

The Surrounding Areas of Danish Cities and Towns on the Brink of Modernity

Abstract: This article describes the urban system and the urban-rural and inter-urban relations between towns in four Danish regions, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and with a focus on Copenhagen and the provincial centres Odense, Aalborg, and Aarhus. For centuries, the capital drew heavily on resources from many parts of the country, with the region extending roughly 30 kilometres outside of Copenhagen representing the most important catchment area during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Researchers have divided this area into several supply zones that provided different products to the capital. Like Copenhagen, Odense and Aalborg have been undisputed centres of their respective parts of the country since the Middle Ages. The regions surrounding both these cities have rather distinct and stable boundaries. For example, the northernmost part of Jutland, which includes the long river-like Limfjord, has always belonged to the hinterland of Aalborg even though several small market towns are likewise situated along the bay. By contrast, eastern Jutland possessed no provincial centre before Aarhus assumed the role in the nineteenth century. Until that time, many of the towns in this region had relatively well-defined catchment areas, and competition for rural customers was apparently less pronounced than in many other parts of Denmark.

Keywords: hinterland, urban-rural relations, trade, infrastructure, urban hierarchy

The country behind the town – a multi-faceted phenomenon

In an article about London and its hinterland between 1600 and 1800, Michael Reed wrote that “all towns are multi-functional, and each function has its own hinterland”.¹ With this statement, he captured the many-faceted character of towns and cities as places for the exchange of goods as well as being economic, administrative, and cultural nodes in regions of varying sizes. At the same time, Reed stressed that the extent of a town’s sphere of influence strongly depends on what aspect is being examined.

For instance, there is usually a significant difference in size between the area from which servants immigrated into a European town during the eighteenth century and the area from which merchants and artisans settling in the same town during the same period originated. Normally, the catchment area for the latter was much larger, whereas the zone from which a

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1 Michael Reed, London and Its Hinterland 1600–1800: The View from the Provinces, in: Peter Clark/Bernard Lepetit (eds.), *Capital Cities and Their Hinterlands in Early Modern Europe*, Aldershot 1996, 51–83, 57.

town recruited its servants was often nearly identical to the closest surrounding area, whose inhabitants walked to the town each week to make their basic purchases. This only applies to smaller towns, however. Capitals, cities, and other towns with considerable attractiveness for immigration have always been able to allure all kinds of people from huge areas.²

Hektor Ammann, a Swiss expert on the history of European fairs, differentiated between three zones of the area surrounding a town in pre-industrial Europe, namely *Umland*, *Hinterland*, and *Einflussbereich*.³ The term *Umland* describes the area up to 30 kilometres from the town, meaning the district from which people would go to any weekly market day that might be held within or outside the town. The *Hinterland*, which extended to a distance of 50 to 60 kilometres outside the town, was the area that normally provided the town with immigrant merchants and artisans – and with buyers and sellers when the large town fairs were held a few times each year. Finally, the *Einflussbereich* was the region (or regions) affected by a town's long-distance trading.

However, the size and character of a town's catchment area in pre-industrial Europe was also heavily influenced by the so-called institutional factors, that is the political, administrative, and juridical framework of the economy: The siting of state works and institutions – from castles and fortresses to episcopal residences, courts, and tax offices – often greatly increased the economic activity of a town. For example, the fact that people from all over a specific region had to travel to a given town to attend court proceedings or public meetings enabled traders and innkeepers there to earn money by rendering services to the arriving travellers.

It was also quite common for the state to intervene in a town's economic life by granting specific privileges like the right to hold a fair on certain days each year. Many towns were also assigned a "protection strip", which meant that their traders and artisans enjoyed a quasi-monopoly concerning the supply of people in the immediate surrounding area.⁴ Staple rights were a further way of concentrating trading activities in specific places. The decision to grant such privileges was often motivated by military considerations: The Danish government, for example, decided in 1661–1667 to concentrate nearly all foreign trade conducted within the kingdom in five towns.⁵ These towns were situated in different parts of the country, and all of them were fortified. They were ordered to permanently maintain a considerable stock of goods to benefit the local population and support the army in case of a new war (Denmark had been at war with Sweden four times between 1610 and 1660). Most of the towns in question were relatively small and economically weak, however, and were therefore unable to

2 See for instance David Nicholas, *Urban Europe, 1100–1700*, Basingstoke/New York 2003, 50; Peter Clark/Bernard Lepetit, Introduction, in: Clark/Lepetit (eds.), *Capital Cities*, 1–25, 7–11; Börje Hanssen, *Österlen. Allmog, köpstafolk & kultursammanhang vid slutet av 1700-talet i sydöstra Skåne, Östervåla 1952*, 388–399.

3 Hektor Ammann, *Vom Lebensraum der mittelalterlichen Stadt. Eine Untersuchung an schwäbischen Beispielen*, in: *Berichte zur deutschen Landeskunde* 31/2 (1963), 284–316, 290–293; cf. Tom Scott/Bob Scribner, *Urban Networks*, in: Bob Scribner (ed.), *Germany. A New Social and Economic History*, vol. 1: 1450–1630, London et al. 1996, 113–143, 117.

4 Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Urbanisering og bysystemer i Europa indtil ca. 1800. En oversigt over nyere forskningsresultater*, Aarhus 2012, 38; cf. inter alia Christopher R. Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City 1450–1750*, London/New York 1995, 51–56.

5 Other towns were only allowed to import lime and timber for buildings, while certain towns were permitted to export horses and oxen.

enforce the provisions of the staple legislation; as a result, all market towns were eventually permitted to conduct trade with foreign countries in 1689.⁶

Danish urban-rural relations – literature and sources

In this article, I will describe and compare the urban-rural and inter-urban relations in four Danish regions, namely the country's two largest islands Zealand and Funen as well as the northern and the eastern part of the peninsula of Jutland. Using Ammann's concepts along with the classic models of Walter Christaller and Johann Heinrich von Thünen, I will focus on the largest and most important city or town in each region and discuss the dynamics of urban hierarchies and conflicts between it and its surroundings and neighbouring towns. The study will primarily deal with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but other periods are included as well whenever necessary or suitable for providing an opportunity for a long historical perspective.

The information provided in this contribution is based on the study of a great many books, articles, and unpublished research about Danish urban history. The precise topic chosen is only rarely treated in detail in the available Danish literature, however. It is therefore necessary to compile data from a scattered and fragmentary field of research, and the sources used can be roughly organised into four groups:

1. Articles whose main subject is Danish urbanisation or the urban system and which therefore compare different (types of) urban areas.
2. "Biographies" of a specific city or town. Like many other countries, Denmark boasts a large number of works – some consisting of multiple thick volumes – intending to offer readers (first and foremost the inhabitants of the urban area in question) a broad overview of the history of a specific place or region "from the beginning" all the way to modern times. Some of these works contain a host of useful information about urban structures and processes that deserves to be considered in research at the national or even international level.
3. PhD theses, doctoral dissertations, and other research work about specific subjects of relevance for the article, especially trade networks and infrastructure.
4. Printed sources from the nineteenth century describing economic conditions in various regions.⁷

6 Henrik Becker-Christensen, *Stabelstadspolitikken 1658–1689*, in: *Erhvervshistorisk Årbog 1975* (1976), 90–105.

7 Several of these works are mentioned in the notes below. It is also worth mentioning the following syntheses of Danish urban history: Gunnar Olsen, *De danske købstæder gennem tiderne*, Copenhagen 1943; Grethe Authén Blom (ed.), *Urbaniseringsprosessen i Norden*, vol. I–III, Oslo/Bergen/Tromsø 1977 (with three articles about Denmark); Vilhelm Lorenzen, *Vore byer. Studier i bybygning*, vol. I–V, Copenhagen 1947–1958; Hans Krongard Kristensen/Bjørn Poulsen, *Danmarks byer i middelalderen*, Aarhus 2016; Ole Degn, *Fremgang, krise og stilstand. De danske byers historie 1536–1720*, Copenhagen 2018. See also Thomas Riis (ed.), *Urbanization in the Oldenburg Monarchy 1500–1800*, Kiel 2012.

The literature mentioned in numbers 1 to 3 encompasses a broad spectrum of printed and unprinted sources ranging from private letters to official reports.⁸ One specific type of archival material used in several works are the probate cases of merchants and other tradesmen, as these files often include a wealth of correspondence and accounts useful for analyses of trade relations. Of particular interest are the debtor lists found in many merchant probate records. They are excerpts of account books and contain the names and addresses of customers who had not repaid their debts to the respective merchant at the time of the administration of the estate. Even if these lists undoubtedly only mention a small share of the total number of customers who purchased from a merchant, they do provide a clear impression of the respective catchment area – especially when comparing debtor lists from different merchants in the same town. Comparisons of such lists from neighbouring towns are likewise useful for studying the urban-rural relations in a region.⁹

Because of the heterogeneous character of the existing literature, it is difficult to draw strict comparisons between the four regions described in this article. I will therefore use a more “essayistic” style in presenting the regions, and the four sections will not all have the same scientific focus. It is my aim, however, to provide as precise and adequate as possible a characteristic of the urban-rural and inter-urban relations within each of the regions with special regard for the main cities and towns.

The Danish urban system and trade patterns before industrialisation

Like in many other parts of Europe, a large number of towns were established in Denmark between the eleventh century and the Black Death around 1350, with roughly 60 of them being granted market town privileges.¹⁰ By contrast, only few towns received these privileges between 1350 and 1900, and while most of the medieval towns were likely founded because of trade imperatives, institutional factors were the most important driving force behind the development of new towns in the early modern period (c. 1500–1800). Some were thus established as fortress towns, while other towns came into being as service centres for a castle or an academy for young noblemen. Apart from these institutional requirements, the urban expansion during the Middle Ages seems to have sufficed to meet Danish needs for a very long time; during economic crises in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Danish government officials even considered a potential reduction of the number of privileged towns

8 Most of the unpublished material from the time before c. 1870 is kept in The National Archives, whereas many later records made by local authorities are in municipal archives.

9 For a discussion of debtor lists as sources, see Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Merchant Trade and Fairs in Zealand, c. 1750–1810. A Study in Market Economy*, in: Finn-Einar Eliassen/Jørgen Mikkelsen/Bjørn Poulsen (eds.), *Regional Integration in Early Modern Scandinavia*, Odense 2001, 162–185, 168. Cf. Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Märkte, Marktstädte und Marktwirtschaft: Das östliche Dänemark im späten 18. Jahrhundert als Beispiel*, in: Holger Th. Gräf (ed.), *Kleine Städte im neuzeitlichen Europa*, Berlin 1997, 169–194.

10 This number includes only the towns within the present-day territory of Denmark. Several towns were also established in the provinces surrendered to Sweden in 1658 and in the districts of southern Jutland that have been part of Germany since 1864.

on several occasions. It was only in 1809, however, that one of the smallest towns, Slangerup, was in fact deprived of its rights as a market town – with the privileges simultaneously transferred to the adjacent loading dock, Frederikssund.¹¹

The market town (*købstad*) privileges comprised two elements: They defined towns as separate jurisdictions (until 1919) and administrative units (until 1970), and they included rights relating to “citizen professions” (until 1862). The principle was that all trade, handicraft, shipping, and other manufacturing or service jobs should be concentrated in the towns, while the rural districts were to subsist on agriculture and fishing. Furthermore, many Danish towns were assigned a *circumferens* (protection strip). These zones sometimes had a radius of only one Danish mile (7.5 kilometres), but most often it was two miles (15 kilometres), with a few towns being granted even larger protected areas. Overlapping between the zones of two or more towns was thus a common occurrence in many parts of Denmark, and it often resulted in inter-urban conflicts.¹²

There were also a number of restrictions to the general rule of concentrating all “citizen activity” in the towns. Landowners, for example, were entitled to sell their own products and buy articles for their own consumption wherever it was most lucrative. Similarly, peasants had the right to buy seed corn, horses, cattle, tools, timber, and fuel anywhere, and some artisans like blacksmiths, carpenters, and shoemakers “who make peasant shoes” were allowed to work in the countryside. In addition, certain people and groups were permitted to travel through the rural districts from time to time in order to sell or buy specific products. Finally, in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all inhabitants in certain parts of Denmark were permitted to import and export specific (and in some cases all) products without involving the nearest towns; such privileges were mainly granted to residents on major islands without market towns.¹³

The general principle of linking a town with its surrounding area was suspended during fairs.¹⁴ At these regional trade meetings, anyone was allowed to appear at the fairground to buy and sell commodities and crafts. Most towns held at least one smallware fair each year, while some towns held three or more. Fairs usually lasted one or two days, but the famous *Snapsting* in Viborg went on for fourteen days. The latter served not only for the purpose of trading goods but was also an arena for settling mortgage payments for all regions of Jutland. The small fairs likewise had important additional functions: Many of them were meeting places for relatives living at a distance from each other, some were used by merchants and grain producers to make arrangements regarding grain supplies, and servants often used them to find new jobs.

11 Arne Sundbo, *Frederikssunds og købstaden Slangerups historie*, vol. I, Copenhagen 1931.

12 Søren Bitsch Christensen, *Danish Towns as Economic Agents in the Market Town System, ca. 1600–1850*, in: Søren Bitsch Christensen/Jørgen Mikkelsen (eds.), *Danish Towns during Absolutism. Urbanisation and Urban Life 1660–1848*, Aarhus 2008, 45–96; Søren Bitsch Christensen, *Det naturlige midtpunkt? Købstædernes økonomiske centralitet ca. 1450–1800*, in: Søren Bitsch Christensen (ed.), *Den klassiske købstad*, Aarhus 2005, 47–136.

13 Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Handlingen i de Smaa Købstæder bestaaer i dend bahre Credit. Økonomiske vilkår for de sjællandske købstæder i 1700-tallet – belyst gennem indberetninger*, in: Knud Prange et al. (eds.), *Det store i det små*, Copenhagen 1997, 119–143, 123–128; English translations of this and all following quotations by the author.

14 The following paragraphs are mostly based on Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Sjællandske markeder 1775–1800*, in: *Historie* 2 (1994), 1–39.

In 1775, it was prescribed that each time traders or artisans wanted to go to another town to sell goods at a fair, they had to obtain a special passport for this journey from the police with information about their identity, the articles they were bringing along, and their destination. On the basis of these documents, the authorities in each town were obliged to draw up annual lists of the citizens who had obtained passports to visit fairs in other towns as well as of the sellers from outside who had attended fairs within the town. Many of these lists still exist, and they reveal that many trips to fairs were made within a specific region, while some traders and artisans were also willing to set out on longer journeys to other parts of Denmark. A large number of shoemakers from Odense and other towns on the island of Funen, for example, attended fairs on Zealand, while Zealand shoemakers (and other artisans) very rarely travelled to fairs on Funen. We also know from other sources that footwear from Funen had a good reputation in other parts of the country. During the last decades of the eighteenth century, the most popular Zealand fairs attracted up to around 175 out-of-town sellers, who usually came from more than ten different towns.¹⁵

In most Danish towns, economic life was not very specialised prior to industrialisation. Many artisans had more than one trade, and most of the shopkeepers sold a wide assortment of articles: from iron and limestone to spices, textiles, and sewing needles. Many tradesmen also brewed beer and distilled spirits, and agriculture played an important role in many towns as well. A calculation on grain cultivation and consumption in the eighteen market towns on Zealand in 1771 shows that eight of them could meet at least a third of their own requirements, with one town even boasting an overproduction. Conversely, four towns had grain harvests covering less than 5 per cent of their needs.¹⁶

Zealand: Hegemony of Copenhagen and competition between other towns

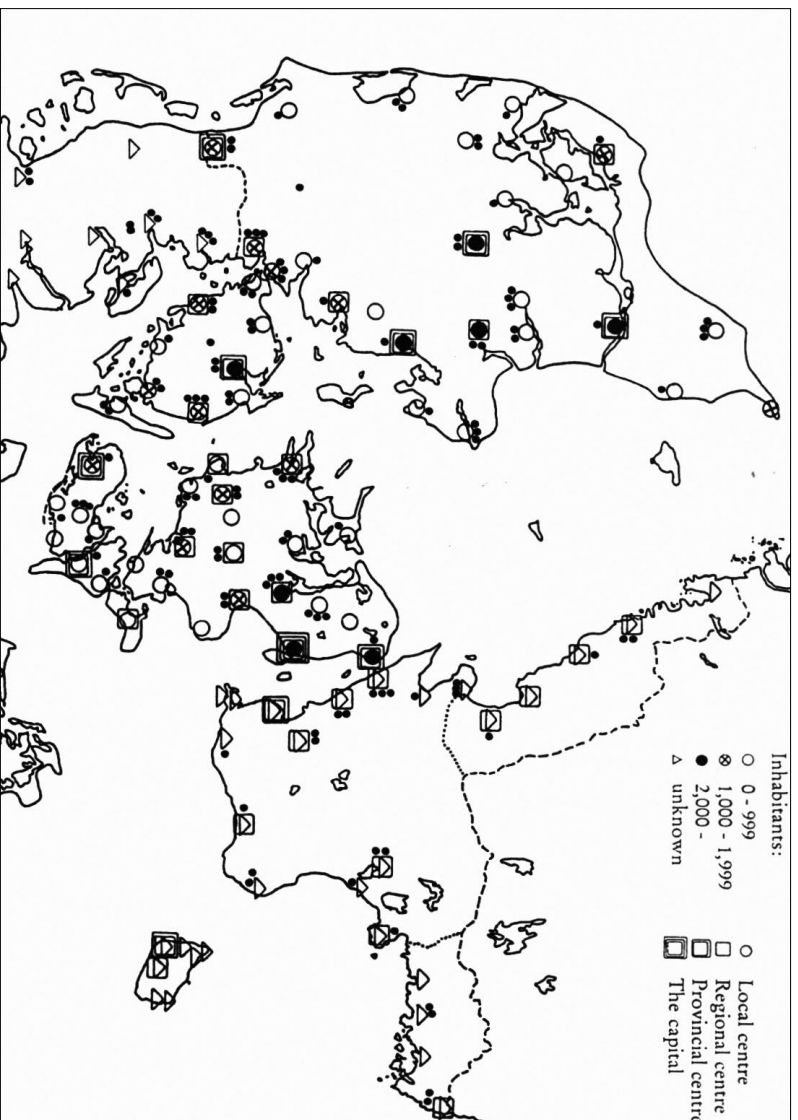
Inspired by Walter Christaller's central place model, urban historian Ole Degn arranged the Danish cities and towns of the early modern period into four categories: the capital, the provincial centres, the regional centres, and the local centres (see Figure 1). The urban centres in the higher categories featured more differentiated trade and offered a wider assortment of articles and more credit possibilities than the local centres, and they therefore attracted numerous customers from the hinterlands of smaller towns. In addition, many of the high-ranking towns also held important administrative functions – for example, all of the six episcopal residences at the time were located in a provincial or regional centre.¹⁷

15 The Danish National Archives, Rentekammeret, Markedsliстер 1776–99 (used in Mikkelsen, *Sjællandske markeder*).

16 Jørgen Mikkelsen, Korn, købmænd og kreditter. Om kornhandel og kornpriser i Sydvestsjælland ca. 1740–1807, in: *Fortid og Nutid* 40 (1993), 178–213, 182.

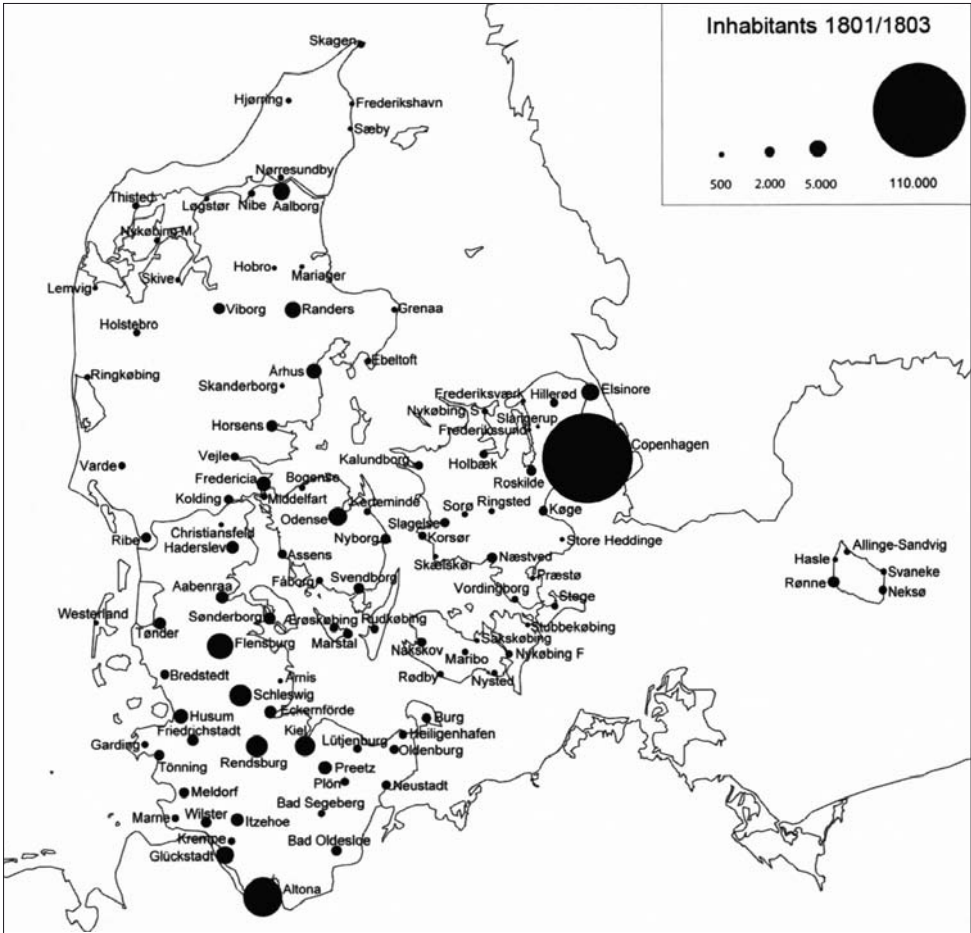
17 Ole Degn, Small Towns in Denmark in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, in: Antoni Maczak/Christopher Smout (eds.), *Gründung und Bedeutung kleinerer Städte im nördlichen Europa der frühen Neuzeit*, Wiesbaden 1991, 151–170.

Figure 1: The Danish urban hierarchy in the middle of the seventeenth century. The categorisation of the towns is based on several economic and administrative factors including the existence of county administration offices and the number of craft guilds. The population numbers are from a town census conducted in 1672. At the time, the regions east of the Sound were no longer part of Denmark.



Source: Ole Degn, Small Towns in Denmark in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, in: Antoni Maczak/Christopher Smout (eds.), Gründung und Bedeutung kleinerer Städte im nördlichen Europa der frühen Neuzeit, Wiesbaden 1991, 151–170, 168.

Figure 2: Inhabitants of Danish cities and towns according to the censuses of 1801 and 1803. In 1801, a census was conducted in the Kingdom of Denmark (the islands and the northern part of Jutland). The provinces of Schleswig and Holstein (the southern part of Jutland), where the King of Denmark ruled as duke, performed a similar census in 1803.



Source: Søren Bitsch Christensen/Jørgen Mikkelsen, Introduction, in: Søren Bitsch Christensen/Jørgen Mikkelsen (eds.), *Danish Towns during Absolutism. Urbanisation and Urban Life 1660–1848*, Aarhus 2008, 11–44, 20.

Since the seventeenth century, Copenhagen has been by far the largest city in Denmark. Between 1660 and 1800 – while the population of most other Danish towns remained stagnant – the number of inhabitants in the capital increased from around 40,000 to roughly 100,000, which was more than the total population of all the other cities and towns in the Kingdom of Denmark combined according to the census of 1801. Among other things, this development must be seen in view of the strong growth of centralised administration and the military sector. These institutions, along with the court and the various envoys from foreign countries – were the source of considerable demand that formed the basis for a vibrant life in the capital.

The growth of the capital also brought about increasing imports of all sorts of commodities from the different parts of the monarchy (including Schleswig, Holstein, Norway, the islands in the North Atlantic, and the colonies – or rather trade posts – in India and the West Indies), thereby expanding the capital's *Einflussbereich*. For example, Copenhagen (like other areas of Denmark) imported large volumes of timber and iron from Norway, while other parts of the kingdom provided the capital with firewood, meat, vegetables, fruit, and other products. The growth of Copenhagen noticeably stimulated the Danish shipping industry in the eighteenth century.¹⁸

The effect of the capital's accretion was, of course, most distinct on Zealand, the island on which Copenhagen is situated. In this context, historian Holger Rasmussen points out so-called "von Thünen zones"¹⁹ named after Johann Heinrich von Thünen, who advanced the theory in 1826 that a city will be surrounded by concentric production zones if there is no significant difference in the land quality of its surrounding areas, since in this case it is transport costs that determine what can reasonably be cultivated at certain distances from the urban centre.²⁰ Rasmussen defines three supply zones: In the inner zone less than ten kilometres from Copenhagen, the peasants of the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century brought milk and vegetables to the city and returned with mash, bran, and manure.²¹ The peasants living at a distance of ten to twenty kilometres from the capital supplied it with hay, straw, and potatoes, whereas peasants who lived further away mainly brought grain to the city. Local specialities could also develop in each of the zones; Rasmussen mentions oatmeal production in Buddinge, fishing in Skovshoved, peat cutting in Sengeløse and Kirke Værløse, and textile bleaching in Sørup. All of these villages are located between ten and twenty kilometres from Copenhagen.²²

In certain regards, however, all parts of Zealand belonged to Copenhagen's hinterland. Even peasants in southern Zealand – more than 100 kilometres from the capital – sometimes travelled to Copenhagen to sell grain on the market. Corn prices in the capital were usually much higher than in the provinces due to the large demand,²³ and the city naturally offered a much greater and more varied supply of goods as well. Some of the travelling peasants passed through many towns on their way to Copenhagen, and the authorities in these transit towns often complained about the traffic. But they also derived certain benefits from the travellers: For instance, the shopkeepers in Køge (around 45 kilometres from Copenhagen) seem to have earned a good living by providing board and lodging to travelling peasants.²⁴

18 Anders Monrad Møller, *Fra galeoth til galease. Studier i de kongerigske provinsers søfart i det 18. århundrede*, Esbjerg 1981, 188.

19 Holger Rasmussen, *Københavnsbønder*, in: *Historiske Meddelelser om København*, Copenhagen 1963, 75–98. The article is based in part on Johannes Philip Hage, *Bidrag til Kundskab om de danske Provindsers nærværende Tilstand i oeconomic Henseende*, Copenhagen 1839, a thorough description of economic life in the county of Copenhagen (the area up to c. 25 kilometres from the city) during the first half of the nineteenth century.

20 Johann Heinrich von Thünen, *Der isolirte Staat in Beziehung auf Landwirthschaft und Nationalökonomie*, Hamburg 1826.

21 This is one of the reasons why the island of Amager, in which Copenhagen airport is located today, is still sometimes colloquially referred to as the "island of shit".

22 Rasmussen, *Københavnsbønder*, 86–90.

23 In any case, this applies to the time before the infrastructure improvements during the nineteenth century.

24 Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Handlingen*, 133 (based on reports from local to central authorities in 1747 and 1775).

The Zealand peasants were also connected the markets in Copenhagen through traveling hawkers licensed to trade in certain articles. In 1721, for example, the inhabitants of the village of Valby near Copenhagen were allowed to buy up poultry from all parts of Zealand in order to sell it in the capital. But according to a report compiled by the shopkeepers of Næstved in 1747, the Valby dealers were not content with purchasing poultry; they also bought hides, old brass, copper, and butter. And in a report from 1775, a tradesman in Slangerup claimed that the Valby dealers were buying tobacco, indigo, and “all sorts of textiles” from the manufacturers in Copenhagen to sell them to the North Zealand peasants.²⁵

The special arrangement concerning Valby shows that the government deemed it necessary to issue legislation to ensure the supply of food for Copenhagen. Similarly, as early as 1441, the people in the North Zealand town of Helsingør were granted the right to make duty-free purchases of grain and foodstuffs everywhere in the kingdom, and in 1565 they received the right to make other purchases in some of the nearest towns. Both of these regulations were based on the fact that Helsingør had a very small *Umland*, of which only little was tilled. At the same time, Helsingør was visited every year by many sailors paying Sound tolls, who had a considerable demand for food.²⁶

Otherwise, there are not many striking examples of measures by the central authorities to regulate the areas surrounding the towns on Zealand. In contrast to the situation in Jutland (see below), only a handful of Zealand towns possessed a *circumferens*. Probate cases of merchants and shopkeepers in many towns make it possible to study the effective boundaries between the different towns' surrounding areas in considerable detail, however – at least for the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and in some regions even before that time. Analysis of these documents gives the impression that a good harbour was a key factor in the competition between neighbouring towns. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when many harbours were significantly improved by dredging, jetties, new quays and the like, most ports seem to have been in a miserable state, so that many medium-sized and large ships had to anchor in open water, from where the seamen and commodities were delivered to the respective towns by barge and horse-drawn carriage.²⁷

In some places like the ferry towns of Kalundborg and Korsør, however, the situation was much better. It is therefore not surprising that an analysis of trade in southwestern Zealand between 1740 and 1810 shows that the merchants and shopkeepers in Korsør had credit customers not only in the *Umland* of Korsør but also in the nearest surrounding areas of the two neighbouring towns of Slagelse and Skælskør, both of which are situated 15 to 20 kilometres from Korsør. However, it also appears that many customers – town citizens as well as peasants in the villages – made purchases in more than one town. This indicates that trade relations between shopkeepers and customers were not as inflexible during pre-industrial times as has often been assumed. For instance, it was possible for a customer to buy some types of

25 Ibid., 127.

26 Bitsch Christensen, *Det naturlige midtpunkt*, 94.

27 See e.g. Jørgen Mikkelsen/Flemming Jensen, *Mudder, maskiner og mennesker. Den sørgmuntre beretning om istandsættelsen af Skælskør havn og fjord 1798–1814*, in: *Maritim Kontakt XVI/6* (1993), 81–119 (especially 81–82).

commodities at one store and other articles at other places – and if a customer was no longer satisfied with their regular shopkeeper, they were able to take their business elsewhere.²⁸

Funen: A provincial centre surrounded by a circle of maritime market towns

Like Copenhagen, Odense has been the undisputed centre of its province since the Middle Ages. It has also been an important regional administrative centre for hundreds of years as cathedral city, centre of the county administration, and the location of various social and cultural institutions.

Odense is very well situated within its region, the island of Funen. It is located on a key road – and since the 1860s also on the most important railway line – between eastern and western Denmark, and has therefore often served as a convenient location for political and other meetings at the national or regional level. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, the noblemen living on Funen held regular meetings in Odense, and a number of noble weddings took place there during this period as well. Such events naturally greatly stimulated economic life in the city. Furthermore, for long periods of time Odense has been one of the Danish cities with the busiest export trade. Around 1600, when Denmark exported considerable numbers of cattle to the Netherlands and northern Germany, Odense was one of the leading ports in this sector alongside Ribe and Flensburg in southern Jutland.²⁹

The analysis of probate cases from Odense in the seventeenth century suggests, however, that the city's hinterland was not as large as one might think considering its economic importance. Apparently, most credit customers lived less than 25 kilometres from Odense, even though noblemen from all parts of Funen made at least some purchases in the city. Research into the Danish grain trade and consumption in the 1760s likewise indicates that most of Odense's hinterland at the time lay within a radius of around 25 kilometres from the city.³⁰ It also seems that the other seven market towns in Funen largely managed to keep their hinterlands to themselves, although it should be kept in mind in this regard that the distance between these towns was generally greater than in much of Zealand. Only the small town of Kerteminde in northeastern Funen was under pressure due to its proximity to Odense. In 1503, the citizens of Kerteminde and Odense were permitted to do business in either town, but there is no doubt that this arrangement primarily benefited the merchants of Odense, who preferred the port in Kerteminde to the small and inconvenient harbour in their own town and therefore maintained storehouses there. After improvements were made to the

28 Mikkelsen, *Merchant Trade*, 166–172; Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Købmandens kontakthflade – en regionalundersøgelse*, in: *Erhvervshistorisk Årbog* 44 (1994), 106–145.

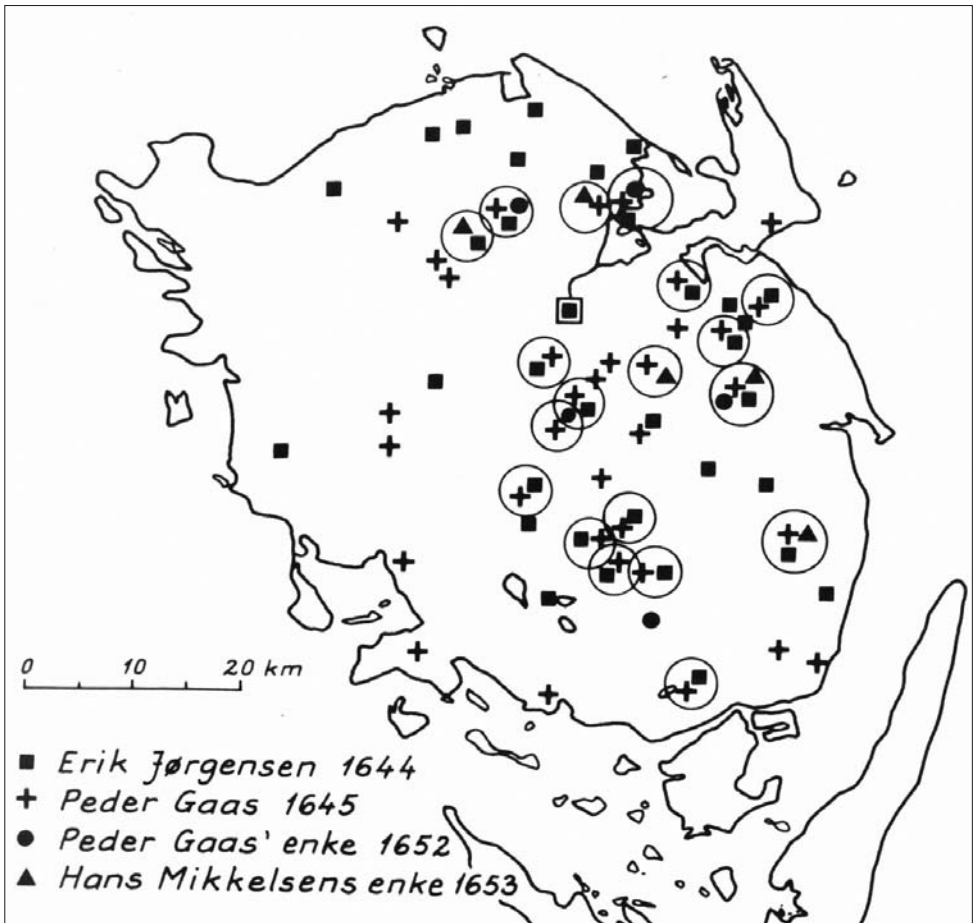
29 Erling Ladewig Petersen et al., *De fede år. Odense 1559–1660* (*Odense bys historie*, vol. 2), Odense 1984, 13, 273; Aage Fasmer Blomberg, *De magre år. Odense 1660–1700* (*Odense bys historie*, vol. 3), Odense 1980, 71–72.

30 Ladewig Petersen et al., *De fede år*, 44–47; Bitsch Christensen, *Det naturlige midtpunkt*, 91–93.

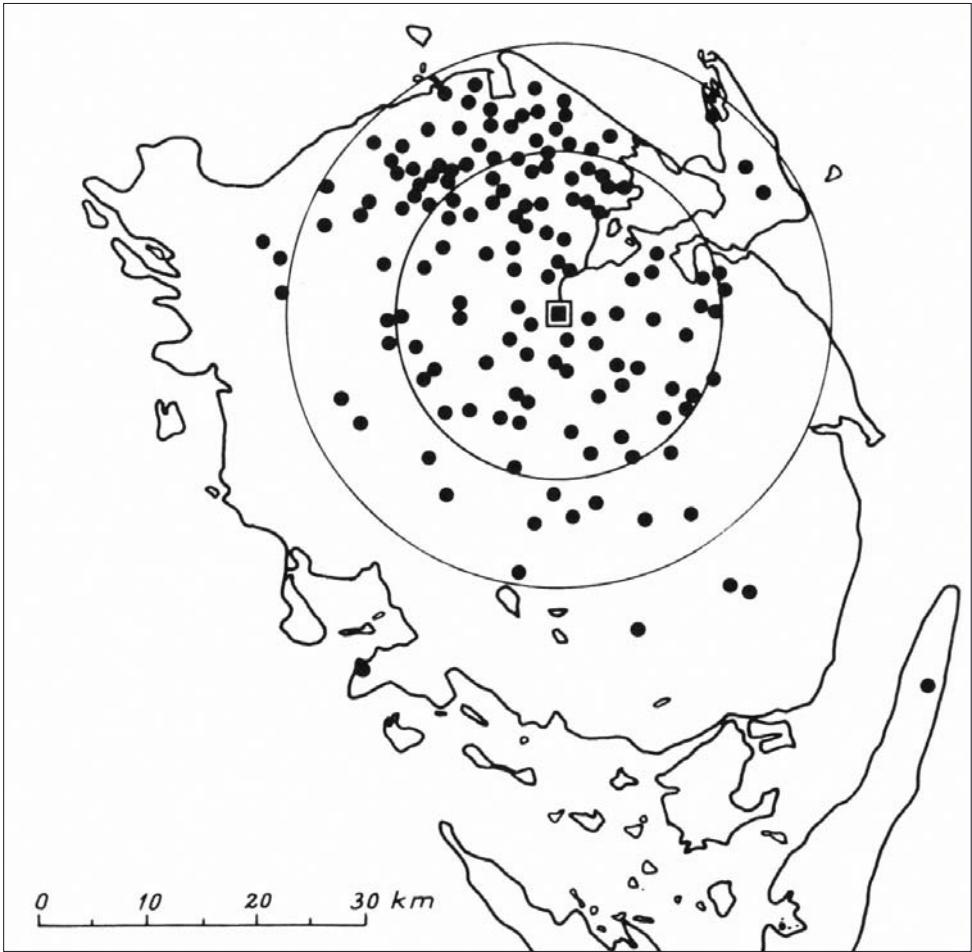
harbour in Odense in 1682 and 1804, most of the exports from the town were shipped from its own port.³¹

The harbour in Odense underwent a further enlargement around 1900, and Peter Franzen's study of business activity in Funen from 1860 to 1920 shows that these improvements strengthened the position of Odense as a trading centre compared to other towns on the island. The railway system, most of which was established from 1865 to around 1900, had a similar effect. In a set of books published in 1887 to 1893, a prominent author of the time even maintained that Odense was now like a spider in the centre of a web, ready to suck the economic life out of the other parts of Funen. However, close examination of the railway

Figure 3a and 3b: The size and character of a town's hinterland depends on what one is looking for. Probate cases of four merchants in Odense (1644–1653, first map) show that noblemen from most of the island of Funen were indebted to one or more merchants in the provincial centre. Most of this debt likely resulted from purchases of commodities. The second map shows the locations of one of the four merchants' peasant customers.



31 Bitsch Christensen, *Det naturlige midtpunkt*, 88–89.



Source: Erling Ladewig Petersen et al., *De fede år. Odense 1559–1660* (Odense bys historie, vol. 2), Odense 1984, 44–47.

companies' and customs service's annual reports reveals that the other old maritime towns also benefited from the infrastructure improvements, even if the effect was not as pronounced for them. In addition, the development of the railway system resulted in more flexible relations between towns and their surrounding areas, since it made it easier for the villagers to make purchases in multiple different towns and also allowed some urban centres to expand their catchment areas for certain commodities.³²

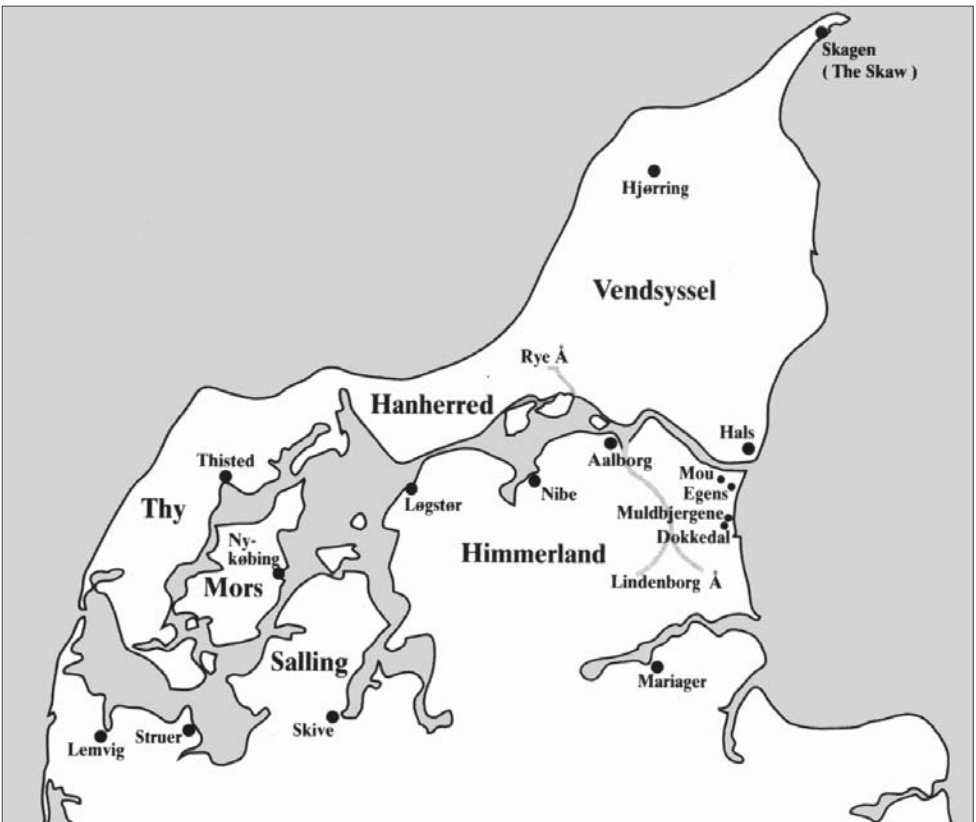
Another important factor was the development of a new type of town in Funen as well as in other Danish provinces during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Typically, these built-up areas were former villages that became the location of various shops and artisans' workshops as well as some service activities thanks to new railway stations, improved roads, and more liberal trade legislation. The vast majority of these new "rural towns" or "railway

32 Peter Fransen, *Varetransport på Fyn via havn og jernbane 1865–1920*, vol. 1, Odense 1997, 67, 240–257.

station towns” remained very small, and in fact they formed the lowest level of the urban hierarchy. In his analysis of Funen’s town and trade structure, Peter Fransen therefore characterises these towns as the old market towns’ “shop assistants” and as middlemen between villagers and the tradesmen in maritime towns.³³

Northern Jutland: A region controlled by Aalborg

The location of Aalborg in the northernmost part of Denmark is even more convenient than that of Odense: The city is situated near the eastern mouth of the long river-like Limfjord, at the narrowest part of the bay (see Figure 4). It was therefore an obvious choice for the establishment of a ferry station in the early Middle Ages. Aalborg’s position was further strengthened by the Limfjord extending from the Lemvig district in the west to Hals in the east



Source: Poul Holm, Aalborg as a Regional Centre, 1400–1814, in: Finn-Einar Eliassen/Jørgen Mikkelsen/Bjørn Poulsen (eds.), *Regional Integration in Early Modern Scandinavia*, Odense 2001, 213–231, 216.

33 Ibid., 258–262.

ned when the western mouth of the Limfjord in the North Sea silted up in the twelfth century, causing all long-distance sea traffic to and from the towns and villages along the waterway to have to pass through Aalborg. As the water along much of the length of the Limfjord is very shallow, it could only be navigated in small flat-bottomed boats until the middle of the nineteenth century. This meant that all products carried by sea had to be transhipped in Aalborg, whose inhabitants distinguished between the small “west sailers” and the larger “east sailers”.³⁴

In 1825, a storm reopened the western mouth of the Limfjord, and by 1835 the gap had become wide enough to allow ships to sail directly from the western end of the Limfjord into the North Sea for the first time in around 700 years. This meant a considerable weakening of the role of Aalborg in the economic life in northern Jutland, whereas several of the towns along the western part of the Limfjord prospered. The shipping trade in the small town of Thisted, for instance, multiplied over the space of a few decades due to the new possibilities, facilitating an increase in the exports of grain to Britain from around 1840.

Before the 1830s, however, Aalborg dominated among the towns along the Limfjord thanks to the natural conditions – supported by the Aalborg merchants’ and skippers’ right “since time immemorial” to trade “free and unimpeded” in all parts of the waterway, a privilege confirmed by the king in 1655. In the same year, the other towns along the fjord were granted similar license to do business in the harbour of Aalborg, but there is little doubt about which of the affected parties benefited most from this reciprocal right.³⁵

A 1735 report from Thisted states that the tradesmen of the town were usually in Aalborg twice a year to make bulk purchases. But we also know that peasants from the vicinity of Thisted frequently travelled to Aalborg with grain and other products in order to sell at better prices than were offered in Thisted – just like the peasants on Zealand who set out on the long journey to Copenhagen.³⁶

The Aalborg dealers were not involved in all branches of trade in the western part of the Limfjord area and its adjoining districts, however. For example, the inhabitants of certain parishes along the west coast were licensed to offer their products for sale in the rural parishes in southern Norway, whose peasants in turn had permission to sell their timber and firewood in Denmark and purchase grain for household use. Furthermore, in a document from 1802, a parson from the neighbourhood of Thisted reported that some of the local peasants bought up wood, skin, and hides from their neighbours in order to sell them in the west Jutland harbour town of Ringkøbing, which maintained close trade relations with Germany and the Netherlands. Apparently, fishermen from the Thisted district also loaded their carts with dried and smoked eels and travelled south through Jutland to sell them in Horsens, Fredericia, and other towns more than 150 kilometres away.³⁷

Nevertheless, Aalborg had a sizable hinterland. In addition to the area around the Limfjord, it comprised the provinces of Vendsyssel and Himmerland (see Figure 4). When talking about the city’s *Einflussbereich*, we must also include the towns and hamlets along the

34 Henning Bender, *Aalborgs industrielle udvikling fra 1735 til 1940* (Aalborgs historie, vol. 4), Aalborg 1987, 20–26.

35 Florian Martensen-Larsen, *Hav, fjord og handel. En studie i handelsveje i Nordjylland i tiden indtil 1850*, Herning 1986, 28, 32.

36 *Ibid.*, 141; P.L. Hald, *Af Thisted købstads historie*, Thisted 1924, 51.

37 Knud Aagaard, *Beskrivelse over Thy 1802*, excerpted by Torsten Balle, in: *Historisk Årbog for Thisted Amt* 1963, 240–256, 251.

southern coast of Norway owing to the intense trade relations with this area – especially before 1814, when Denmark and Norway belonged to a united monarchy. Moreover, in an article about Aalborg as a regional centre, Poul Holm has pointed out that the city played such a key role in the “herring boom” in Båhuslen (north of present-day Gothenburg) in the period between 1550 and 1650 that it makes sense to include the latter as an important part of Aalborg’s sphere of influence at the time as well.³⁸

The Limfjord region also experienced its own periods of “herring boom”, in particular between 1670 and 1730. The fluctuating herring fishing conditions were of vital importance for several towns in northern Jutland, especially Nibe and Løgstør. Even though they had no privileges, these two towns were ordered in 1672 to pay a new duty known as *konsumtion* that was collected in all market towns, while the rural districts were exempt. Allegedly, the reason for the imposition of the tax on Nibe and Løgstør was that their inhabitants engaged in “more than peasants’ business”.³⁹ The duty was introduced pursuant to an application from the municipal corporation in Aalborg that complained about the many inhabitants of the city who were using the fishing hamlets as tax havens. The inhabitants of Nibe were even able to derive an advantage from the duty: They referred to the *konsumtion* in 1727 when petitioning the king for town privileges. When the central authorities complied with the petition, the people of Nibe decided to aim even higher: The following year, they applied for a monopoly on all fishing and salting in the town. The government refused to classify these activities as “townsman occupations”, however, and so the citizens of Aalborg and other outsiders remained entitled to engage in such work in Nibe.⁴⁰

In 1752, the inhabitants of Løgstør likewise petitioned for town privileges, but the zealous Aalborg merchants succeeded in quashing their efforts – as they later also managed to do twice in the case of Nørresundby, a village immediately north of Aalborg. It was not until 1900 that Løgstør and Nørresundby finally received their town privileges.⁴¹

Eastern Jutland: From “a certain region in equilibrium” to Aarhus’ sphere of dominance

For many hundreds of years, Aarhus in the eastern part of Jutland had more or less the same administrative functions at the regional level as Odense and Aalborg. Nevertheless, there was no clear provincial centre in this part of the country prior to the nineteenth century. In the census of 1801, Randers and Aarhus as the two largest cities in the region had 4,562 and 4,102 inhabitants respectively, while Fredericia and Horsens as number three and four had 3,474 and 2,396. By comparison, Aalborg boasted 5,579 inhabitants in the same census, while Thisted as the second largest town in the Limfjord region had only 1,068. In Funen, Odense was listed with a population of 5,782 ahead of Svendborg with 1,942.⁴²

38 Poul Holm, Aalborg as a Regional Centre, 1400–1814, in: Eliassen/Mikkelsen/Poulsen (eds.), *Regional Integration*, 213–231.

39 Harry Christensen, *Ni tværsnit af Nibes historie*, Nibe 1977, 55.

40 *Ibid.*, 113–117.

41 Anders Bloksgaard, *Løgstør. Limfjordsby – gennem ild og vand*, Løgstør 2018, 229–243.

42 Ole Feldbæk, *Danmarks historie*, vol. 4: *Tiden 1730–1814*, Copenhagen 1982, 125.

In 1505, Aarhus was assigned a *circumferens* of no less than four Danish miles (30 kilometres), but at the same time it was emphasised that the town's citizens had to respect the rights granted to the three neighbouring towns of Randers, Grenaa, and Horsens. Since each of the latter had a *circumferens* of two miles (15 kilometres) and the distance between Aarhus and Randers respectively Aarhus and Horsens was less than 45 kilometres, Aarhus only had a limited "right of disposal" concerning some of the villages to its north and south. By contrast, the Aarhus charter said nothing about consideration for the citizens of Ebeltoft to the northeast or of Ry and Skanderborg to the west, all of which are between 25 and 50 kilometres from the city. Economic life in these towns was apparently on a rather small scale, and it was perhaps not easy for them to fulfil even basic service functions in relation to their immediate *Umland*.⁴³

Judging from account books and probate cases of merchants in Aarhus for the centuries following its assignment of a *circumferens*, the town had a relatively large hinterland to the west, but also a considerable number of credit customers to the northeast, northwest, and south.⁴⁴ In general, it seems there was less overlapping with the hinterlands of neighbouring towns in this region than in many other parts of Denmark. Søren Bitsch Christensen has described the situation by stating that eastern Jutland was "a certain region in equilibrium, where the hinterlands of the market towns strictly followed the chartered division of the country between the towns".⁴⁵

When Aarhus became the most important junction for railway traffic in Jutland in the 1860s, however (a development that coincided with a significant extension of the city's harbour area), it was able to extend the boundaries of its catchment area considerably within a few decades. Its export activity also benefited from the fact that the traditional trade relations between many parts of Jutland and the seaports in northern Germany were hampered by the delineation of a new Danish-German frontier in 1864. This favourable business development brought about a rapid increase in the population of Aarhus, making it the second largest city in Denmark in the 1880s – a position it has retained ever since.⁴⁶

Today, Aarhus plays a key role within the most important "growth region" in Denmark outside the greater capital region. Even though Aarhus and the other cities and towns in the region still feature distinct physical appearances, there is a tendency towards coalescence, and some officials are now talking about the "string of towns in eastern Jutland" as a coherent urban region. In his PhD thesis on infrastructure and the development of economic life in eastern Jutland since 1945, Henrik Mølgaard Frandsen has argued that motorways in particular have played an important role in establishing very close relations between the labour markets in the various cities and towns. Here too, infrastructure has thus had a decisive influence on Aarhus' regional functions.⁴⁷

43 Bitsch Christensen, *Det naturlige midtpunkt*, 75–80.

44 See e.g. Ole Degn, *Borgernes by 1550–1720*, in: Ib Gejl (ed.), *Århus – Byens historie*, vol. 1: –1720, Aarhus 1996, 243–341, 301; Allan Frandsen, *Bonden og købmanden*, in: *Fortid og Nutid XXXIV* (1987), 1–20; Per Boje, *Danske provinskøbmands vareomsætning og kapitalforhold 1815–47*, Aarhus 1977, 146–155.

45 Bitsch Christensen, *Det naturlige midtpunkt*, 80.

46 See e.g. Jørgen Fink, *Byens rum*, in: Ib Gejl (ed.), *Århus – Byens historie*, vol. 3: 1870–1945, Aarhus 1998, 7–76, 10.

47 Henrik Mølgaard Frandsen, *Infrastruktur og erhvervsudvikling i Østjylland siden 1945*, PhD thesis, Aarhus University 2010, DOI: 10.7146/aul.11.10; cf. Henrik Mølgaard Frandsen/Mikkel Thelle, *Soft space – byregioner*,

Conclusion and perspectives

In this article, I have attempted to provide a varied picture of how the notion of “the country behind the town” manifested in Denmark, especially before the era of industrialisation. I used Ammann’s notions and von Thünen’s location theory while at the same time pointing out the importance of institutional factors – in particular the formal rights of Danish cities and towns, which some of them used vigorously in their competition for surrounding rural areas. Especially in regions with higher densities of towns, there was often a considerable overlapping of hinterlands. Infrastructure played an important role in determining the relative strengths of towns within a region. For instance, it appears from the Aarhus case that substantial improvements to the harbour and railway system in a specific town could pave the way for a permanent boost of that town’s economy. On the other hand, the examination of trade in Funen shows that overall improvements to the infrastructure in an entire region could benefit not only the largest and most powerful towns but in fact bring about more flexible relations between towns and rural areas in general – and consequently result in more favourable conditions for stakeholders who were able to make use of the new possibilities, for example by specialising in certain industries and products. A further conclusion is that natural conditions often played a crucial role. The fluctuations in herring population and the reopening of the western mouth of the Limfjord, for instance, had noticeable consequences for the trade patterns and inter-urban relations in northern Jutland.

Stability has always characterised the Danish urban system, which was established in the Middle Ages. Even though significant population growth and urbanisation since the middle of the nineteenth century have resulted in the development of many new towns – most of them former villages or fishing hamlets – only few have been able to rise to a position among the 50 largest Danish municipalities. By contrast, most of the towns that developed into centres with appreciable trade and important administrative functions (for example as episcopal residences) during the Early Middle Ages are still among the most important in the Danish urban hierarchy.

Scholars often distinguish between the central place model and the network model describing the urban systems and development in a country or region. While the central place model stresses the relations between a town and its surrounding areas, the network model focuses on the flow of goods, services, and information, accentuating the role of towns as nodes along lines of exchange. Cities and towns whose economy is primarily based on import and export as well as maritime activities are thus often typical exponents of the network model.⁴⁸

Despite the length of the Danish shoreline and the large number of towns near the sea, only a few of the latter can be characterised as typical network towns.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, long-distance

business regions og megaregioner – et blik på udviklingen af det uformelle planlægningsrum i Danmark siden 1990, in: *Fabrik og Bolig* 35/1 (2017), 22–41.

48 For a general description of the two models, see Paul M. Hohenberg/Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994*, Cambridge, MA/London 1995, especially 65. The models are used in: Søren Bitsch Christensen/Jørgen Mikkelsen, *The Danish Urban System pre-1800: A Survey of Recent Research Results*, in: *Urban History* 33/3 (2006), 484–510.

49 One of them is Helsingør, the town of the Sound tolls, whose development from c. 1500 to the middle of the nineteenth century depended largely on shipping between the Baltics and Western Europe.

trading played an important role in many cities and towns – at least during certain periods, as we have seen with the examples of Copenhagen, Odense, and Aalborg.

The central place model is generally much more suitable for describing and explaining the Danish urban system, as it focuses on the role of towns as service providers for the peasants, supplying manufactured goods as well as immaterial products (like education and juridical service) to the rural areas and purchasing their surplus agrarian production. Until around 1870, at least 75 per cent of all Danes lived in rural areas, and the cities and towns were highly dependent on the countryside's economic development as a result: Economic growth in the countryside had a positive effect on the respective centres, while periods with agricultural crises – like the majority of the time between 1660 and around 1750 – caused many towns to stagnate.⁵⁰ The agrarian reforms during the late eighteenth century thus provided a stimulus to many towns. The same applies to the increase in grain production and export, especially to Great Britain, in the middle of the nineteenth century, which resulted in a rise in peasant demand for manufactured goods.

It is also worthy of note that the cultivation of vast moorlands and significant population growth in the countryside of central and western Jutland during the second half of the nineteenth century sparked a considerable urbanisation in this region, where only few and small towns had previously existed. The most successful of these new towns was Herning, a former village in the very centre of Jutland. After becoming a junction of several main roads and railway lines, Herning developed into a thriving centre of trade, industry, and liberal professions. The town's population grew from around 450 in 1870 to more than 5,500 in the 1906 census, and today Herning and its suburbs have a total of roughly 50,000 inhabitants.⁵¹ This makes it one of the few significant examples of towns that have challenged the structural heritage of the Danish urban hierarchy going back to the Middle Ages.

50 Christensen/Mikkelsen, *The Danish Urban System*, 497.

51 Jørgen Mikkelsen, *Hernings historie*, in: Niels Ehlers Koch (ed.), *Trap Danmark*, 6th ed., vol. 10 (Ringkøbing-Skjern, Herning), Copenhagen 2019, 181–185.