

# Becoming people

## Early Iron Age courtyard sites in Norway as arenas for *rites de passage*

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This paper suggests that the courtyard sites of western Scandinavia were primarily arenas for transformation rituals from childhood to manhood. These were central, defining practices for both individuals and society as a whole. Due to their liminality, these processes can be difficult to engage with archaeologically. Also our cultural situatedness often leaves marginality out of interpretations. This paper wishes to show how youths and age-set institutions could be the producers of monumental material culture, otherwise conceived of as the prerogative of adults.

*Keywords:* courtyard sites, Early Iron Age Norway, *rites de passage*, liminality

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### Introducing a new approach to courtyard sites (in Norway)

The argument in this article is that the courtyard sites could have been arenas of rites of passage, placed in marginal spaces away from society. This is developing the argument presented in an earlier article, that the religious aspect of the courtyard sites is central to any understanding of them (Armstrong 2000). It is also argued here that manipulation of these arenas, and through this the control over youths, particularly should they be young men participating in these rites, could have been a catalyst for power in the Early Iron Age in Norway. As long as we are unable to disprove hypotheses, we must discuss the likelihood of the various ones presented. I believe this hypothesis has a greater explanatory power, and thereby greater likelihood, than those that have been in use so far to explain these sites.

Courtyard sites in the landscape consist of small houses organised radially around a central court. There are three characteristic physical shapes: *oval*, with entrances on the two short sides (Fig. 2); *horse-shoe*, with one side open; and *linear*, on a slightly

curved line.<sup>1</sup> The relatively small houses are ordered side by side, with a single entrance on the inner gable end. Every house has been habitated, with one or more hearths in each house. Around the sites we usually find many cooking pits. There are in general few finds in the houses, with somewhat more finds being found in the cultural layers deposited in the courtyard sites of south-western Norway, and with ordinary household objects predominating. Many of the courtyard sites are associated with power centres, and with some near seats of some of the most powerful families of Viking and Medieval times in northern Norway. Most of the northern ones are associated with bogs, and well away from the farm. The sites are also most often on poorly defensible sites, for example just at the foot of a hill.

Most recognised sites are in northern and south-western Norway (Fig. 1). Though, considering that the two found in the northern part of western Norway, at Gjerland and at Stryn in the county of Sogn & Fjordane (Fig. 1, Q and P), were only found by top-soil stripping, there might be many more still undiscovered in this area. Most of the sites are dated to between 100 and 600 AD, especially concentrated in 200–400 AD and

<sup>1</sup> Even if courtyard sites have several phases of usage, investigations have shown that these are distinct shapes from the outset (see Storli 2001), and the oval sites are not the result of houses added on to the smaller sites.



Fig. 1. Map of Norway with the distribution of 27 courtyard sites (A–Æ).

the Late Roman Period, but particularly in northern Norway there are significant sites with dates stretching up to the Viking Period (800–1030 AD). For the purpose of this article, it is the early period that will be the focus, as the courtyard sites of the later period have slightly different characteristics.

The unusual qualities of the courtyard sites have made them the object of many hypotheses. It was said already in 1971 that when it comes to courtyard sites what we need are fewer hypotheses and more data (Sjøvold 1971). However, I beg to differ. Hypotheses steer our interpretation and we need a continual re-assessment of the applicability of various hypotheses so as to ensure that future research does not take too

many things for granted. I also believe that archaeology is based on finding interpretive hypotheses that fit with the uncovered material. The objects and contexts do not speak by themselves, but through our interpretive schemes and hypotheses, and we must acknowledge that our hypotheses never are one hundred per cent certain. We therefore need, for courtyard sites as for archaeology in general, more hypotheses than data.

What should we expect of a hypothesis? Naturally, it cannot contradict the evidence. Contradicted hypotheses are soon abandoned. It should be able to explain other evidence. A hypothesis without explanatory power presumes institutions without contact with the rest of society. It should be congruent with known or

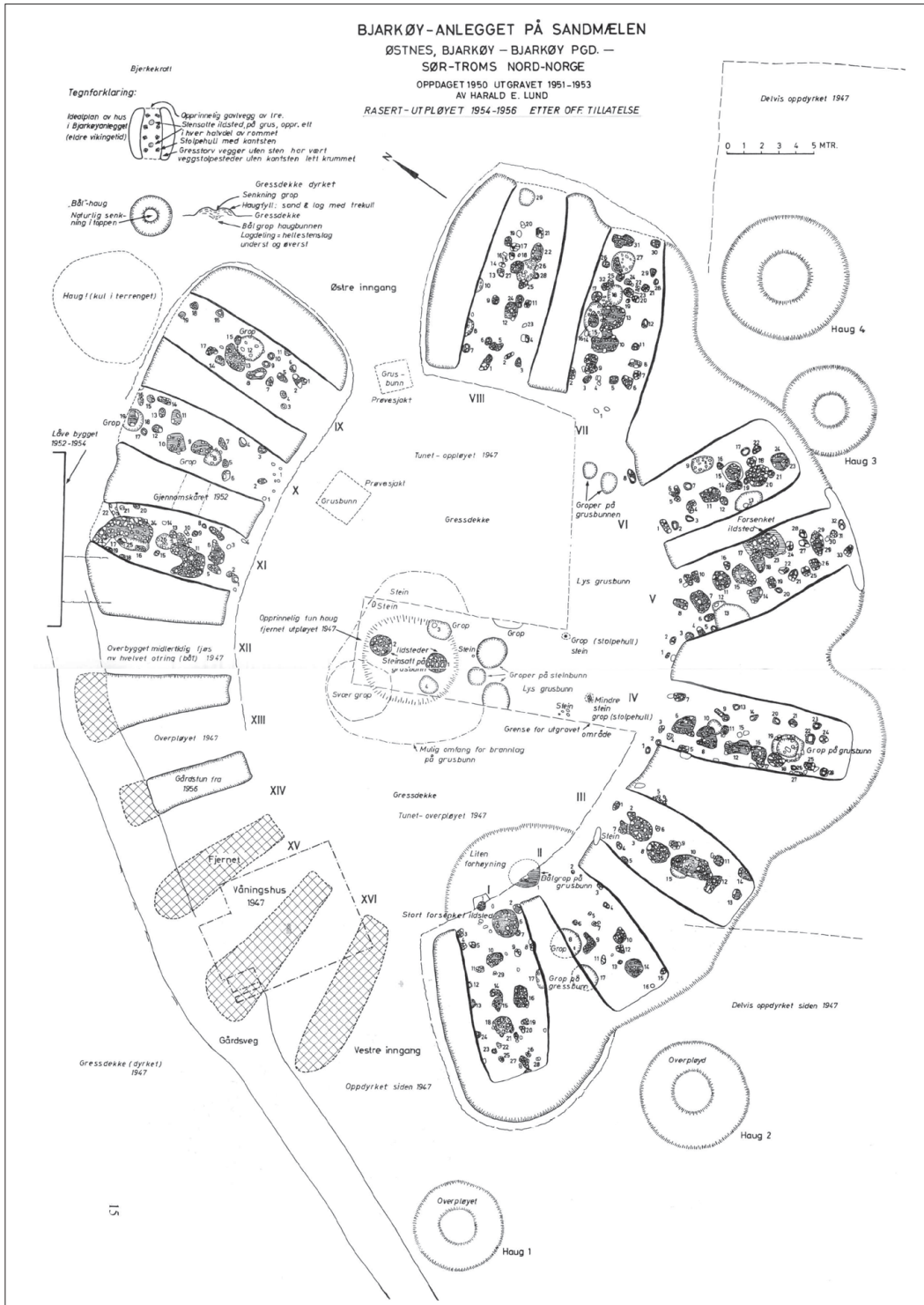


Fig. 2: Sandmælan, Austnes, Bjarkøya in Troms, the northernmost courtyard site in Norway (Fig. 1, A). A typical example of the oval type of courtyard site, with small, radially organised longhouses, traces of activity in the central area and surrounding cooking pits (Drawing: H. E. Lund, cf. Johansen & Søbstad 1977, Fig. 2).

presumed developments. Such congruence allows us to see the whole society functioning. Also, for such discrete architectural phenomena as courtyard sites, the hypothesis should be applicable to all sites, and not just a select few. What are the hypotheses that have dominated research about the courtyard sites?

**Burial** – an initial theory, and still today we are apt to misinterpret a collection of narrow mounds as a series

of boat-shaped graves lying together in a burial ground. It is an easy mistake, not least because the glamour of graves holds many of us “tomb robbers”, the archaeologists, enthralled. This interpretation is soon abandoned when the sites are studied more closely.

**The original farm** – a long-lived theory was that courtyard sites represented a collective farm (Møllerop 1971, Berglund 1995). In northern Norway this

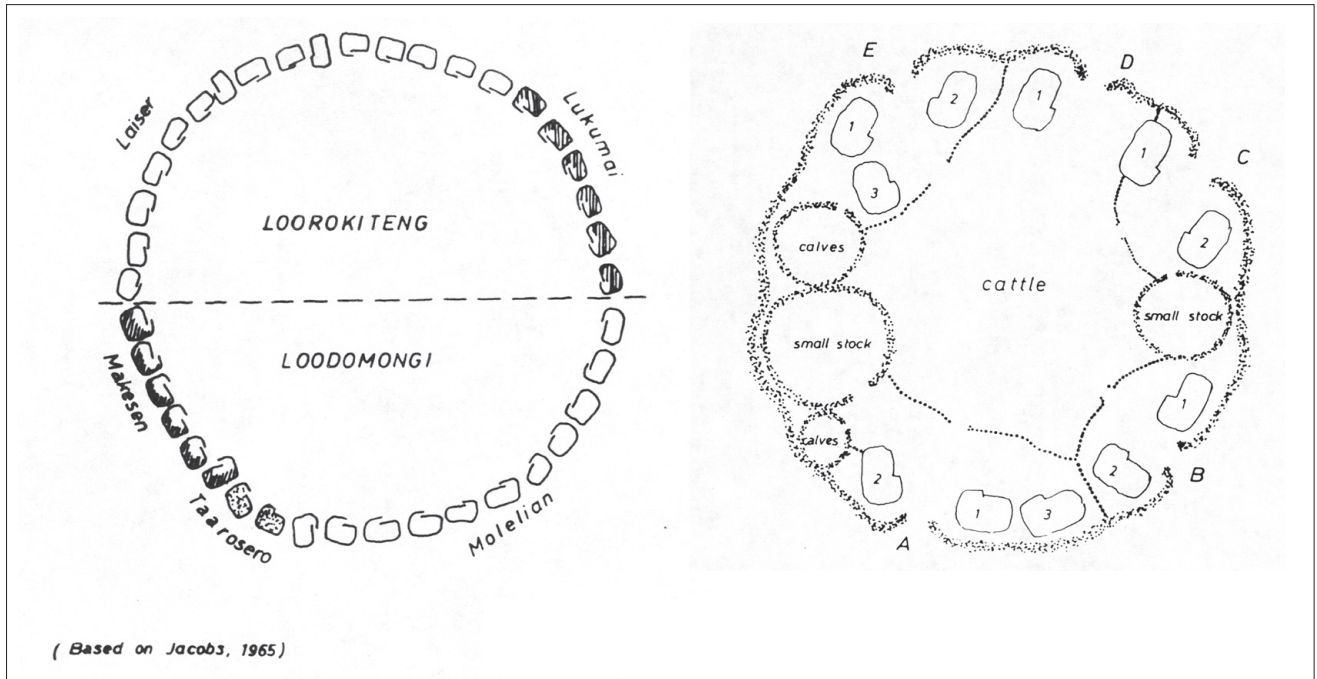


Fig. 3. Warrior manyatta, on the left, opposed to normal homestead kraal, on the right. Names of the warrior manyatta designate divisions between clans and sub-clans. The drawing are not to scale (cf. Århem 1985, Figs. 6 and 3).

was seen as a result of migration from the south, where the immigrants settled in these protected villages to defend themselves from the original inhabitants. This theory was particularly popular between the world wars, at the time of collectivisation in Soviet Russia, when there was a research programme that focused on the establishment of the first farms in Norway. But as it became obvious that all the houses had hearths and that farming and individual farmsteads had existed for centuries prior to the building of courtyard sites, this theory was gradually abandoned.

**Trading site** – a theory perhaps strangely seldom referred to (Urbanczyk 1992). It claims that the Norse and Sámi of northern Norway needed neutral arenas for trading, and that the courtyard sites fulfilled this role. Its attraction is perhaps also its weakness, as one would expect such a place to be subject to less stability than the courtyard sites in northern Norway display. The specificity to the encounter of Norse and Sámi also makes it less applicable to the southern Norwegian material, and therefore this theory fails.

**The chieftain's barracks** – one of the two most prevalent hypotheses at the moment (Lund 1965, Johansen & Søbstad 1977, Løken 2001, Grimm & Stylegar 2004<sup>2</sup>). It claims that the well-organised courtyard sites needed

a higher authority to assemble people in such a building. The spread of courtyard sites along the coast of Norway suits a distribution among various chiefdoms, and many are close to known power centres. The bog depots of Illerup Ådal show that there was a military organisation in Norway at this time, and the barracks seem to fulfil this role (Løken 2001).

**The ting (parliament)** – a relatively new hypothesis, though suggested earlier by Nicolaysen (1866), is that the courtyard site is the original “ting” (Olsen 2003, Bruen-Olsen 2005, Storli 2006). These sites were the combined law-courts and parliaments of the Iron Age, perhaps having been more like the assembly places described by Tacitus in *Germania*. This theory compares the small houses of the courtyard sites with the similar houses found at known ting sites in Iceland.

### Military or ting sites or what?

Let us have a closer look at the last two hypotheses, as they are at present the most discussed among archaeologists partaking in the discourse. How do they relate to each other? Do they satisfy our expectations? Are they coherent with what we know, and do they fully explain the data? The hypotheses are quite opposed to each other, in that one believes that courtyard

<sup>2</sup>Grimm & Stylegar (2004) suggest that the courtyard sites are multifunctional, and discuss both “lek” and ritual aspects. Their focus is on their relation to petty kings and military aspects.

sites are associated with the chieftain, and the other sees a somewhat democratic institution. One focuses on the militant aspects of society, while the other focuses on how these monuments could have housed a stable institution. Looking upon the courtyard sites as barracks is a way to explain the association of weapon graves, rise of hierarchy and the militancy evidenced in the Danish bogs of Illerup Ådal and elsewhere (Løken 2001). While looking upon them as *ting* sites sees the power centres first appearing on the ashes of the courtyard sites (demonstrating meanwhile that the connection between power centres and courtyard sites is tenuous), and demonstrating that the suggested institution did exist in Germanic societies during the Roman Period and was organised with similar small houses in Iceland.

Each hypothesis has its weaknesses. The barracks hypothesis can hardly account for why such peripheral and non-tactical locations were chosen for the sites. Would it not have been better for the chief to keep his bodyguard close? Or at least let them have an easily defensible site, rather than at the bottom of a hill? Do not barracks represent an institution dependent upon a complex society? An anthropological example of how barracks work in simple chiefdoms would be helpful to our attempts at envisioning this hypothesis.

The *ting* site hypothesis fails to explain why the *ting* sites in Iceland have erratically placed houses, while the supposed ones in Norway are radially organised; a lack that casts doubt on their actual comparability.<sup>3</sup> Another problem is that at the time of the colonisation of Iceland, just prior to the Viking Period, there were no courtyard sites in use in southern Norway, and only a handful still in use in northern Norway. There is therefore no continuity between the courtyard sites in Norway and the Icelandic *ting* sites. Finally, known prehistoric *ting* sites in Scandinavia are generally found on natural or artificial hills, such as Bruberget in Vågan, Nordland, in northern Norway (near Fig. 1, C) and Tinghaug, in Rogaland, in south-western Norway (near Fig. 1, X). Though there are exceptions, the courtyard sites in contrast are most frequently hidden from view. Therefore neither of the two hypotheses is fully satisfying.

### An alternative hypothesis

The time has come to present an alternative hypothesis. By focusing on liminal qualities of courtyard sites

we might see if they could have played a role in rites of passage. Courtyard sites could have been arenas for age-set ceremonies and similar rituals. They would then have been “homes” for those in transition, and bases for various ritual activities not to be performed at home.

The institutions that were housed in the courtyard sites would have been partially independent, meant to be separate and segregated from society, with different rules, but perhaps under the control of experts in rituals. The institution in the courtyard sites could then be a potential catalyst for power aggrandisement, forming a power base of certain militancy. At the same time, the conservativeness of the ritual activities would have meant that the institution could be capable of great stability, at least as long as the same ritual systems were in use. Before investigating this hypothesis further, it is necessary to briefly discuss the theme of liminality as presented in the classic studies of van Genep ([1909] 1960), Turner (1967, 1969) and La Fontaine (1985).

van Genep's ([1909] 1960) seminal study, *Les rites de Passage*, introduced the three stages of transition rituals: the preliminal, liminal and postliminal. These stages allow people to be “born again”, as new and improved beings. By making transitions between roles possible these rites enable society to regenerate itself, while it remains strictly structured by age. van Genep showed how these three phases are found in various kinds of rituals all over the world. Turner's (1967, 1969) focus was on the distinctive state that people in transition inhabited. This was described as “betwixt and between”, which means that such people were expected to behave according to values in opposition to those ruling the rest of society. One of these values is described as a sense of *communitas*, where the hierarchies of society are extinguished. In some sense this justifies the existence of these distinctions in society. La Fontaine's (1985) study of initiation emphasised how, despite the above, the initiation rituals are still an integrated part of the society wherein they act. There is power – real, political power – in having authority over ritual, despite, or even because of, the conservative nature of ritual. And this conservativeness is also dependent upon a pragmatic adaptability. In addition, the secret and theatrical nature of ritual is dependent upon the creation and control of ritual space in an arena. These are aspects that we will recognise in our model for how the courtyard sites functioned within the Iron Age society in Norway.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one could compare the Icelandic *ting* sites with Norwegian shielings, such as that at Svolset (see Fig. 4 in Skrede 2005)

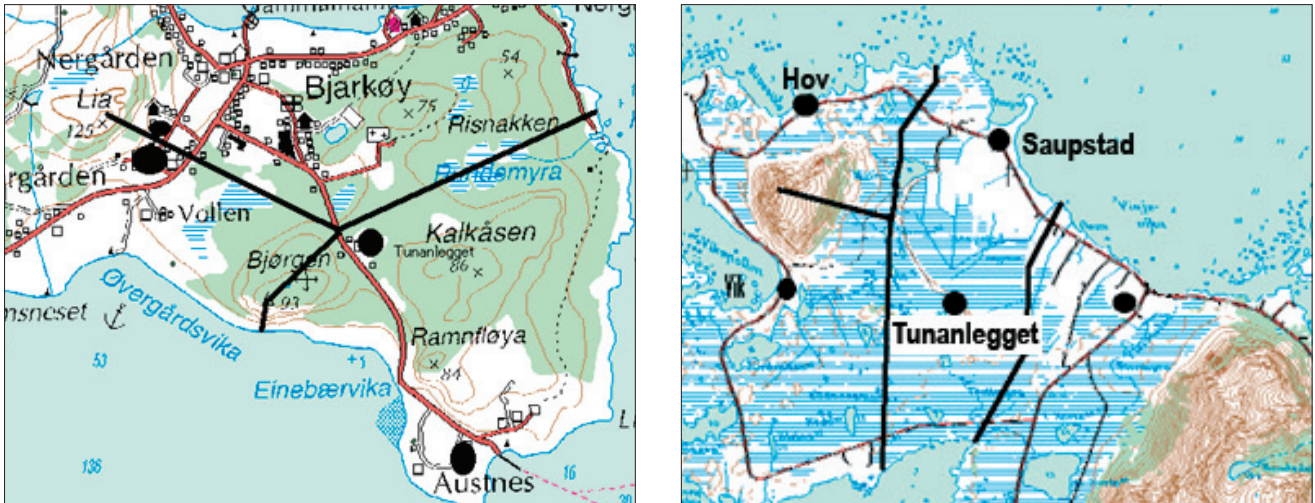


Fig. 4. Maps showing two locations of courtyard sites in northern Norway, and in both cases, as elsewhere, located on a sandy spur: Bjarkøya in Troms, left, and Gimsøya in Nordland, right (see Fig. 1, A and C). Modern farm boundaries are marked with black lines, courtyard sites are denoted “Tunanlegget”, and farms are denoted with names. Note that the bogs, marked with horizontal blue lines, were more extensive prior to modern drainage.

Let us have a look at an anthropological example to see how such liminal institutions function today and how they may have functioned in the past. The *Maasai* of eastern Africa<sup>4</sup> are pastoralists, and almost totally dependent upon their cattle (though there are farming *Maasai* in Tanzania). They are organised into clans, with vague territorial borders, and are most famous for their warriors, their *morani*. Technically, these are not warriors, but an age-set of young men, neither boys nor men (Århem 1985). All the young men must pass through a transitional phase lasting several years, where they are systematically excluded from the rest of society. They let their hair grow long, they are expected to be impetuous and violent, they are not permitted to marry, they should stay away from the family enclosure, they must eat and drink in the company of other *morani*, and not in front of their elders, and they have the otherwise unheard of opportunity to travel. They are expected to follow a different moral code, encouraging cattle raiding and daring exploits. They are the glamorous centre of attention among their own and for the rest of the world the emblem of the *Maasai*. They are, in short, in a long-term state of liminality, as described by van Gennep ([1909] 1960) and Turner (1967, 1969).

After one or two years in this age-set, a group of these young men are allowed to establish their own *manyatta* (Fig. 3), where they are to be in charge. These enclosures – unfortified, as the *morani* are

expected to be vigilant enough to do without such protection – lie in the periphery of what is considered the group’s territory. They are expected to find fresh pastures for their family’s cattle, not as over-grazed as the more central areas. They are also looked upon as border guards, warding off cattle raiders and predatory animals.

But their role is not primarily a defensive one. There are periods when there are no *morani manyattas*, and the *Maasai* seem to do very well without them. The *morani manyattas* are primarily arenas of socialisation, where solidaric principles are ingrained. *Manyattas* are circular and this circularity gets added significance in the *eunoto* ceremony, where it functions as an arena for the collective rituals, as also described by La Fontaine as characteristic for liminal rituals. There is a strict organisation as to where members of different clans are supposed to be housed in the *manyatta* (Jacobs 1965). This organisation is equivalent to the radial organisation of the courtyard sites and can be seen as an aspect of the equality expected of liminality.

The *Laibon* is a particularly interesting person in the *Maasai* society. He is the clan’s medicine man, using shamanistic techniques to cure people. During the colonial period, some *Laibon*, such as Olonana Ole Mbatian, also gained great political power. Some claim that this was due to their role as supervisors to the *morani*, being able to determine their tasks to such

<sup>4</sup>The choice of the Maasai may seem unnecessarily exotic, as similar liminal institutions are known from ancient Greece (ephebes), and have been claimed for early Irish society (fer midboth). The example of the Maasai has a few advantages. Firstly, their society has been described by modern anthropology. Secondly, the historical development of the institutions is known. Thirdly, it avoids bringing up Indo-European issues, showing instead the universality of the institutions considered.

a degree that some *morani* were seen as the personal bodyguards of the *Laibon* (see Johnsen 1992). The role of the *Laibon* demonstrates that, according to La Fontaine's (1985) insights, the power of the liminal ritual, despite its egalitarian ideals, can be transformed into political power.

I imagine the courtyard sites in Norway may have played a similar role to the *morani manyatta* of eastern Africa. They were originally liminal sites, placed beyond the control of the rest of society. But their point of contact with the rest of society, a possibly shamanic figure, an Odinic chief<sup>5</sup>, could gently wield them to his own benefit, and thereby earn himself great power. In this way, the courtyard sites would be later associated with central sites, and the chieftains of the Iron Age, while these places also maintained their liminal quality. This allows courtyard sites to be centres of militancy in a society that otherwise could be relatively pacific and egalitarian. Thereby, such a society would be able to mobilise young men for military exploits, but without the formal power structures of larger societies. A site for *rites des passage* can therefore function like a chieftain's barrack, without needing the social organisation associated with the latter. Also, they embrace the lack of hierarchy associated with "*ting*", without necessitating any conflict with the hierarchies of society.

### Liminal places in the landscape

It is not hard to find traces of liminality in the Early Iron Age landscape. The Danish bog offerings have been interpreted by Charlotte Fabech (1994) as being done in marginal territory, in contrast to the more centralised activities of the Late Iron Age. Bogs themselves are often interpreted as constituting liminal areas, as they could be seen as wet land, and thereby neither here nor there (Gjessing 1938) in contrast to both dry land and the seas. In northern Norway especially, one can find burials on borders and small islets in the Early Iron Age, while in the Late Iron Age they are most frequently located centrally on the farm. These changes have been interpreted as a ritual centralisation. In this sense, the courtyard sites fit very well. One of the few courtyard sites that was in use in the Late Iron Age, at Steigen in Nordland (Fig. 1, G), had been moved to a site much closer to the relevant

farm, thereby centralising this marginal institution somewhat.

The primary liminality of the courtyard sites available to us today is their location in the landscape. The examples in northern Norway show the location of courtyard sites in relation to modern farm boundaries and presumed prehistoric farms. As the landscape in the north is mountainous and fertile land very dispersed, the relationship between prehistoric and present-day farms is much the same<sup>6</sup>, which makes reading the landscape much easier than in the south of Norway.

The northernmost courtyard site is on Bjarkøy in Troms (Fig. 1, A). It is located on the modern farm boundary between Øvergården and Austnes farms, and also midway between them (Fig. 4). Bogs and woods separate it from the farms. The courtyard site is dominated by the nearby hill Bjergeren. There are pre-Christian grave mounds on both farms, indicating that they were both in use at least during the Late Iron Age, when Øvergården was the seat of one of Norway's most powerful aristocratic families of the Viking Period and the Middle Ages. Further west is the Åse courtyard site on Andøya in Nordland (Fig. 1, B). It lies in the middle of a huge bog, 2 km north-east of a deserted Iron Age farm site, Lanesskog/Sletten, and 2 km south-west of the "farm mound"<sup>7</sup> at Åse. No significant signs of any power centre have been found at Åse.

The northernmost of the three courtyard sites in Lofoten (Fig. 1, C–E), at Saupstad on Gimsøya, Nordland (Fig. 4, see Fig. 1, C), is located on a sandy spur in the middle of huge bogs, 2 km walking distance from the three nearest farms, Saupstad, Vinje and Vik. Of these, Vinje is most often seen as a possible power centre, with a Late Iron Age runic standing stone and a historical church site, while the more distant Hov has a collection of boatsheds seen as part of a power centre. The courtyard site at Bøstad in Nordland (Fig. 1, D) lies alongside the border river between this farm and Borg, about 500 m from the well-known prehistoric farmsteads. The locations are not suitable to protect either the courtyard sites themselves or the nearby farms. Nor are they of practical use as an assembly place, being hidden from view and in a remote location for travellers from beyond the neighbouring farms. The above examples show that courtyard sites may lie near both

<sup>5</sup>I have suggested previously a connection between the courtyard sites and an Odinic chieftain (Armstrong 2000), seeing these chieftains as combining secular and religious power through association with the god Odin.

<sup>6</sup>See the discussion of longevity and ubiquity of northern Norway's Iron Age farms in Johansen (1990). While the bogs may be larger today than in the Early Iron Age, they had already been growing for many hundred years, and would have been a part of a uncultivated and inaccessible landscape.

<sup>7</sup>"Gårdshaug": i.e. the accumulated debris of a prehistoric farm, located on the same site over the centuries.

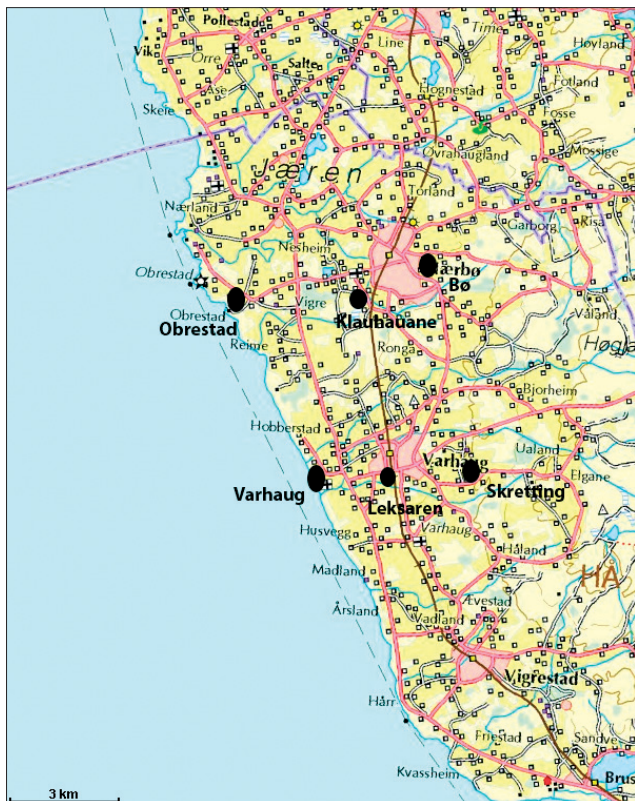


Fig. 5. Map based on Myhre's (1978) and Rønneseth's (1974, 2001) discussions of early farms in southern Jæren, Rogaland. The courtyard sites, Klauhaugane and Leksaren, are situated midway between the most prominent of the Iron Age farms in the area. Note the proximity to modern urban areas marked pink, on marginal agricultural land.

power centres and lesser farms, and while virtually equidistant from neighbouring farms, the sites actually often lie on what today is the land of the "lesser" farm. Similar arguments may be construed for the other Early Iron Age courtyard sites in northern Norway, though with less clarity.

In contrast to northern Norway, south-western Norway and specifically the district of Jæren in Rogaland (Fig. 1, S–Y) is a rich agricultural area lacking mountains, and where the borders between farms may be a bit more fluid. This is perhaps why courtyard sites were for so long taken for villages. Rønneseth ([1974] 2001) noted that the courtyard sites were not on the best agricultural land, but on marginal land. Whether they are on borderlands is more difficult to ascertain. However, Myhre's (1978) suggested territories of the Early Iron Age (Fig. 5) indicate that the two southernmost of the courtyard sites, Klauhaugane and Leksaren (Fig.

1, X and Y), seem to be on borderlands between Obrestad and Bø farms and Varhaug and Skretting farms, respectively<sup>8</sup>.

Some other courtyard sites lie innermost in valleys (for example, Gjerland in Sogn & Fjordane and Skjelbreid in Rogaland (Fig. 1, Q and U)), or on promontories (for example, Hegraberg in Rogaland and Hov in Nordland (Fig. 1, T and I)), which are liminal sites in their own way in that they turn their backs on the settled farmsteads. To conclude, both southern and northern courtyard sites in Norway are located at liminal places in the landscape.

A further liminal aspect of the courtyard sites may be found if we follow up a hint given in an earlier article, where I argued that the form of the courtyard sites was based on the Roman amphitheatres (Armstrong 2000). This is a consideration of the prefix, "lek-", which is associated with the location of several courtyard sites: "Leksaren" in Varhaug, and "Leigvom" (Levang) adjacent to Skjelbreid, in Rogaland, and "Lekenga" on Tjøtta and Leknes on Vestvågøy in Nordland (Fig. 1, Y, U, K and E). The first is the name given to the monument locally, the second is the neighbouring farm, with its ancient monuments bordering onto the courtyard site, the third is the field where the courtyard site is located, and the fourth is the farm on whose land the courtyard site is located.

The prefix "lek-" means "game" or "play", and denotes places where people assembled to play games. It is hard to date the use of the name, but there is little reason to assume that it is as old as the Early Iron Age.<sup>9</sup> In historical times, there apparently was a common Scandinavian tradition of assembling youths for competitions and transition rituals on a specific site on the border between communities (Götling 1933). While it is unlikely that all places with the prefix "lek-" have been courtyard sites, the continuity confirms that the latter have been located at suitable border sites for such activities. I consider this a historical analogy for the hypothesis of rites of passage at liminal sites in Scandinavia, but without buildings and not necessarily constituting a continuity of practice. But, perhaps this interest in competing with the neighbouring youths was not particular to historical periods, and could have manifested itself in Iron Age society, giving rise to more permanent institutions, in need of houses.

<sup>8</sup> Also, Dysjane, further north in Jæren (cf. Fig. 1, V) lies near the boundary between the adjacent farms Hauge and Tu, but this boundary is not necessarily ancient. I believe the presence of the courtyard site may be an argument for the existence of this boundary in the Early Iron Age, but for the present purposes such an argument would be highly circular.

<sup>9</sup> The existence of a "lek-" farm, Leiknes, as far north as Nordreisa, in the county of Troms, a region in northern Norway only settled by farming communities after the end of the Iron Age, shows that this naming tradition was in use as late as the Medieval Period, but the tradition may well be older.



Similar games on borders are known elsewhere, such as ancient Greece, where they are the precursors of the Olympic and similar games (Valavanis 2004). While the *lek* sites seem to imply innocent rituals, liminality in written sources hints at a darker side. There are many initiations to be found in the written sources, though they seldom happen at places that may be interpreted as similar to courtyard sites. One exception is found in the Icelandic *Volsunga Saga* (Morris [1807] 1962). A strange sequence happens in Chapter Six, where the fugitive hero Sigmund tries to make men of his nephews, and kills them when he fails. He has been hiding in an underground hut in the wild woods, and it is there that he successively tries to foster two ten-year-olds (Morris 1962). Usually the initiations are restricted to individuals, but two groups are seen as constituting initiated collectives. The bearskin-wearing *berserker* and wolfskin-wearing *ulvhednar* are often interpreted as constituting groups of people who believed they were able to take on the characteristics of animals in warfare (see Weiser 1927) This state of otherness is seen as a militant form of shamanism, which could be associated with the courtyard sites (see also Armstrong 2000).

## Conclusion

It is doubtful whether we will ever be able to find positive proof of what the courtyard sites in Norway were used for. The best we can hope for is to find a model that explains the data and achieves a consensus. It is my claim that none of the existing hypotheses achieve this, while the *rites de passage* hypothesis at least achieves the former. Interpreting courtyard sites as arenas for transition rituals allows us to view them as having a single function for their construction and use during the Early Iron Age, from which other functions may have arisen. This interpretation also allows the marginalised youth to be central to our understanding of past society. While segregation and liminality are part of the treatment of the young, they are also part of their power, which may have had an essential impact upon the development of Early Iron Age society in Norway.

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