4 The Avaldsnes Royal Manor Project's Research Plan and Excavation Objectives

This chapter provides an outline of the scholarly problems that the Avaldsnes Royal Manor Project was designed to address, the central theme explored being the political institutions and processes in the first millennium AD. The research plan was developed during the 2007–9 pilot project phase, and was adjusted and supplemented during the 2011–12 excavations and the research and publication phase in the subsequent years.

The first of the research plan's two sections, the results of which are presented in the present volume, deals with Avaldsnes, Kormt, and the Karmsund Strait. The research plan included a series of selected themes, taking as a point of departure the rich and varied research strand on so-called central places. The central-place approach informed the choice of objectives for the 2011–12 excavations at Avaldsnes alongside a corresponding excavation and sampling strategy. Relevant specialists were invited to join the project.

The second section of the research plan addresses the first-millennium history of political institutions and processes in the south-western coast of the Scandinavian Peninsula. The first results from this research are presented in this volume's final chapter, which discusses Avaldsnes in a western Scandinavian context. The preliminary results presented in that chapter will be further developed in the next volume from this project.

Why did kings prefer to reside on the island of Kormt, a modestly fertile and wind-blown island, rather than in the more fertile and more densely populated regions further inland and along the fjords? This is the central question with which researchers of Avaldsnes have grappled for 450 years, and which the Avaldsnes Royal Manor (ARM) Project takes as its point of departure (Skre, Ch. 2). The short answer – proximity to the naval sailing route – can yet be developed to encompass discussions of most aspects of societal and political development in western Scandinavia through the first millennium AD.

Two aspects of this vast field of research are addressed in this project: firstly, to discuss the shifting nature and context of a prominent western Scandinavian aristocratic site; and secondly, to reconsider the history of political institutions and processes in the first-millennium south-western coast of the Scandinavian Peninsula (Fig. 29.3) – both aspects with some potential bearing on the rest of Scandinavia and Germanic areas in general. The present volume will be devoted to the first part of the ARM Project research plan, the second volume to the latter.

The chosen approach pursues a prominent strand of research in Scandinavian archaeology; the exploration of political sites, institutions, and processes in the first millennium AD. This strand can be traced back to the earliest writers of history (regarding Norway, see Skre, Ch. 2), but has been particularly vibrant during the past half-century. The application in the 1970s of anthropological research (notably, Service 1971; Sahlins 1972) introduced evolutionary models and social stratification as

frameworks for discussions of societal hierarchisation and political institutions and processes. The period's large-scale surveys of ancient monuments in the three Scandinavian countries have provided an empirical base of unprecedented volume and quality for this research. In the following two decades, research on political institutions and processes was based primarily on cemetery studies and agrarian settlement history, as well as on special types of sites, such as hilltop fortifications, boathouses, rune stones, and courtyard sites (e. g. Hyenstrand 1974; Magnus et al. 1976; Randsborg 1980; Hyenstrand 1982; Ambrosiani 1985; Myhre 1985; Solberg 1985; Myhre 1987; Ramqvist 1991; Hedeager 1992a).

A shift occurred in the early 1990s towards qualitative and away from quantitative approaches and methods, leading to less model-based research. The Danish project 'Fra stamme til stat' ('From tribe to state', Mortensen and Rasmussen 1988, 1991) was instrumental in that reorientation. By bringing together archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, numismatists, and specialists in Old Norse literature and religion, the project set the path for an increasingly interdisciplinary research practice. Over the following decade a series of productive research themes were introduced or revitalised, most significantly the Iron Age hall (Herschend 1993), warfare (Olausson 1995; Nørgård Jørgensen and Clausen 1997), the history of landed property (Skre 1998; Zachrisson 1998; Iversen 1999), ethnic groups and territoriality (Callmer 1991; Näsman 1999), judicial organisation (Storli 2006; Iversen 2013a, 2015b), and central places (Brink 1996, 1997; Larsson and Hårdh 1998; Näsman 1998; Fabech 1999; Hedeager 2001; Jørgensen 2003; Söderberg 2005; Ljungkvist 2006; Skre 2007b).

To varying degree, all these research strands involve the study of social stratification. Of the various strata, attention has been directed predominantly towards the social elite; this book applies the term 'aristocracy'. The lack of formal nobility in first-millennium Scandinavia gives this term a less precise content than, for example, in high-medieval continental Europe. In the mainly agrarian subsistence economy of first-millennium Scandinavia, food production sufficient to support a group of people who were exempt from production activities is the first basic prerequisite for the existence of an aristocracy; the social group's control of that production is the second. That position provides the opportunity to develop lifestyles and competences that more or less clearly separate that group from the rest of the population.

The aristocratic lifestyle can take forms that are rarely or not at all reflected in the archaeological record – for instance, bodily gestures and oral language – archaeologists need to rely on those that are. Clearly, as indicated by rich depositions and huge mounds with lavish furnishing, these conditions were present in many Scandinavian regions in the Bronze Age, northern Kormt among them. From the early pre-Roman Iron Age, however, very few indications of social stratification are found in western Scandinavia. As at Avaldsnes (Bauer and Østmo, Ch. 8:154), agricultural yield increased during that period, and in the Roman Iron Age, a marked shift occurred. High-status grave furnishings and prominent grave monuments as well as luxury imports and huge buildings are found in most Scandinavian regions with a

predominantly agrarian economy. Although the expressions of an aristocratic life-style found in the archaeological record vary through the first millennium, they are always present to varying degrees. They are probably only to some extent representative of the power and relative size of the aristocratic group. In the present context a variety of potentially aristocratic expressions will be considered (below; Skre, Ch. 27).

Although some farms in western Scandinavia appear to have been large-scale in the late and most likely the early first millennium, the access to foodstuffs sufficient to feed the variety of specialists requisite to maintaining an aristocratic lifestyle – artisans, poets, warriors, servants, carpenters, and the like – will have necessitated access to surplus produce from other farms. The history of landed property has been explored intensively in the literature of the last twenty-five years (for references to Norwegian publications 1995–2008, see Skre 2011a:201–2). Although the number and extent of estates in the early first millennium is tentative, their existence is plausible. Thus, in this volume, the term ‘manor’ is applied to a farm that appears to be an estate-holder’s residence. In addition, political leaders may have had access to produce through the *veizla* institution. Prior to the introduction of royal taxes, fines, and the like in the 10th–12th centuries, the *veizla* appears to be the only redistributive mechanism for foodstuff other than land ownership (Skre, Ch. 29:798).

Political institutions in first-millennium Scandinavia appear to have had both communal and aristocratic aspects; exploring institutions and processes therefore involves studying the communal. For instance, while local thing assemblies in the late Viking Age probably consisted of all land owners in the area, also such that possessed no farm but their own, the literary and judicial evidence clearly indicates that thing assemblies were dominated by the aristocracy. The relation between the communal and the aristocratic will be touched upon in this volume (Iversen, Ch. 26; Skre, Ch. 28) and explored further in the second volume.

4.1 Avaldsnes – a central place?

The first part of the research plan, which this first Avaldsnes volume is intended to fulfil, is based primarily on the last 25 years of research into sites that have come to be identified as central places. These decades of exploration have allowed in-depth studies of the site or complex that hosted a variety of essential societal functions, for instance cultic rituals and feasts, thing meetings, and markets, and where aristocratic residences and prominent cemeteries were to be found. The ARM research plan aimed at applying the rich and varied research perspectives within this field, which primarily had been developed on sites in southern Scandinavia, Svealand, Vestfold, and Hedmarken (Fig. 1.2) onto a prominent west-Scandinavian site. A PhD thesis by Arnfrid Opedal (2005) and a Master’s thesis by Håkon Reiersen (2009) have demonstrated the potential of applying a central-place approach onto Avaldsnes and Kormt.

One of the reasons for choosing the central-place approach was to enable critical evaluation of the concept of the 'central place'. The concept has primarily been applied to sites such as Helgö (Arrhenius and O'Meadhra 2011), Old Uppsala (Ljungkvist 2006, 2009), Uppåkra (Andrén 1998), Gudme (Hedeager 2001), and Tissø (Jørgensen 2010). North of Skagerrak in present-day Norway, Åker in Hedmarken (Hernæs 1989; Ingstad 1993; Pilø 1993) and Skiringssal in Vestfold (Skre 2007a, 2008, 2011b) display many of the same characteristics, and are here considered to be of the same type as the former (Fig. 1.2). The archaeological material from these sites consists of remains of numerous houses of which some are apparently aristocratic residences, thick and find-rich deposits often with substantial remains from craft production, and finds in deposits and graves of gold and other exotic materials and types. Together with written evidence and place names, the finds indicate juridical, social, and sacral activities.

The search along the west-Scandinavian coast for central places of the type described above has been modestly successful. Surely, some sites there would have had central functions; however, aristocratic sites along the coast of western Scandinavia generally appear to lack several of the archaeological characteristics mentioned above. For example, find-rich deposits are rare or non-existent, and indications of extensive craft production and market sites are not commonly found in or near aristocratic sites. As opposed to southern and eastern Scandinavia, place names here that indicate sacral sites appear to be utterly few; securely identified theophoric names (i. e. containing names of a god or goddess) may be counted on one hand, while those in the south and east approach 200 (Brink 2007b).

However, numerous aristocratic sites from the first millennium AD did exist in western Scandinavia, from Rogaland in the south to Hålogaland in the north. Some are situated on the outer coast, others further inland along the fjords and in the two areas with continuous stretches of arable land, Jæren and Trøndelag (see maps in Figs. 29.5–5). Apparently, the centrality of these sites differed from that of aristocratic sites in southern and eastern Scandinavia.

Parallels and differences between central places in southern and eastern Scandinavia and potential central places in western Scandinavia merit further exploration. If there are systematic differences, what caused them? Was centrality in the western regions of an entirely different nature from centrality in the south and east, or did the difference lie in the inclusion in central places of particular functions and exclusion of others? Were the differences in central-place features connected to differences in political institutions and processes? Or perhaps the concept of 'central place', or rather the content it has attained in Scandinavian Iron Age research, is in need of refinement (Skre 2010)? A research project centred on a site outside the central-place regions in southern and eastern Scandinavia, but which still appears to have had regional and possibly superregional political significance through much of the first millennium AD, would supply the opportunity to address such questions. Avaldsnes fulfils those criteria.

Some of these questions will be discussed in Section E that concludes this volume; others will be pursued in the second ARM volume. The path towards understanding the nature and extent of Avaldsnes' centrality pursued in the current volume is, firstly (Skre, Ch. 27), to identify the extent of aristocratic presence at Avaldsnes based on the research presented in Sections A–D. Secondly (Skre, Ch. 28), guided by the types of central functions identified in south- and east-Scandinavian central places, an attempt will be made to identify central functions that Avaldsnes may have had for people living in the vicinity as well as for those residing in the centre. Thirdly, the conclusions from these two chapters will be set in a west-Scandinavian context of aristocratic sites (Skre, Ch. 29).

To provide an empirical basis for these analyses and discussions, the excavations at Avaldsnes as well as the exploration of the island of Kormt and the Karmsund Strait will be analysed to highlight a variety of aspects of centrality and aristocratic presence. These aspects and related research questions are outlined in the following.

4.2 Excavating Avaldsnes

From the first-millennium monuments and finds in northern Kormt and along the Karmsund Strait, Avaldsnes appears to have been the most prominent manor in the area, at least in parts if not the entirety of that long period. The main aims of the ARM excavations were thus to identify indications of aristocratic presence and central functions at Avaldsnes, as well as the absence of such.

The existing first-millennium archaeological evidence at Avaldsnes consists primarily of grave finds and monuments, some of which clearly indicate aristocratic presence. The vast majority of those that have been dated stem from the first half of the millennium (Østmo and Bauer, Ch. 12). Evidence of Viking Period aristocratic presence is predominantly literary and documentary. In the process of writing the ARM research plan it became clear that the existing evidence of both the early and the later periods was in dire need of reassessment, as well as substantiation and qualification through additional archaeological evidence (Mundal, Ch. 3; Stylegar and Reiersen, Ch. 22; Skre, Ch. 23).

Although grave furnishings and monumentality supply significant information on aristocratic presence, graves represent points in time rather than trends that span decades and centuries. To identify more continuous trends and to date possible shifts in aristocratic presence and centrality, the Avaldsnes settlement site or sites from the first millennium would need to be identified and excavated.

Furthermore, although it not an explicit component of the original excavation plan, the excavation proved that one additional type of evidence held great potential for exploring long-term trends in the site's development: the history of agriculture at Avaldsnes. The excavation set out to address the following specific themes:

1. The types and numbers of buildings over time. Can periods without buildings be identified?
2. The character of the settlement. Do the functions and features of buildings, areas, deposits, artefacts, or biofacts indicate aristocratic presence or superregional networks?
3. The location of the farmyard. Was it stable, or was it moved at any time?
4. Graves and monumentality. Were there graves and monumental elements in addition to those already known, and can their chronology be outlined in greater detail?
5. Agricultural strategies and output. Can shifts in agricultural strategies be detected? Are there periods of increasingly intensive or extensive production?

To produce an excavation strategy aimed at highlighting themes 1–3, the evidence from existing archaeological and geophysical surveys was analysed to identify indications of first-millennium buildings and occupation (Bauer and Østmo, Ch. 5; Stamnes and Bauer, Ch. 16). Indications such as postholes and cooking pits were found in widely dispersed areas, but the evidence was not sufficiently detailed or precisely dated to decide their extent or to reconstruct buildings or other types of constructions.

On the basis of our analyses of this material and on a detailed LiDAR scan of the Avaldsnes headland, commissioned by the ARM Project, six areas (Areas 1–6, Fig 5.2) were identified as having potential for containing settlement features and deposits. In the excavation strategy designed to explore themes 1–3, the first step was to conduct initial survey trenching in those six areas followed by the opening up of larger excavation areas where the trenching had revealed settlement features and deposits. The minimising approach to further excavation was aimed at limiting intervention in these archaeological features and deposits to what was absolutely necessary to explore themes 1–3. After excavation, unexcavated features were carefully covered in preservation for future excavation.

In addition to buildings in and around the farmyard, Avaldsnes would be expected to have had boathouses along the shore; the discovery, date, size, and construction of these would be relevant for themes 1–2. Several boathouse features had already been identified through visual surveying, and remains of one assumed boathouse were partially excavated in 2001. To identify and explore first-millennium boathouses, a methodology was designed that combined surface surveying, sea-level datings, and limited trenching (Bauer, Ch. 10).

To highlight theme 4, limited trenching was conducted in the two monumental grave mounds Flaghaug and Kjellerhaug. The latter had not yet been dated, and the trenching was aimed at dating the mound and any subsequent phases of further build-up. This was also the aim of the trenching in the scant remains of Flaghaug (Østmo and Bauer, Ch. 12).

In Areas 2–4 (Figs. 5.1–2), previous survey trenching had identified postholes and other indications of settlement. As the ARM trenching proceeded in 2011, it soon

became clear that no first-millennium building remains could be securely identified in these areas. However, Area 2 presented excellent opportunities to explore the history of cultivation in the Avaldsnes headland. Because an understanding of this aspect of Avaldsnes' history would contribute to identifying trends and shifts that might be linked to aristocratic presence and central functions, the excavation and sampling of these remains were included in the excavation plan as a fifth theme.

While the project was focused on the first millennium AD, excavations revealed extensive remains from the subsequent millennium. In Area 1, quite unexpectedly, the ruins of a high-medieval masonry building were discovered. Less surprising was the identification in Area 1 of the remains of buildings and garden from the post-medieval rectory, although these were more substantial than anticipated. Following the excavation it was decided that these remains, in particular the masonry building, merited their respective chapters in this publication (Bauer, Chs. 14, 15). This inclusion did not substantially alter the chronological emphasis of the project, other than to extend the survey of the medieval literary and documentary evidence to include the evidence on the 13th–15th centuries (Mundal, Ch. 3).

Because Areas 1, 5, and 6 lay in what was known to be the post-medieval rectory farmyard, excavations there were expected to reveal remains from that period. To improve the prospects of identifying such remains while avoiding unnecessary excavation, the ARM Project commissioned the historian Frode Fyllingsnes to survey public archives and produce a detailed overview of buildings and land use in the post-medieval era. His report (Fyllingsnes 2008) aided the identification of several features that occurred during excavation, in particular in Area 1, and during the writing of the history of the post-medieval rectory (Bauer, Ch. 15).

The research plan included a strategy for scientific sampling of the site. Sampling methods were chosen that could potentially highlight all the themes 1–5 and contribute to dating features and deposits. All postholes and numerous other features were sampled to collect biological material: burnt animal bone fragments, charred plant macrofossils, and wood charcoal. In addition, bone fragments were collected manually during excavation. To solve particular research questions encountered during the post-excavation phase, the scope of biological analysis was extended to include phytolith analysis (silica microfossils of plants) and stable isotopes (Ballantyne et al., Ch. 19). Samples for radiocarbon datings were collected from all relevant contexts; macrofossils and charcoal were taken from biological samples, while charcoal was also collected manually during excavation.

Additionally, extensive sampling from relevant contexts was conducted to map magnetic susceptibility, soil micromorphology, and soil chemistry, the latter samples also from grids. In accordance with research questions and sampling opportunities that occurred during excavation, a pollen profile and a single organic chemistry sample were collected and analysed (Macphail and Linderholm, Ch. 17). Extensive geochemical analyses using portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) were conducted on core samples that had been systematically collected prior to survey trenching and exca-

ventions in all areas. Analyses of samples in Area 6 proved particularly relevant to the second of the themes that the excavation was set to address; these analyses are thus published here (Cannell et al., Ch. 18). Further details of excavation methodology and artefact recovery are described by Bauer and Østmo elsewhere in this volume (Ch. 5).

4.3 Exploring Kormt

As already noted, surveys and analyses of prominent grave monuments (Opedal 1998, 2005) and certain central-place elements (Reiersen 2009) in Kormt had already been undertaken. Thus, fulfilling these aspects of the research plan did not demand new surveys, but could be based upon existing publications. However, exploration of central functions and aristocratic presence in the area required several additional studies of Kormt. Place-name studies are of demonstrated relevance to central-place studies (Brink, Ch. 24), as are analyses of ritual depositions (Zahrissn, Ch. 25). Recent studies have suggested that judicial organisation as it is known from the high medieval period has a great time depth. There is a need for such studies to be undertaken for larger regions than Kormt; to that end, Frode Iversen (Ch. 26) has studied the whole of Ryfylke.

One category of artefacts from the ARM excavations had the potential for highlighting aspects of centrality and aristocratic presence: pottery. Analyses of this material and a reassessment of finds in Kormt and along the Karmsund Strait were thus included in the research plan (Kristoffersen and Hauken, Ch. 21). The results from these chapters are employed in Chapters 27–28, where the research problems in this part of the research plan are addressed.

4.4 Researching political dominance in south-western Scandinavia in the first millennium AD

The exploration of Avaldsnes and Kormt presented in this volume is meant to serve as a basis for implementing the second part of the ARM Project research plan, which aims at reconsidering the history of political dominance and institutions in first-millennium south-western Scandinavia – potentially with some bearing on the rest of Scandinavia and Germanic areas in general. The bulk of these studies will be presented in the second volume from the ARM Project, where the corresponding section of the research plan will also be presented.

The final chapter in the present volume (Skre, Ch. 29) develops some of the themes that will be explored in these subsequent studies. The west-Scandinavian landscape sets rather rigid parameters for premodern communication. A communicative per-

spective on aristocratic and communal sites highlights some structural features of settlement, economy, and society that deserve more attention in the historiography of kingship in western Scandinavia and beyond.