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‘Female’ Activities, ‘Female’ Artefacts? A Theoretical Approach to Women and Gender in Medieval Bergen

Being part of an international academic trend associated with second- and third-wave feminism, women and in time also gender in general have repeatedly been the subject of archaeological investigations. The integration of women and gender as research topics within medieval archaeology has, however, been slow to pick up speed, and on the whole, there are few book-length archaeological studies on these issues. As gender is commonly the subject of more or less extensive theoretical examinations and discussions, it is tempting to ascribe this prolonged lack of a gender perspective to a general reluctance towards theory within medieval archaeology – which has been observed more than once (e.g. Gustin and Sabo 1994, 48; Andersson et al. 2007, 27; Gilchrist 2009, 386, with references; Nøttveit 2010, 32). Researchers remain somewhat cautious about including gender in their discussions, in many cases apparently due to the recurrent and pronounced problem of relating artefacts and activities to women or men in past societies.

This challenge was met also in my examination of women, gender and material culture at Bryggen (‘The Wharf’) in Bergen, Western Norway, c. 1120-1500 (Mygland 2014), upon which this article is based. The first archaeological indications of an urban settlement in Bergen are registered in this area between c. 1020/30 and 1070 (Hansen 2005, 145-156), and throughout the entire Middle Ages, Bryggen was dominated by international trade and large scale commerce (Helle 1982; Herteig 1990; 1991). An increasingly male dominance and a probable change of traditional gender roles mean that women and gender cannot be examined by means of gender-related archaeological artefacts (such as textile-production equipment and kitchen utensils) within this context without discussions. In addition, interrelated aspects of age, status and particularly ethnicity complicate the matter even further. In the following, the question on whether or to what degree archaeological artefacts can be related to one gender or the other in this urban society is pursued – or rather gender roles in general and medieval gender roles in particular, and thus the likelihood of the activities from which artefacts stem may be related to e.g. women or men. A contextual approach is stressed, as is the impossibility of establishing a one-in-one relationship between artefacts and gender.

Rural versus urban gender roles in medieval Norway and Bergen

In medieval society, most people in Norway lived, worked and made their living in rural areas, and separate farms were by far the most common units of habitation and production (Helle 1982, 117). There were differences concerning social status and conditions; yet, female activities basically seem to have been related to women's biological/reproductive role and to the home, including household, cooking and caring. Men took care of hunting, fishing, many agricultural activities and defence (Holtsmark 1964, 565-571; Jacobsen 1985, 9).

Different aspects of 'otherness' – not least concerning base of existence and the composition of the population in urban societies opposed to rural areas – complicate the interpretations of material culture in relation to gender-related and/or 'female' activities as well as artefacts here. At the end of the Norwegian high Middle Ages (c. 1150-1350), the proportion of people living in towns or small urban communities was roughly four to five per cent, rising to only about 13 per cent as late as in 1830 (Helle et al. 2006, 110, 254). The towns, which only emerged in Norway from the eleventh century onwards, were first and foremost trading centres and administrative foci, often with a history as seasonal trading centres and marketplaces (Helle 1982, 117). They were thus largely dominated by groups of permanently or temporarily settled single people – merchants, craftsmen and small traders, in addition to workmen and servants – the majority men. This large number of single townspeople caused a need for a work force to perform traditional female tasks in the towns, which again with time were professionalised and split into many separate occupations, often taking place outside the home as paid work (Jacobsen 1985, 9-10). Particularly in the latter cases, men came to dominate, although there is also evidence of working women. In Bergen, both written sources (e.g. DN I, 97; XII, 47) and archaeological remnants such as labels with female names (Johnsen 1990; Liestøl 1991) indicate the presence of presumably high-ranking business women – e.g. owning tenements and running housing and accommodation. There also seems to have been single women working as servants, bakers and prostitutes, in addition to brewing and selling beer (Helle 1982, 461-464; Øye 2006, 441, with references). Thus, the female role in the town was apparently less bound to the family than in rural areas.

Medieval Bergen was a town with far-reaching trading contacts and eventually a considerable element of foreigners – generally including high-ranking merchants visiting the town during summer seasons, and winter-sitters particularly from the middle of the thirteenth century. Not least, this applied to German merchants and craftsmen, of which the former marked their presence at Bryggen in particular. Culminating in the establishment of the Hanseatic Kontor around 1360 and a gradual taking over of the tenements at Bryggen, a male-dominated, German settlement from now on came to dominate. This society – with its own jurisdiction, and which encouraged celibacy and in 1498 forbade marriage to women outside the Hansa – is generally thought to have more or less replaced an initial population of a primarily local origin, and came to include resident merchants, their deputies (*geseller*), and workers in general. The latter particularly included young, male apprentices who took care of traditional female duties such as cooking and cleaning (Helle 1982, 473-487, 730-750, with references); thus, complicating a possible relation between women and food processing. Still, Bryggen was apparently not totally under control by the Kontor even in the fifteenth century, and it has been argued that neither did the German merchants make up a strict juridical nor topographically closed entity (Ersland 2005).

How does one know, then, whether a certain artefact – or a group of artefacts – was used by a man or a woman within medieval Bryggen? Or rather: how does one know whether the activities to which the different artefacts are related were performed by either, and throughout the entire Middle Ages? In fact, what chances do we have of recognizing contemporary gender structures and gender roles at different times, only visible indirectly through remains of buildings, archaeological artefacts and/or through written sources? Last, but not least, how likely are gender structures to remain stable or to change across time and space? Urban gender roles in the Middle Ages and to what degree it can be assumed that social structures in general and gender in particular were changed or conserved at the commercial area of Bryggen throughout this period need to be investigated: not least in the meeting between rural and urban society, and between different ethnic groups. In all, to what degree may we assume that traditional rural gender roles took on new shapes or remained more or less unchanged in the urban environment of medieval Bergen and how likely is it that this social structure was changed or conserved thereafter?

Theoretical reflections related to the constitution of gender are called for, focusing on gender as socially constructed and changeable. Studying social structures such as gender in space in a period stretching of several centuries also necessitates a discussion and understanding of social processes and driving forces in general. In this respect, important issues concern what forces and/or processes – particularly in terms of individual actors versus overall structures – contribute to change and what factors contribute to conservation of society and social structures in general, and in Bergen and at Bryggen in particular within a period of major demographic, economic and social changes.

No man is an island ... Women, men and the concept of gender

The sex we attribute to an individual is (...) tremendously important in determining how we see, understand and respond to them. (...) sex is the primary category through which people identify and subsequently gender stereotypes others (...). People are also typically classified according to sex faster than any other forms of categorisation (Green 2004, 39-40).

The concept of gender has become a recognized and integral part of archaeological and historical studies in the last decades, regarded as an important social structure as well as a dynamic force in a community. However, gender is also a repeated theme of discussion. In particular, this relates to what actually constitutes gender and how it is made, increasingly questioning the relationship between a biological category of sex and a socially and culturally constructed gender. The idea of an essential woman and man has, for instance – in common with ideas of universal laws of human experience in general – been rejected by so-called third-wave feminism inspired by poststructuralism and thoughts of American historian Thomas Laqueur (1990) (Gilchrist 1999, 3-8; Sørensen 2004, 54). They emphasize that gender, biological sex and sexuality are so intermingled that they can hardly be separated, and that also biological sex (like gender) may be considered socially constructed (Green 2004, 44; Sørensen 2004, 54-55). Particularly American philosopher Judith Butler is among those who advocate these thoughts, arguing that the sexed body is itself culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time (Butler 1990).

A 'deconstruction' of biological sex is relatively problematic in relation to the questions posed above, and this view is not considered a productive approach in the following. Instead, the idea of a male-female dichotomy is maintained. Men and women are interpreted as individuals with both a biological and a social sex (gender), where the former is regarded as a natural, biologically given category, referring to 'biological characteristics, in particular reproductive capacities and external genitalia' (Sørensen 2004, 42). Also – although far from promoting the sociobiological argument of behaviour as genetically controlled, in which male and female behaviour is largely explained by evolutionary need for reproductive fitness (Sørensen 2004, 10) – it is not denied that there may be some inherent biological dispositions that influence the way we behave as men and women. At least, cognitive studies of men and women point to differences in the male and female brain concerning physical structure, as well as men and women having specialized and different brain functions. Despite overlapping, these differences seemingly result in diverging cognitive skills on the average, possibly connected to reproductive strategies (Gilchrist 1999, 11-13, with references). In this respect, biological sex is generally considered a possible stable and stabilizing factor concerning gender. It may perhaps also explain what may be characterized as cross-cultural gender roles; for instance traditional female work often being related to women's biological role. As discussed above, this seems to have been the case in rural areas in Norway in the Middle Ages, and in some way or another probably applied also to urban women in the same period.

Still, gender and gendered behaviour may be overridden, negotiated and/or restricted. The distinction between sex and gender means that the notion of men and women can be explained in other than purely biological terms, gender being considered socially constructed and historically changeable, driven by social, cultural, ideological and political circumstances. Generally, gender is understood as a social and/or cultural construction based on sex and a male/female-dichotomy – 'the cultural values inscribed on sex' (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 1998, xv) – or in slightly more archaeological terms, 'the cultural interpretation of sexual difference that results in the categorisation of individual artefacts, spaces and bodies' (Gilchrist 1999: xv). Thus, it has been argued that gender itself cannot be regarded a common identity, as it can hardly be separated from other basic aspects of identity, like skin colour, religion and sexuality (Young 2000, 228; Fahlander 2003, 31). Indeed, differences between women and men or between women and men of e.g. different ethnicity or social class are also increasingly being integrated in the concept in general. In this respect, gender may be defined as 'the social and cultural roles and identities that are attributed to humans (by ourselves and/or others) based on several gender-determining factors, like biological sex, social status, marital status, age and kinship, and that regulate the relations between us' (Schmidt Sabo 2005, 107, author's translation).

French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (2010 [1984]) idea of habitus – referring to a set of corporeal dispositions, or a mental structure comprising a system of dispositions that generates perceptions, appreciations and practises (Green 2004, 48; Maton 2008, 51) – similarly incorporates such factors. Generally, habitus is shaped by *social fields*, i.e. social arenas where social practice takes place, and where people struggle and manoeuvre over resources, and where every participating individual holds a position, defined not only by class, but by different forms of capital that the members are in possession of – economic, social, cultural and symbolic. In practise, the same 'rules' or expectations concerning appropriate gender behaviour and gender roles may not necessarily apply to or affect every man or woman, but depend on e.g. age, status and ethnicity as well. Men and women may in other words be

considered individuals with a number of different part-identities, where the most significant criterion concerning social classification varies according to context. These are obviously important factors to bear in mind when approaching women, gender and gender-related roles, activities and artefacts at different time levels in medieval Bergen.

Reproduction of gender and gender systems

Concerning driving factors and mechanisms in society contributing to changes and/or conservation, social practice has roughly been explained based on a structure-agency dichotomy that focuses either on the individual actor and its freedom of choice, or on social/cultural processes as controlled and constrained by underlying structures – in other words as a result of rationally based human actions, or as driven by underlying structures (Wilken 2006, 38-40). The present point of departure lies somewhere in between. Social structures and changes are regarded as stemming from interaction between different actors and their overall historical and social context, reflected in and affecting physical surroundings and material culture. Human activity creates and affects (physical and) social structures, which again work back on the actors and their choices. Later generations of inhabitants in medieval Bergen, for instance, had to relate to existing and more or less established (physical and) social structures, whereas their actual choices and degree of adjustment to these overall structures on a more detailed level probably affected the former. As British sociologist Anthony Giddens (2008 [1984]) argues in favour of in his work on *the duality of structure*, social structures do not only frame and limit human activity, but enable agency as well. Indeed, it is underlined that people are not just subjects to underlying structures or completely restricted by e.g. a more or less rigid gender system. They 'accommodate to and adapt to gender identities to varying degrees, but are not totally bound by them' (Green 2004, 57).

Particularly in relatively dynamic societies like towns and cities may social changes and discontinuity be accounted for. Transition phases like the early urban stages and the more or less gradual establishment of an international community of foreign guests and winter-sitters in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and of the establishment of the Hansa Kontor at Bryggen around 1360 allow for discussions on social discontinuity and change here. Giddens, for instance, argues that there is always a potential for social change when the existing prerequisites are changed and/or new actors enter the arena. Discussing the concept of *time-space edges*, he stresses that the coexistence of societies of different structures – e.g. modern capitalistic societies and tribal societies – can contribute to change (Giddens 2008 [1984], 244-256). In the meeting of the rural and the urban society, and not least by the introduction of new ethnic groups with a different household structure at Bryggen from the fourteenth century in particular, an international melting pot such as medieval Bergen may in this respect be understood as a new arena where traditional social limits could be challenged and/or trespassed – concerning gender in general, and female gender roles in particular. Similarly, also single events as discussed by Bourdieu (2009 [1977]) may directly or indirectly cause social changes. One may perhaps discuss the new buildings and structures raised at Bryggen after the repeated physical destructions caused by the many devastating town fires in this area during the Middle Ages in terms of possible turning points. Despite conserving/binding/committing elements like owner's structure and functional needs, the fires also entailed the opportunity of breaks with a previous physical organization rooted in, based on and reflecting established social norms.

The likelihood of gender systems being changed or preserved at medieval Bryggen, and at what speed and to what degree may nevertheless be discussed. French Annales-historian Fernand Braudel has distinguished three levels of time or time frames (e.g. Braudel 1980 [1969]). By *l'histoire événementielle* – history of events – he refers to events of a relatively short character, whereas *conjoncture* lasts somewhere between a decade and half a century. Both may bring about change; however, Braudel first and foremost regards history and society as constrained by long lasting structures lasting over centuries or millennia, and stresses slow-changing and structurally stable elements. Following Braudel, history is enclosed by a slow-moving framework, represented by *longue durée* – the most enduring and penetrating of time durations, taking a century or longer as a unit of analysis – which may be considered a long-run underlying movement that resolves and overturns shorter vanishing events. Similarly, Giddens argues that *longue durée* – in his works primarily reflecting the reproduction of social institutions (e.g. judicial, political, economic or symbolic institutions, or rules reproduced over long time) – both pre-exists and outlasts the lives of individuals born into a particular society, and may thus be seen as a constraining element (Giddens 2008 [1984], 35-37). Similarly, physical space and structures – like rooms, buildings and streets – may be considered structures framing and conserving human activity, and represent products of human activity over time. These structures do not only reflect social conventions, but actively work back on and affect the activities that are taking place, reproducing social order. Also, Human geographer Robert A. Dodgshon finds that 'the more organized a society the more problems it will face over change, having both greater amounts of inertia to sustain and greater vested interest in defending the *status quo* against radical change' (Dodgshon 1998, 184). An established organization and use of physical space may in this way act as counterbalance to changes of gender structures.

Also in a shorter time perspective may durability be stressed, and Bourdieu argues that tradition, continuity and reproduction are more important than renewal, break and mobility. It is stressed that social practice is the result of relations between one actor's habitus and position (or so-called capital) within different social fields (Bourdieu 2009 [1977], Wilken 2006, 46; Maton 2008, 51-52). Through the everyday practices that take place within these social fields, the individuals develop a habitus that is typical of his or her position, meaning that people think, act and perceive the world and their social surroundings according to patterns, in a process where also material culture itself may contribute (Maton 2008, 51-52). Individual actions altogether become part of the social practice of our class' social practice, which makes the base of social reproduction (Rosenlund 1991: 28). Similarly, reproductive aspects are prominent in Giddens's theory on the duality of structure, in which it is stressed that human activity takes place within social structures as organized sets of rules and resources (Giddens 2008 [1984]). According to Giddens, these structures are confirmed, maintained and strengthened by repeated human activity. But whereas Bourdieu focuses on habitus and fields, Giddens's basic unit of analysis is *routine* – habitual actions which are repeated in day-to-day social activity – representing a base of the creation, maintenance and influence on social structures (Giddens 2008 [1984], xxiii). According to Giddens, people perform activities in like manners day after day, and when acting, it involves routines or social practice. People follow 'rules' or 'procedures' that tell them how to perform in social life (including both laws as well as unspoken social conventions) and these structure the act and contribute to organizing it. As routinized and automatic, actions are most of the time performed at a level of practical

consciousness, and 'the day-to-day activity of social actors draws upon and reproduces social structural features of wider societal systems' (Giddens 2008 [1984], xxiii, 24).

Thus, both Bourdieu and Giddens focus in particular on a more or less slow, continual form of change through time – either based on habitus/social fields or daily routines and tasks where new solutions that may arise in social practice, gradually change the rules. This ties in with ideas of gender as a social construction reproduced in structuring practice, and may largely speak in favour of relatively stable gender patterns. Although representing a relatively new social structure – in addition to being quantitatively few and somewhat small – towns were not an unfamiliar phenomenon in Norway after 1100. Bergen should mentally as well as physically probably be characterized as well-established even prior to the High Middle Ages, indicated by the first scattered and vague archaeological traces dated to about 1020/30 and more distinctly by the twelfth century (Hansen 2005). In other words, there had been more than enough time for ideas of urban women, men and their respective roles to be integrated into this society by the starting point of my study. Framed by presumably conserving social – as well as physical – structures, these must still have entailed restrictions, first and foremost to be transgressed by certain individuals, for instance based on age and status, and within special circumstances.

Interpreted as 'learned behaviour' (Gilchrist 1999, 9), gender and gender identity are often explained by socialization theories as internalized self-fulfilling products of socialization in childhood. In an article analysing the relationship between identity and gender, British sociologist Lorraine Green argues in favour of 'gender identity being both socially constructed and performative' and biological sex and associated culturally gendered characteristics reinforced and encouraged by adults from a very early age. According to Green, differential socialization and different familiar and occupational roles one undertakes in adult life may be considered the most significant differences between men and women (Green 2004, 52, 57). Similar ideas can also be found in the concept of habitus, which is acquired and internalized early on through socialization of the child within family, and modified while growing up, not least by educational experiences (Rosenlund 1991, 28). Thus, gender – and/or what we think of as male/female – may be considered learned and internalized social constructions, reproduced in structuring social practice (Butler 1990, 140; Fahlander 2003, 33).

British sociologist Lois McNay also argues that gender identities 'are not free-floating: they involve deep-rooted investments on the part of individuals and historically sedimented practises which severely limit their transferability and transformability. Although subject formations receive their shape from prevailing social conditions, certain predispositions and tendencies may still continue to affect embodied practices long after their original conditions of emergence have been surpassed' (McNay 2000, 18). Swedish ethnologist Ella Johansson's study of masculinity and modernity among loggers in northern Sweden in the period between 1860 and 1940 (Johansson 1994), for instance, indicates that notions of gender roles are not easily transgressed – even when there are no other options available. Living and working in more or less isolated male groups in the forests for parts of the year, these men had to take care of traditional female work such as cooking and fetching water. However, the fear of appearing as less masculine meant that rather than taking turns, each logger preferred to make their own food and by means of their own equipment. Additionally, the loggers would do without water for as long as possible if running out of it, hoping for someone else to fill the empty buckets (Johansson 1994, 70, 72, 74, 77-79).

In all, then – although the content is not fixed, but varies in time and space – it seems reasonable to interpret social structures like gender and gender systems in general as durable and not easily changed. Not least in light of Braudel's and Giddens' ideas of *longue durée*, gender systems may be interpreted as long-lasting social structures. Gender norms apparently varied according to e.g. social status. Yet, at least the first generations of the urban population in Bergen probably moved in from rural areas in particular, bringing with them general notions of female and male roles and appropriate gendered behaviour that must have been deeply rooted in rural social structures. This may speak against any immediate radical gender-related changes. Additionally, the town must also later have experienced a continuous influx of rural people with similar ideas – although not of rural people alone – considering the high degree of mobility characterizing medieval towns, when people frequently moved there long after childhood, and left them before their days came to an end (Øye 2005 [1995], 57). Working women in medieval towns as documented in contemporary written sources may thus not necessarily have represented a major break with traditional gender roles. Also a rural woman of lower social status could perform male work if needed. It is perhaps also symptomatic of the durability of gender systems that female urban work could be taken over by men when it became professionalized and thus more comprehensive and defined than earlier.

Thus, exploring women, gender and gender roles in the past based on archaeological artefacts gives rise to many considerations in relation to issues of stability and changes in time and space. Notions of men and women are seemingly embedded in almost every society – the present as well as the medieval. At the same time, gender is socially constructed, meaning that its content varies according to social and economic conditions and different contexts. Although more or less united by biology, men and women do not make up homogenous groups, rather individuals whose social identities and roles also depend on criteria such as age, status and ethnicity. In these relationships, generalizations beyond time and space cannot be made. Thus, methodologically, women and men – as well as gender-related activities and artefacts – need to be assessed and discussed in terms of their spatial, social as well as temporal contexts. This also applies to medieval Bergen, where social circumstances related to base of existence, the composition of the townspeople at different times and a recurrent destruction and rebuilding of the urban space offer a special situation concerning issues of gender and materiality in a historical context.

Especially seen in relation to medieval towns in general and Bergen in particular, the concept of gender includes aspects of change, possibly representing social arenas where traditional gender roles could be challenged and overridden. Still, concerning both social structures in general as well as gender systems in particular, it is possible that durability and reproduction may be an opportunity in the long run. The failure of the only known attempt at establishing a guild for working women (ON *heimakonur*) in Bergen in 1293/94 (NGL V, 273) may perhaps reflect the likelihood of more or less radical breaks with traditional gender roles taking place here. In this respect, it does not seem unreasonable to ascribe also women in medieval Bergen traditional rural female activities in general, like cooking and textile production. However, this possible relation neither is nor can be taken for granted, and continuous and thorough discussions and examinations are necessitated.

Concluding remarks

Gender, gender roles and gender systems are not universal categories with a fixed content, but may vary according to time, as well as place and social strata. There is no inherent one-in-one relationship between an archaeological artefact and its user, and what is considered characteristic gender-related activities and artefacts in our present Western society may not necessarily be valid in e.g. Bergen in the Middle Ages. Thorough considerations are thus needed when studying material culture in relation to gender in past societies. Still, although the gender relations may be debatable, it is possible to shed light on women and gender based on archaeological artefacts. Indeed, material culture represents a unique source for exploring gender in time and space – for instance at medieval Bryggen.

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