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The First Norwegian Towns Seen on the Background of European History

New archaeological finds and new research have given us a better understanding of the question about the revitalisation of the economic life and emergence of towns in Europe after the Dark Ages following the fall of the Roman Empire in AD 476. Among other things, the Pirenne Thesis ‘Without Islam, the Frankish Empire would have probably never existed, and Charlemagne, without Muhammad, would be inconceivable’ (Pirenne 1939) is again brought into light. In this paper, I will give an account of this and discuss the emergence of centralisation and subsequent urbanism. The actual span of time in Norway will be the Viking Period and the early Middle Ages (c. AD 800-1130). At the beginning of this period, Norway was not defined as a gathered state, but according to the account of the chieftain and seafarer Othere of Hålogaland from around AD 890, Norway was regarded as a defined territory at that time (Andersen 1977, 84). This was a geographic unit that, without Finnmark and Northern part of Troms, for the most part corresponded with the present day border of Norway. In this article, I will give a survey of the background of the emergence of first Norwegian towns seen in the light of these finds and new research.

Europe – historical background

There are numerous uncertain factors regarding the history of the population size of Europe. The general impression is, however, that the 7th century AD represented the end of a long period of demographic drops. There can be many reasons for this. As early as the first century AD, there are signs of a decline in the population in the Roman world. The Plague of Justinian that ravaged in the 6th century and later plagues that are recorded in written sources until the mid-8th century in Western Europe can have had a great impact on the population and settlements (Duby 1981, 18). The historian Chris Wickham has, however, recently concluded that the sixth-century plague, however dramatic its local incidences, was a marginal event in the demographic history of our period. The population falls that we do see, in a variety of different periods, must have had local causes (Wickham 2005, 548-549). Agrarian problems have been proposed as another explanation. However, based on new knowledge stemming from pollen analysis, Wickham argues against an agrarian catastrophe (Wickham 2005, 550), a conclusion also drawn by archaeologist Bjørn Myhre with regard to Norwegian Agrarian History, and demonstrated with Norwegian examples (Myhre 2002, 173-174).

Wickham (2005, 549-550) would, on the basis of the population model of the economist Ester Boserup (1965), rather see the loss in the light of political changes; after the final collapse of the West Roman Empire in AD 475, because of the Germanic migrations, the Roman trade

system dissolved. This led to a collapse of the urban life in Western Europe and, at least in the British Isles, the circumstances in the 5th and 6th centuries seem to have led to a decline into a mainly rural society (Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991, 5). In Norway, the decline also acted on the political and economic unities that had come into being in Western Norway. As an example, we can mention the Forsand village, where economic problems are among one of the possible explanations for its dissolution as late as in the first half of the 7th century (Løken 2001, 17). Some of the Roman towns in Gallia continued with their administrative role from the Roman Period as centres for royal courts (Lat. *palatium*), bishop's residences and/or cloister centres, but there is little evidence to indicate that the previous trade and industry activity also continued (Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991, 6-11). Tours (Roman Caesaraugodunum) in the Loire valley, the homestead of St Gregor from AD 573 to AD 594, can serve as an example in this regard. Excavations showed that Tours was a solely Church centre until the 10th century, which caused the director of the archaeological excavations Henri Galiné to characterise Tours as 'a town without urban life' (from Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991, 7). Excavations have shown that many Western Roman towns maintained their administrative functions, but Galiné's characterisation can well be applied to most of them. In the British Isles, where no sacral organisations had been established during the first centuries after the Roman period, we cannot see such a continuation.

In many ways, the 7th century was the time when urban life started re-establishing itself in Western Europe. There can be many reasons for this; the consolidation of a new royal power both on the Continent and in England, the establishment of church centres and a general flourishing of industry and trade can be mentioned as the most important. The economic and political developments in Western Europe and the simultaneous, comprehensive establishing of the caliphate in Bagdad as leading economic and political force in the old world, were of importance in the coming century. The northern areas were linked to these forces in a complicated, mainly indirect, centre-periphery manner, which created a general frame for the beginning of this process (Callmer 1994, 79).

Often we can see that the trade found place at the same locations where people gathered for cultic or juridical reasons. Trade was of great importance in the Carolingian written sources and was one of the consequences of the new rise of the monarchy. The connection with the Islamic area must, however, be mentioned in this connection. The historian Michael McCormick (2007, 59) has evolved a trade-model grounded on the works of the historians Henry Pirenne (1968 [1925], 20) and Sture Bolin (1953), supplemented with studies of written sources and finds of Islamic and Byzantine coins found in western contexts. He claimed that 'in the end, the European economies did engage deeply with those of the Muslim world and Byzantium, and that process began in the eighth century' (McCormick 2001, 797). Even if a long time has passed since Pirenne put forward his thesis 'without Muhammed no Charlemange' with the ensuing discussion, we have to admit that Islam changed the growing European economy. McCormick's final conclusion in his extensive book *Origin of European Economy* is in fact:

'But it did so not so much by applying the coup de grace to a moribund late Roman exchange system in the 600s. A century later it offered the wealth and markets which would fire the first rise of western Europe, a rise whose rhythms we can detect in the movements of diplomats, pilgrims, warriors, merchants, and, I think, slaves, as a new Europe and its satellite societies exported its own human wealth in exchange

for the wealth of goods and species of the House of Islam. So in a paradoxical and profound sense, Pirenne was right, even when he was wrong: without Muhammad, there would have been no Charlemagne' (McCormick 2001, 798).

When Charlemagne ordered the replacement of plundering and gift-giving with regular taxes, and in particular after the decree carried out at the Frankfurt Council in AD 793/794, with a monetary reform, the conditions for creating a commercial market economy became easier. Subsequently, we see the beginning of a socially unlimited economy, which led to the emergence of independent market towns in England and in the Frank territory, for instance in the regions under Frankish influence, such as in Central Italy, West-Central Europe and Southern Scandinavia during late 10th and 11th centuries (compare also Reuter 1985 and Verhulst 2002, referred in Hodges 2012, 6).

It was the Emperor who had the aim of creating a new empire and who, crowned by the bishops, was fully aware of being the tool of God, protector of peace and the rule of law, and of the need to closely monitor economic life, as this was considered unnatural and thus in need of special control. Historian Georges Duby (1981, 106) wrote that commercial activities were suspect because they gave rise to a desire for profit that was condemned by Christian ethics. The rulers gave special attention to keeping the peace at the places where business transactions were conducted. Peace and security where people gathered, whether for bartering or trading goods, to participate in cultic, administrative or juridical activities is, as already mentioned and also will be discussed again later, a premise for trade and the emerge of towns.

Some of these centres can be characterised as 'specialised' for trade and manufacturing and for being suppliers of foodstuffs and clothes for the ruling elite. London, Canterbury, Winchester and York, that were among the Roman towns that were re-established as important centres in 7th century England, emerged as administrative centres, which has been confirmed by archaeological finds that, as far as we can see, tell us that trade and industry initially only played a minor role (Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991, 5).

The political and economic changes in the north-western part of the Continent and in the area around the English Chanel that best can be studied through the numismatic material in Western Europe, soon also could be seen in Southern Scandinavia and in the Baltic region. There are a number of temporary trading places found in this area shortly after AD 700. Some of them can also be traced back to earlier times. The archaeologist Johan Callmer (1994, 53) wrote that this shows that long distance trade also existed in the problematic 7th century. The first permanent urban centres in the 8th and 9th centuries were modest to start. Dorestad, which later became known as a *vicus famosus*, at the river Nederrrijn (a tributary of the Rhine) where the name was changed to Lek, seems to have been the largest of the emporia, with several kilometres of quays. Initially, Dorestad was dominated by farmer-merchants living in wooden buildings. At that time, the church and craftsmen were almost absent (Hodges 2012, 93). There has been much focus on the trade relations with Scandinavia as well as the Viking raids against, among others, Dorestad. There are finds from Kaupang in Vestfold that suggest a connection to Frankish areas, supposedly traded via Dorestad (Willemsen 2009, 177).

Viking Age Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, the Viking Period is a transition period from a pre-state formation to a state formation. From the start, power was in the hands of chieftains and local kings, who, with their farms as a base, ruled with varying degrees of personal authority over frequently shifting territories. This changed at the end of the Viking Period when three Scandinavian kingdoms were created through the establishment of an administrative and military organisation for controlling and protecting these territories. The state formation in Norway by Harald Fairhair cannot be seen as the permanent formation of a state. Only under Olav Haraldsson (king from 1015 to 1030) can we begin talking of a real High King of a gathered nation.

In Scandinavia, before c. AD 700, there were several seasonal markets tied to aristocratic centres, such as Helgö in Sweden and Gudme in Denmark, and independent seasonal markets were established early in the 8th century (Skre 2008, 327). In the first stage of the urbanisation process, four Scandinavian places are worth mentioning: Ribe at the southwest coast of Jylland, Hedeby at the bottom of the Schlei, now in Germany, Birka at Lake Mälaren in Sweden and finally Kaupang in Vestfold, Norway.

Ribe sprang up at latest around AD 700 as a seasonal bartering and trading market. Traces of craftsmen's activity were also found. Early, but not from the very beginning, the area was divided into plots (Feveile 2006, 25). The king probably founded Ribe, but this cannot be said for certain. Ribe is considered to have had a key-position as trade centre for Scandinavia because all transport from Western Europe was directed through this centre (Callmer 1994, 53). This is, however, not necessarily true for the connection between the British Isles and Western Norway. Ribe appears to have replaced the Chief Seat of Dankirke, which can, among other things, be one of the signs of a new political structure coming into being (Andersson 2003, 317).

Archaeological finds tell us that Birka started its urbanisation in the course of the 8th century and it functioned as a centre until the end of the 10th century. Birka is known from the account of Rimbert about the missionary Ansgard's visit here about AD 830. The excavations have mainly been carried out in the large grave fields, but recently, part of the harbour has been investigated. The finds bear witness to an extensive network of long distance trade and a differentiated population. Not far away, on the other side of the sea, was the King's estate of Adelsö. According to Rimbert, the king played an important role here. (Andersson 2003, 320). Sigtuna seems to replace Birka's role in the late 10th century.

Hedeby is recorded as Schliestorp at the start of the 9th century, but can be dated by archaeological finds back to the middle of the 8th century. The town that later was fortified with a semi-circular earthwork was closely connected to the defence earthwork Danevirke (Dobat 2008, 27). Later, Schleswig replaced the functions of Hedeby.

In an account by the 'farmer-merchant' Othere from Hålogaland, we can read that, on his voyage from Northern Norway to Hedeby, he visited the harbour town, a port, Skiringsheal, about or sometime before AD 890. Skiringsheal is identified as Kaupang in Vestfold, where archaeological finds tell of regular contact with both Eastern and Western Europe from the late 8th century until the end of the 9th century when the settlement dissolved. This is the only place in Norway where we (Skre 2007, 45-46) can talk about an urban settlement, a town, in the Viking Period.

Common to these towns is that they played a part in the long-distance trade and that they were strategically situated on sea or water routes. At this time, Viken was reigned by the Danish king, and archaeologist Dagfinn Skre goes far in stating that Kaupang, Hedeby and Ribe were all founded by the Danish king based on the pattern of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon emporia. By founding towns along the borders of the kingdom, the Danish king adopted a new principle for his reign. This was the continental model for ruling introduced in Northern Europe in the first millennium AD by the Romans. The Germanic kings who established themselves later also employed this model. Security for trade must have been guaranteed by the royal forces in Ribe and Hedeby. Skre is, however, of the opinion that it was the sacred character of Skiringsal, founded on a religious belief that was shared by the people of both sides of the border, which could guarantee the security for the traders from near and far, at the northern border of the Danish empire (Skre 2007, 461).

In addition, we should briefly mention that a new market and production site was recently found at Heimdalsjordet, 500 m from the Gokstad ship's gravemound in Vestfold. A georadar investigation in 2011 revealed a larger system of rectangular parcels lining a street. Traces from eight over-ploughed gravemounds were also registered. Finds of numerous fragments of coins, weights, bars, hack-silver etc. witness about the function and age of the site, from the 8th century until AD 950 (Bill & Rødsrud 2013, 5-11). This centre can scarcely be compared with the renowned Viking Age centres or towns mentioned above. The finds must be characterised as remnants of a local manufacturing and trade centre among several others in Scandinavia. Another newly discovered Viking centre in Norway is Bjørkum in Lærdal, Sogn, which functioned as a seasonal production and trade centre (Ramstad 2011; Ramstad et al. 2011).

Depression

In the second half of the 9th century, we witness the beginning signs of a depression for some of the towns, when others, as for instance Wollin on the river Dzwina, emerged (Callmer 1994, 66; Filipowiak 1989, 694). Partly as a result of the Viking raids, the Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon towns declined suddenly before the middle of the 9th century. This resulted in the Scandinavian trade turning eastward. For instance, the contact between Birka and the Rhineland and West-Slavonic areas around the Baltic dominated around the mid-9th century. Contact with the West-Slavonic area continued when contact with Byzantium, the Caliphate and Khazars land became dominant (Ambrosiani 1999, 241). This change can also be traced in Kaupang (Willemsen 2009, 177). When the Vikings attacked Dorestad again in AD 863, in a long series of attacks, they found that this once so great emporium had been falling into decay for many years (Coupland 2010, 101-102). Signs of that can be traced through, among other things, the finds from Kaupang, Ribe and Birka. Frankish and Frisian ceramics that are supposed to have been exported from Dorestad disappeared sometime between AD 860 and AD 880. This shows the effect the trading connection with Dorestad had had for especially the northern partners after the commodities from Rhineland no longer passed through the town (Callmer 1994, 177).

The Danish kingdom was weakened for nearly a century after the death of King Horik in AD 854. In the same way as a stable kingdom facilitated, and the king actively in his own interest participated in, the establishment of commercial centres that could lead to urbanisation, a weakened royal power would be unfavourable in this regard. The great ship graves around

the Oslo fjord can be a manifestation of local changes. Perhaps these graves are a sign of the weakened Danish kingdom's position in Viken, which may have caused the disappearance of Kaupang. The changes can correspond with the moving of the Ynglinge- family to Borre area in Vestfold about AD 800 and their possible return in the late 9th century, when Olav Geirstad-Alf may have assumed the reign over Skiringssal (Skre 2007, 468). The same thoughts have been proposed regarding the great graves at the Karmsund in Rogland (Opedal 2005). Another reason can have been the disturbances forced by the attempt to unify Norway by King Harald Fairhair. We cannot know, however, how this affected the circumstances. What happens in and around Kaupang is that the hall at the nearby farm Huseby is abandoned in the first half of the 10th century. There are few finds from the town area, but the graves testify that this was the most intensive period for burials. Without the rule of the Danish king, which ended about AD 900, the position of Kaupang as a place of importance at an important border also disappeared.

On the other hand, the Viking raids and their subsequent more non-violent voyages, led to the import of valuable items into Norway, as reflected in numerous insular finds from the graves, especially in Western Norway, except for Hordaland, and Trøndelag (Wamers 1985, Karte 3, 5-7, 13; Sørheim 2010, 206, 378-381). This can have led to a strengthening of the economy and centralisation around the local aristocracy. We can see Gausel in Stavanger as an example of a prosperous farm with inhabitants that took active part in this traffic (Sørheim 2010, 206; 2011, 17-28).

The first medieval towns

Over the course of six centuries, the west modified its economic and social hierarchy very little. The historian Gabriel Le Bras wrote that the open economy of the empire from the Migration period, the Migration period included, and the later Arabic expansion was replaced by a closed economy with a static technique. In the 11th century, there was a general revolution in the organisation of the society. The contact between east and west and between the different regions in the west was re-established on a broader foundation by more and more active fairs and markets, assisted by maritime and overland business. Ships and caravans began to move more freely and frequently. Banks and co-operations were established and the methods for effective payments were improved. As result, there was a thorough change in the social structure; the merchant arose at the warrior's side, the citizens next to the nobleman (Le Bras 1975, 291 translated).

The historian Georges Duby (1981, 141) found numerous examples of purchases and sales in the Domesday book and other sources. Following that, he sees that England was a land where one was familiar with money and profit. The internal trade was connected to widespread trade relations, mainly directed towards Scandinavia, but also to the Continent. The fact that English types of coins served as a model for the oldest minting in the Nordic countries bears witness to this fact.

In this connection, I will shortly add that the Viking activities also led to urbanisation in the British Isles. The great armies, mainly consisting of Danes, conquered most of Eastern England and that led to the establishing of Danelagen through the Wedmore-tractate in AD 878. As a result, several towns grew up, of which York, which became the Scandinavian capital of Danelagen, was the most important. Norwegian Vikings, that had no tradition for

establishing urban settlements, settled in what later became the town Dublin at the middle of 9th century. The Viking town Dublin grew up as a centre for trade and industry. Of other 'Viking towns' in Ireland, Waterford, Limerick and Wexford can be mentioned (Clarke & Ambrosiani 1991, 90).

According to an agreement with King Ethelred in AD 991, the Vikings committed themselves not to attack merchant ships in English river-mounts and leave the English merchants in Francia in peace. Cnut the Great gained privileges from the king of Burgundy in AD 1027 that benefited the Ange-Saxon *merkatores* on their routes to Italy. Duby also refers to Aelfric Grammaticus' *Collegium*, written in the year AD 1000, which tells about those adventurers that 'load their commodities on ships, go to sea, sell their cargo and buy commodities not found in England' (Duby 1981, 142). One also knows that some of them became rich. London became the nodal point for this trade. According to the customs regulations drawn up by King Ethelred in the year AD 1000, the 'subjects of the emperor', i.e. merchants from Rhineland that came to buy wool, had the same privileges as the citizens of London. The men from Huy, Liège, and Novelles were not let into the town before they had paid duty. We hear about merchants from Rouen selling wine, those who came from Flanders, Ponthieu and Francia (i.e. Ile-de-France) and finally the Danes and Norwegians, who could live freely for one year in London. Duby points out that when the economy was opened in this way, it promoted the emergence of towns (Duby 1981, 142).

Before AD 800, towns were only found in south-east England, but a number of fortifications were gradually established for strategic reasons, so-called *burhs*. Some of them were situated in commercial centres, and against a fee, the king erected protected sites, *hagae*, for traders. The most important of them were given permission to mint coins. They are described in the written sources as *portus*, specialised for trade. In addition to the mentioned Irish areas, in the Scandinavian occupied Danelagen, other centres emerged, for instance York, where a suburb inhabited by merchants and craftsmen grew up outside the old Roman walls. Another town was Norwich, where as many as 25 churches could be seen in AD 1086. According to the Domesday book, where we can read that 1/12 of the inhabitants lived in town-like concentrations, the towns were already as numerous as in the 14th century (Duby 1981, 142).

In Germania, the same process took place but at a slower pace. After getting rid of the threat of the Mayars, the German kingdom became the most stable state in Europe. Because of silver mining in Hartz, Saxon dinars overflowed into Baltic and Polish areas. This gave rise to trade routes from the east and north. The Ottonian emperors were in control and introduced trade regulations. About 20 ports of trade, protected by the emperor, grew up between AD 936 and 1002. As in England, also Germany was urbanised. Through Rhineland, the Germans gained contact with one of the areas that had suffered the most damage from the Viking raids, but soon rose again after the attacks. Flanders and the areas around Maas saw a growth that outshined what was happening in England (Duby 1981, 142).

A fast demographical increase took place at this time in Northern Europe. Earlier, Western Europe was so sparsely populated that one could choose the best agricultural areas with a diverse economic basis. This favoured extensive self-sufficiency within each town or local area. However, the population pressure gradually forced a more intensive exploitation of the traditional resources and more marginal resources had to be taken into use. This subsequently formed the foundation for a specialised production for a more extensive market and exchange

of goods (Nedkvitne 2014, 16). Cloth was so to say the only industrial product that was exported in the Middle Ages on a really large scale. The systematic production for export started in the Flemish towns around the middle of the 11th century. Before this, the production of for instance Frisian cloth had been a side job performed in quiet periods alongside other tasks (Werveke 1975, 14).

People living inside what today is the border of Norway have exchanged commodities with people abroad since the early Stone Age. From around AD 890, we have the account from the trading-farmer Othere from Hålogaland, who taxed the Sami people and travelled with his commodities himself to the ports Skiringssal (Kaupang in Vestfold), Hedeby near Schleswig as well as to England. Early in the second millennium, a new form of commercial activity arose that consisted of the specialised production of items for sale in distant markets. Because of the rise in trade, the former farmer- and landowner-merchants, such as Othere, were increasingly replaced by professional town tradesmen. This economic specialisation led to a commercialising of the stockfish production in Norway (Nedkvitne 2014, 25). Signs of the growth of long distance trade and transport in Northern Europe can be seen through the development of specialised cargo-vessels from the 10th to 12th centuries (Crumlin-Pedersen 1999, 17).

The first permanent Norwegian towns

In the middle of the AD 1130, Oredicus Vitalis in his *Historia ecclesiastica* listed six *civitates* along the Norwegian coast: Bergen, Konghelle, Kaupang (Nidaros/Trondheim), Borg (Sarpsborg), Oslo and Tønsberg (Helle 1995, 3). The first Norwegian towns, except for Kaupang, can be traced back to around and shortly after the millennium change. This should be seen in light of the political situation, the demographic development and the growth in production and commerce we saw in Northern Europe at this time. The following centuries were an important period in the development of the production of commodities and trade. Norway took also part in this expansion. The trade of stockfish formed the foundation for new settlements and economy along the Western coast and in Northern Norway. I will return to this in more detail later.

A stable and strong royal power that could create security and peace for the merchants, in addition to the king's own activity, which could give impulses and make efforts that would stimulate urbanisation, were as discussed, important factors for the existence of Kaupang and other Scandinavian and Northern European towns. The gathered kingdom of Norway and a stable royal power were therefore important premises for towns and urban activity to grow up in Norway in the same way as we saw in Europe. On this basis, it is no surprise that the founding of Nidaros (Trondheim), where the oldest traces of a permanent urban settlement can be found in Norway, took place under the relatively stable and peaceful political reign of the mighty Earls of Lade and King Olav Trygvasson. What role the king played in the founding of the new town at the mouth of the river Nid, where archaeological finds have told that there already was a settlement, can be that he regulated the plots, he built a royal estate and probably a church. In addition, he can have gathered and organised the spread political-administrative, juridical and cultic functions. The presence of the king with his administration, servants and military forces and other followers, was of course an important factor by itself that forced urban settlements because of the huge number of people and high activity of the royal court in one place. This can be illustrated from information about the vast

number of people at the royal estate of Olaf the Saint in Nidaros given by Snorre Sturlasson (Sturlasson 1997, 236). Below, I will provide a brief account of the first history of some of the oldest medieval towns in Norway.

Concerning Oslo, the role of the king is not that obvious. Snorre must have been mistaken when he gave King Harald Hardrada (ruled AD 1046-1066) the honour of being the founder of Oslo. The old historians Munck and Nicolaysen thought that an old marked or fishing villages could have been the background for the emerging of Oslo (Storm 1969 [1899], 389-392). This was a hypothesis that their later colleague Halfdan Koht supported (Koht 1969 [1921]). Archaeological investigations have shown that an urban centre was already established at the bottom of the Oslo fjord. Archaeologist Erik Schia therefore believed that Oslo arose as a royal administration centre for agricultural trade. Archaeological investigations have shown that this activity could go back to the second half of the 10th century (Schia 1989, 63). This is in accordance with the term *port of trade* as the economic historian Karl Polanyi defined it (Polanyi et al. 1957; Polanyi 1963, 30). When Snorre used the term *kaupstad* about Oslo in the saga of Harald Hardrada, this explains the function of the place. 'The meaning of the term *kaupstaðr* seems originally to have been closely connected to the functional aspect: a place where trade is conducted, *kaup* [...] nevertheless it seems decisively likely that these terms reflect the need for a linguistic distinction, necessitated by trade and forthcoming urbanism. The constructions *kaupstaðr* and *kaupboer* [people living in the kaupstaðr] must be original; *staðr* and *boer* were secondary town terms' (Translated from Nilsen 1976, 308).

The topographic organisation of medieval Oslo tells us about the evolution towards a town. The oldest street is Østre strete (Eastern street) that was a part of an old main road from the shore to the countryside north and east of the town, i.e. through the Grorud valley towards the large agriculture district of Romerike. Geographically, we can regard Oslo as a natural nodal point on this route between the rich agricultural area and the Oslo fjord, a nodal point that, with the help of the king, must have developed into an urban society early on. Archaeological investigations have shown that there was an urban area here before AD 1050, the traditional anniversary year of Oslo. The eldest of the two churchyards under the Clements church from the 1130's, can be dated back to c. AD 1000. The graves indicate that the first church had the same orientation as the ordinary buildings on plots north of the church (Schia 1987; Molaug 2008; Brendalsmo & Molaug 2014). It is very likely that the Clements church in Oslo was a royal church from about AD 1000 because this is the oldest church here (Brendalsmo & Molaug 2014, 20). The king that assumedly would have been behind the founding of the city could not, however, be a Norwegian but Danish, likely Harald Bluetooth (c. AD 940-985, or his son Svein Forkbeard c. AD 985-1015), who had his royal seat in Viken at that time.

As opposed to Oslo, in Tønsberg, a number of structures of prehistoric longhouses were found that tell us about rural occupation at the site before the medieval town became a reality during the 11th century. Dating of material from recent augering in the area between the medieval Stræti and the sea shows that there has been habitation in this area from around 1000 or early 11th century with accumulated, well preserved organic material (Brendalsmo & Molaug 2014, 147, 149 Fig. 5, 197).

According to the Saga tradition, Bergen was supposed to have been 'satt' (founded) as a kaupstad by King Olav Kyrre (AD 1067-1093) (Old Norse: kyrri, English: 'the Peaceful'). Not many archaeological finds older than that are registered, but the archaeologist Gitte

Hansen, based on the few finds, among others from traces of property borders, argues that the founding of Bergen took place half a century before. Olav Kyrre changed this plot system by including more land in the town and by building churches at Holmen (the royal area north of the town where, among others, the Håkon hall, first used 11th September 1261, can be found today) (Hansen 2005). Bergen was founded in an area (Mid- and North-Hordaland) that has astonishingly few archaeological Viking finds and monuments, as opposed to the rest of Western Norway. From this information, we cannot see the founding of Bergen as a result of local economic activity. From the few insular finds in Mid- and North-Hordaland, we can also ask the question if the Vikings of these areas were frequent participants in the Viking raids or trade to the west (Sørheim 2010, Fig. 15, 217, 310). Can the dominance of King Harald Fairhair or later kings in this area be an answer to this question? The basis for the establishment of Bergen may be seen as the king's estate Alrekstad, 2 km south of the city centre, which would have drawn early activity to a modest harbour at Vågen and the need of a point of support and centre for the later national kings in Western Norway.

Except for the royal initiative, expansion and the subsequent need of a permanent, national administrative centre, we have to see the late growth of Bergen in the light of international trade and the country's opportunities for economic activity and expansion in the first centuries of the Middle Ages. Through King Sverre's speech against drunkenness in AD 1186, we know that Bergen was involved in international trade at this time (*Sverres saga* 1986, 151-152). Stockfish, *bergefisk* (fish from Bergen), from North-Western Norway (Møre) and Northern Norway became the dominating international export article that was traded via Bergen. The export of hides, furs, oil, wood and butter was obviously of less importance. The trade of stockfish improved rapidly in the 12th century, parallel to the general rise in Northern European trade at this time. The trade of stockfish brought 'the commercial revolution of the Middle Ages' to Norway (Nedkvitne 2014, 38).

Gitte Hansen (2005, 239) concludes that the kings, first and foremost King Eystein (reign from AD 1103-1123), had a plan to strengthen Bergen as a royal and sacral centre. They invested in the town with a plan to influence and control the export of stockfish to Europe and probably wanted to channel the supplies and taxes from the royal and other estates through the town, into a system of trade. The church also became an important economic power that was a part of this business. What is of great importance with regard to the church, is that Norway became a part of the extensive religious and cultural network, stretching from the pope in Rome to the tiniest little Norwegian fjord or valley.

Worth noting is that Stavanger is not mentioned in the list of Ordericus Vitalis (1972-80). Stavanger was founded as an episcopal residence at his time. Nor one of the other episcopal residences, Hamar, which was a minting place in the middle of the 11th century, is mentioned. These two places must, however, be reckoned as nodal points in the European organisation of the Church, without necessarily having had any function besides being an episcopal seat from the beginning (Sørheim 2010, 303). Skien in Telemark may have had an early function as a seasonal market at an important waterway, especially connected to the trade of hones from Eidsborg in Telemark from the end of the Viking Period and later. In the High Medieval Period, Skien expanded to be a town (Myrvoll 1992, 159, 279). In addition, we can consider the small towns Steinkjer, Veøy, Borgund and Vågan among the oldest urban centres.

Stavanger and Veøy were later called towns in written sources. This means that the inhabitants regarded them as towns. Borgund also qualifies to be classified as a town (Sørheim 2010, 324). Besides these places, there are a number of local sites that stand out in written sources or from place names as nodal points, for instance as trading places or seasonal markets. This can be places with name combinations as *kaup* (buying), *lahelle* (loading place) or *-torg* (market). Some of them, as earlier mentioned, can be traced back to the Viking Period. In addition, these places filled an important role beyond the local needs, and they served as small and distant nodal points in international trade.

Besides Bergen and Trondheim, which are also mentioned as participants in the stockfish trade in the Sverre Saga (1996, 21), I would particularly like to draw attention to Borgund, near Ålesund and Vågan in Lofoten as fishing stations, production and staple places of stockfish. They both built the main part of their existence on the fishing of *skrei* (Atlantic cod) and production of stockfish to be exported via Bergen. The cod fisheries of Lofoten are well known, but also the fisheries of spawning cod at the coast of Sunnmøre, and especially in the Borgund fjord, were occasionally on par with the Lofoten fisheries (Sørheim 2004). Stockfish was an appreciated commodity in Europe, not the least because of the catholic Lenten fare. The sociologist Ernst Mandel defined a commodity as a product not produced for own consumption, but meant for sale in a market. Every commodity must have a value for selling as well as a practical value. He also points out that when a production starts and becomes general, this radically changes production methods and social organisation (Mandel 1968, 11). This led to considerable changes along the coast of North-Western and Northern Norway from the early Middle Ages.

When stockfish became a major commodity for export, this laid the foundation for new industries, settlements and new social conditions along the coast (see for instance Sandnes 1977; Bertelsen 2011, 78). Borgund and Vågan, established in the early Middle Ages, are known as the most important local staples. From Møre and north along the coast, people now could make a living from fishing. They settled near the spawning grounds, where previously agriculture alone was not sufficient for making a living. By trading fish products for e.g. grain and clothes, access to soil for agriculture or grassing land for animals was no longer of crucial importance for the settlements. The concept of 'fisherman-farmer' was created (Bertelsen 1997). Some of these fishing societies or fishing stations grew into important, highly populated and densely built up, urban-like societies in the Middle Ages. They also had an economy that differed from the agrarian societies, and on basis of some of the town-definitions, they should have been regarded as towns. They have, however, never been defined as such. As an example, I can mention the fishing station Grip, on some very small islands, without any soil at all for agriculture or not at all for burying their dead, far out in the Atlantic Ocean, outside Kristiansund at Nordmøre. Here, a wooden church was built in the 15th century. Another example is Bud in Romsdal that grew up as the most important fishing station, trading centre and densely built up village between Bergen and Trondheim during the 16th and 17th centuries. Here, the last national assembly in the free medieval Norway took place in 1533. The archaeologist Reidar Bertelsen (2011) has, through archaeological investigations, found how a fishing society in Northern Norway functioned and what resources that were the foundation for such settlements. For instance, the ceramic finds bear witness to the connection to German and Southern Scandinavian areas. These fishing stations, and in particular the staple places

such as Vågan and Borgund, were important nodal points on the route from the production sites, via Bergen, to the consumers areas. When the trade of fish along the coast during the 14th-15th centuries, changed to direct contact between fishermen and the Bergen merchants, dominated by the German Hansa, these staple places were deserted. What is important in this connection is that these new economic activities and new way of living arose as a direct result of developments in Northern European societies, with the emerge of industry, organised trade, towns, population increases, political developments etc., and – as mentioned – helped forward by the catholic rules of the fast of Lent. Because of trade and religion, even the most out-of-the-way little settlement in Norway had contact with Europe and European culture and along the routes were nodal points, where also administrative centres for the church and for the king were established. Of these, Bergen was the most important example.

Conclusion

The prehistoric centres in what we today understand as Norway were small and mostly connected to estates of the local elite. The growth towards urban and urban-like society was late. The only urban place in Viking Norway was Skiringssalkaupangen (Kaupang) in Vestfold. Kaupang grew up, like other urban sites in Europe, because of the increasing establishment of nations, based on new political forces, the initiative of mighty emperors or kings, religious activities and organisation and because of a general blooming in economy and trade following a period of decline after the fall of the Roman Empire. New research, where recent archaeological finds have been brought in as active sources for historians as well, has again brought Pirenne's thesis into the light. McCormick (2001, 798) concludes that

Although we must now situate the moments and stages of economic decline from antiquity elsewhere in time, space and causality, yet there remains fundamental truth in his (Pirenne, authors remark) overall insight, that the rise – and economic consolidation – of Islam changed the nature of an emerging European economy. But it did so not so much by applying the coup de grace to moribund the late Roman exchange system in the 600s. A century later it offered the wealth and markets which would fire the first rise of western Europe, a rise whose rhythms we can detect in the movements of diplomats, pilgrims, warriors, merchants, and, I think, slaves.'

We can follow this rise during the Viking Period also in Norway, but the time was not yet ready for the emergence of permanent towns. Kaupang as the only Viking urban settlement known in Norway grew up like one of several towns at the border of the Danish kingdom, but because of the weakening of this kingdom, the lifetime of Kaupang was limited. Several similar centres and towns suffered and disappeared at the end of the Viking Period. It is a peculiar thing that several of the sites established in the British Isles by Vikings, who had no tradition for founding towns back home, developed into permanent towns. This can be explained by both economic and political reasons, but also from the limited population back home. The spread settlement in Norwegian societies, with self-supporting farms, did not have the necessary economy, enough movement of people and commodities or help from a central political power that could support urban centres. The flow of commodities, carried out by local chieftains, was not of a volume that could create nodal points of importance.

In Norway, we can see that first at the very end of the Viking Period, near the transition to the Medieval Period, the circumstances were sufficient for the establishment of real and permanent urban centres and towns. At this time, we had a mostly gathered nation and a royal power that could help in the developments of towns. Through the kings' own activities, and through laws, regulations and orders, the king could create better conditions for economic activities. The Norwegians became participants in the European trade system, where stockfish became our dominant export article. When stockfish became a commodity, not for own consumption but for trade, it became possible to settle along the coast, near the spawning grounds, where poor conditions for agriculture and stock breeding had made settling during the time of farming-bound societies in previous times impossible. An important factor that also was essential for the growth of towns was the church and its administration, with its somewhat later significant economic activity. We cannot without doubt point at one particular reason for the founding and growth of permanent Norwegian towns, either on the background of the saga tradition, (founded by the king), the 'harbour town theory', (grown from older trading places), or the activity of the church. Two exceptions with regard to the church can, however, be the founding of the bishop's residential towns of Stavanger and Hamar. The foundation and growth of the towns and the smaller marked towns were, however, closely connected to European development. I don't think I go too far when stating that developments in the political and religious circumstances in Europe, and the increase in population, trade, industry and technology, were the main contributing factors for the emergence of urban societies and towns in Norway as well.

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