

Viking-Age Wolin (Wollin) in the Norse Context of the Southern Coast of the Baltic Sea

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Although not nomadic, Scandinavians were a people on the move. Well-documented in both written sources and archaeology, Scandinavian voyaging reached its peak during the Viking Age (between the late eighth and eleventh centuries), when they travelled far and wide to undertake various activities. For three centuries Norsemen sailed on their well-built ships along the coasts of Europe in search of plunder. But raiding was not the sole purpose of their activity. In addition to stealing things and people, Scandinavians also stole land: They took over the North Atlantic islands, parts of Anglo-Saxon Britain, Ireland, Frankia, and various territories in eastern Europe, which everywhere caused short- and long-term changes in the ethnic composition of local populations (Loyn 1994, Byock 2001, Duczko 2004). The Vikings' large-scale looting eventually turned into equally successful economic occupation. When they had had enough of plundering, Scandinavian pirates started to engage in trading goods, specializing in slaves, and commerce became the principal reason for their travels.

The Norsemen were mainly interested in the riches of the West and the East, but they also recognized the opportunities to be found in places that were much closer to home, such as the southern coast of the Baltic Sea, populated by Slavs, Balts, and Finns. From the early eighth century and during the ninth century the Danes and Swedes established several emporia, centres for trade and crafts, along this long coast and increased the circulation of commodities within an already functioning interregional trade network (Jöns 2009).

Among these trading sites, Wolin, known as Jumne, was the most famous. In the 1070s, Adam of Bremen mentioned it in his chronicle of

the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen as "... a most noble city, affords a very widely known trading centre..." (Tschan 1959: 66). During Adam's time, the glory-days of Wolin were already history, but the memory of Wolin's former greatness was kept alive and used as a theme in Norse literature, especially in *Jómsvíkinga saga* composed by medieval authors living in Iceland.

Wolin was founded on the island of the same name located in the eastern part of the estuary of the river Odra (Oder). The island was part of a larger agglomeration that consisted of another island, Uznam (Usedom), and Kamień Pomorski (Cammin), a settlement on the Pomeranian mainland. Taking advantage of its strategic position deep within the estuary of a great river that connected the Baltic Sea to the Slavic lands in the south, the settlement that appeared on the eastern side of the island of Wolin, close to the river Dziwna (Dievenow), developed in the early ninth century into a centre of thriving trade. Its importance peaked between the mid-tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh century, and it eventually lost its position after year 1043, when King Magnús of Norway and Denmark destroyed the city.

Historians and archaeologists have focused their attention on Viking-Age Wolin for a long time. The Icelandic saga's story about Jomsborg, a fort occupied by a Norse warrior-community that functioned as a kind of secular order, made many scholars, who identified Wolin with this fort, to see it as a purely Scandinavian site. However, archaeological research has changed this once dominant opinion by introducing results that have allowed for a new approach to the early history of the town. It is now clear that the original settlement on the eastern shore of the island of Wolin was Slavic. It was restricted to an area on a hill that lay on one of the islands that originally comprised Wolin before it much later became a part of the mainland (Stanisławski 2013b: 287).

What the initial impulse for founding this site was we do not know. The small size of the first site and its weak contacts with the outer world show that early Wolin had little to offer traders, which meant that the island was left outside of the mainstream of trading in the Baltic (Sindbæk 2006). It is possible that in the beginning people on the island were more interested in agrarian economy than in trading. In the long run, this appears to have been a sensible choice: The production of food attracted the attention of traders and sped up developments on the island. Structural changes introduced during the second part of the ninth century considerably enlarged what was previously a very modest settlement and show that

the opportunities offered by the place were finally being recognized (Stanisławski & Filipowiak 2013: 279).

The serious nature of ongoing changes manifested itself in various ways, mainly through the erection of exclusive houses in the central part of the settlement at Stare Miasto ‘Old Town’, but also through the construction of a harbour on the river Dziwna and, most notably, the building of a wall for defence. This sort of urban unit points to the establishment of an elite who were involved in new kinds of activities — trading and crafts — which exposed them to the dangers of plundering raids. Wolin was becoming a regular port of trade similar to many other pre-existing sites around the Baltic. Further developments that occurred in the first decades of the tenth century also reveal that the town was successful: A new district was built that consisted of houses arranged in a regular way on the Srebrne Wzgórze ‘Silver Hill’, north of the main settlement, which was rebuilt and also surrounded by a much stronger wall. In the same period a chain of forts along the river Dziwna were built that secured the city from the sea.

Wolin was systematically gaining an important position in the network of long-distance trade. Evidence for this includes the building of a new district with a harbour in the Ogrody ‘Gardens’, a district between Stare Miasto and Srebrne Wzgórze, with many houses in which a variety of foreign goods were stored. Another phenomenon that clearly demonstrates the growing wealth of the people of Wolin are the many hoards of silver coins, Islamic dirhams, deposited in and around the town in the middle of the tenth century (Žak 1963). The phenomenon of hoarding is usually connected to Scandinavians, the main actors in the Baltic trade, who were now also making their appearance on the island (Duczko 2005; Stanisławski 2013a: 201). The Norse presence, which had been almost non-existent in the early phases of Viking-Age Wolin, was now taking up more space and exerting more influence. The clearest trace of this can be found in the form of a large house built in the late 960s during the heyday of the main settlement in Stare Miasto. Its central location and the kind of material used for its construction — oak, a tree that was already rare on the island — demonstrate the exceptional nature of the building and its purpose. Finds from this place provide us with the evidence that it was serving people from the North. Artefacts such as twelve wooden knife-handles decorated in Scandinavian manner with plait-work, three miniature swords and five small wooden figures, obviously representations

of gods, tell us about the ethnicity of the people in the house (Stanisławski 2013b: 131 f.).

The site with the oak-house was not the only place in Wolin where Norsemen dwelt from the end of the tenth century to the first decades of the eleventh (Filipowiak 2004). There are at least seven such places, including wooden houses, where typical Norse objects have been discovered: jewellery — silver pendants, two round brooches, and amulets in the shape of Thor's hammer made from silver, iron, and amber — gaming pieces, and again, wooden handles with excellently executed plait-work, a lot of schist whetstones and soap-stones for pots of Norwegian origin, even some weapons, not forgetting to mention lumps of Scandinavian iron ore, and, last but not least, a piece of wood with a runic inscription (Stanisławski 2013b: 162 f.). What we have here is a collection of easily recognizable items of Norse origin far more numerous than was previously believed would be the case in the city.

Not all of the aforementioned artefacts were initially recognized as works by Norsemen. Especially one, a very famous object, is notorious: a little wooden piece with four heads on the top that was identified as a representation of the Slavic god Światowid (Svantovit) uncovered in a building that was subsequently thought to be a Slavic temple (Filipowiak & Gundlach 1992). From my studies it became obvious that this artefact belonged to the Norse religious sphere, not only because of the characteristic element with four faces, but also because of the shape of the elongated part, which is in fact a whetstone with the same decoration as an item found in the Oseberg ship (Duczko 2000: 26).

In the same study I was able to attribute a large number of items found in Wolin to a local Norse workshop. These included the aforementioned wooden and bone knife-handles decorated with plait-work of a type well-known in Insular-Scandinavian art, the one that was especially often employed in the stone-art flourishing among the Norsemen on the Isle of Man (Duczko 2000: 25). The number of items with such decoration and their homogeneity show that artisans who had been trained in Britain were working in Wolin. I have coined a term for this art — “the Pomeranian School of Insular-Scandinavian Art” (Duczko 2000: 29). The use of this art was not restricted to the town of Wolin, we also come across examples of it in Kamień Pomorski and Szczecin (Stettin), which is only to be expected as those places were closely connected with each other, and also beyond. Many of the objects with the typical motifs of this art were discovered in the main centres of the young Polish state of the Piasts: in

Gniezno (Gnesen), Giecz, Santok (Zantoch) and some others; they were also found in Śląsk (Silesia), the south-western territory conquered by the Piasts in the 980s (Jaworski et al. 2013). The distribution of products that are characteristic of the Wolin workshop indicates the existence of a special kind of relation between the city and the rulers of Poland.

What can the aforementioned Norse archaeological source material from Wolin tell us about this site when we compare it with other trading sites on the southern shore of the Baltic? There are several of them — in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern: Gross Strömkendorf, Rostock-Dierkow, and Menzlin, on Rügen: Ralswiek, further east in Polish Pomerania: Bardy-Świelubie (Bartin-Zwillipp) near Kołobrzeg (Kolberg), and two sites on the coast of the Balts: Truso in Prussia and Wiskiauten in Sambia (Jöns 2009, Łosiński 1975, Jagodziński 2010, Zur Mühlen 1975). One distinguishing feature is significant: Wolin was founded later than these other emporia which in most cases were established in the early eighth century. Equally important is that they appeared in the regions where a Scandinavian presence had been unbroken since at least sixth century (Duczko 1997; Dulnicz 2001). The other important fact is that — with exception of Truso and Wiskiauten — these sites only existed for a century or two: Gross Strömkendorf (probably known from written sources as Reric) was active until the first decade of the ninth century, Rostock-Dierkow fell into disuse in the middle of the ninth century, Menzlin was gone around 900, and only Ralswiek continued through the tenth and eleventh centuries (Kleingärtner 2011: 185).

The main feature of these sites is their wholly Norse character: families, with a very clear presence of Norse women, and graves with rich inventories, sometimes placed within stone-ship settings, in some cases in real boats, burials of warriors together with weapons and standard Norse material culture, sometimes with exclusive jewellery of Danish type. Menzlin has to be considered as a special site. Located on the river Peene, only about ninety kilometres west from Wolin across the Bay of Szczecin, it was occupied by Danes and comprised a complete Norse society, where the infrastructure with a harbour, stone roads and bridges was standard and where the burial ground with family graves was visible in the landscape in a most impressive way.

How does Wolin look in this context? Different, as we have already been able to see. Wolin was fortified while none of the other aforementioned emporia, with the exception of Truso, was protected by a wall. It appears certain that Norse families did not dwell in Wolin, unlike in Menzlin and

other sites from the coast where evidence for their existence is easy to discover.

The presence of entire families, with women and children, is a necessary prerequisite for the creation of a society with a distinctive culture, as is so well manifested in eastern Europe, where many settlements can be easily recognized as Scandinavian because of family burials with classic Norse elements (Duczko 2004: 9).

The absence of typical oval brooches as well as extremely few finds of female jewellery in Wolin is a revealing feature. It is well-known that Norse women used a lot of ornaments as can be seen from finds not only in their own countries but also abroad. The few finds of Norse ornaments lead us to assume that some Norse women were living in Wolin, but they were not many. Only a pair of very untypical oval brooches have been discovered here, along with another pair of round brooches with a four-volute motif, which are not in an orthodox, standard form. This reinforces the idea that the Norsemen did not constitute a consolidated group acting as a regular society here.

So the presence of so few Norse women can be taken as an indication that the Scandinavian community in Wolin was not functioning as in the other Norse emporia along the Slavic and Baltic coasts. Does this mean that the Jónsborg with its brotherhood of warriors was a reality and not a legend? Not exactly. Contradicting the contents of the saga are the very few finds of weapons and similarly the few burials of warriors, practically none of the kind in the form of chamber-graves known from Birka, Hedeby, Pskov, and Gnezdovo. Alas, we cannot be sure that such elite burials never existed in Wolin because the grave-fields that once existed to the south of the city have since been destroyed and they may have contained special burials, about which we know nothing.

So the weak presence of Norse women is matched by only a few traces of warrior culture, which makes the legendary existence of the Jónsvíkings look even more legendary. However, we have to notice what is special about Wolin, namely the activity of a workshop producing knife-handles with Insular decoration: This is an important indication of the presence of a group of males of Danish origin with Anglo-Saxon connections enjoying the art they were accustomed to.

What usually gives a site outside Scandinavia a distinctive Norse flavour are finds of artefacts with runic inscriptions. Such things — on pieces of wood and bone — were found in West Pomerania, namely in Wolin and Kamień Pomorski, in both cases within settlements. Objects

with runes are so intimately connected with Scandinavian culture that any attempts to see them as neutral things, or trading goods, should be treated as a misunderstanding of Norse civilization (Liestøl 1970). It is worth remembering that Scandinavians had been using writing since the beginning of the first millennium, while West Slavic societies were illiterate, and that the use of runes had many purposes, among which magic was reportedly the most important. It should also be stressed that when objects with runes appear outside Scandinavia, they are usually discovered in places where Norsemen were evidently dwelling, which is also the case in Wolin.

We can be sure that Danes were living in the town, where they played an important, but temporary, leading role in the Slavic community of Wolin. They were traders and warriors, some of them both at the same time, like many other Scandinavians during the Viking Age. It is possible that persons with names like *Pálnatóki*, *Sigvaldi* or *Styrbjörn*, who according to *Jómsvíkinga saga*, were deeply involved in Danish-Norwegian-Swedish conflicts, were staying in Wolin, possibly in the Ogrody district, as is suggested by Błażej Stanisławski (2013b: 288).

However, as their presence there was not recorded in reliable written documents, they have to remain literary heroes.

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Summary

The article discusses archaeological material regarding the Viking-Age settlement of Wolin (Wollin) identified as the Jónsborg of the Icelandic sagas. The study shows that Wolin stands out among other Scandinavian settlements on the southern shore of the Baltic Sea such as Gross Strömkendorf, Rostock-Dierkow, Menzlin, and Ralswiek. Firstly, Wolin was founded later than other emporia in the region. Secondly, the character of the Scandinavian presence is different. Wolin is characterized by a distinct Slavic core and a short-lived presence of a Scandinavian elite with a clear underrepresentation of Norse women. Other emporia bear evidence of a continuous Scandinavian presence and wholly Norse character, including families, with a very clear presence of Norse women, and graves with rich inventories. Thirdly, Wolin was fortified while none of the other aforementioned emporia was protected by a wall. Another striking element of the archaeology of Wolin includes plait-work of “the Pomeranian School of Insular-Scandinavian Art”.

Keywords: Archaeology, Jónsborg, Wolin (Wollin), Slavic-Scandinavian contacts, Southern Baltic, Viking Age

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