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Viking Worlds

Things, Spaces and Movement

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Front cover: Doorway from the reconstructed Iron-Age longhouse at Ullandhaug, Stavanger, Norway. Photo © Marianne Hem Eriksen

Back cover: above: Proposed reconstruction of the courtyard site at Hjelle, Stryn, Sogn og Fjordane. Produced by Ragnar Børsheim, © Arkikon AS, Bergen; below: Armed female figurine found at Hårby, Denmark. Photo: John Lee, © National Museum of Denmark, used by kind permission.

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Courtyard sites in western Norway. Central assembly places and judicial institutions in the Late Iron Age

Asle Bruen Olsen

Abstract

This paper presents four western Norwegian Iron-Age courtyard sites, of which three have been investigated during the last ten years. By comparing functional and contextual aspects of these sites it is argued that they represent central assembly sites in local communities. The coherent similarity of such complex physical structures across time is seen as an expression of strong social and ideological continuity in Iron-Age society from the Roman period until the process of territorial unification under kings with national ambitions that started in the late 9th century. With reference to the Icelandic analogy and the historical connection between Iceland and Western Norway in the Viking period it is also argued for the courtyard sites as an important institution (*þing*) in the pre-state judicial and political system.

Introduction

The so-called courtyard site consists of a collection of house remains facing or surrounding a courtyard (Fig. 4.1). These sites are dated within the period AD 200–900. The courtyard site is a typical Norwegian phenomenon with no clear parallels outside the country border. The total number of 28 sites is distributed from Bjarkøy, Troms, in northern Norway to Spangereid, Lista, near the southernmost point in southern Norway. Most of the sites are located in south-western Norway (Rogaland) and northern Norway (Nordland/Troms). During the later years, Iron-Age research has focused on the courtyard sites as important contexts in the study of social and political organization in the late Early and Late Iron-Age society (Armstrong 2010; Brink *et al.* 2011; Grimm 2010; Grimm and Stylegard 2004; Kallhovd 1994; Olsen 2003; Olsen 2005, 2013; Storli 2000, 2001, 2006, 2010; Strøm 2010). Today it is agreed that the courtyard sites are gathering places and not settlements, but it is still debated as to whether they were built primarily for economic, religious, judicial,



Fig. 4.1. Proposed reconstruction of the courtyard site at Hjelle, Stryn, Sogn og Fjordane. Produced by Ragnar Børsheim, © Arkikon AS, Bergen.

military or other purposes. This paper will focus on the four sites discovered and investigated so far in western Norway (the counties Hordaland, Sogn og Fjordane and Sunnmøre, the southern district of the county Møre og Romsdal). From the location and construction of these sites it will be argued that the Norwegian courtyard sites reflect a polycentric structure of many small territories in which the courtyard sites served as central institutions for the gatherings of independent farmers in societies with a high degree of social equality. Inspired by the work of Morten Olsen (2003) it is further argued that they are the archaeological remains of a pre-state system of local assembly places, or *thing* assemblies, with judicial functions.

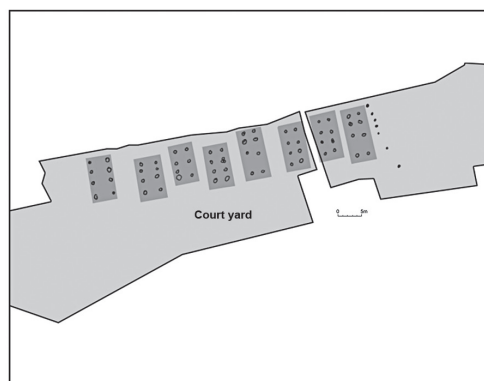
The west Norwegian courtyard sites

The west Norwegian courtyard sites are all recorded under modern cultivation top soil, and appear in the subsoil mainly as house grounds with postholes, hearths and cooking pits. Most of the courtyard sites further north and south have been recognized by visible surface structures from the construction of outer earth and stone walls. This outer wall construction was not a part of the house-building tradition in western Norway. The four sites were all discovered by chance in connection with rescue excavation. This seriously questions to what degree the visible sites give a representative picture of density and distribution, and indicates that the courtyard sites may have been much more common than we can observe today.

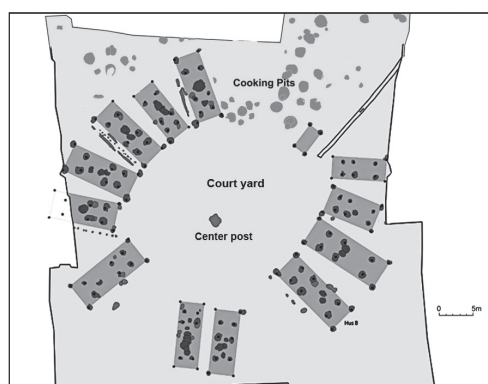
West Norway is represented with three sites in Sogn og Fjordane county and one site



Hjelle Stryn 800-900 AD (650 - 900)



Bø, Stryn 600-900 AD



Sausjord 350 - 550 AD



Gjerland 200 - 600 AD

Fig. 4.2. Plan drawings of the four courtyard sites in western Norway: Hjelle, Stryn (Olsen 2005: fig. 5), Sausjord, Voss (Olsen 2013), Bø, Stryn (Diinhoff and Bødal 2013) and Gjerland, Førde (Randers 1989: fig. 1).

in Hordaland county: Gjerland, Førde, dated to the late Roman/Migration period (Myhre 1973; Randers 1989), Hjelle, Stryn, dated to the late Merovingian/early Viking period (Olsen 2004, 2005), Bø, Stryn, dated to the Merovingian/early Viking period (Diinhoff and Bødal 2013), and Sausjord, Voss, dated to the Migration period (Fig. 4.2; Hatling and Olsen 2012; Olsen 2013). Gjerland, Hjelle and Bø were not fully excavated, but the position of the uncovered house remains gives positive clues on real extensions and house frequencies. Sausjord was totally excavated, and constitutes the most completely investigated courtyard site in Norway. Gjerland, Hjelle and Sausjord are circular sites with the entrances facing an inner courtyard, thus falling into the common pattern of the Norwegian courtyard sites. Sausjord has 12 three-aisled houses, and it is likely that Gjerland has consisted of eight houses and Hjelle of 11 houses. Bø differs from the others by the linear position of eight exposed houses, and it can certainly be disputed as to whether this is a variant of the courtyard site or another type of gathering place. However, in Northern Norway courtyard

sites with documented continuity in the late Early Iron Age and Late Iron Age show late extensions with more linear or irregular house rows (Berglund 1995: 63). There are also more linear structures in two of the three dated to the Late Iron Age in mid-Norway, Trøndelag (Stenvik 2001: 41, 2005: 133–145), indicating a larger variety in courtyard site construction in the Late Iron Age. Bø is therefore included here as a courtyard site.

Finds and localization narrowing the frame of interpretation

Finds from postholes and hearths are few and scattered. At Hjelle the house floors were sunken and partly preserved under the topsoil, containing a relatively large sample of objects related to the court site activities. Among these is an Anglo-Saxon copper coin, *a styca*, embossed by the coin master Eanwin under king Eanred (Ethelred) in Northumbria in the period AD 810–840. The Hjelle material is dominated by small iron objects comprising several knives, arrowhead, scissor fragment, fish hook, key ring and a large number of rivets and nails, in addition to two beads of Viking-Age type, fire flints and stones for polishing. The three uncovered house grounds had almost identical find frequencies and distributions, with high densities in and near the entrances, lower around the house hearths and lack of finds in the inner space (Olsen 2005: 328–330). The Sausjord material contains a small Migration-period fibula, found in a posthole, one fibula needle pin of iron, two beads, two iron key fragments and a few rivets and nails (Olsen 2013: 98–100). Gjerland and Bø suffer from the lack of determinable artifact types (Diinhoff and Bødal 2013; Randers 1989: 16).

The absence of textile production tools, the most common find category in farm contexts, and the lack of finds that can be associated with military activities, strengthen the interpretation of the courtyard sites *as temporary assembly places constructed for peaceful activities*. This tendency in the composition of artifacts generally matches the inventories from investigated courtyard sites further north and south (Grimm 2010: 151–189; Johansen and Søbstad 1977). The peaceful aspect is also indicated by the fact that all the four sites lie on exposed, unsheltered places outside Iron-Age farmsteads and cultivation fields, located on what we may describe as ‘neutral ground’, but still in the vicinity of the settlements (Olsen 2005: 338, 2013: 103). This pattern also seems to characterize the layout of the sites in Southwest Norway (Grimm 2010: 44) and northern Norway (Storli 2010: 130–135).

Common structural features and spheres of activity

The west Norwegian courtyard site houses vary in size between 8 m and 12 m in length and 4–5 m in width, and show no spatial or functional differentiation indicating that they have been built for main purposes other than the lodging of people at the assembly (Randers 1989: 5–6; Olsen 2005: 337, 2013: 103). This also seems to be the case for the other Norwegian sites, although it is better founded in the more thoroughly investigated sites in west Norway. The excavations in west Norway have to a larger degree than other court site investigations exposed areas in the front of and at the back of the house complexes.

Sausjord as the most completely uncovered site clearly constitutes a physical organization with an inner almost 'clean' courtyard, in which a posthole in the middle marks the center, and a high density of cooking pits are located between and behind the houses (Fig. 4.2). The excavations at Gjerland and Hjelle have also uncovered large concentrations of cooking pits outside the houses (Randers 1989: 19; Olsen 2005: 324). The courtyards of these two sites were only partially uncovered, at Hjelle only a small area without pits close to the houses. At Gjerland the excavation reached the center part of the courtyard, and here several small postholes were exposed, maybe the remains of shifting center posts or a light, wooden construction (Randers 1989: 6). At Bø, the area behind the houses remains unexposed. Here, a few cooking pits are documented at the side of the houses, but not in the front area (Diinhoff and Bødal 2013). Bø differs from the other sites, and one should be careful to draw conclusions about function at this stage. The features of the three *circular* courtyard sites seem to mark three main spheres of activity: One inner courtyard as the central space for gathering and dialogue, surrounding buildings for the lodging of those who met at the assembly, and behind the houses an area for the preparation of foods which most likely were consumed in the context of ceremonial and ritual actions that took place in the courtyard.

The courtyard sites reflecting social equality

The courtyard sites reflect more clearly than any other types of archaeological sites the horizontal social dimension of Iron-Age society. This is indicated by both location and physical structure. Landscape analysis of the courtyard sites in Northern and Southwest Norway show a generally low affinity to farms which from the grave finds can be associated with chieftain farms (Grimm 2010: 44; Storli 2010: 130–136). This pattern can also be applied to the sites in west Norway, suggesting that the courtyard sites basically represent assembly places outside the control of individual power. Another argument for the same is that strong territorial chiefdoms hardly would have structured the exertion of power on collective gatherings as expressed by the courtyard sites. The horizontal dimension is also expressed in the physical organization of closely attached, identically constructed houses with only small internal variations in size. This uniformity is best illustrated at Sausjord as the only completely excavated courtyard (Olsen 2013: 92, 105). These aspects point to the courtyard sites as an institution grounded on a large degree of social equality between the people who met at the assembly, and, consequently, as an institution that served a society with strong egalitarian traits.

General view on the courtyard site assemblies as an important structuring element of the pre-state society

The West Norwegian courtyard site dates, finds and locations picture a society which in the late Early Iron Age had grown dependent of neutral assembly places for peaceful collective gathering and dialogue. The main purpose of the gatherings can hardly be recognized from

the finds and the physical structures, but the importance of this institution is underlined by its following long-lasting continuity across periods and through changes. In the perspective of the 700 year time span and the wide distribution of all the Norwegian courtyard sites as a body of similar, complex physical structures, they can be seen as an expression of a common social and political pre-state system established in the Roman period, and as an institution that served to maintain and reproduce the tribal structure of the northern Germanic society in Norway (*cf.* Olsen 2005: 341–352).

Central assembly places in settlement territories

The farming district of Jæren in south-west Norway has the highest frequency of courtyard sites in Norway, all of them so far dated to the late Early Iron Age. Here the sites are situated close to the geographical center points of delimited Iron-Age settlement areas (Grimm 2010). This pattern is coherent with a polycentric social and political structure of small tribal territories with courtyard sites as central assemblies. Considering the landscape context of the west Norwegian sites, neither of these appear to be center points in larger regional networks. Gjerland is located in Haukedalen, a remote and rather isolated Iron-Age settlement area outside historically important communication lines in the region. The Late Iron-Age sites Hjelle and Bø are situated at knot junctions in the two adjacent districts Oppstryn and Nedstryn. Sausjord is located in the middle of the historically interconnected area of Vossestrand, north of the district Vangen in Voss, a densely populated area in the Iron Age (Olsen 2013: 104). The locations of the few known West Norwegian sites thus seem to reflect a structure of many small, more or less adjacent local communities organized around the courtyard site assembly (Fig. 4.3). This structure was established in the Roman period, possibly as a result of contact with and influence from southern Germanic tribes (Olsen 2005: 341–344). The Late Iron-Age continuity of sites implies that it was maintained, but interrupted in the end by the process of territorial unification under kings with national ambitions which started in the 9th century. However, it may have resolved at an earlier stage in certain areas. In Jæren, the absence of sites dated to the Late Iron Age can be seen as an indicator of a development towards territorial unification due to political events and structural change in the early Late Iron Age.

The Icelandic thing as a reference for interpretation

The written Icelandic sources, especially The book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*) and The book of Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*) recount the stories of the first settlers, stories that give us a clearer picture of the Viking Age in Iceland than in the Scandinavian homelands of the emigrants. These stories have been important in the attempts of archaeologists and historians to understand and describe the pre-state society of Norway. The use of the so-called Icelandic analogy is problematic in many aspects, mainly because the stories were written down more than 200 years after the period of colonization. Linking the colonization to clearly interrelated archaeological features in the two countries has been a problem for

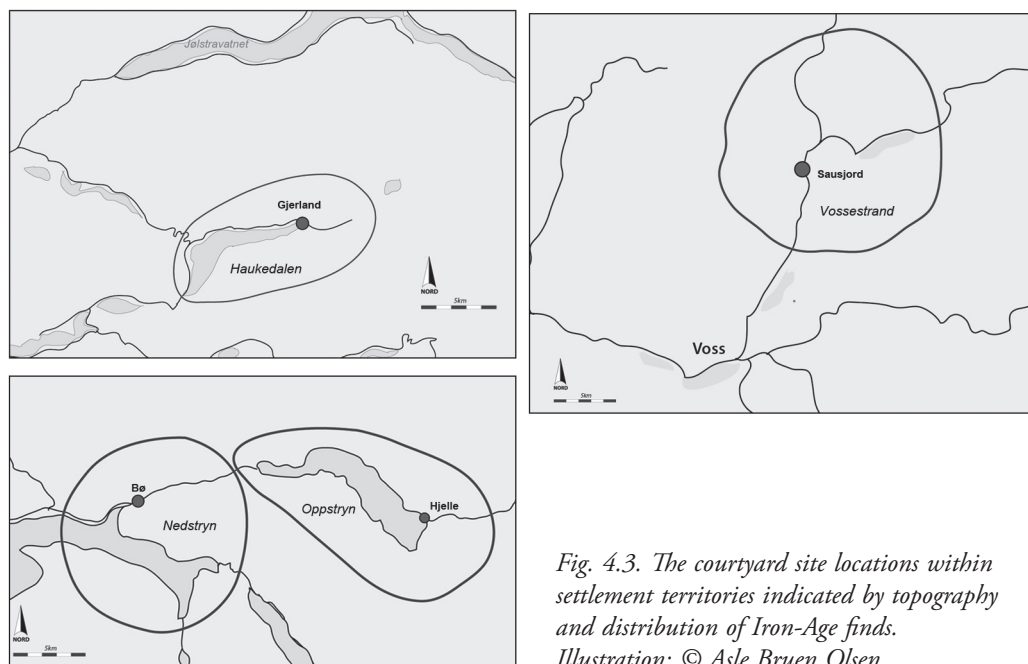


Fig. 4.3. The courtyard site locations within settlement territories indicated by topography and distribution of Iron-Age finds.

Illustration: © Asle Bruen Olsen.

archaeologists. Contrary to earlier research, recent studies have focused more specifically on the Icelandic sources as a basis for interpreting the courtyard sites as *þing* assemblies (M. Olsen 2003; A. Olsen 2005, 2013; Storli 2010).

From the written sources it can be stated that the Viking-Age Icelandic thing was not an institution connected with chieftdom control and individual territorial supremacy. Within a basically tribal society the thing served two main purposes: First, to exercise law and rules in order to solve conflicts and to negotiate and secure collective and individual rights and interests, and, secondly, to regulate and control leadership through assembly election of leaders. Simplified, one can say that the Viking-Age population in Iceland was divided into two social categories, freeborn men and women and their slaves, and it was the freeborn, independent farmers that represented at the thing assemblies and elected the leaders (Eínarsson 1995: 64; Pétursdóttir 2007: 3). The leaders, *i.e.* *goðar*, were recruited mainly within a social class of freeborn men with status linked to ancestry and wealth, and they formed a kind of aristocracy (Þorláksson 2005: 120). But the position of the leaders was based less on wealth than on personal charisma, honour and reputation (Byock 2001: 120).

The Icelandic Althing (general assembly) governing system was established after the settlement period, around AD 930. This national system of political, judicial and social organization of the Icelandic society was a result of an autonomous historical development. The thing assembly itself was older, and may have originated from Norwegian territory. The oldest archaeologically known local site lies close to Elliðavatn at Krossnes in the vicinity of Reykjavík, commonly named *þingnes*. It has been partly investigated (1981–1986 and 2003

by Guðmundur Ólafsson), and consists of twelve 10–15 m long turf ‘boots’ built for the lodging of participants at the assembly. The boots are more irregularly scattered than the houses in most of the Norwegian courtyard sites, and less solid in construction (perhaps due to the limited availability of trees as house building material), but face a flat and open central area marked with a circular turf wall, 15 m in diameter, surrounding a small mound in the middle. Some of the structures are dated shortly after the 871±2 tephra settlement layer, probably around AD 900 (Ólafsson 1987: 41; Þorláksson 2007: 40). *Pingnes* has a physical organization that resembles the Late Iron-Age courtyard sites in Norway, both in the cluster of houses obviously built for temporary lodging of many people and in the orientation of these houses with the entrances facing a central court area.

Ingolfr Arnarsson

Within the research on the pioneer settlements (the *Landnám*) it is generally agreed that Iceland was settled mostly by Norsemen in the period AD 870–930, and that Ingolfr Arnarson from Western Norway, most probably with his homestead farm at Rivedal, Fjaler, Sogn og Fjordane, was the first settler. He established himself with farm and household in Reykjavik around AD 870. He may have emigrated because he was convicted of murder, but the written sources also indicate that he as well as many of his followers went to Iceland to escape from – or in opposition to – king Harald Fairhair, the most important actor in the events concerning the process of national unification (Olsen 2005: 52, Þorláksson 2007: 52, 72). In the center of Reykjavik, a Viking-Age farm hall was excavated in 2001–2003 (today preserved and exhibited), situated on the historically largest farmstead in the area before the development of the city. This settlement was established around or immediately before a volcanic eruption tephra layer dated in glaciers to 871±2 (Stefánsson and Þorgímsdóttir 2007: 132). It is assumed to represent the farm of Ingolfr Arnarson. The farm confirms that written sources and archaeology are broadly consistent, and that Norse settlers came to Iceland around the time stated in old Icelandic writings (Gunnarsdóttir 2007: 9).

The courtyard sites as thing assemblies based on their historical and chronological affinity to the early Icelandic thing

Stryn is an eastern municipality in the Fjordane district of Sogn og Fjordane. This district covers almost the same area as the Old Norse Firdafylkir, which also included Fjaler and the homestead of Ingolfr Arnarson. The late Merovingian and early Viking-Age settlements in Stryn are rich in grave finds. These are evenly distributed, and do not reflect a farm hierarchy (Olsen 2005: 252). Together with the location of the Hjelle and Bø courtyard sites, this indicates that the sites functioned as local assembly places in a pre-kingdom society of basically egalitarian farmers. Thus, Hjelle and Bø represent an institution with potential affinity to the early Icelandic society, both in time, organization and in terms of their geographical location in one of the supposed core areas of emigration to Iceland.

The Fjordane district has the densest concentration in Norway of Irish and Anglo-Saxon



Fig. 4.4. Map illustrating the possible historical connection between the western Norwegian courtyard sites and the early Icelandic thing. Illustration: © Asle Bruen Olsen.

coins and other objects from the 9th century brought back through raids and colonization (Bakka 1963: 55). And, furthermore, this area is represented with the so far largest known Norwegian Viking ship buried under Rundehågen in Eid (Magnus 1967: 61, 141). This ship certainly shows the ability of these local societies to equip vessels for raids and journeys across oceans.

More important in this context is that the Hjelle courtyard site, which according to several radiocarbon dates was abandoned around AD 880 (Olsen 2005: 327), probably existed when Ingólfr Arnarson lived in Fjaler, possibly also at the time of his final departure from Fjordane (Fig. 4.4). It is almost unlikely that he was not familiar with the courtyard assemblies in Stryn as well as other courtyard sites in the area. If this was the case, then he would have had knowledge of the institution and the system this represented. He may even have been an active participant in courtyard site assemblies. With this background it is reasonable to assume that he, as an influential person in the organization of the core settlements in the Reykjavik area, contributed to the establishment of the first thing assembly modelled after the assemblies in the society he left, like the ones in Stryn. Consequently, from this possible historical and chronological affinity between the two institutions, the *Western Norwegian courtyard sites should be interpreted and understood as thing assemblies.*

The position of Ingolfr and his family in the establishment of the thing assembly in the new land is supported by written sources. According to the book of Icelanders the oldest thing assembly was situated at Kjalarnes north of Reykjavik. This is supposed to have been founded by Þorstein, son of Ingolfr. The sources also point to Þorstein as the precursor of the national general assembly, the Althing, at *Þingvellir*. Kjalarnes is described as the most important local thing before the Althing, but it has not been identified archaeologically. One opinion is that it shortly after its establishment was moved to Krossnes, and that Þingnes in reality represents the Kjalarnes assembly referred to in the book of Icelanders (Þorláksson 2007: 40).

The law practiced at the early Icelandic thing was recited at the assembly by a law speaker. This started before the Althing and the later Icelandic implementation of the Norwegian Gulathing law code. According to Helgi Þorláksson (2007: 40), the early Icelanders are presumed to have applied common and customary law and legal principles to which they were accustomed in their home countries. It is therefore likely that a West Norwegian courtyard site law code was brought to Iceland by Ingolfr and his followers, and formed an important part of the judicial practice at the early thing, probably with modifications applied to Icelandic circumstances.

Concluding remarks

It is generally agreed that Ingolfr Arnarssons immigration to Iceland was motivated by his opposition to the new ruling forces that wanted to abolish the equality of tribal leaders, with the vision to contribute to the formation of a 'free' society based on old values, a society in which the local thing was a strong pillar (Þorláksson 2007: 52). This implies that Ingolfr had the reproduction of the traditional pre-state tribal society as a political and ideological agenda.

From the story of Ingolfr Arnarsson and the strong possibility of him and his followers as a link between the early Icelandic thing and the late Norwegian courtyard sites, represented by the Hjelle and Bø sites, it is – in my opinion – more relevant than before to use the Icelandic analogy as a framework for discussion and analysis on social and political organization of the pre-state Iron-Age societies in Norway. The polycentric tribal structure indicated by the location of the courtyard sites and the social egalitarianism reflected in the physical construction of the sites seems to be in accordance with how the early Icelandic society can be described from written and archaeological sources. A premise for further research should therefore be that the early Icelandic tribal society in most aspects mirrors the western Norwegian pre-state society in the Iron Age.

Iceland had basically a tribal organization in the colonization period. However, this obviously does not mean that the social and political structure of the early Icelandic society was purely egalitarian, and that it reflects a Norwegian structure without any form of hierarchy and ranking. As mentioned above, the Icelandic leaders (*goðar*) were recruited mainly within a group of freeborn men with status linked to ancestry and wealth, thus forming a kind of aristocracy. In Norway, the existence of an aristocracy is expressed by a

marked differentiation in the burial custom from the Late Roman period. This aristocracy probably built much of its power on the ability to control trade and to mobilize warrior followers, and over time conflicts within this aristocracy must have been an important factor in the development from tribal confederacy to early kingdom in West Norway as well as in other regions. Before the process of territorial unification and the formation of a more stratified society in Norway, the aristocracy was hardly a uniform class, but in the areas it held a strong position in, it is likely to have had a monopoly on the recruitment of leaders elected at the assemblies.

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