes and Kormt

Avaldsnes is among a select group of Scandinavian sites to feature repeatedly in the Old Norse literature (Fig. 1.1; Mundal, Ch. 3; Brink, Ch. 22). Upon closer examination, such sites tend to be rich in archaeological monuments and finds dating to the time periods referred to in the saga accounts and skaldic verses. Further back in time, fewer such sites show up, and more often the accounts take on the cast of legends.

For instance, it is fairly easy to connect the urban topography revealed through more than 150 years of archaeological excavations in high-medieval Oslo with the sites, streets, and buildings mentioned in, for example, the early 13th-century King Sverris saga, written only a few years after the events. Less obvious is the correspondence between Snorri's statements regarding the founding of Oslo by King Harald *harðráði* in the mid-11th century and the archaeology of the urban remains there dating back to around AD 1000. What can be made of the account in Egill Skallagrímsson's saga of Egill's sacking of Lund in Skåne in the mid-10th century, at which time the town Lund did not exist? Was 'Lund' at the time of Egill's visit the name of the site that is now called Uppåkra, a huge 1st–10th-century aristocratic settlement some 4 kilometres south of the town (Andrén 1998)? Skíringssalr in Othere's account from c. 890 is securely identified as the 9th-century town Kaupang in Vestfold (Skre 2007c), and Lejre mentioned repeatedly in *Beowulf* is evidently the site near Roskilde in Sjælland where several hall buildings from the 7th–10th centuries have been excavated (Christensen 2015). Uppsala, mentioned in *Ynglingatal* and by Saxo Grammaticus, is securely identified as Old Uppsala with its huge 7th-century mounds, several raised platforms with remains of hall buildings, and the recently discovered one-kilometre row of posts (Ljungkvist et al. 2011; Jörpeland et al. 2013). However, it remains an uncertain endeavour to establish a connection between these unique and highly impressive monuments and the row of twenty kings that according to *Ynglingatal* ruled there, the first of whom was purportedly a son of the god Frey.

Although connections between monuments and more or less legendary accounts in sagas and poems necessarily remain obscure, they are the rule rather than the exception. Uppsala is but one example; others are the locations where Odin and his following, according to Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*, resided on their way through Scandinavia to Uppsala, namely Fornsigstuna and Fyn. In Fornsigstuna two large hall buildings on raised platforms (Hedman 1991) have been found, and in Gudme on Fyn an early Iron Age aristocratic settlement with prestigious finds and large central hall building have been excavated (Nielsen et al. 1994). Thus, the written evidence should not be dismissed as untrustworthy, but rather be involved in careful attempts to connect the two types of evidence. Fruitful results have emerged from such undertakings (e.g., regarding Uppsala, see Sundqvist 2002).



Fig. 1.1: Avaldsnes, Old Norse *Qgvaldsnes* (*‘Qgvaldr’s headland’*), seen towards the south-south-east. The archaeological evidence retrieved by the ARM Project 2011–12 is found near the St Óláfr Church, commissioned by King Hákon Hákonarson c. 1250. The sheltered sailing route along the western Scandinavian coast, the *Norðvegr*, here protected from the ocean in the west by the island of *Kormt*, Old Norse *Kormt* (*‘low protective wall’*, to the right in the photo), runs just past the site. The route continues southwards past the conspicuous mountain seen in the distance. Its name, *Bokn*, meaning *‘sign, signal’* and related to the English *‘beacon’*, most probably owes to its visible appearance in the flat coastal landscape (Skre, Ch. 29:782–4), which made for a useful navigational mark (Brink, Ch. 24:668). Photo: KIB media.

Avaldsnes is one of the sites connected in sagas and poems to prominent persons and their activities. Accounts that involve historical persons that occurred only a century or two before the time when they were written down can be treated as relatively historically reliable. For example, the tale of *Ásbjörn selsbani* (Mundal, Ch. 3), despite Snorri’s literary embellishment, appears to be based on the actual murder of one of King Óláfr inn helgi’s men at Avaldsnes committed by *Ásbjörn*, a relative of the prominent men *Þórir hundr* and *Erlingr Skjálǫgsson*. Detailed analyses of the texts are necessary to identify trustworthy elements (Mundal, Ch. 3; Skre, Ch. 27:761–4).

Less trustworthy are those saga accounts that have a legendary or folkloric form, contain elements borrowed from other literary works, or occur in a less precisely defined distant past, apparently at least 5–6 centuries before they were written down. To this category belongs the tale of King *Qgvaldr* and his cow that always accompanied him – the story contains all the elements of a legend.

As Mundal points out (Ch 3:45–6), traditions regarding significant persons of a



Fig. 1.2: Prominent aristocratic sites in first-millennium Scandinavia mentioned in Chapters 1, 4, and 28. Illustration: I. T. Bøckman, MCH.

distant past are often ‘drawn’ to sites that are coincidentally known to have been prominent in a more recent past. Avaldsnes’ status as a royal manor from the 10th century onwards may have inspired saga writers of the 13th–14th centuries to set their stories about a more distant past at Avaldsnes. However, the likelihood of such tales reflecting a historical reality increases in light of the archaeological evidence of an aristocratic presence there from the 3rd century onwards, although not necessarily continuously (Skre, Ch. 27). Moreover, it appears that Avaldsnes had achieved a mythical status well before the 10th century (Mundal, Ch. 3:36–7; Skre, Ch. 28:777–8). As such, the sequence of causality in the explanation above may be inverted: the site’s mythical status, probably established in the site’s first heyday in the 3rd–4th centuries, may itself have drawn men of power and ambition to settle there and to bury their predecessors nearby.

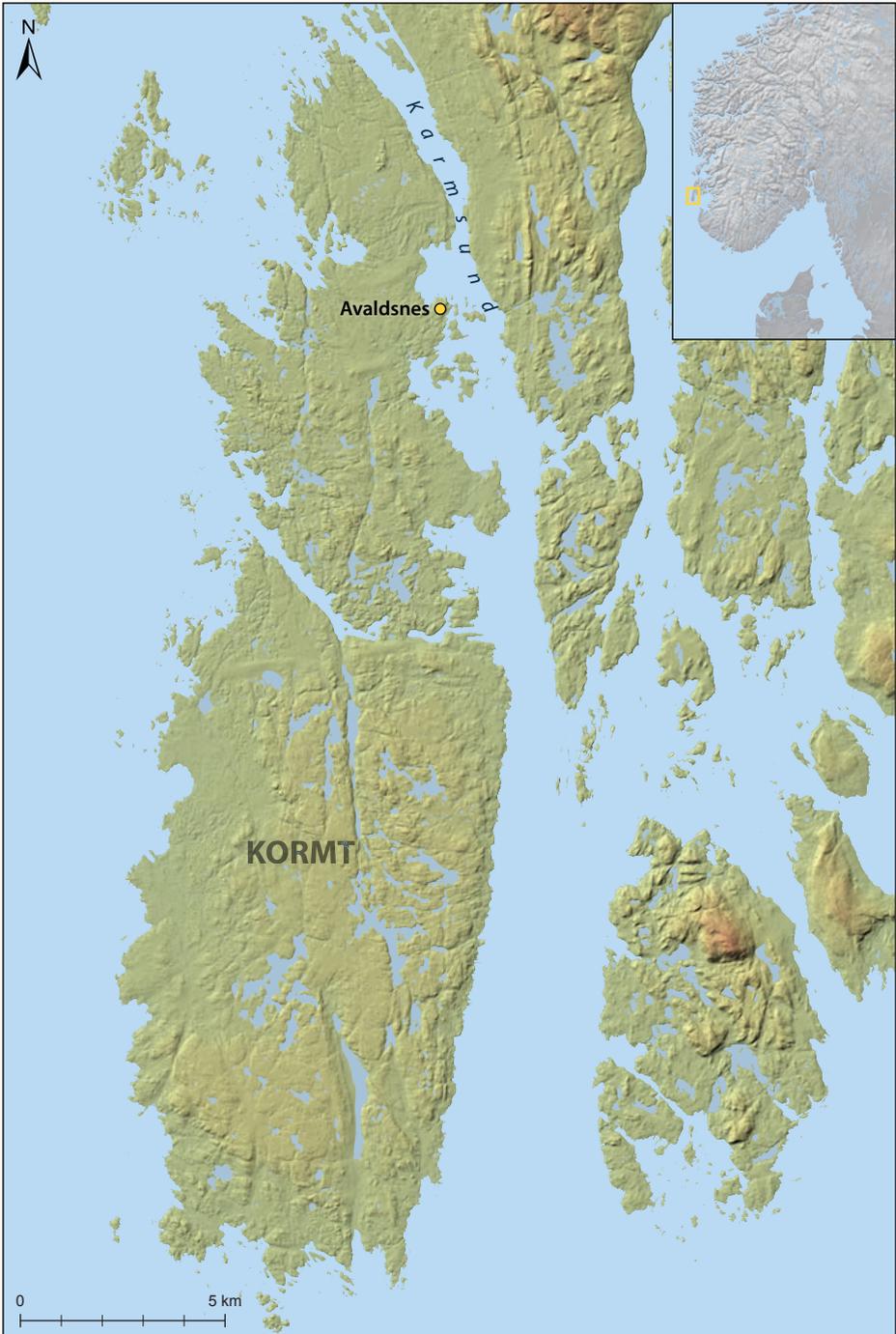


Fig. 1.3: In this book, Avaldsnes and the surrounding land in northern Kormt and on both sides of the Karmsund Strait constitute the primary area of study. Illustration: I. T. Bøckman, MCH.

These are but some of the deliberations developed in this volume. Although Avaldsnes has more than 450 years of research history (Skre, Ch. 2), the multifaceted scholarly challenges and possibilities in reconsidering Avaldsnes and Kormt have been the primary impetus for initiating the Avaldsnes Royal Manor (ARM) Project. In bringing to light a substantial corpus of archaeological material from the site, initiating a wide scope of scholarly research efforts, and revitalising the existing archaeological and written evidence, the project seeks to produce new insights into the history of Avaldsnes and the land along the Karmsund Strait. This research is presented in the present volume. In the second volume, this knowledge will be used as a springboard to address some classic research questions in northern European history: the transformation through the first millennium AD of the Germanic tribal societies and the emergence of kingship. The details of the project's objectives and research plan are described in Chapter 4.

1.1 The content of this volume – a guide to readers

The book is divided in five sections. Section A (chapters 1–4) lays out the scholarly background for the research presented in the book. Section B (chapters 5–15) presents the results from the 2011–12 excavations in thematic chapters. Section C (chapters 16–19) presents scientific analyses from the excavations. Section D (chapters 20–26) presents specialist studies of relevant finds, sites, and place names from Avaldsnes, Kormt, and nearby. Section E (chapters 27–29) explores the research questions outlined in chapter 4 on the basis of the results from Sections A–D.

Readers may derive an overview of the book's content from the abstracts that introduce each chapter. Some readers will doubtless have special interest in specific chapters and sections. The general reader is advised to read section A *ad libitum*, and use chapter 6 as a key to excavation results and scientific analyses presented in sections B and C. The specialist studies in section D may also be read *ad libitum*, and are referred to in section E. Chapter 27 is based on the site chronology and main finds presented in chapter 6, while chapters 28–29 are more thematic.

The volume is extensively cross-referenced. These references appear in the following format: (Østmo, Ch. 9:163), indicating author, chapter number, and page; and (Østmo, Fig. 9.4), indicating this specific figure occurring in chapter 9. Initial capitals (Ch., Fig., Tab.) indicate that these are cross-references within the volume; references to chapters, figures, and tables in other publications are not capitalised.

All radiocarbon datings, both from 2011–12 and earlier campaigns, have been calibrated according to OxCal v4.2.3; they are listed with their respective calibration curves in Appendix II. When referred to in the text, datings are given in terms of the one sigma (68.2% probability) unless otherwise stated. If the one sigma spans more than one time interval, only the start of the earliest and end of the most recent is indi-

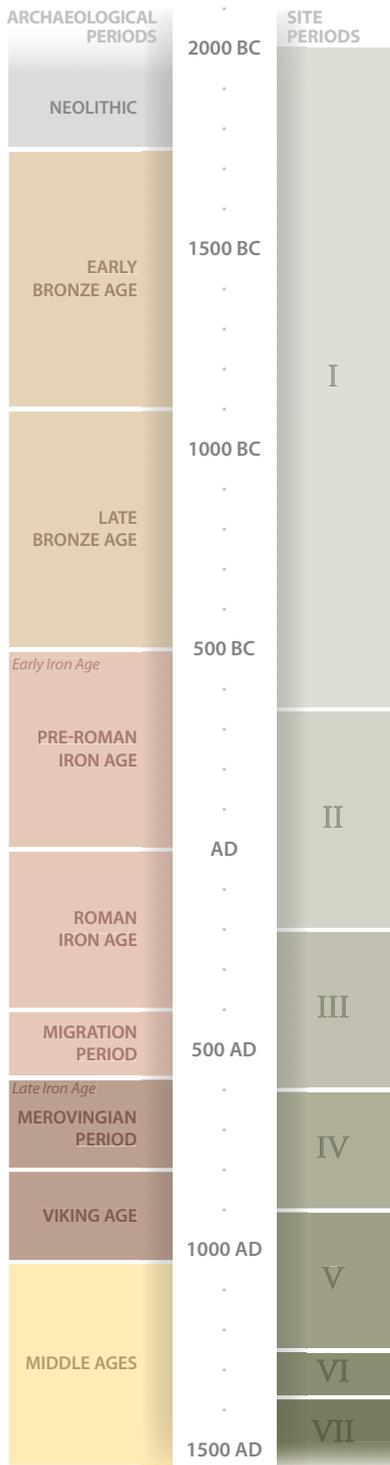


Fig. 1.4: This time line provides an overview of the standard chronological periods in west-Scandinavian archaeology (left) as well as the main chronological periods in the Avaldsnes site (Site Periods I–VII, right; see Østmo and Bauer, Ch. 6).

Illustration: I. T. Bøckman, MCH.

cated. For example, for the dating Beta-304876 where the one sigma spans the two periods AD 214–61 and 280–326, this is written as AD 214–326.

Place names are in generally written in their modern form and according to their native spelling, except where a name's Old Norse forms are discussed. With one notable exception: the form Kormt is used throughout the book, despite the island's current name of Karmøy. This is intended to avoid confusion with the modern Karmøy Municipality, which also encompasses other islands and a part of the mainland. Kormt corresponds to the island's Old Norse name *Kǫrmt*, a form used in local speech into the 20th century. Names of Old Norse literary works are spelled according to conventions in the specialist disciplines, as are names of persons mentioned therein.

Finally, the use throughout this book of *Norðvegr* ('the route to the north' or 'the northern route'; Brink, Ch. 24:667) as the reconstructed Old Norse form of the coastal sailing route's name is not meant to disregard the current debate on whether the original form could instead be *Nórvegr* ('the narrow route'; e. g. Myrvoll 2011). In the context of this volume, the essential issue is that the route bore a name that became the name of the kingdom that was created around AD 900. The name's original form and meaning, and indeed the sailing route, will be discussed in detail in the second Avaldsnes volume.

Book acknowledgements:

Copyediting and language revision of the present book has been undertaken by Anthony Zannino. Illustrations have been managed by Ingvild Tinglum Bøckman, who also has produced most of them (see captions). Maps of Norway are used under licence from The Norwegian Mapping Authority (Kartverket). Topographical data for Europe are obtained from Natural Earth Data. LiDAR data from Avaldsnes are produced by Blom Geonatics AS.

