

All roads lead to Hedeby – communication routes, local markets and mercantile interaction in the hinterland of a trading town

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The Viking Age trading town of Hedeby is well known for its location at the intersection of two important communication routes – the east-west oriented passage from the Baltic Sea via the Schlei inlet, the 15 km wide Schleswig isthmus and rivers draining into the North Sea, and the north-south directed so-called „army road“. On these trade routes various goods – raw and refined materials – were transported to Hedeby.

In the past, various studies have dealt with the distribution of imported goods in the wider area – the so-called hinterland of Hedeby. It is assumed that these products found their way into the hinterland via the trading centre. The distribution of imported goods in this region is often presented on simple maps showing the coastlines, the location of Hedeby and the positions of the find sites. For orientation purposes, the larger watercourses are usually drawn, sometimes also the geological landscapes or the elevation relief. However, all these mappings have one thing in common: They give no or only very vague information on how the goods circulated between the central trading place and the settlements in its hinterland.

Since there are only a few navigable watercourses in the area around Hedeby, and since most of the find sites are located at some distance from them, it can be assumed that a considerable amount of traffic took place by land. But how exactly were the goods traded further into the hinterland? Did this happen directly between the vendor in Hedeby and the customer who came to town to purchase goods? Or was it perhaps done indirectly via intermediaries on smaller local markets in the hinterland, which were visited by customers? No matter how –

whether directly or indirectly – the central trading town of Hedeby must have been integrated into a dense network of land and waterways.

Only recently an attempt was made to reconstruct the ancient roads in the hinterland of Hedeby. The aim of this paper is to present this reconstructed road network, to explain the methods used and to discuss their possibilities and limitations. Furthermore, from the macro-perspective, which will include the wider surroundings of the trading place, potential regional main trading routes by land and water as well as nodal points will be highlighted and discussed with regard to imported goods, coins minted in Hedeby, hack-silver, scales and weights. On this basis, a few settlement sites will be emphasized that might have functioned as local markets. In the micro-perspective, the area west of Hedeby will be considered more closely. This area – including the transit route via the Schleswig isthmus to Hollingstedt and various ramparts of the Danevirke defence system – offers possibilities to discuss potential routes in particular detail on the basis of Viking Age monuments and sites.

By presenting the reconstructed network of roads and waterways in relation to sites, which have a connection to Hedeby based on the find material, the paper intends to exemplarily address an often neglected topic – the actual traffic connections of a trading town with its hinterland.