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Linear Settlements in Vendsyssel, Denmark

By Viggo Hansen

Vendsyssel is the northernmost province of Jutland, Denmark. It is divided from the mainland by the narrow strait of Limfjorden. To the east lies the Kattegat, to the north and west the Skagerrak, and the only landbridge to the southwest passes over low lying, previously swampy tracts. Vendsyssel comprises three different landscapes. Oldest and most prominent is the glacial surface with its often imposing terminal moraines rising to over a hundred metres. The end of the last glaciation saw Vendsyssel as a multitude of islands in an arctic sea, called the Yoldia Sea, but the subsequent isostatic uplift brought to light extensive plains of sand and silt, the Yoldia plains or plateaux. This uplift was followed by an eustatic rise of the sea in mesolithic time, called the Litorina or Stone-Age transgression, since when the northern part of Denmark has seen a constant, though decreasing uplift of the land, the southern part of the country at the same time having been submerged.

The older of the two terraces, the Yoldia plain, has its uppermost level at 59 metres above present sea-level in the northeast, where the depression of the ice cap had its greatest effect, but at only + 25 metres in southwest Vendsyssel. The younger and lower terrace, the Litorina terrace, has risen to + 15 metres in the northeast and to 7—8 metres in the southwest. While the arctic Yoldia Sea merely eroded in glacial deposits, the subsequent Litorina coast was modeled partly in the raised Yoldia plains and partly in glacial layers. While this younger raised beach is hardly discernible at more sheltered places in the south, the more exposed ones form low cliffs, in front of which the marine forelands are developed as wet, swampy flats — just recently reclaimed — or as beach ridge plains composed of successive beach ridges and intervening long, narrow lagoons, locally called the Rimmer-Dopper relief.



Fig. 1. Linear settlements on the border of a morainic island in the raised Litorina sea. The letters G. T. (Old-Paddocks) and Ø. (Øslands Paddocks) show the previous location of South Saltum.

It is to these raised beaches — now far inland — that many villages and hamlets are located, the typical settlement made up of one single row of farms parallel to the fossile coastline. In outer appearance they are very similar to the German *Waldhufendörfer* or *Marschhufendörfer*.

For this kind of settlement I have chosen the name of linear settlement instead of marginal settlement, because the villages lie in the middle of their land. Another outstanding feature is that the villages without exception have adopted the normal open-field system, in which each farm had its many strips scattered all over the township. But anywhere the arable land lay at the upper level — the dry level — the wet meadows occupying the lower level. This arrangement, in which the village itself separated the arable land from the meadowland, reduced the fencing to one or two cattle drives through the arable land between the village and the far-lying rough pasture at the outer margin of the township. The linear settlements also stress the importance of hay production and cattle rearing in the rural economy unlike other types of villages, as for instance the Green Villages on the better and more uniform soils in the eastern Denmark, where farming was of greater importance than animal husbandry. Yet the meadows had many other functions than

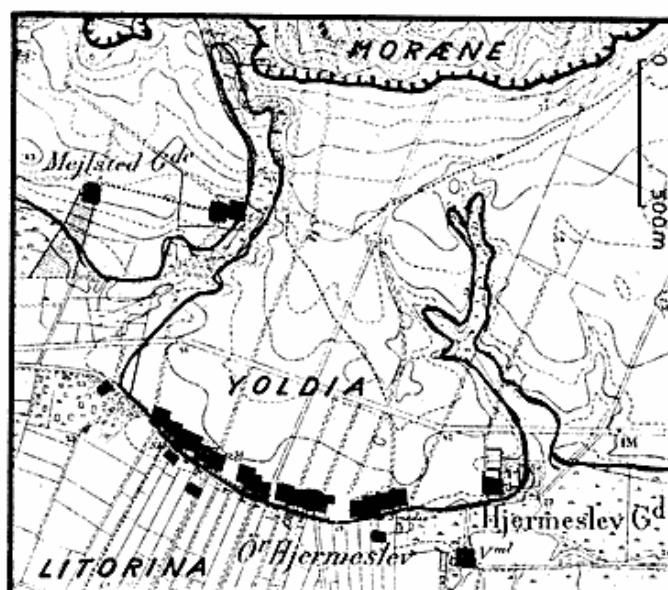


Fig. 2. Typical linear settlement on the borderline between the Yoldia and the Litorina plains.

just to provide the essential winter fodder: They also supplied manure, fuel and thatching material.

It is hard to tell when this approach of settlements to the extensive meadowlands took place. Historical records give only a few indications. Most important in this respect are some local records by the village clergy, called now and then during the 16th and 17th centuries by the bishops. These reports reveal that at least some tracts in South Vendsyssel during that time witnessed a strong expansion of settlements of the linear type, by the adding of new farms to existing shorter rows on the borderline between the Yoldia and the Litorina plains, but the establishment of new villages is never mentioned. The records also show that the open-field system was still practised in these villages.

A means to date the linear settlements is the study of the most common place name endings, so often successful in the age determination on Scandinavian ground. But in using the accepted theories one finds that linear settlements appear to have been established at nearly any time since the second century A.D., because this settlement type besides place name endings in -um (before 500 A. D.) and -lev (500-800 A.D.) as well as in -torp (after 800 A.D.) includes a lot of unidentified names. But as the linear settlements indicate a special rural economy different from the multitude of other settlements of pre-Viking age and more similar to the majority of the torp

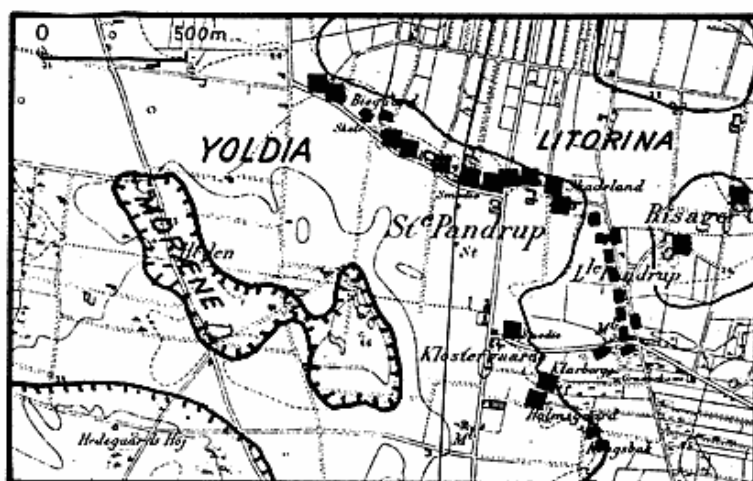


Fig. 3. Typical linear settlement on the borderline between the Yoldia and the Litorina plains.

settlements, an exact dating from the place names could hardly be true in this case.

To understand this apparent discrepancy between the age of a settlement and the age of its name, one must bear in mind that villages are not necessarily ever stable constructions, but may be subject to changes of location in an expanding rural society. Lack of space at the local territory may lead to the establishment of annex settlements, where part of an old village for convenience moves to a new and better place inside the township, or a village in a cramped position shifts to a new location as a whole. Other reasons for such a decision may have been: A change of rural economy, soil exhaustion or soil erosion.

Investigations of the old Danish land register of 1688 reveal the frequent occurrence of field names as *Gammelager* or *Gammeljord* (Old-Acres) and as *Gammeltoft* (Old-Paddocks), *Nørtoft* (North Paddocks) and *Søndertoft* (South Paddocks) at some distance from the village itself. It is reasonable to believe that such field names indicate the position of a lost village or a left village site. In a lot of cases an unquestionable ownership relation is still found at enclosure times between the strips in those fields and a specific group of farms in the "new" village. This has then presumably resulted from a concentration of several smaller settlements, one of which existed at the chosen spot previous to the concentration, and which also gave its name to the enlarged village, in many cases a name ending in -torp. But then in other cases one finds evidence to show that the shifted village retained its old name instead of adopting a new one

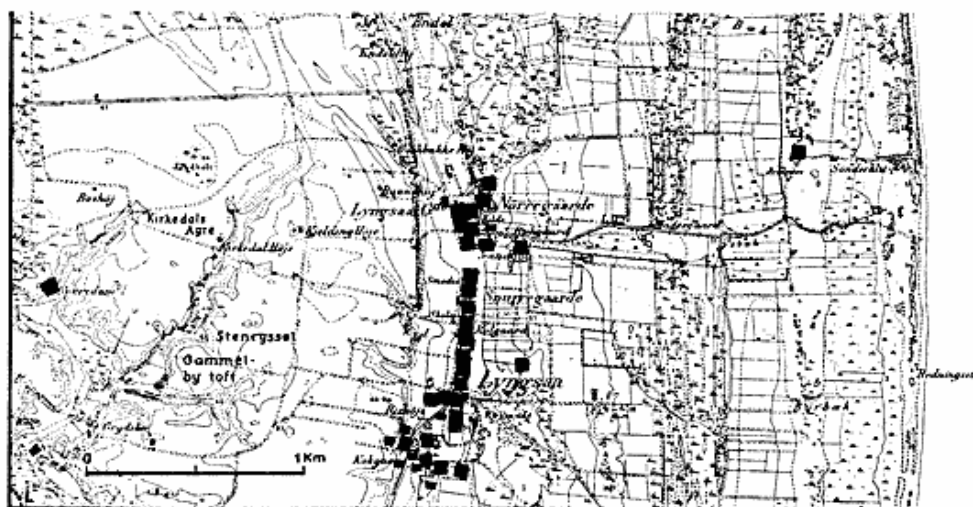


Fig. 4. Linear settlement on the Litorina plain border grown by natural development and by the shift of a village site. The old field names Gammelby Toft and Stenryssel indicate the old site of Lyngsaa Gde.

or instead of being named after its new neighbour—if such one. This is especially clear where we today have two neighbouring villages carrying the same name, with only a different prefix, for example: South and North or East and West. In such cases the two villages undoubtedly originated in one settlement which had increased so much that there was not room for any more farms, for which reason it was divided into two. The one half found a suitable location on the borderline between the Yoldia and the Litorina plains, where it adopted the linear village plan but retained its old name with the above mentioned prefix, while the other half stayed back on or near the old site without much change in outer appearance.

One may conclude that the linear settlement in Vendsyssel—and in Denmark—is the result of a medieval approach to a different rural economy attaching a greater importance to the utilization of the wet meadowlands, and that whenever the place names indicate an older age than medieval, traces of a shift of the settlement, including the name, will be found.