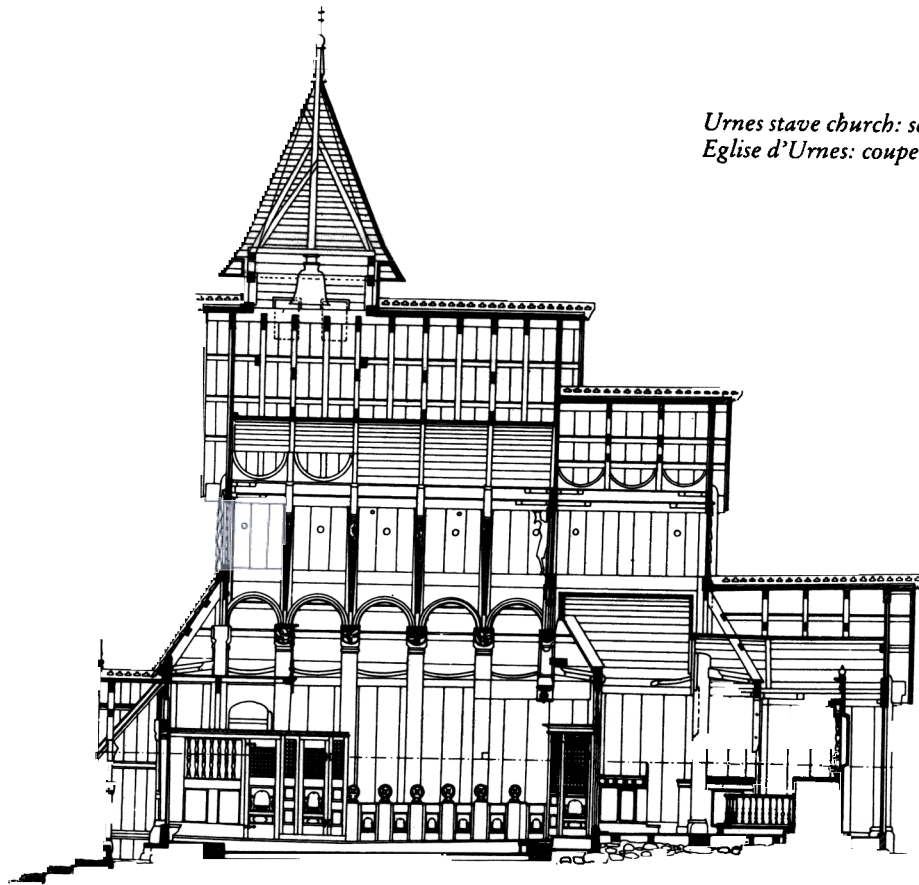


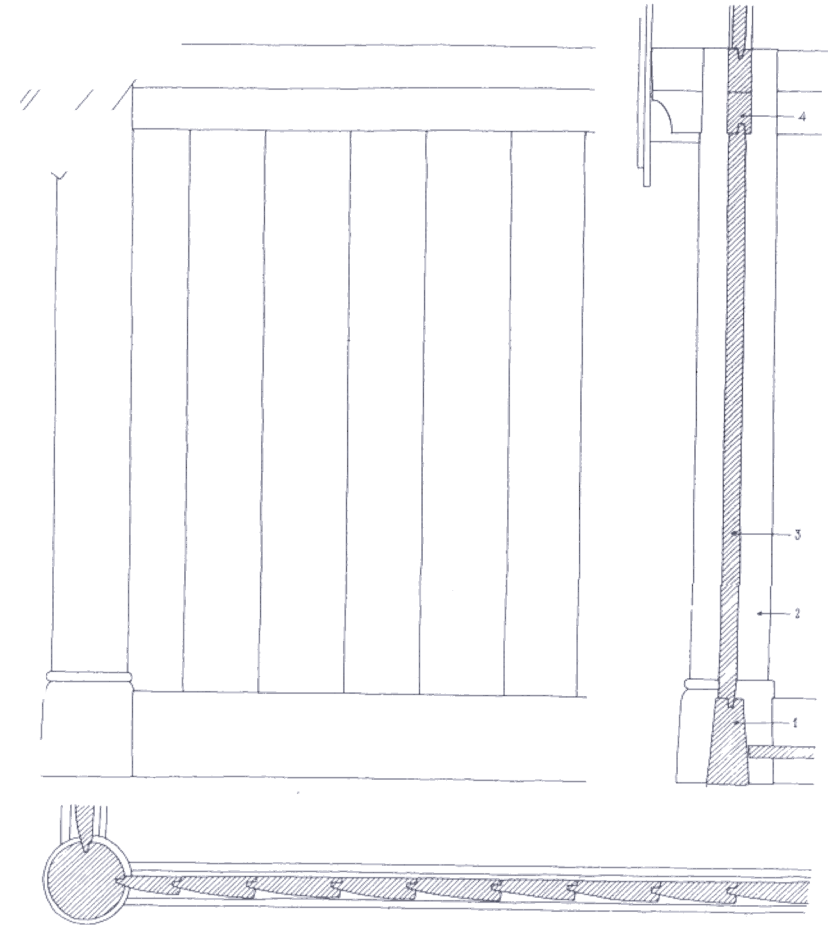
HÅKON CHRISTIE:  
Norwegian Stave Churches



*Urnes stave church: section  
Eglise d'Urnes: coupe*

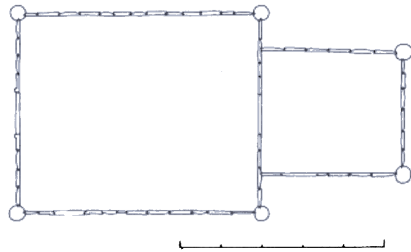
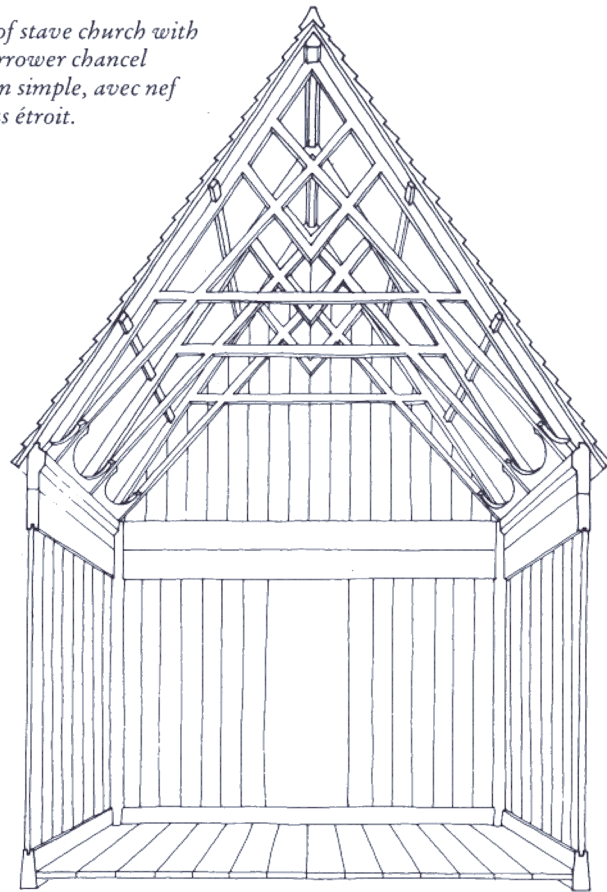
Urnes stave church stands as a symbol of ancient Norwegian architecture in general and of the Norwegian stave churches in particular. It is indeed one of our oldest and best preserved of the stave churches. There are, however, stave churches which look completely different, but which must equally be considered as perfectly good stave churches. This makes it necessary to provide a closer definition of what a stave church actually is.

Stave churches are those churches which have walls in stave technique. A stave wall has perpendicular wall planks joined together with tongue and groove. The foot of each plank is tenoned into the sill beam, and in the same way the top is tenoned into the wall plate. In each corner the wall has a corner post which is joined to the sill beam at the bottom and the wall plate at the top. Thus a stave wall has a powerfully dimensioned and solidly connected frame consisting of a sill beam, two corner posts and a wall plate. Furthermore, the sill beams of the four walls of the church form a solid base frame which the whole building rests upon. The wall plates form a corresponding top frame which bears the roof.



*Stave wall: 1-sill, 2-corner post, 3-wall plank, 4-wall plate.  
Paroi en bois debout: 1-sablère basse, 2-poteau cornier, 3-planches, 4-sablère haute.*

Simple type of stave church with nave and narrower chancel  
 Eglise au plan simple, avec nef et chœur plus étroit.

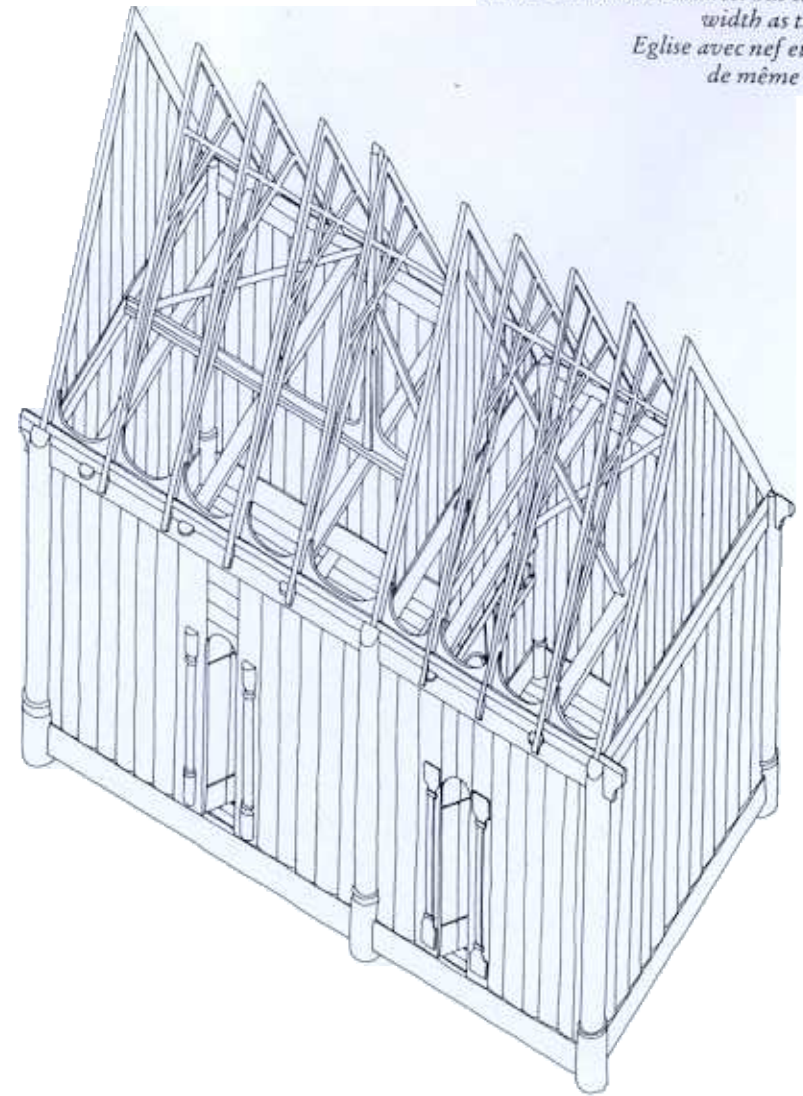


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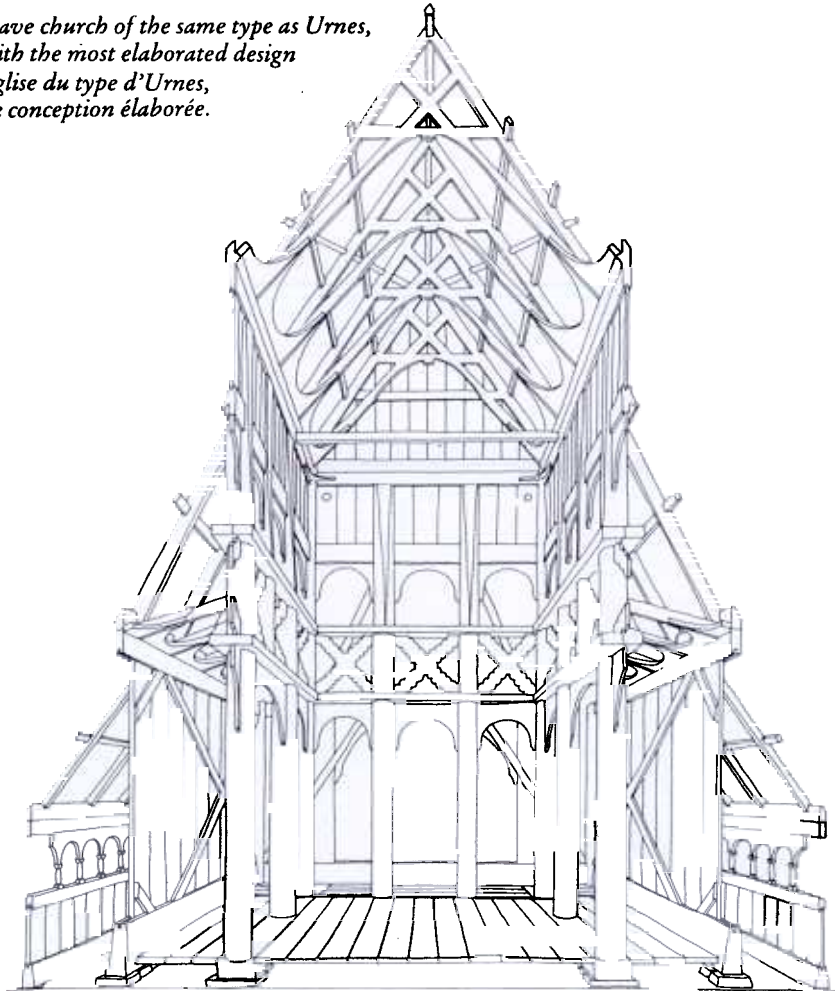
common the fact that they are simple and relatively small.

Stave church whose chancel has the same width as the nave  
 Eglise avec nef et chœur de même largeur

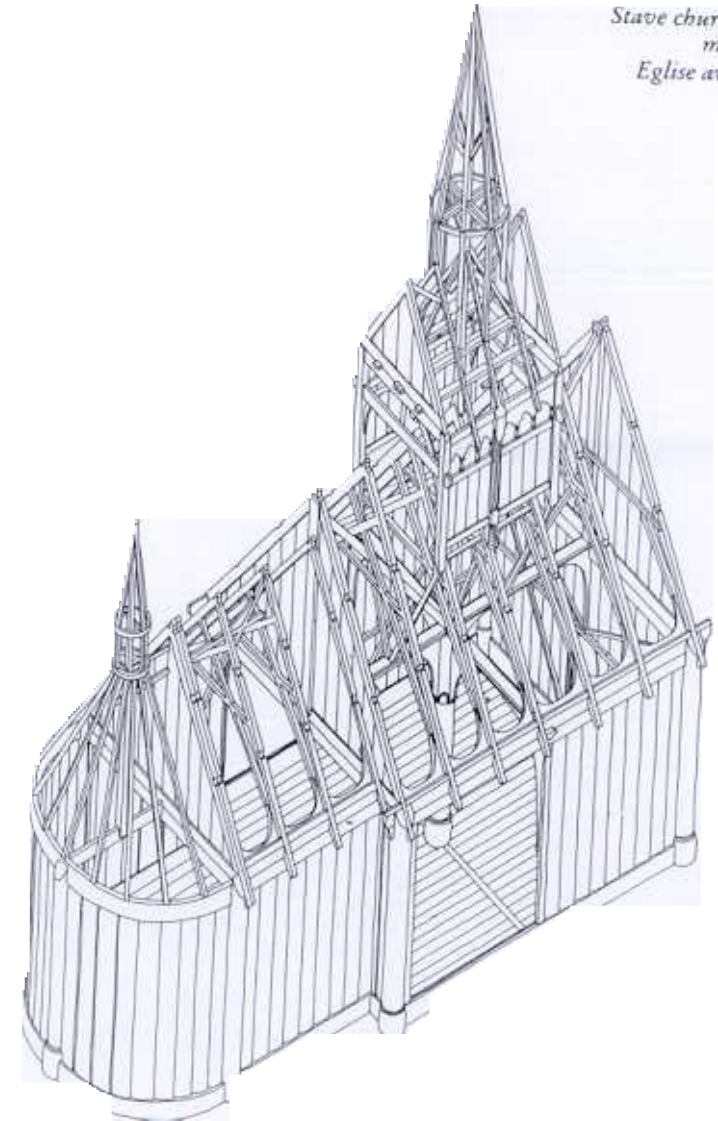


An even simpler type of stave church is the long church with a chancel and chancel arch. In these churches the chancel is separated from the nave by a wall with an opening through it, called a choir screen.

*Stave church of the same type as Urnes,  
with the most elaborated design  
Eglise du type d'Urnes,  
de conception élaborée.*



*Stave church with central  
mast in the nave  
Eglise avec mât central  
dans la nef*



Urnes belongs to the largest and most elaborately designed type of stave churches. This type has a nave and a narrower chancel, and often a semicircular extension to the end of the chancel, an apse as it is termed. What distinguishes this type, however, is the fact that the central part of the room in nave, chancel and apse is higher than the outer area of the rooms, which is called the aisles. (The aisles are not to be confused with the pences, which often go round the whole church. Pences are normal in all types of stave church and are therefore not characteristic of one particular type). The raised central area in the nave is borne by free-standing posts with roughly two metres between one another about 1 meter inside the outer walls, and it marks the border between nave and aisle.

Certain stave churches have only a single free-standing mast placed in the centre of the nave and extending right up to the roof ridge. These central.mast churches, as they are called, come closest in appearance to the churches of the simple type with nave and narrower chancel, but they have a more complicated structural system.



Determining the age of stave churches is difficult because there are practically no written sources of information about church building in the Middle Ages. However, most churches are decorated with wood carvings on portals and other striking elements of the building, and on the basis of the style and motif of the carving one can draw conclusions about the age of the church. In addition, coins found on the site of the church may reveal something about when the building was constructed. In recent years the natural sciences have provided us with certain aids to determining the age of woodwork. It appears that the oldest stave churches now standing were constructed in the second half of the 12th century, and that in the course of the following hundred years stave churches were built in practically every rural district in Norway. At the end of the 13th century, when we must assume that the building of churches in this country had been completed, there must have been approximately one thousand stave churches in Norway. Most of them were probably built as replacements for older stave churches which had either fallen into decay or been pulled down. Some of the stave churches which were standing at the end of the 13th century were replaced by new ones later in the Middle Ages. In the course of the Middle Ages, which means in Norway the period from the year 1000 to 1536, altogether a couple of thousand stave churches must have been built in this country. The 30 which have been preserved up to our time thus represent a small part of the church architecture which set its stamp on this country in the first centuries of Christianity.

Ever since the stave churches were «discovered» in the last century, the question of their origin and development has been a central issue in the field of stave church research. In our time archaeology has contributed very new material to this research. Excavations in our churches have shown that the stave churches had often replaced older churches on the same site. The predecessors of these stave churches, which appear to have been built in the 11th century, were also constructed in a kind of stave technique, but the wall posts stood in holes in the ground. This oldest generation of church buildings in this country was related to the churches of which one finds traces during church excavations in most countries north of the Alps. Throughout the whole of this part of Europe therefore wooden churches were built with walls set in the ground in the earliest Christian times, but whilst other countries went over to building churches of stone, this country stuck to wood as a building material and developed the stave churches which we know and which are considered to be the finest preserved examples of European mediaeval architecture in wood. Thus the final phase in the development of the stave churches took place on Norwegian soil. But the Norwegian stave churches have their roots in the first wooden churches that were built in this country, and they were a part of that architecture in wood which was once the common property of Europe.

### Résumé

#### *Les «stavkirker» norvégiennes*

L'église d'Urnes en est le prototype, c'est aussi l'une de nos plus anciennes églises, également l'une des mieux conservées.

Le terme «stavkirke» si difficile à traduire en français (faute de mieux nous proposons «église en bois debout») s'applique non à la forme mais à la technique de la construction. Une paroi en bois debout se compose d'un cadre garni de planches verticales assemblées par rainures et languettes. Ce cadre est constitué par une sablière basse, deux poteaux corniers et une sablière haute. Il existe donc des églises dont l'aspect diffère, mais qui n'en sont pas moins des «stavkirker».

Dans les églises de modeste dimension chaque paroi est composée d'un seul cadre. Ce système constructif, également utilisé dans l'architecture profane, atteint son apogée avec les églises à nef surélevée comme à Urnes.

De sont des édifices compliqués tant par leur conception que par la technique de mise en oeuvre utilisée. Ils se composent d'une partie haute – la nef proprement dite – reposant sur des poteaux intérieurs et entourée de bas-côtés s'appuyant sur la construction interne. Les parois des bas-côtés se composent de plusieurs cadres. La partie surélevée de la nef est close par des planches verticales qui remplissent les intervalles entre les poteaux intérieurs.

Déterminer l'âge de telles constructions est une tâche difficile étant donné que nous n'avons aucun texte. Le style des sculptures a pendant longtemps été le seul point de repère des historiens de l'art. Ces dernières décades d'autres renseignements nous sont apportés par l'Archéologie et les Sciences Naturelles. Nous pouvons dire avec certitude que les plus anciennes églises en bois qui nous restent à l'heure actuelle doivent dater de la dernière moitié du 12<sup>e</sup> siècle et qu'elles remplacent des édifices antérieurs.

La question de l'origine des «stavkirker» a fait couler pas mal d'encre depuis leur «découverte» au siècle dernier. Là encore l'Archéologie nous apporte de précieux renseignements. Des traces d'édifices plus primitifs, mais de même technique à cela près que les poteaux étaient fichés en terre, se retrouvent dans toute l'Europe du Nord (Danemark, Suède, Hollande, Allemagne). Tandis que le reste de l'Europe abandonne petit à petit le bois pour la pierre, la Norvège continuera à contruire en bois, et c'est finalement ici que cette technique se développera et atteindra son apogée.