ON THE TRACK OF VANISHED CHURCHES

HANS-EMIL LIDÉN

CHRCH ARCHAEOLOGY in the widest sense of the term comprises both the investigation of standing buildings and the excavation of the terrain under and around them. It also includes the excavation of sites where churches have once stood. Investigations of this nature have taken place in Norway as long as there has been any organised form of protection of our historical monuments. One of the first tasks which the newly founded Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments undertook was the excavation in 1845 of the ruins of the monastic church on the island of Hovedøya outside Oslo, and from 1851 to 1899, during the presidency of the historian and archaeologist Nicolay Nicolaysen, most of the standing medieval churches were surveyed and several church ruins excavated. Archaeological excavations were concentrated on important sites where all traces had more or less disappeared, such as St Hallvard's Cathedral, one of the two cathedral churches in SE Norway, situated in Oslo, and St Mary's, the royal chapel in Oslo. These were excavated by Nicolaysen himself and for purely academic reasons: to reveal the full extent and form of the buried monument and to throw light on its architectural history. The most important of these early investigations, involving the analysis of a standing building combined with an excavation, were in the cathedrals in Trondheim and Bergen. In both cases, however, the excavations were organised essentially for practical rather than academic reasons: both cathedral churches were to be restored and in this connection the undergroud terrain was to be cleared of earlier graves and the foundations checked and strengthened where necessary. During the operations various significant finds and observations were made. In Bergen, the foundations of a hitherto unknown stone-built church were discovered, while

ON ENTEND PAR ARCHEOLOGIE DES EGLISES AU SENS LE PLUS LARGE DU TERME

À LA RECHERCHE DES EGLISES DISPARUES

beneath the chancel of Trondheim cathedral lay the foundations of the earliest cathedral, begun by King Olaf Kyrrre (1006–1093) and completed during the first part of the twelfth century. The surviving medieval graves within the cathedral were also recorded in a most adequate way considering the conditions.

From the turn of the century and right up to the 1950s very little happened in Norway in the field of church archaeology. The sole exception was the work of Gerhard Fischer. In Oslo he undertook excavations of St Hallvard's and St Mary's and he also uncovered the ruins of two of the town's parish churches, St Clement's and Holy Cross. Moreover, he was responsible for the partial or total excavations in the 1930s of the ruined churches of the Dominican Priory and of the Franciscans. He worked in other parts of the country also, including Sarsborg and Skien, as well as in Bergen, where his excavations in 1929–31 revealed the rather sparse remains of the city's medieval cathedral which had been pulled down in 1530.

Common to all these excavations was the fact that they involved stone buildings and that the work was more or less limited to uncovering the

dansis que sous le chœur de la cathédrale de Trondheim gisaient les fondations de la cathédrale primitive, commencée par le roi Olaf Kyrrre (1006–1093) et complétée pendant la première partie du XIIe siècle. Les tombes médiévales subsistant à l'intérieur de la cathédrale ont été relevées d'une manière satisfaisante compte tenu des conditions.

Depuis le début du siècle jusqu'aux années 1950, il y eut peu de nouveau en Norvège dans le domaine de l'archéologie des églises. Seul le travail de Gerhard Fischer fit exception. À Oslo il entreprit des fouilles approfondies de St Hallvard et de Ste Marie, et il découvrit aussi les ruines de deux églises paroissiales de la ville, St Clément et Ste Croix. En outre, il fut responsable des fouilles partielles ou totales, dans les années 1930, des ruines des monastères dominicains et franciscains. Il travailla également dans d'autres parties du pays, à Sarsborg et à Skien, aussi bien qu'à Bergen, où ses fouilles en 1929–1931 mirent à jour les vestiges assez clairsemés de la cathédrale médiévale de la cité, qui avait été abattue en 1530.

Toutes ces fouilles ont en commun le fait qu'elles concernent des bâtiments en pierre et que le travail était plus ou moins limité à la découverte
ruined stone walls or foundations. There were no excavations associated with wooden churches in this period. The first time that this happened in Norway was in 1956–57, when the floor of Urnes stave-church in the district of Sogn was to be repaired.

That Urnes was the first stave-church to be excavated was by no means a coincidence. For a long time scholars had maintained that it held a central place in Norway's architectural history, particularly as it clearly incorporated material from an older building (e.g. in the north doorway). In fact, the church had already given its name to the particular style seen at its best in the decoration around this door. It was an obvious temptation to try to find the possible traces of an earlier building below the ground surface under the present building.

On the other hand the excavators did not realise at the time that they were following a current trend in church archaeology, one especially practised at that time in Denmark and Germany, where a number of investigations had produced some exciting results. These had shown that a hitherto unknown generation of wooden churches had existed in these regions prior to the stone-built parish churches of the High Middle Ages. Contact with what was happening in Denmark was established through Olaf Olsen, a young Danish archaeologist who took part in the excavations at Urnes. Olsen is now head of the National Museum in Denmark. This contact was to play a significant role in the future work in Norway.

The excavations at Urnes soon showed that there must have been at least one building on the site before the present church was built. Traces were revealed of one or more building phases where the structural elements had been set into the ground, thus relating it to those early wooden churches whose traces had been found in Denmark and Germany. There could be no doubt about this discovery, but it was difficult to offer a simple interpretation. To the present day the discussion about the interpretation of Urnes has played a significant role in the debate on the development of the stave-church in Norway.

The stave-church at Urnes, Sogn, is from c. 1160. The north door with its famous carved decoration (left) must have come from an earlier church on the site. Archaeological traces of one, or possibly two, earlier churches were found beneath the present building.

L'actuelle église en bois debout d'Urnus, Sogn, date d'environ 1160. Le fameux portail de la façade nord (visible à gauche) doit appartenir à une église plus ancienne située sur le même emplacement. Des traces archéologiques d'une, peut-être même deux églises plus anciennes ont été localisées sous le bâtiment actuel.
The sensational results of the excavations at Urnes naturally triggered off similar work in other churches, both wooden and stone buildings. During the period from 1956 to 1985 some thirty churches were investigated. In ten cases the traces of earlier church buildings in the form of post-holes and sleeper-beam trenches, as well as the evidence of the surrounding graves, have been so clear that it has proved possible to reconstruct the shape and size of the earlier building, and even to some extent the method of construction. One common feature is that the side-walls seem to have been divided into sections, where thick perpendicular planks have been carried on sole-plates or sill-beams supported between corner and intermediate posts set in the ground. In three cases, traces of internal roof-bearing posts were also recorded. Both the form and orientation of the building, as well as the relationship between the building and the surrounding graves, clearly show that these earlier buildings had been churches. In only one case, at Mære in Nord-Trøndelag, were there found the faint but definite traces of a pre-Christian structure beneath the first wooden church.

These results have been obtained in spite of the fact that the churches which have been investigated were not chosen for academic reasons: in most cases the excavations have been due to external factors, such as the need for repairs to the floor or more extensive restoration or consolidation work. In Norway it is the Central Office of Historic Monuments which is legally responsible both for historical buildings and for church archaeology. In retrospect it could be maintained that this situation has contributed to the fact that archaeological research into churches has been rather one-sided, being directed towards problems related to the history of the buildings and towards individual monuments. A research programme embracing several churches with the intention of finding out more about such essential themes as the process of Christianisation or the organisational development of the church in medieval Norway has not yet been provided and

explication simple. Jusqu'à aujourd'hui, la discussion sur l'interprétation d'Urnes est au cœur du débat sur le développement des églises en bois debout en Norvège.

Les résultats sensationnels des fouilles d'Urnes ont naturellement déclenché des recherches similaires dans d'autres églises, tant en bois qu'en pierre. Pendant la période de 1956 à 1985, quelques trente églises ont ainsi été explorées. Dans dix cas, les vestiges d'édifices écleastiques antérieurs - sous forme de traces de poteaux et de sablières basses - ont été relevés au décapage des tombes avoisinantes, étaient si évidents qu'il s'est avéré possible de reconstruire la forme et la taille du bâtiment primitif, et même, jusqu'à un certain point, la méthode de construction. Ils ont pour caractère commun le fait que les murs latéraux semblent avoir été divisés en cadres, où d'épaisse planches perpendiculaires ont été posées sur des poutres horizontales elles-mêmes supportées par des poteaux centraux et intermédiaires plantés dans le sol. Dans trois cas, des vestiges soutenant la voûte intermédiaire ont été découverts, témoignant de l'orientation du bâtiment, ainsi que le lien établi entre le bâtiment et les tombes avoisinantes, sont autant de preuves que ces édifices primitifs étaient des églises. Dans un seul cas, à Mære dans le Trøndelag septentrional, on a découvert des traces faibles mais irréfutables d'une structure pré-chrétienne sous la première église en bois.

Ces résultats ont été obtenus bien que les églises qui ont fait l'objet de fouilles n'aient pas été choisies pour des raisons scientifiques: dans la plupart des cas, ce sont des facteurs extérieurs qui ont donné lieu aux fouilles, tels que réparation du plancher, restauration plus importante ou travail de consolidation. En Norvège, c'est la Direction des Monuments Historiques qui est légalement responsable tant des bâtiments historiques que de l'archéologie des églises. D'un point de vue retrospectif, on pourrait prétendre que cette situation a contribué à rendre unilatérale la recherche archéologique à l'intérieur des églises, orientée vers les questions liées à l'histoire des édifices et vers les monuments en tant que tels. Un vaste programme d'études embrassant plusieurs églises et tendant à découvrir de nouvelles perspectives dans des domaines aussi importants que le processus de christianisation ou le développement de l'organisation de l'Eglise en Norvège médiéval, n'a pas encore été proposé et peut à peine être formulé aussi longtemps que l'archéologie des églises sera régée par des raisons et des demandes purement pratiques.

Dans l'avenir, il serait souhaitable que l'on donne à cette branche de l'archéologie l'occasion d'entreprendre des recherches pour des raisons strictement scientifiques, en plus de l'exécution des travaux nécessaires de sauvegarde. Néanmoins, il devrait être possible, même dans la situation actuelle, d'établir le champ d'investigation de l'archéologie des églises. La nouvelle génération de scientifiques est consciente de cette possibilité. Les plus récentes fouilles d'églises ont eu de bien plus larges perspectives que la stricte exploration archéologique de l'édifice. En outre, un programme de recherche a été amorcé dans le but d'éclairer l'histoire structurelle des églises en bois debout existantes, en faisant usage de plans analytiques détaillés, de photoraphies et de descriptions litérales. C'est pourquoi on peut dire que l'archéologie des bâtiments en Norvège tend vers une plus grande différenciation que par le passé et qu'elle va sans doute y puiser une vigueur nouvelle.