

SITUATING GENDER IN EUROPEAN ARCHAEOLOGIES

Edited by

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Front Cover Illustration

Gold foil from Rogaland in western Norway showing a man and a woman,
often interpreted as the Nordic Vanir god Freyr and his wife Gerd
from the family of Giants. 7th–8th century AD.

(Photo: Svein Skare. © Bergen Museum, University of Bergen, Norway.)

Back Cover Illustration

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New Pathways for Women in Twelfth-century Bergen, Norway?

GITTE HANSEN

What roles did women take when they moved into town? Did some find new ways of making a living? Archaeological and historical sources from twelfth-century Bergen on the west coast of Norway are investigated to shed light upon this question. Within medieval studies, emphasis has most often been on the “big questions” such as Christianisation, state formation, and urbanisation. Attention is often given to actors and politics at the highest level of society. What I present here is a close-up study that provides some substance to our insight into the everyday life of a group of ordinary people – traditionally anonymous or voiceless actors – who belonged to the first generations of townspeople in a newly established town.

The remnants of advanced food production – in this case sausage pins – have been considered an insignificant source category. One reason for this may perhaps be that they indeed represent food production, which is traditionally considered a domestic activity carried out by actors on lower levels of society (women) and thus inherently less interesting for the “big questions” in mainstream studies. In this study, however, sausage pins play an intriguing role because insight into their spatial distribution has triggered the discovery of what may be a new urban trade in early Bergen.

Bergen was founded in the eleventh century, and in the following generations a living urban community developed here. With this as a background, remnants of advanced food production are studied in relation to the traces of visitors to the town, such as ambulating artisans. It appears that inn-keeping and the production of food for sale soon emerged. It is also argued that women were central actors in these new urban trades.

The paper has its background in a comprehensive study of early Bergen, where the overall aim was to study the emergence of Bergen as a town (HANSEN 2005). Through the years researchers have tried to identify the primary forces that led to urbanisation in northern Europe (e.g. ANDERSSON 2003; ANDRÉN 1989; PIRENNE [1925] 1968). In Norway the rise of Bergen – the country’s most important

town during the Middle Ages¹ – has been a central issue since the middle of the nineteenth century (e.g. HELLE 1982 with references; STORM 1899). However, until the middle of the 1990s, research was with few exceptions lead by historians (see HJELLE 2000, with references). Although archaeological excavations had been performed with “modern” methods since the mid 1950s, the growing but mainly unpublished archeological material was not readily accessible to non-archaeologists. Hence, being based primarily on the sparse written records, the story of Bergen’s genesis was drawn up in rather general terms. Focus was to a large extent on the impact of kings, the Church as an institution, and the “the system of society’s” inherent needs for a town (for a further discussion and references see HANSEN 2000; HANSEN 2005, 23–33).

In my research I wanted to approach early Bergen from new angles. One angle was to study urbanisation on the basis of all available archaeological, botanical, topographical, and written sources but with the archaeological sources as the point of departure. With a basic understanding of social change as a result of the interplay between people from different levels of the social hierarchy and their wider social context – an understanding inspired by Anthony Giddens’ Theory of Structuration (eg. GIDDENS 1984) – another new angle was to apply an explicit actor perspective when analysing the sources: in a somewhat simplified and schematic way, one may say that in a stratified society like that of the early Norwegian central kingdom, initiatives were taken from the “top and down” or from the “bottom and up”. In this model “top-down” initiatives were taken by resourceful actors with a central position in society: the king or his representatives. “Bottom-up” initiatives were taken from less resourceful actors positioned at lower levels of the social hierarchy: the townspeople and visitors in the town. Both groups of actors could perform “major initiatives” and “daily activities” in interplay with one another and within a wider historical context.

Documentary sources from the period under study here often have an overrepresentation of activities carried out by male actors from the highest levels of society or from institutions such as the Church. In comparison archaeological sources are relatively unbiased in their representation; they reflect activities independent of the actors’ age, sex, social status, etc., and are thus well suited for the study of daily activities carried out by a broad spectrum of people. The

¹ In Scandinavia the Middle Ages is the period after the Viking Age and before the Reformation: c. 1030–1536). The time span between c. 1030 and c. 1130 is often referred to as the early Middle Ages.

archaeological sources reflect activities in a rather concrete way; remains of buildings and constructions are likely to reflect conscious strategies and intentional action, that is, “major initiatives” taken by actors. Accumulated layers, waste, and artefacts either lost or thrown away reflect the intended or unintended outcome of “daily activities”, also carried out by actors. My aim was to populate the story of the emergence of Bergen with groups of people from different levels of society. By linking the major initiatives and daily activities discerned in the sources to my two groups of actors: top-down actors such as kings and bottom-up actors including the townspeople – men, women, and children – and visitors to the town such as artisans, merchants, etc., I wanted to draw up a more diversified picture of how Bergen developed from “a materialised idea” into a living urban community with a broad spectrum of functions, activities, inhabitants, and visitors. (HANSEN 2005, 30–33).

The sources were studied using Visual Impact Analysis (VIA), an analytic tool borrowed from landscape geography (EMMELIN 1984; HANSEN 1994). VIA implicates the production of maps as a means to visualise patterns and tendencies in the sources and hence analyse relationships between the natural topography and physical structures, people, and activities in this setting – patterns and relationships that might otherwise be difficult to discern (HANSEN 2008, 81–85). Although medieval Bergen covers a large geographical area the town was treated as “one site”. Having dated and correlated material from the relevant archaeological sites, I drew all major structures, houses, pathways, churches, etc., onto five digital maps. These maps represent five layers of contemporary structures: five archaeological horizons. This was done using a Geographical Information System (GIS). One benefit of this approach was the possibility to effortlessly switch between macro (the whole town) and micro (town plot/household) levels. When zooming out and for the first time appreciating the relationship between structures found at the many individual archaeological sites, previously unrecognised patterns in the material emerged and gave way to new, unexpected, and even previously “unthought-of” questions. One important result aided by the VIA approach was the recognition of plot-systems. Having reconstructed plots for large parts of the town area, these plots served as analytic units and offered the opportunity to analyse structures and the artefact material on a plot/extended household level. Patterns in the sources were hence studied contextually on a plot/extended household level, and unacknowledged activities – and actors – emerged. One of the interesting patterns in the data was that formed by the differing distributions of sausage pins and ordinary cooking tools

versus debris from workshops occupied by travelling artisans. This pattern is pursued here.

The empirical basis

Archaeological, environmental, and a sparse written material provide sources for the first years of Bergen's history as a town. The cultural deposits of Bergen are characterised by very good, often waterlogged conditions for the preservation of organic materials; metal is also fairly well preserved in addition to the usual body of well preserved stone and ceramic artefacts. In Norway wood was, and still is, the common building material for ordinary houses. One disadvantage of this is that it makes medieval Bergen vulnerable to fire. Major historically known fires have devastated the whole or parts of the town during history, and they have left "fire-layers" in the archaeological deposits. Using a combination of artefact studies, dendrochronology, and information about fires from written sources, the fire-layers are used as an additional means when dating archaeological remains. Consequently Bergen is blessed with rather good conditions for narrow dates of the archaeological data (HANSEN 1998; HANSEN 2005, 45–47).

I have analysed patterns in the distribution of artefacts and structures from 46 sites dating between c. 800 and c. 1170. The sites cover about 13,000 m² and range in size from small ditches with a single profile to the famous Bryggen site at the German Wharf with some 5700 m² (HERTEIG 1990, 9), of which c. 2000 m² revealed structures that date to the period of interest here.² The sources were, as already mentioned, analysed within five chronological horizons. Horizon 1 (c. 800–1020/30) was studied as a backdrop for the emergence of the town. From horizon 2 (1020/30–c. 1070) onward, the material was analysed with the town plot as the lowest analytic unit (for a full account of the methodological approach see HANSEN 2005, 42–53). The sources are scarce for the oldest "urban horizons" (horizons 2 and 3), reflecting not only that activity was low but also that artefact contexts were methodologically unsatisfying. In horizon 4 (1100–1120s), activities were intensified in the new town, and from a methodological point of view the source situation is better. However, for this horizon, one still cannot perform quantitative analyses across the plots and make conclusions based on the *absence* of certain groups of finds on the single plots – which is what I want to do

² All archaeological sites in Bergen investigated up to 1999 have been studied in order to identify material dating to the period under consideration here.

in the present study. Thus my focus will be on the period covered by my horizon 5, that is, the period between the 1120s and c. 1170.

The artefact assemblage assigned to horizon 5 comprised some 9,100 finds, stemming from 24 plots/analytic units (*Fig. 1*). Most of the plots were only partially excavated, but the contexts were largely well-dated. Data from horizon 5 is valid for reliable conclusions regarding activities in the town area seen as a whole. When going to the plot level, however, there are still methodological problems, and the representativity of the material is strong enough for a quantitative approach on only on four plots, where the absence of finds may be given

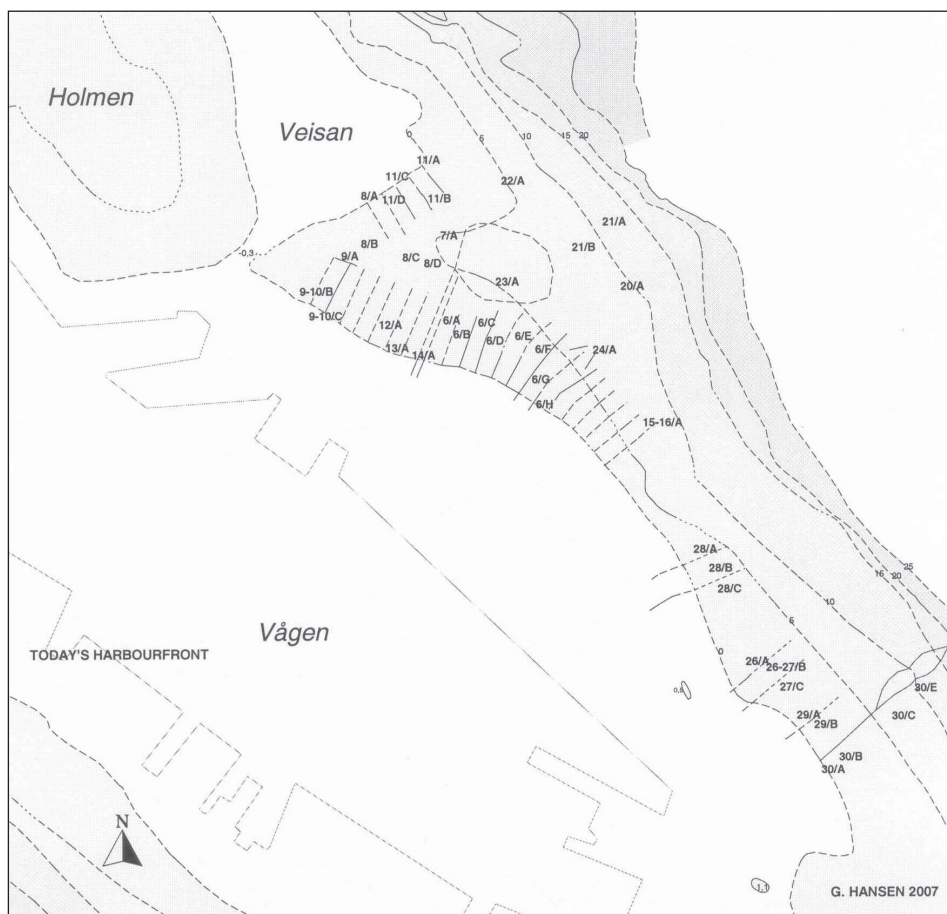


Fig. 1. Plots and analytic units in the northern and middle town areas of Bergen. Plots/units with a number have been fully or partially investigated archaeologically. 24 of the plots/units produced artefacts.

culture-historical explanations as opposed to predominantly methodological ones. I will return to this below.

Sausage pins are common in medieval urban contexts in Scandinavia (WEBER 1990; NORDEIDE 1990). The pins are 6–27 cm long wooden sticks with a diameter of 0.5–0.7 cm with one end pointed whereas the other may be cut or broken straight off (*Fig. 2*). From ethnological studies it is known that pins with the same characteristics as the archaeological artefacts were used up into modern days when making sausages. The pins were used when closing the sausage casings. The sausage was then hung up, dried, smoked or otherwise prepared for consumption (*Fig. 3*). In historical times sausage pins were often reused (WEBER 1990, 76–81).

There are at least three steps from the production of a sausage to consumption. Having butchered and dressed the animal, meat and entrails are chopped and filled into the sausage casing. The casing is then closed with a pin, and the sausage is dried or smoked for storage. The second step is storage of the sausage, and the third step is serving and eating the sausage. I find it most likely that the sausage pin was taken out of the sausage before it was served and eaten. At this point the pin would have outlived its purpose and could be reused in the household where the sausages were made. This would be in accordance with the ethnologically documented reuse of the pins. On this basis, I assume that a sausage pin recovered from an archaeological context signifies a site of sausage-production or storage, rather than its place of consumption.



Fig. 2. Sausage pins. (Photo G. Hansen).



*Fig. 3. The production of sausages: The sausage is stuffed, a sausage pin is inserted to close the sausage casing, and the sausage is dried or smoked for storage.
(Photo: Jan Haug, Hedemarksuseet, after Birthe Weber 1990).*

In horizon 5, some 730 objects were classified as sausage pins; this comprises about 8% of the total number of artefacts assigned to this horizon. The sausage pin is not complex in form, and it is thus possible that some may have been incorrectly classified.³ However, since we are dealing with such a large number of objects, it is likely that the true number of sausage pins is still very high⁴.

³ In material from medieval Ribe in Denmark, pins initially interpreted as sausage pins were through their context re-classified as skewers/stretchers used when stretching skins. The Ribe pins were found in the ground encircling patches of dark soil (BENCARD 1973). In the present material the pins have not been found in such a context.

⁴ The majority of the pins studied here were initially classified in the 1950s–1970s. Until 2009 the pins were not accessible in the Bergen University Museum storerooms, so

When we compare the distributions of sausage pins with other find groups, interesting patterns emerge. The distribution of tools for ordinary or basic cooking – that is, soapstone cooking vessels and stone slabs for baking flat bread or heating up foodstuffs – showed that food was prepared on 17 of the 24 investigated plots/analytic units in horizon 5. This is not surprising, because everyone must eat. The distribution of sausage pins, however, showed that sausages were not made or stored everywhere (*Fig. 4*). This may imply that sausage making, in some respects, was a specialised activity. The question then is whether the plots where sausage pins were few in number or have not been found are also characterised by patterning in other find categories.

Many ambulating artisans, such as shoemakers, comb makers, and some types of smiths, visited Bergen for short periods during horizon 5. This is shown through the distribution of production waste and blanks on the town plots (HANSEN 2005, 203–204). On several of the plots where relatively few or no sausage pins were found, artisans had probably used a temporary workshop. During horizon 5 this is the case on six plots; 6/G, 8/A, 8/B, 26/A, 30/B and 30/E. There was also a lack of sausage pins on plot 27/C, but some pins were found between this plot and the neighbouring plot 26–27/B and it cannot be determined from which plot the pins stem (cf. *Fig. 4*). If “everybody” ate sausages – and this is an assumption in my study – the general pattern in the archaeological record implies that ambulating artisans did not themselves make sausages but instead had to buy their “hot dogs”. This thought is not unreasonable, considering the comprehensive tasks involved in sausage-making. From this it follows logically that some townspeople must have made sausages for sale.

However, as pointed out above, there are problems of representativity in the artefact material from this early part of Bergen’s history. I find that one can only perform a meaningful quantitative analysis of the artefacts across four of the plots in horizon 5, namely plots 6/C, 6/D, 6/E and 6/G. As seen in the diagram in *Fig. 4*, a quantitative analysis of data from these plots, however, supports a pattern of ambulating artisans on plots with few or no sausage pins: on plot 6/G, where

when performing my analysis for the present study I had to rely on the old classifications. In May 2009 the pins became accessible and I have looked through the material. I am pleased to report that with a very few exceptions (6–7 objects out of 730) the pins under study here have been classified in accordance with WEBER’s (1990) description of the object type. Since the number of wrongly classified pins is so low, I have not found it necessary to adjust the numbers in tables or statistics here.

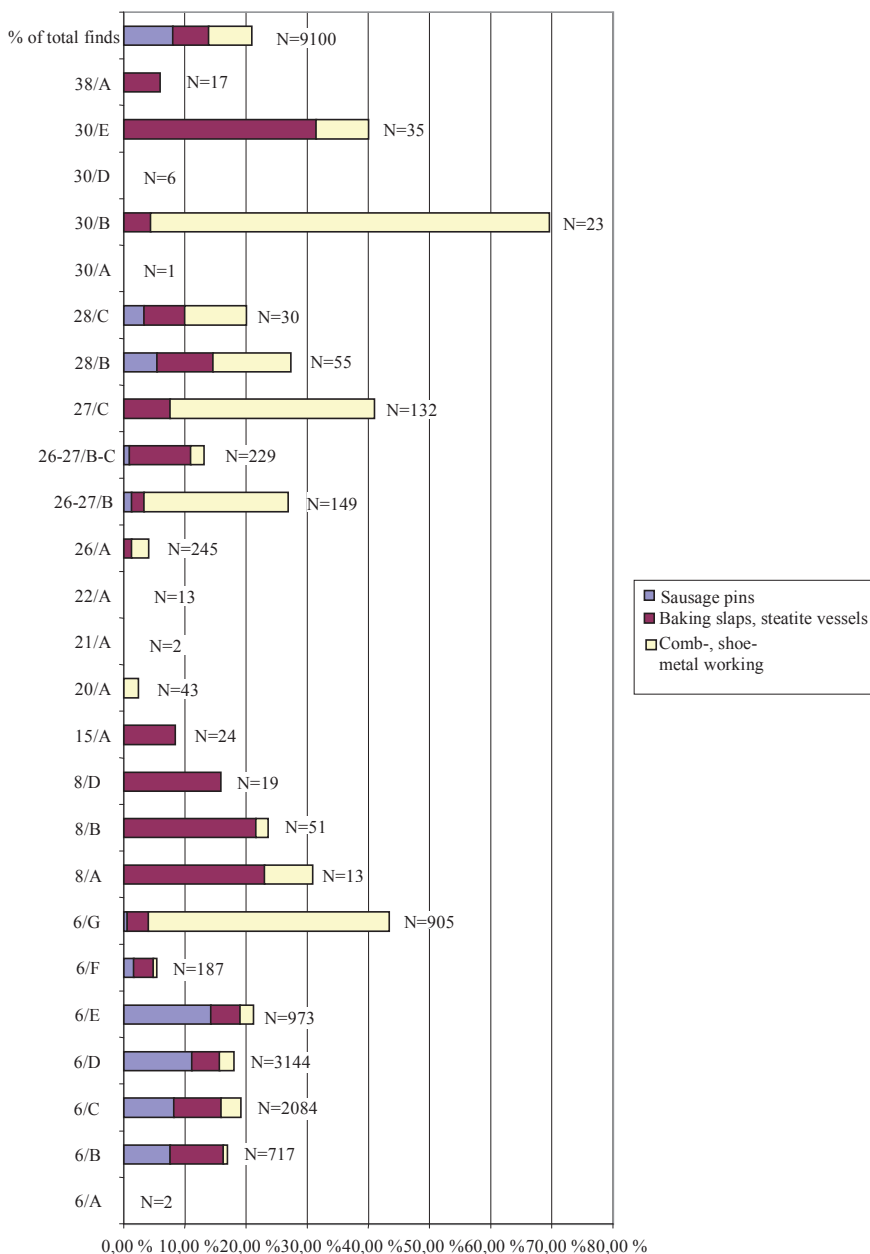


Fig. 4. Horizon 5 (1120s–c 1170). Sausage pins, basic cooking tools, and production waste from ambulating comb makers, shoe makers, and metal workers: as a % of the total number of finds from each of the artefact-yielding plots/units.

artisans of different kinds had stayed, sausage pins only made up 0.55% of the total number of finds, as opposed to the average c. 8%. This suggests that sausage making was not a common activity on plot 6/G. Thus, if everyone ate sausages, quantitative analysis supports the idea that some townspeople or visitors of the town *bought* their sausages and that some townspeople made sausages for sale and thus were professional sausage-makers.

Who were the professional sausage makers?

In early medieval Scandinavia, it was traditionally women who cooked and refined foodstuffs. Grinding by hand mill and milk-processing are examples of refinement of raw materials or food processing that were always associated with women in written and iconographic sources in the early Middle Ages (HOLTSMARK 1964; SCHMIDT SABO 2005, 161–167). Sausage-making is not known from contemporary written or iconographic evidence so we cannot connect the activity directly to either men or women through such sources. Olaus Magnus (1490–1557), a Swedish priest who in the years between c. 1530 and c. 1554 wrote a comprehensive, illustrated history of the people of the North, referred to “foreign sausage-makers” (GRANLUND 1976 part 13:36; HAGEN 1996). However, from Olaus’s description it is not possible to tell whether these sausage makers were men or women. In any case, since Olaus relates to a period some 300–400 years after the period under study here, I will not give his account weight in the present context. In written sources describing episodes as far back as the thirteenth century, we learn that men could work as cooks, but in these sources the male cooks are always associated with monasteries or households within the highest social levels of society (BØ 1963, 626–627; KJERSGÅRD 1978). In the few contemporary sources in which men are otherwise associated with cooking, their activities are in connection with simple or ordinary cooking, and usually the man is on a journey while cooking (see for instance GÍSLADÓTTIR 1985, 46–48). The latter makes it tempting to suggest that the reason why he is cooking is that he is travelling. I find it most plausible to see sausage-making as a food-processing activity bound to a permanently located household, and sausage-making is thus likely to have been an activity traditionally related to women in the early Middle Ages.

While women could perform traditional male tasks without the fear of losing social recognition, men could not carry out female tasks without the risk of losing male prestige (SCHMIDT SABO 2005, 174). Thus, if we assume that refinement of

food was traditionally a female task, it is highly likely that the sausage makers of twelfth-century Bergen were women. As a counterargument one could hold that the town as such was an arena where traditional limits for male and female tasks could be challenged and even trespassed (see for instance ØYE 2005, 58). A possible scenario is also that men who may have belonged to a group of people that had no social prestige to lose, for instance men who were not free, could have made the sausages. On the other hand, the division of work between different social groups was deeply rooted in the fundamental structures of the agrarian society (SCHMIDT SABO 2005, 174), and the first generations of townspeople must have come from the agrarian surroundings (HANSEN 2005, 223). They surely brought along their traditions and values when coming to town, and radical changes in the traditional division of work were not likely to be carried through overnight. This speaks in favour of women as professional sausage makers in early Bergen. I thus find it most likely that the professional sausage makers were women.

Professional women in twelfth-century Bergen – is it realistic?

Is it wishful thinking to suggest that there were professional women in twelfth-century Bergen? We have two written sources that mention twelfth-century Bergen women in a way that makes it plausible to think of them as professionals: The Orkneyinga saga that tells the history of the earls of Orkney was probably written at the end of the twelfth century. The parts of the saga that are of relevance here – those concerning the whereabouts of Ragnvald Kale who eventually became earl of Orkney – may have been recorded as early as c. 1165, so they are not very remote in time in relation to the events described. These parts are considered quite reliable regarding information about the persons involved (GUDMUNDSSON 1967, 699–702; HANSEN 2005, 44–45). The second source is the Heimskringla saga (SNORRI STURLUSON [1911]), one of the Kings' sagas that tell the story of Norwegian kings and their deeds. It was most likely written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson, probably around 1230. Snorri used older manuscripts and perhaps also oral tradition as sources. Although Heimskringla is somewhat remote in time from the events described, the saga is generally considered reliable as a source about events that are described on the grounds that it cites skaldic poems traditionally passed on in a metric form (for a discussion of this see LIE 1961, 299–302). In the Orkneyinga saga we learn that when Ragnvald Kale visited Bergen, probably sometime between 1115 and 1120 (HELLE 1982, 114), he drank and slept in Unn's residence (NORDAL 1913–16; HOLTSMARK 1970, parts 60–61),

which from the description must have functioned as an inn. Unn is a woman's name, and Unn was apparently the mistress of the inn (STEEN 1929, 350–351). In the section about King Inge, the *Heimskringla* saga relates that when King Sigurd Munn (Sigurth Haraldsson) was killed in 1155 (HELLE 1982, 6), he was also in a house drinking. Sigrid Sæta was the mistress there (SNORRI STURLUSON *Haraldssona saga*, chapt. 28; HOLTSMARK – SEIP 1975, 679), and her dwelling apparently functioned as an inn (STEEN 1929, 350). Since these saga passages, as already mentioned, were recorded for the first time some years later than the events described, they may actually describe Bergen at a later date. This is a precaution historian Knut Helle has pointed out regarding the interpretation of Unn's place as an inn (HELLE 1982, 462).

Based on the interpretation of the archaeological sources, however, I find it reasonable to assume that inns were indeed established in Bergen – at least as early as in the 1120s. Because accepting – as the archaeological sources strongly suggest – that various ambulating artisans visited the town by the middle of the twelfth century (during horizon 5, 1120s–c. 1170), it is likely that these individuals and probably also other visitors such as merchants in still-increasing numbers (HANSEN 2005, 205–218) could not depend merely on the traditional hospitality of the townspeople (cf. BØ 1960, 701–704). Visitors to the town would need food, drink, and temporary accommodation. It is thus plausible that inns were a reality in the period covered by my horizon 5, and the sagas certainly seem to imply that women were among the early innkeepers. The presence of professional women in the twelfth century is accordingly a realistic suggestion. Having rendered possible that there were professional female innkeepers in early Bergen, it is not difficult to accept that there may also have been professional female sausage makers here. It is even reasonable to suggest that innkeepers such as Unn and Sigrid made sausages – and probably other foodstuffs for sale as part of their inn-keeping business.

Conclusion

With a broad study of the archaeological sources as a point of departure, pursuing unexpected patterns in the archaeological sources, and applying an actor-based perspective, a group of traditionally voiceless actors has been brought to our attention. The close-up study has shown that some women, when entering an urban setting, probably transformed traditional rural female tasks such as cooking and serving beer into professional trades; they became professional

innkeepers and perhaps also sausage makers. They may have done this using the opportunities provided by a new setting in which “the urban way of life” was still under negotiation.

The study is, however, not just about new pathways for women in a young town. It is also a case study that brings to our attention aspects of urbanisation that have been given little weight in traditional research. It gives a glimpse of how a materialised idea of a town through time developed into a living urban community with a diversity of functions – functions that were carried into life by actors from lower levels of the social hierarchy. And among these were new urban service-related trades in which women in all likelihood were central actors.

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