ARCHAEOLOGY IN MEDIEVAL TOWNS

ARCHÉOLOGIE DANS LES VILLES MÉDIÉVALES

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Urban archaeology in Norway has its roots in the last century, but it is only in the past decade that it has really become significant. It took a long time before it was acknowledged that a medieval town with its occupation deposits must be regarded as a single monument in legal terms. In Norway there are eight towns with medieval origins (Oslo, Sarpsborg, Hamar, Tønsberg, Skien, Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim) and the protection which these enjoy has attracted attention from abroad, not only from foreign archaeological circles involved in town planning or otherwise concerned with the town’s growth and development and who are responsible for the care and protection of the cultural heritage.

URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY BEFORE THE ANCIENT MONUMENTS ACT OF 1905

At first it was the visible monuments in the medieval towns which received most attention, particularly the standing buildings which were duly investigated and restored. The excavation of ruins was only carried out to any extent in Oslo and Trondheim.

In Oslo the most important ecclesiastical and monastic remains were excavated in the 1860s by Nicolay Nicolaysen, who was president of the Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments from 1852 to 1899.

The most extensive excavations to be undertaken in Oslo were caused by the fact that the site of the medieval town lay right in the railway development area to the east of the modern city centre. Two architects who were originally connected with the railway, Peter Blix and Johan Meyer, respectively, in the 1870s and 1890s, followed the excavation work for the railway and documented the finds from the thick occupation deposits which were revealed. They both later became leading figures in heritage protection work.

In 1869 work was begun on the restoration of the cathedral in Trondheim and this led to an interest in the remains of the medieval town itself. In contrast to Oslo where urban excavations were carried out with the railway as the major contractor, archaeological activities in Trondheim were on a more limited scale and were generally associated with ordinary site development and commercial excavations. This work was kept under observation by various people with a special interest in the historical development of the town, many of whom were connected with the restoration work in the cathedral. Occupying a rather special position, however, is Victor Ronander, a Dane who came to Trondheim as a vaudeville artist in 1892 and who was subsequently responsible for recording the finds from many sites in the town.

The end of the nineteenth century was a period of great activity concerning the establishment of archaeology in Norway. The major museums played a central role here. The two existing museums which had been founded in the middle of the eighteenth century, the University Collection of National Antiquities in Oslo and Bergen Museum, were supplemented in the 1870s with museums in Trondheim (1879), Tromsø (1872) and Stavanger (1877).

THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE 1905 AND THE 1951 ACTS

The first Act of Parliament giving automatic protection to all remains from ancient and medieval times was passed in 1905. The immediate cause for the introduction of the Act was the danger that the newly discovered Oseberg Viking ship would be sold abroad. The regulations attached to the Act dealing with the delegation of responsibility followed the previously established division among the five archaeological museums and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments, which in effect gave the Society responsibility for medieval buildings of all kinds and for fortifications or their remains. The five museums took responsibility in their respective district for all other monuments, such as prehistoric burial mounds, standing stones, etc., as well as loose finds and objects from both the prehis-

LA PÉRIODE ENTRE LES LOIS DE 1905 ET DE 1951

La première loi sur la protection automatique de tous les monuments et objets de la préhistoire et du Moyen Age fut promulguée en 1905. La cause directe de cette loi était la crainte de voir le bateau d’Oseberg vendu à l’étranger. Les lois de 1906 (art. 906) firent suivre la répartition des tâches déjà établie entre les cinq musées archéologiques et l’Association pour la sauvegarde des Antiquités. Cela voulait dire que l’Association avait la responsabilité de tous les bâtiments du Moyen Âge ainsi que des fortifications et autres ruines. Tous les monuments, tels que les tumuli ou les tumuli, les sites archéologiques de pierres, etc., étaient sous la responsabilité des musées. Une démarcation fut ainsi établie entre l’archéologie préhistorique, qui en Norvège se termine en l’an 1000, régie par les musées et l’archéologie du Moyen Âge du ressort de l’Association (les tâches de celle-ci furent, à partir de 1912, celles de la Direction générale des Monuments Historiques nouvellement créée). La période allant de 1905 à la nouvelle révision de loi en 1951 fut marquée par un intérêt accru pour l’archéologie préhistorique en tant que discipline, et des problèmes de recherche fondamentale furent abordés. Cette période fut une
toric and the medieval periods. A formal distinction was thus created between the archaeology of the period known in Norway as the prehistoric period, ending with the introduction of Christianity in AD 1036, which came under the aegis of the archaeological museums, and the archaeology of standing buildings and ruins from the Christian period (i.e. after AD 1036) which came under the aegis of the Ancient Monuments Society. In 1912 the Society’s area of responsibility was transferred to the newly established Central Office of Historic Monuments.

During the period between 1905 and the next revision of the law which took place in 1951, prehistoric archaeology (including the Viking Period up to AD 1036) flourished as a university subject and much basic research work was carried out. This was a period of growth for the subject and the age was influenced by many strong personalities with the firm backing of the current legislation.

In urban archaeology, the investigation of standing buildings was taken up in Oslo by the architect Gerhard Fischer. He began excavating sites in the medieval part of the city in 1917 and continued with one project after another right up to 1970. Eventually the whole country became his field of operations and most of the major building projects from the Middle Ages in Norway have been investigated by him. In connection with research into urban development, attention must be drawn to his work on the medieval topography of the major towns and his suggested reconstructions of these, in addition to his other important research work in Oslo.

The valuable research on the medieval finds from Bergen and Oslo carried out by the archaeologist Sigurd Grieg and published in 1933 must also be mentioned here, as well as the work of Koren Wiberg in Bergen who in the early part of this period recorded finds from various excavations and laid the foundations for further research with his comprehensive collation of earlier work and theories on the urban development of Bergen. But apart from Oslo and Bergen, Trondheim was the only other town where any archaeological work went on at this time. As in the preceding century, commercial excavation on sites around the city was kept under archaeological surveillance and the observations were recorded. An extra effort was required when a model of the phase d’établissement marquée par de fortes personnalités ancrées sur la solide plateforme que leur donnait la loi.


A propos il faut citer les travaux importants de l’archéologue Sigurd Grieg qui fit en 1933 des découvertes à Bergen et à Oslo. L’historien Koren Wiberg qui a documenté des fouilles à Bergen au début de cette période, accomplit en outre un travail fondamental avec ses synthèses et ses théories sur le développement de Bergen. En dehors d’Oslo et de Bergen il n’y a qu’à Trondheim que l’on trouve des fouilles faites sous surveillance professionnelle durant cette période. A Trondheim on travaillait et enregistrait, sur les terrains de construction, comme au siècle précédent. Un effort exceptionnel fut demandé lorsqu’il fallut faire une maquette de la ville de Trondheim à l’occasion du 900ème anniversaire de l’Église fêté dans cette ville en 1936. Toutes les villes du Moyen Age devaient être représentées de cette manière et cela incita fortement à la recherche dans les villes du pays. L’architecte Sigurd O. Tiller, qui se trouvait à Trondheim pour y faire des recherches archéologiques, tient une place centrale en ce qui concerne la maquette de Trondheim. Les fouilles de Kongensgade (Rue du Roi) en 1926 étaient exemplaires par l’excavation et l’exhumation des niveaux de chaussée et de restes de maisons. On ne peut pas non plus ne pas citer, en ce qui concerne les fouilles de Trondheim, le Pasteur Olaf A. Dregel qui, de 1935 à 1956, suivit toutes les fouilles entreprises et les documenta de la façon la plus complète. Ce sont des conditions de travail difficiles qu’il empêchent d’enregistrer les vestiges trouvés au cours d’excavations.

LA PÉRIODE ENTRE LES LOIS DE 1951 ET 1978

La loi sur les antiquités fut révisée en 1951. Bien que cette nouvelle loi fut un bien meilleur outil elle n’apportait guère de changements en ce qui concernait la conservation des monuments. La ville de Trondheim en 1930 à célérer le troisième anniversaire de la mort de l’architecte. Tous les villes de Trondheim furent présentés et ce pour être une source de grand inspiration à ceux qui œuvraient dans ce domaine.

La central figure in connection with the model of Trondheim was the architect Sigurd O. Tiller who undertook archaeological excavations in the town specifically for this purpose. His recording of the street levels and remains of buildings in his excavation in Kongens Gate in 1928 were to set the pattern for future work.

However, it is impossible to discuss urban archaeology in Trondheim without mentioning the Rev. Olaf A. Dregel. He held a watching brief on all commercial excavation in the town from 1935 until 1956 and he recorded his observations in a most serviceable way. In the end it was unworkable site conditions which prevented him from continuing—mechanical excavators replaced the slow manual digging which had made his recording work possible previously.

THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE ACTS OF 1951 AND 1978

In 1951 the Act concerning the Protection and Preservation of Ancient Monuments was revised. Even though the new Ancient Monuments Act proved to be a much better tool than its predecessor, it brought about changes as far as medieval towns were concerned. Division of responsibility remained unchanged, with standing monuments from the Christian medieval period continuing to come under the Central Office of Historic Monuments. This division seemed natural as medieval archaeology to a great extent was associated with the architecture of standing buildings.

The turning point in urban archaeology in Norway came in 1955 when fire destroyed almost half of the old timber buildings at Bryggen, the old merchants’ quarter in Bergen. The Historic Monuments Office took the initiative in organizing the archaeological investigation of the site, and Asbjorn Hetteig was appointed to lead the work. Hetteig was subsequently employed by the Historical Museum in Bergen and the work in practice was therefore directed by the museum, which was in any case responsible for the enormous quantity of finds. The question was raised:...
whether the five archaeological museums ought to have full responsibility for all archaeology, including medieval, and although this led to lively discussions, it did not result in any alteration to the existing division of responsibility.

Because of the size of the task, the excavations at Bryggen were organised and directed according to new methods, but these were based on the traditional principles of excavation practised in prehistoric archaeology. It would not be wrong to say that these excavations laid the foundations for urban archaeology as it is practised in Norway today. They are also significant in an international context and have played an important role in the way in which urban archaeology is regarded within the subject as a whole.

Even though the excavations at Bryggen made a great contribution to the general understanding of urban archaeology, only minor investigations were carried out in the medieval towns of Oslo, Tonsberg and Trondheim prior to 1970. This was due to the lack of qualified staff and to lack of funding, but there were also shortcomings in the legislation, since it was necessary first to prove the existence of buried medieval deposits before it could be claimed that they were part of a protected monument. By this time, of course, the site development would be well under way and would demand compensation if work had to be stopped in order to carry out an archaeological investigation. Even though the 1951 Act made it clear that the costs of an investigation were to be covered by the site contractors in the case of large-scale projects, either public or private, private development schemes in the towns at that time were never considered to be on a large enough scale to come to this category, so that even the extensive archaeological excavation of the site for a new bank had to be funded by the government.

The turning point came with extensive public projects in 1969-70 in Oslo and Trondheim. There could be no doubt about who had to pay the costs of the archaeological investigation of the site: in both cases the city authority was the developer and therefore financially responsible for the excavation. Development of privately-owned sites at the same time meant more excavation, but here the banks and insurance companies involved actually offered to cover the costs.

A projected intersection of the main trunk roads into Oslo from the south-east would be

que. L’Etat devait même couvrir les frais de fouilles pour la construction d’une nouvelle grande banque. Des projets municipaux importants à Oslo et Trondheim en 1969-70, aménèrent un changement. Pour de tels projets il était “indiscutable” que la commune, en tant qu’entrepreneur, dût payer. En même temps que ces projets municipaux, certaines banques et sociétés d’assurances offrirent de financer des recherches archéologiques à l’occasion de nouvelles constructions dans ces villes.


Après la création d’un nouveau bureau de fouilles dans Sandregate à Trondheim, 1970-71. Tous les vestiges en bois sont antérieurs à l’incendie de 1681, sauf les conduites d’eau en bois qui datent des années 1770.


Dans plusieurs villes norvégiennes, particulièrement à Trondheim, on a fait un enregistrement archéologique de la ville et des études du matériel qui montrent, entre autres, le terrain original avant la création de la ville, la croissance des couches culturelles et les changements ultérieurs de la topographie de la ville. Ces études donnent la
excavation became an annual event also in Tønsberg.

The projects in Oslo, Trondheim and Tønsberg could be tackled because the Central Office of Historic Monuments had their own staff on the spot. The general public was kept informed about the work with displays and exhibitions, guided tours of the site, printed leaflets, films, etc., and those employed on the projects soon became involved in local discussions about possible forthcoming projects. Although it took some time before the three excavation offices were formally established, they existed in reality already from 1970/71.

After the establishment of an excavation office in Bergen in 1981, the archaeological section of the Central Office of Historic Monuments was consolidated by the conversion in 1982 of all the existing long-term temporary appointments to permanent posts.

Information and communication became important aspects of the work of these excavation offices. In 1981, when the Oslo office drew up a conservation plan for the area of the medieval town and its standing medieval monuments and presented a model indicating where the planned traffic intersection could best be sited. This led to a change in views on the part of the politicians, and new through-roads are now planned to avoid the medieval area.

In most of the Norwegian towns, but particularly in Trondheim, existing archaeological information from the town has been collated, showing such features as the original configuration of the terrain before the town was founded, the accumulation of occupation deposits and later changes in the town’s topography. This research has made it possible to formulate hypotheses which can later be tested by archaeological excavation. The presentation of the archaeological map is important, as the recorded data enables certain information to be extracted, such as the maximum extent of the medieval town, the thickness of occupation deposits, areas where these have already been removed by commercial or archaeological excavation, archaeological data depicted symbolically or in detail, the plan of the medieval town, and the

developed and mis en système dans des projets nationaux en suède (70 villes), Finlande (4) et Danemark (11).

À côté de ces connaissances toujours plus développées, cette initiative a été prise en compte dans la planification, des exigences archéologiques. La connaissance de la ville archéologique est ici importante, et non moins importante, celle de ses limites. La notion de la ville archéologique en tant qu’antiquité cohérente a petit à petit grandit pendant les années 70 et « les fouilles de Neder Langgate » à Tønsberg en 1976-77 furent particulièrement importantes. Un conduit pour les égouts de la ville avait été placé dans la rue le long du fiord, c.a.d. le long de la plage médiévale, sur 600 mètres de long. Suivant la loi en vigueur, il fallait signaler les vestiges physiques que l’on trouvait, mais après avoir arrêté les travaux d’excavation dans huit trous le long du tracé, des fouilles des couche culturelles conservées firent entreprises sur 300 mètres de long. Cette affaire prit, de maintes façons, une importance de principe car le Ministère de l’Environnement, responsable des sites et des antiquités, fit passer les intérêts des préparatifs en premier.

LA PÉRIODE APRÈS LA LOI DE 1978

La loi sur les antiquités de 1951 fut remplacée en 1978 par une nouvelle loi sur les biens culturels. Cette loi améliora encore la situation des villes médiévales car elle stipule que sont automati-
height of the original ground surface. Similar archaeological mapping has been carried out and incorporated into national projects in Sweden, involving 70 medieval towns, Finland (4 towns) and Denmark (11).

With increasingly better knowledge about the medieval towns, the town planning authorities have been able to incorporate the demands of the archaeologist and to take archaeological remains into account at an early stage in their planning work. Knowledge about the medieval town is important in this respect, in particular its maximum extent. The recognition of the medieval town as a single protected monument as defined by law has only come about gradually during the 1970s, and the Nedre Langatte excavation in Tønsberg in 1976–77 was especially important in this respect. It had been decided to redirect the drainage and sewage from the town into a main sewer system along the fjord side of the town. This involved a 600 m long trench in the street which lay on the same alignment as the medieval

quement protégés: « Les concentrations de constructions telles qu’entrepôts et marchés, villes et autres ou restes de celles-ci. » « La ville médiévale devint aussi, juridiquement, une antiquité dans le cadre des limites définies et établies sur plan par les professionnels. La répartition des responsabilités fut un peu changée par la nouvelle loi, mais l’archéologie urbaine dans les villes médiévales garda la même position. Les problèmes qui se posent du fait que les objets trouvés par la Direction des Monuments Historiques sont en fait du ressort des musées n’ont pas été résolus, mais on espère qu’ils le seront avec la réorganisation des services annoncée. La précision, dans cette nouvelle loi, que la ville médiévale est une antiquité a, grâce au nouveau paragraphe (10) donné aux services compétents un outil utile pour assurer la protection des quartiers médiévaux. Suivant la nouvelle loi le propriétaire doit, en règle générale, couvrir les frais en cas de fouilles archéologiques. Que cela soit un principe juste se discute encore. Dans

shoreline. According to the Ancient Monuments Act of 1951 in force at the time, it was required to prove the existence of medieval remains below the surface before an archaeological investigation could be enforced. After having stopped the work in eight places along the line of the planned trench, an excavation of the surviving occupation deposits over a distance of 300 m was organised. In many ways this case became an important matter of principle, as the Ministry of the Environment, which was ultimately responsible both for the redirection of the effluent and for the protection of the archaeological remains, gave priority to the latter.

THE PERIOD FOLLOWING THE 1978 ACT

In 1978 the existing ancient Monuments Act from 1951 was replaced by the new Cultural Heritage Act. For the medieval towns this was a great improvement. According to the new Act, concentrations of buildings older than 1357, such as market settlements and trading centres, towns and similar settlements, or any remains of these, were now to be automatically protected. The medieval town became a legally defined monument within properly designated boundaries drawn in on the map.

The division of responsibility in connection with the new Act was changed slightly, but this did not affect urban archaeology in the medieval towns, for which the Central Office of Historic Monuments is still responsible. No solution has been found for the problems caused by the fact that two distinct institutions are involved: the local archaeological museum becomes responsible for the conservation and storage of objects and finds which have been excavated by the Historic Monuments Office. It is expected that the impending reorganisation of the whole cultural heritage sector will deal with this problem.

The specific point in the new Act defining the medieval town as a single protected monument and the new paragraph concerning the costs when a special examination of the site or monument is required have given the Central Office of Historic Monuments a useful tool for dealing with the
certaines villes, les propriétaires de terrains se sont assurés contre les autorités au cas où celles-ci les obligeraient, à la suite d’un incendie, par exemple, à couvrir les frais de fouilles archéologiques. Les questions et les tâches sont, en bref, devenues nombreuses après la mise en vigueur de cette loi. La Direction des Monuments Historiques a beaucoup travaillé pour trouver des routines convenables et uniformes, et veiller ainsi aux intérêts et exigences archéologiques au même titre qu’aux autres intérêts de la société. La législation, et particulièrement la nouvelle loi du travail ainsi que la création de bureaux archéologiques régionaux, ont exigé un important développement des règles et routines.

Vu qu’il existait peu d’archéologues norvégiens ayant l’expérience de l’archéologie urbaine au début des années 70, l’assistance des pays nordi-
protection of medieval town areas. According to the new Act, as a general rule the site developer is obliged to cover the costs of an archaeological investigation. Whether this is a reasonable principle is still a matter for discussion. In some medieval towns, property owners have taken out an insurance to cover all official financial obligations in the event of their property being destroyed by fire, including the costs of an archaeological excavation of the site. After the new Act came into force, many questions have had to be dealt with. The Central Office of Historic Monuments has devoted much energy to establishing expedient and uniform routines so that archaeological interests and demands will be taken into account parallel with other social aspects. The various laws, especially the Workers’ Protection Act, and the establishment of the four permanent regional offices for archaeology in Oslo, Trondheim, Bergen and Trondheim have necessitated a considerable development of the internal regulations and routines in the Historic Monuments Office.

As there were so few Norwegian archaeologists at the beginning of the 1970s with experience in urban archaeology, assistance was required from the other Scandinavian countries and from the British Isles. There are still few Norwegian archaeology students working in urban archaeology and this problem of recruitment has both an educational and an economic aspect.

During the early part of the 1970s, field work, building up the organisation, and integrating urban archaeology in town planning were given priority. Now, however, information and communication are the central themes, including the publication of the results of several seasons of excavations. The analysis of the total excavated material from early excavations has the topmost priority. Above all, special efforts are being made to finish the reports of field work from the 1970s.

This applies particularly to Trondheim and Tønsberg and in both these towns, as well as in Oslo and Bergen, separate publication project groups have been established to take on these assignments. Oslo lies well ahead in this respect with reports already published, but publications are now beginning to appear from the other three towns.

The recognition of the medieval town as a single protected monument as defined in the new Cultural Heritage Act from 1978 is perhaps the most important thing which has happened in urban archaeology in Norway in recent years. With this Act the Central Office of Historic Monuments has a worthy tool for taking care of the history of the medieval town in the ground. If this tool is to be used with insight, it requires research, as well as the communication of results, while effective administration is also necessary to show willingness in co-ordinating archaeological interests with other aspects of social planning.

The above bronze mount, found as part of the excavations at Oslo, is a typical example of the art of this period.