Routes and long-distance traffic – the nodal points of Wulfstan's voyage

by Søren M. Sindbæk

Wulfstan, author of the sole preserved contemporary description of the 9th-century southern Baltic littoral, is an enigmatic figure. From archaeology we have learned that the coast he followed was at this time speckled with trading ports, large and small. Yet not only does Wulfstan's party call in none of these ports, but his description omits them completely, while supplying consistently accurate information on the islands passed to the north. Was Wulfstan therefore badly informed? To approach an answer it will be useful to consider more closely the relationship between the activities he was engaged in and his geographical knowledge.

Routes and 'routinization'

If by 'route' we mean the course followed by any particular journey, there would hardly be any point in trying to define or study the routes of the Viking Age. Chance and accidents, then as now, occasionally brought people to move over any stretch of land and sea where physical barriers did not exclude the possibility. As a concept, 'route' must be taken in another, more precise sense: as a well-known and frequently-used way between specific destinations. In this sense of the word, a 'route' is defined not by the incidents of the journey, but by the intention and knowledge available to the traveller before departure. In a pre-literate society such knowledge cannot be stored in archives, but is created and maintained only if the journey is taken on a regular basis and is expressed in verbal exchanges; that is, the route is being performed as a social practice.

A route is an expression of the fact that exchange between specific regions has been 'routinized',[1] or made routine. Although a route may follow a natural geographical corridor, it is never a self-evident fact of geography, but must be 'worked out' as a social reality and – occurring in a specific period – as a historical process. This process can be called 'routinization'.

Routinized practices are essential to the constitution and reproduction of any social institution. As argued by Anthony Giddens, social structures are essentially routines – the medium and outcome of organised action.[2] Early historic trade and communication is no exception. It was not abstract logic that organised Viking-Age trade and exchange, as it has sometimes appeared in evolutionary models proposed by archaeologists and historians. Instead, it was the motivated acts of individual agents that edited practices associated with exchange into recognisable social structures, recursively constituting travelling as routes and exchange as trade.

'Nodal points' and regional markets

Routinized exchange implies that the transportation of goods takes place recurrently along specific routes. This entails that long-distance exchange is practiced in an organised form in specific localities, where large cargoes are loaded or unloaded. This practice, the assemblage or breaking down of bulk, constitutes what can be called a 'nodal point.' This concept is defined in order to classify the activities pursued at a particular site, rather than produce a general typology

1. A term minted by Giddens 1984.
2. Giddens 1984: 25.

of sites. There is nothing to suggest that the nodal point role was fixed to one uniform type of site in the Viking Age. How long-distance exchange met with other activities could vary in individual cases. Therefore, this definition is meant to characterise one practice among others and not a new locational archetype.

A generation ago, only a handful of 9th-century sites that could be identified as nodal points in long-distance trade were known archaeologically in Northern Europe; the model examples of these are Hedeby and Birka.[3] They were almost invariably sites that were also ascribed with such a role in contemporary written sources. At this stage Wulfstan's account seemed in perfect agreement with the archaeological evidence.

In recent decades, however, many new sites have been added to this number. On the southern Baltic coast, sites such as Dierkow, Menzlin, Ralswiek or Wolin are now frequently compared to the classic examples. When systematic surveys in the 1980s revealed scores of Viking-Age harbour sites in regions like Gotland, it was even suggested that "the places we know of from written documents or which have been discovered by pure chance are only the tip of the iceberg. We should calculate with a vast number of trading places all around the Baltic coast."[4] It is this growing archaeological knowledge that raises a question of Wulfstan's report: why was the author seemingly ignorant of these sites?

It may be suggested that there was indeed a critical difference between Wulfstan's terminal stations and the sites he passed in silence. Recently, new results from extensive archaeological investigations have been presented from a number of 'classic' 9th-century nodal points like Ribe, Lundenwic and Kaupang.[5] They allow us for the first time to compare the archaeological evidence of these sites more specifically, and to compare them with earlier investigations such as Hedeby.[6] A remarkably consistent picture emerges from this comparison. Some obvious differences are conditioned by regional cultural distinction, by the different chronological limits of the sites, or by the activities in the particular areas investigated. But relating the number of finds to the size of the investigations and the excavation methods employed (in particular the use of sieving), we find the same classes of imports occurring with great frequency, while tools of exchange like coins, weights and scales are found in numbers that are rarely approached in other archaeological contexts.[7]

It is quite a different matter with sites such as Groß Strömkendorf, Dierkow, Ralswiek, Menzlin, Bardy/Kołobrzeg or Ystad/Tankbåten.[8] According to publications, imports and tools of exchange are found at these sites in incomparably low numbers, also when seen in proportion to the volume of earth excavated, or the methods of retrieval. However, the structures uncovered give evidence that these sites were by no means unimportant for maritime communication. Indeed they may well have acted as regional markets for trade and exchange. It is not trade as such that distinguishes "great" from "small" trading places – but exactly the role as nodal points for long-distance exchange. It is this role that was absent in the many minor ports of the Baltic Sea area.

Crafts and raw materials: local and imported

The distribution of crafts adds further to the definition of nodal points. It is interesting to note that refuse from crafts like textile production, iron working or antler working occur in Groß Strömkendorf, Dierkow or Menzlin in quantities almost similar to those at Birka, Hedeby, Kaupang and Ribe. Crafts using locally-available materials, or using only materials in small quantities, could be prac-

3. E.g., Jankuhn 1953.
4. Carlsson 1991: 158.
5. Feveile & Jensen 2000; Fevejle (ed.) 2006; Malcolm & Bowsher 2003; Skre (ed.) 2007.
6. Survey in Jankuhn *et al.* 1984.
7. Sindbæk 2005.
8. Wietrzichowski 1993; Jöns *et al.* 1997; Warnke 1993; Herrmann 1997; Herrmann 1998; Schoknecht 1977; Leciejewicz 2000 with further references; Strömberg 1978; Strömberg 1981.

ticed where there was a demand for them – and apparently there was in many regional markets.

Remains from large-scale metal casting and glass working, on the other hand, are closely restricted to the latter sites. Though some remains of both crafts are occasionally found at other sites, especially in elite residences, the question of scale indicates a difference. The salient feature of large-scale bronze or glass working is their consumption of raw materials imported from a distance. To manufacture quantities of delicate *cire perdue* fittings in serial production, Viking-Age metal workers could not rely on scrap metal, but used mostly freshly alloyed brass. This was not produced in the Baltic region, but in the 9th century was probably imported from the Rhineland.[9] The same is true for raw glass.[10] Craftsmen themselves were mobile, and would occasionally practice at other sites. But for large-scale production there was a need for a steady supply of raw materials, which could only be secured in the nodal points. Serial production with imported raw materials may therefore be added to the archaeological indications of nodal points. The distinction is summarised in Fig. 1.

In several respects the model is very simplified: the distribution of regional markets is likely to have been denser than indicated, their role must have been more varied and the number of crafts and the types of imports involved more diverse. Moreover, the important aspect of cultural diversity in regards to production and consumption is not considered here. The model shows the difference between the kinds of true nodal points directly engaged in routinized long-distance transport, and regional markets served by lo-

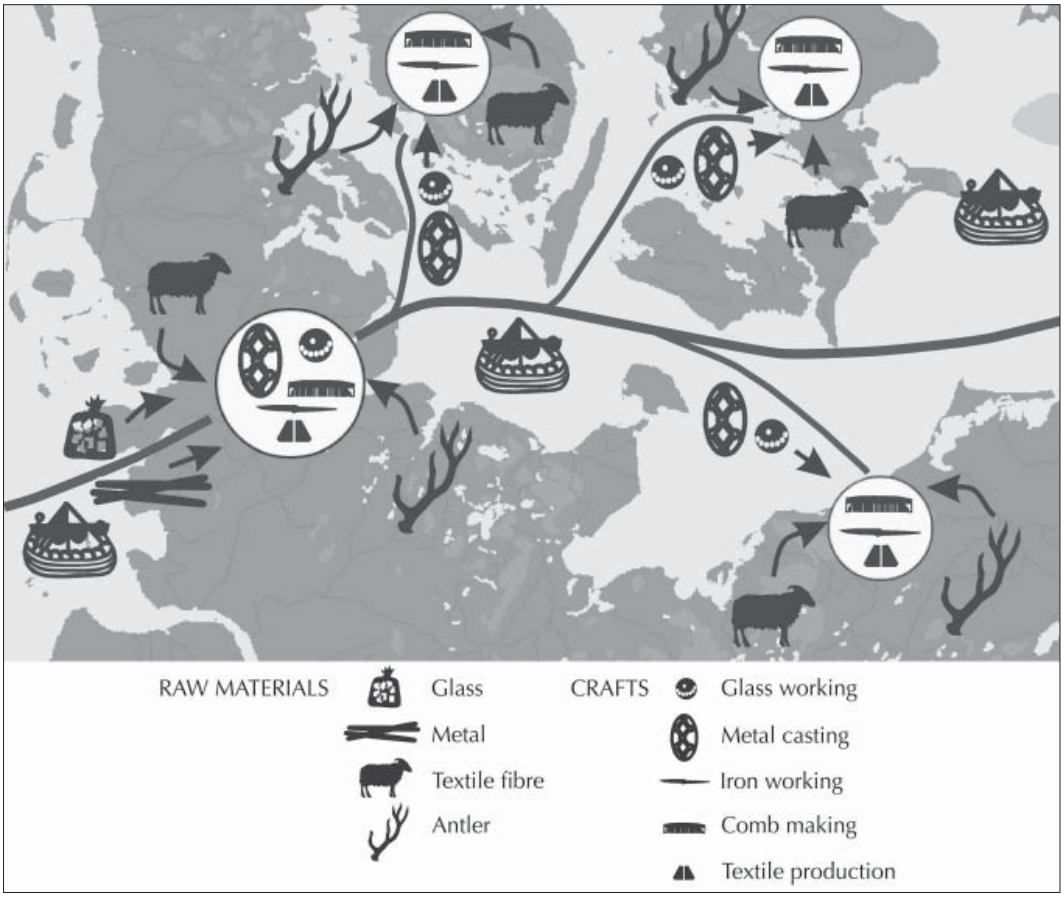

Fig. 1. Raw material movements through nodal points and areas of craft production in the Baltic region.

9. Sindbæk 2003: 58 ff.
10. Sode 2002.

cal traffic and by traffic to the nodal points. The latter traffic is also 'local,' in the geographical sense that it serves to re-distribute goods between a centre and its satellites.[11]

The logic of long-distance traffic

The functional separation between nodal points and more ordinary trading places may be explained by reference to what is sometimes called the "logic of practice".[12] The role of a nodal point implies conditions that could motivate the topographical localisation and the spatial hierarchy that the sites display.

Viking-Age trading places have often been described and analysed as central places, i.e., localities whose basic purpose was to serve a hinterland in a regional re-distribution.[13] Working from this assumption researchers have either sought to establish a relation between the size and rank of sites and the political hierarchy of societies, or to prove that trading sites were distributed in a dense network, from which only a few sites have hitherto been identified archaeologically. Both of these notions may rise from the false employment of the concept of the central place. Central place theory not only pays too little attention to topography, but even stresses the wrong topographical and traffic criteria in relation to Viking-Age long-distance exchange.

While most central place functions are served by local traffic and thus depend on maximum accessibility from the greatest possible hinterland, the role of a nodal point is exercised through long-distance traffic and will therefore be stimulated in particular by topographical restrictions that guide traffic into narrow corridors. A situation of particular significance occurs where a topographical or social barrier causes a break of traffic and demands the trans-shipment and perhaps temporary storage of goods. Where such a physical break occurs, a social transaction is likely to take place as well. This topographical logic was noted more than a hundred years ago by the American sociologist Charles H. Cooley.[14] More recently, a similar point was argued by the urban historians Paul M. Hohenberg and Lynn Hollen Lees.[15]

While these observations should not lead us to retreat to geographical determinism – physical as well as social barriers may be negotiated – they must be considered crucial factors bearing on the action of individual agents. Each participant in a long-distance exchange will have a significant incentive to seek out what he considers the most favourable, safe and active places for trading. Regardless of the political situation nodal points will therefore tend to generate a hierarchical network, conditioned by the very practices that define them. Such a hierarchy of settlements may also be described within central place theory, but not without loosing the basic point that spatial structures are determined by many independent and potentially conflicting factors.

The structural difference between sites operating as centrals place and nodal points can be summarised in Table 1.

It should be noted that the role as central place vs. nodal point does not denote separate localities, but separate functions that may to a varying extent be performed at the same or different sites. The two groups of functions are mutually stimulating, but the degree to which they become developed may vary greatly. Evidently a site like Hedeby related to a hinterland, but it was the function as a nodal point on trade routes that conditioned its special importance.

Enigma solved

Wulfstan's voyage brought him directly by ship from Hedeby to Truso in the Vistula Delta. The course of the voyage and the character of the destinations would suggest that he was either himself engaged in long-distance trade or a passenger with a trading

11. Voppel 1980: 61.
12. Bourdieu 1990: 80 ff.
13. See also Christaller 1966.
14. Cooley 1969 [1894].
15. Hohenberg & Lees 1996: 59 ff.

Function	central place	nodal point
Constituting structure	hinterland	routes
Dominant mode of transport	local	long distance
Dominant economic function	regional re-distribution	transmission
Dominant economic activity	market	break-of-bulk
Dominant external relation	peer polity interaction	hierarchic network
Topographic logic	accessibility	barrier
Examples	Ystad, Dierkow, Ralswiek, Wolin (9th century)	Hedeby, Birka, Truso, Wolin (10th century)

Table 1. The differences between sites operating as central places and nodal points.

party. The separation between nodal points and regional markets, as concerns routinized long-distance transport and exchange, may thus be a key to understand the seeming omissions in his account.

There is little doubt that Hedeby was the most significant nodal point in the Baltic area. Though much less information is published for the site of Truso (Janów Pomorski), there seem to be reasons to consider this also as a nodal point. Besides more than 80 Kufic coins found in excavations, archaeological reports record Badorf ceramics and a "large volume" of broken glass.[16]

No other site on the southern Baltic coast in the 9th century possesses comparable evidence. This is true even for Wolin – a fact that deserves mention, since this town in particular is often considered to have rivalled Hedeby or Birka.[17] While the 10th-century archaeological evidence of Wolin as a trading centre is overwhelming, few imported objects or trading tools are found there from earlier periods.[18] An examination of the unpublished finds from the harbour area, the most important find complex from 9th-century Wolin, confirms this.[19] The settlement area provides similar evidence. The large harbour facilities were mainly constructed in the years 896-900, and the main fortifications erected ca 903.[20] From a perspective of natural geography, Wolin may seem pre-destined to form a hub of early long-distance communication.[21] But before the 10th century, the settlement lacked most features that were later to identify the site as a major nodal point. It may be suggested that Wolin rapidly took up this role at the turn of the 10th century, as a parallel development to the processes that fashioned the formation of the Piast Kingdom in central Poland.

Once the nature of Viking-Age long-distance exchange and its spatial organisation has been realised, some of the odd points in Wulfstan's account become clearer. Wulfstan did not mention any of the small ports and coastal settlements identified through archaeological finds along the coast he followed because these sites were not nodal points concerned with routinized, long-distance traffic. This was the case because it was in the interest of the individual agents engaged in trade that such nodal points occurred widely spaced and in very limited numbers. In the entire Baltic Sea region, it is likely that no more than a handful of sites performed such a function. In the 9th century, Hedeby and Truso were in all probability the only sites active on the southern Baltic shores. Other trading sites served as regional markets, communicating with the nodal points, but not with the long-distance traffic between them that served Wulfstan for the voyage that he relates.

16. Jagodziński 2000: 174; Brather 1996; Jagodziński & Kasprzycka 1991: 700; see also Jagodziński this volume.
17. E.g., Herrmann 1997: 7; Ambrosiani & Clarke 1991: 115.
18. See also Wojtasik 1999; Filipowiak & Gundlach 1992; Stanisławski 2000.
19. Sindbæk 2006.
20. Filipowiak 2000: 153.
21. Filipowiak 1995a; Filipowiak 1995b.

Borrowing terms from trigonometry, the nodal points communicated as a first-order network, to which local markets were linked as a second order. In the dendritic ('tree-like') set of contacts that ensued, communication in the first-order network would generally by-pass the second.

Thus considered, Wulfstan's account is no longer enigmatic. Indeed, it offers us a plausible description of the southern Baltic coast from the perspective of routinized, long-distance maritime traffic. There were other more regional aspects of trade and communication that were certainly ignored by Wulfstan, but the account is in accordance with the archaeological evidence of the ports in which he called, as well as the sites he passed *en route*.

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