

Archaeology and the Medieval Towns of Norway

By ØIVIND LUNDE

This paper was part of the address given at the Annual General Meeting of the Society in 1984 by the author, who is head of the Archaeological Department of the Central Office of Historic Monuments in Norway (Riksantikvaren).

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK which has been carried out in Norwegian towns in recent years has resulted in the medieval town being regarded as a single monument. Permanent excavation offices have been established in the most important medieval towns. Survey accounts of archaeological data and other relevant information form important tools for safeguarding archaeological interests, both in connection with excavation and with the administrative co-ordination of the clauses in the Cultural Heritage Act. The large number of excavations in recent years has left little time for research but this is now being given the highest priority.

For many years there has been intense discussion in Norway about the definition of ancient monuments within the boundaries of medieval towns for which there should be legal protection. Should only *visible* remains, such as the cathedral of Nidaros and the archbishop's palace in Trondheim be protected or should protection also be given to areas where there are known building complexes below ground? Or should all traces of human activity within the limits of the medieval town as defined by archaeological and historical sources, and by the topography, be treated as monuments?

With the new *Lov om kulturminner* (Cultural Heritage Act) of 1978, administered by the Ministry of the Environment, Norway has now gained more clarity on this point. The law states that all remains older than the Reformation (1537) are automatically protected. The law lists a number of different types of monument, amongst which are *medieval towns* or their remains. Medieval occupation deposits in towns are therefore monuments on a par with stave churches or monasteries. It is, therefore, no longer necessary to discuss whether a medieval town should be protected, rather its extent and how archaeological interests can be taken care of and made compatible with other interests.

The medieval towns, with their large areas and thick occupation deposits containing closely-packed building remains, can be regarded as the most extensive type of monument in Norway. In many ways they are also the most complicated to

work with. There are many sources of information, other than archaeological, which must be brought together in describing the town and its development through time. The fact that it may still be living and expanding does not make the problem any easier, but makes special demands on the archaeologist who is to organize and carry out excavations in a town's thick occupation deposit. The enormous amount of material which comes to light must be processed and presented in a way which, irrespective of its bulk, will make it usable in continuing research on the medieval town. If the archaeologist himself does not have a proper understanding of earlier results and current aims and objectives, it is, of course, impossible for him to present information in such a way that public opinion, and therefore the politicians, will allow reasonable opportunities for further work.

Norway lies a long way from the oldest cultural centres and has a relatively small population. It has, therefore, neither the number nor the extent of ancient monuments of the much older societies further south in Europe. On the other hand this reinforces the wish to protect the remains that are left, and is perhaps why our demands for protection, and for development of excavation techniques and documentation, are greater than in many other countries.

The medieval towns in Norway, which developed from the 11th century onwards, are a type of monument which in recent years has held a central position in conservation work. As there are only eight of them, Oslo, Sarpsborg, Hamar, Tønsberg, Skien, Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim, it has been possible to gain a clear understanding of the archaeological problems and tasks concerning them. The towns were made the direct responsibility of the Riksantikvar by the new legislation of 1978 (Fig. 1). There were, of course, other settlements in medieval Norway, but they never became towns, that is, with legal privileges, in the Middle Ages. Some of these settlements have subsequently been abandoned and are now protected as monuments in areas without redevelopment pressures.¹

Since the middle of the 19th century archaeological work has been carried out in most of the towns, particularly in Oslo and Trondheim, extensive building activity being the reason. For the documentation of the excavated remains in the 19th and early 20th century we can thank a few active enthusiasts. Only a few had an archaeological education, but they created an invaluable and very varied archaeological archive upon which we today can expand.² To find one's way through their material it is not enough merely to look in the museum records, one must also look at their place of work.³ A similar situation is to be found in many other places in Europe, where, as in Norway, interest was concentrated on the large building complexes. Occupation deposits remained unobserved and were effectively dug out when there were interesting building remains to explore. All the same, we should be thankful that digging of new foundations was done by hand; as it was not easy to dig through building remains, work had to slow down and there was an opportunity to record them.

The situation was catastrophically changed in the 1950s when the spade had to give way to the mechanical excavator. After the Second World War, Europe was in urgent need of new buildings, roads, airports, etc. At the same time agriculture and forestry were modernized and mechanized. The centuries-old cultural landscape

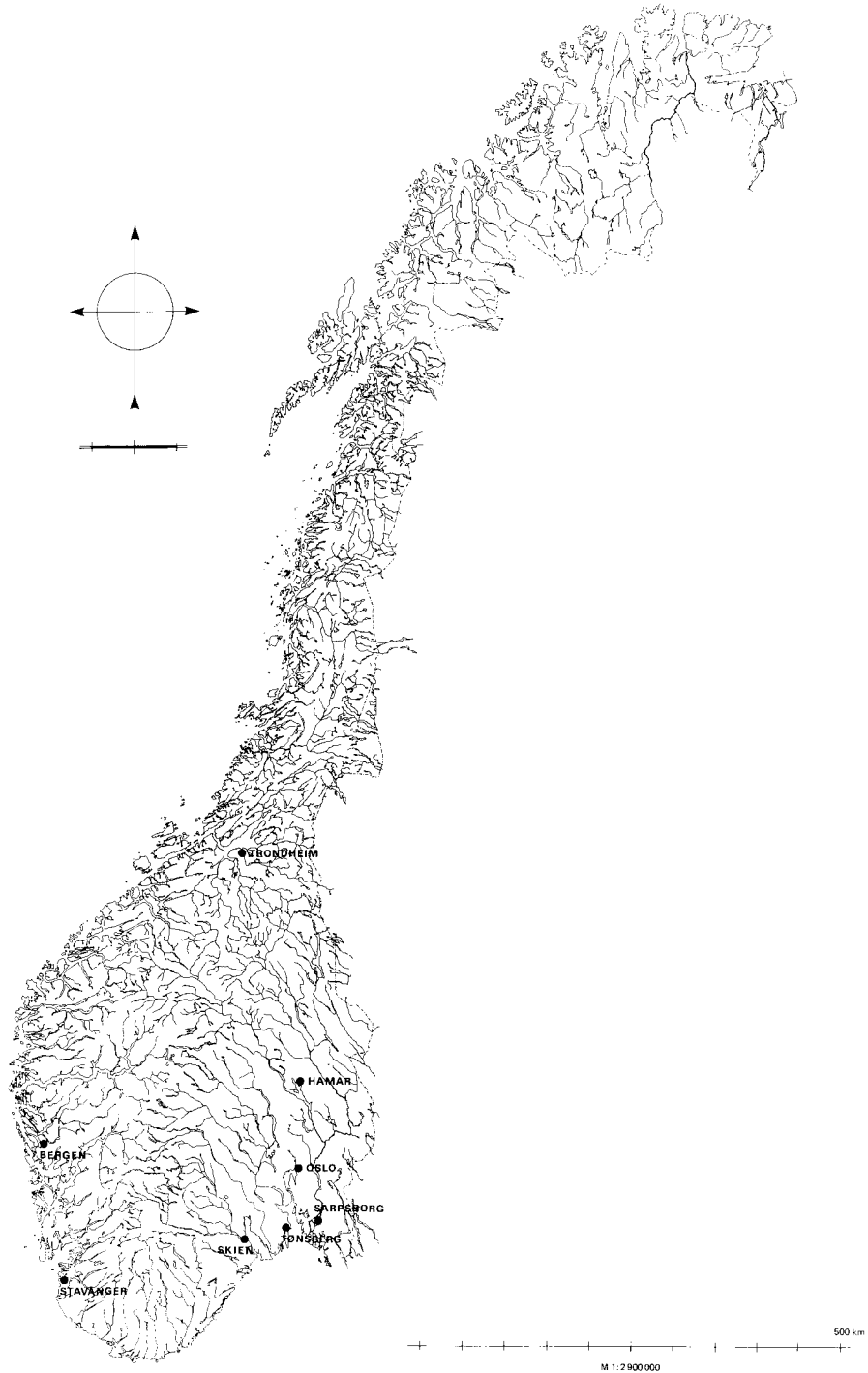


FIG. I

The eight medieval towns within the boundaries of modern Norway. There were also three other towns (Konghelle, Uddevalla and Marstrand) in Bohuslän in the south-east which was acquired by Sweden in 1658. Nucleated settlements and market places are not included

changed suddenly and monuments were destroyed faster than ever before. It took time before the extent of its consequences for the future were realized.⁴ It was, however, not easy to fight for a cultural heritage when the population had no roof over its head.

With these drastic changes one can in many ways talk of the beginning of a new era, the counter-reaction first gaining strength about 1970. England had led the way with surveys and analyses of the problems in archaeology, and rescue operations were organized. 'Rescue archaeology' was also discussed amongst archaeologists in other countries, but it was more important to convince people in general of the necessity of saving our past. Gradually as this succeeded — which was by no means everywhere — it could be seen how large excavation projects were organized to record most of what otherwise would have been lost.

In Norway this development can also be seen in both rural and urban areas during the 1950s and 1960s. When large department stores and office blocks were erected in a medieval town it was not possible to follow the work and record the finds. The pre-1978 *Fornminneloven* was not consistent with regard to medieval occupation deposits in towns. It stated that amongst the automatically protected monuments were 'houses and buildings of all types and the remains thereof' together with 'dwelling places, tofts, beaching places for boats and overhanging rocks showing traces of people having lived or worked there'. This definition made it difficult to demand an excavation before medieval building remains were actually shown to exist. This could have been done by trial excavation, but usually such finds were first reported after building work had started. By then it was economically impossible to stop the work, even though the law then, as now, demanded that the contractor paid for the excavation. Any delay in the building work because of an archaeological excavation would have led to a demand for compensation which the government wished to avoid. Another problem was that the Riksantikvar had neither sufficient archaeologists nor organized units in the towns to follow up these operations. The five district museums had no responsibility for urban excavations, and had more than enough work dealing with their own tasks since they were responsible for all monuments pre-A.D. 1030. (Since 1979 they have been responsible for all medieval monuments except churches, abbeys, castles, towns and all other standing buildings from this period.)

The first really large and internationally known urban excavation in Norway started at Bryggen in Bergen after the catastrophic fire there in 1955. This excavation, led by A. Herteig, can be regarded as a pioneer work even in a European context.⁵ It continued for over thirteen years and brought about an awareness of the medieval town as a monument both amongst fellow archaeologists and society in general. The Bryggen excavation gave rise to the still-continuing discussion on the division of responsibility for the protection of monuments in Norway. To illustrate this, all finds from the Riksantikvar's excavations are deposited in the respective district museum since the Riksantikvar does not have its own collection. Even with close co-operation the situation is not satisfactory, but it is hoped that the pending reorganization of the administration of cultural heritage in Norway will solve this problem

With a few exceptions, it was not until 1970 that the consequences of the Bryggen excavations were followed up in towns other than Bergen. Even if one could say that 'the time was right', it was special circumstances which gave the impetus. In Oslo excavations had to be carried out because a motorway junction was being planned in the middle of the medieval town. In Trondheim one of the main streets was to be relaid and archaeologists had to be called in when large wooden constructions were found. In Tønsberg the town was to celebrate its 1100th jubilee in 1971, and excavations were planned in connection with this. These projects led to the forming of temporary units giving the Riksantikvar direct local contact. New projects replaced the others in all these towns, and the units soon became permanent. Most of those who had worked under very uncertain conditions during this time were given permanent jobs. In 1980 the Riksantikvar established its own unit in Bergen, which took over the role which the Bryggen Museum (Historical Museum) had played.

THE MEDIEVAL TOWN AS A MONUMENT

In 1970–71 works started in Søndregate, Trondheim, and helped to change local attitudes towards archaeology. People in the town could daily see the excavation of a church surrounded by graves. Beneath this the remains of several wooden buildings, the oldest dating from the 11th century, lay nearly 5 m below the present street level. Interest was further heightened by an exhibition, a film and guided tours of the site.⁶

In Oslo also emphasis was placed on public relations. This was especially important in order to gain enough arguments to avoid the planned 'traffic machine' in the middle of the medieval town. The construction of a conservation plan for the area and a model with and without this large road system successfully swung opinion. New road plans are now being drawn up, which take the medieval town into account.⁷

It was the excavation in Nedre Langgate, Tønsberg, in 1976–77 which brought about the breakthrough for the view that the medieval town is a single monument. A main sewer was to be laid in the street, along the fjord. This project, which was given high priority by the Ministry of the Environment, would have meant digging through the medieval remains along the whole of the waterfront, a distance of 600 m. Archaeologically this was totally unacceptable without prior excavation. Even though it was known that there were medieval remains below the road surface, it was necessary to prove their existence by digging a series of holes along the whole length of the pipeline. Such was the law before 1978. After digging eight holes along the street, negotiations started, and an excavation of the preserved archaeological deposits (300 m) was carried out. Despite problems both with the sewer plan and traffic this was done successfully, and the archaeological results were astonishing. The remains of houses and wharves together with all the property boundaries and roads running down to the harbour were uncovered.⁸ This case was immensely important for later decisions. Since then it is not only the physically proven remains which are treated as monuments, but also earth floors, passages between houses,

courtyards, streets, the market place — in short the whole of the town area within clearly defined limits shown on a map.

At a conference on 'Medieval town centres — their historical meaning and status' in Bergen in 1977, A. Herteig strongly maintained the need to see medieval towns as unified monuments.⁹ A final solution was not reached at the conference, but the case of Nedre Langgate and later experience has proved Herteig right. The archaeological deposits lie like a carpet, perforated by later intrusions (see Fig. 4), and have to be treated as one monument by all who are planning projects within it.

When the new Cultural Heritage Act came into being in 1978 it stated amongst other things that 'sites with concentrations of buildings, such as marts and trading centres, town sites and the like, or remains of these' were to be automatically protected. This involved an acknowledgement, even though its exact outer limit was not precisely defined by law. With this we have gained a long-awaited safeguarding of medieval urban remains in Norway. Such precision also makes possible expedient planning of archaeological projects in the towns.

MAPPING OF THE HIDDEN MONUMENT

Documentary sources, maps, prints and results from previous excavations and observation work vary in each town, but are collated to produce maps that illustrate all the known archaeological situations and all other data relevant to an understanding of the medieval town. These maps present important information of which the following can be mentioned. Trondheim can serve as an example:¹⁰

(a) *The extent of the monument:* As long as the medieval town does not have a known limit in the form of either an existing or a known alignment (e.g. a street) for the town wall, earthworks, palisade or the like, a boundary must be drawn on the map based on the known extent of archaeological deposits and other archaeological data, such as the spread of loose finds. It is important that when the limit is drawn on the map it can be easily followed in the present-day town. Besides the professional safeguarding and control of the unknown archaeological sources in the medieval town, the aim of the map is to show a clear limit to the monument for planning purposes (Fig. 2).

(b) *Map of the archaeological deposits:* From excavations, bore-holes and other work in the town one can draw in the extent of the archaeological deposits, or 'black earth' layers, with information about their thickness where this is known (Fig. 3).

(c) *Map of intrusions:* Cellars, trenches, and other excavations and disturbances, such as landslides, below the present surface are recorded and drawn on the map. Their depths are compared to the thickness of the archaeological deposits (b) and recent filling (levelling) below the present surface. This makes it possible to show how and to what extent the archaeological deposits have been removed. One gets, in other words, a map showing what is preserved (Fig. 4).

(d) *The original ground surface:* On the basis of a present-day contour map and the information about the thickness of the archaeological deposits, and more recent filling below the present surface, it is possible to reconstruct the original topography,

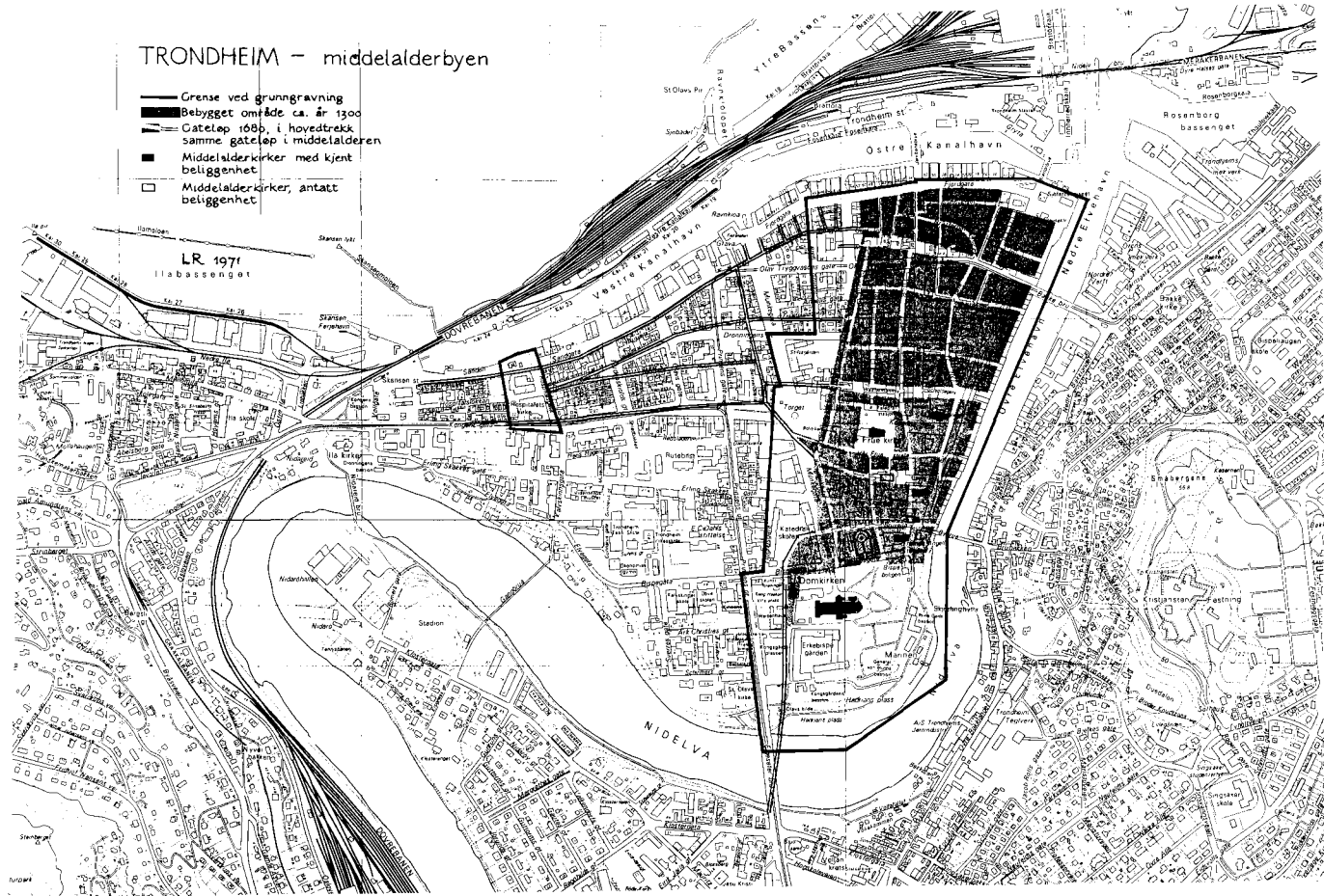


FIG. 2

Trondheim, with the scheduled area 1969–71. The outer limit of the area is marked by a heavy line (modified in 1984, see Fig. 4). The streets in the shaded area show the plan before the re-planning of 1681. (After Lars Roede)

where the first buildings were erected. Land rise and the relationship to earlier beach lines is also evaluated in connection with this. This map is of particular importance in discussions about the town's development, but is also important for understanding how the archaeological deposits have been formed (Fig. 5).¹¹

(e) *The archaeological map*: This map presents all the known archaeological data with numbers referring to a more extensive catalogue. The amount of detail can vary, from a simple schematic presentation of the building remains with symbols for other finds where location and orientation are the most important, to an exact representation of the remains of different periods of the town's history¹² on successive maps (Fig. 6).

(f) *Reconstruction map*: Such a map represents, with varying degrees of certainty, the main theories about the town's development at different times, based on the different sources. This is a map which should be used with care, but it is of importance when discussing how sources can be interpreted. The maps are not, in other words, an aim in themselves, but a means of presenting current theories.

(g) *Map of priorities*: The knowledge one has about the medieval town and which, amongst other things, is shown on the maps, makes it possible to give priorities to the archaeological demands within the area. There are many different reasons for establishing priorities: areas where it is of importance to carry out an excavation, areas that should remain intact for the future, areas where an excavation should be carried out because the archaeological deposits are in danger of drying out because of changes in the drainage, etc.

With these maps and the supplementary text written on an interdisciplinary basis, the 'known document' about the medieval town will be presented in an understandable way. One can make a 'diagnosis' based on all the known relationships before digging. These maps, especially those which give a readily available survey of the size of the monument and its limits (a), its state of preservation (c) and the priority areas (g), can be correlated with an evaluation of all the standing buildings to work out a conservation plan where all interests are evaluated in relation to each other. Such a plan can prevent many unnecessary conflicts.

PLANNING AND THE INTEREST OF THE PROPERTY OWNERS

When the medieval town has been given monument status, a system of notification is organized to gather information about all potential sites as early as possible. A permanent routine is agreed upon with the Council, particularly the building and/or planning departments, since all building plans are submitted to these. The archaeological interest can be presented as early as possible before a decision is made and conflicts will therefore be avoided. The engineers' department is another important partner since it gives permission to dig after several official institutions have commented on the application

The Riksantikvar is now present in many of the towns, as the agent responsible for giving permission to remove archaeological deposits. Negotiations start with the

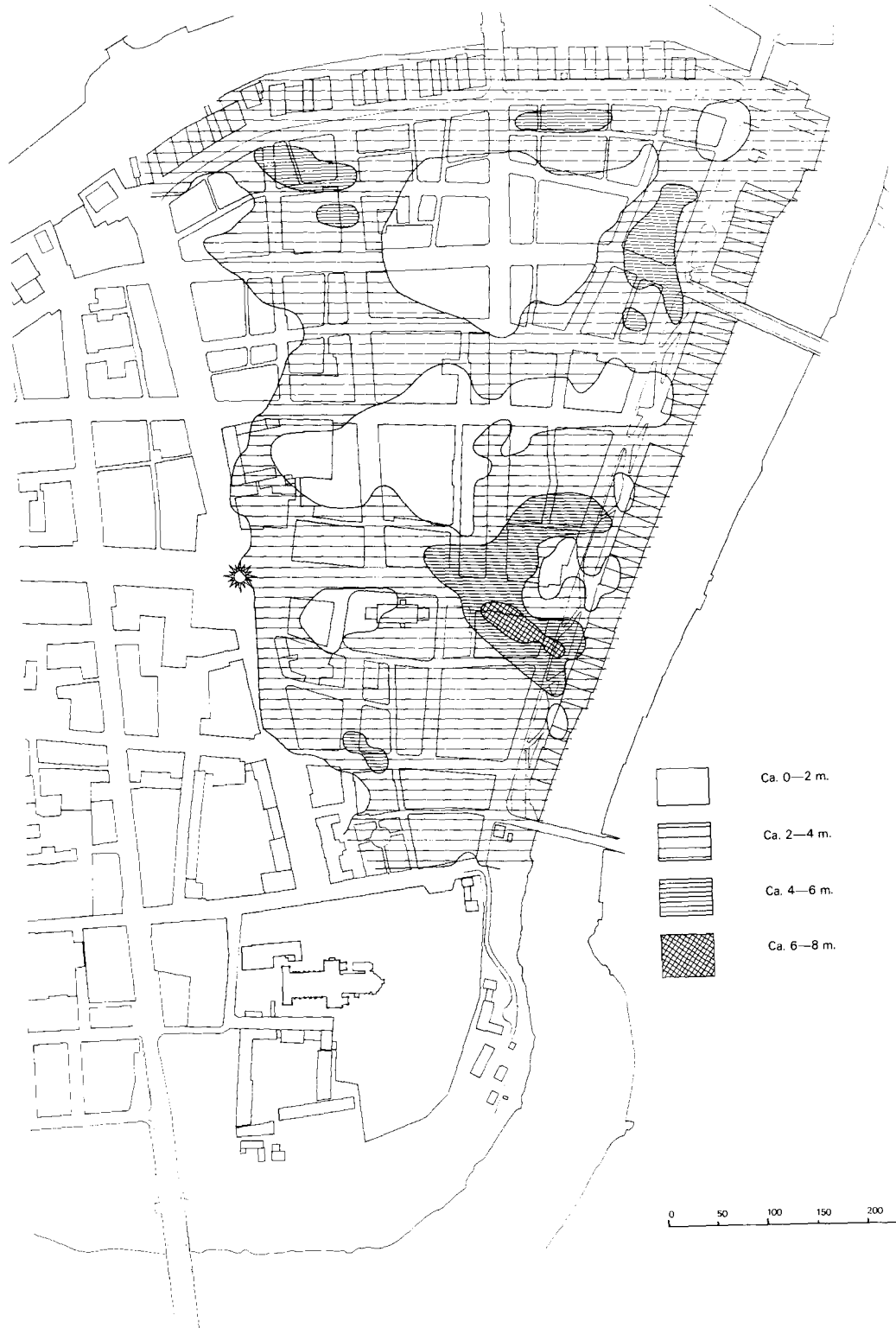


FIG. 3

Trondheim. Map showing the depth of occupation deposits. This map was drawn up in 1976 but recent excavations have resulted in some modifications (Fig. 5)

contractor on the terms for granting permission. It is important to mention here that Norwegian law states that the contractor shall pay for the excavation. Official funding can be sought if the cost of an excavation appears unreasonable, with the Ministry of the Environment undertaking this evaluation. The degree of 'reasonableness' can be discussed, but on the basis of cases already dealt with by the Ministry, it is only small private projects which will be eligible for support, for example, work in connection with building a private house. Unambiguous rules for this have not been worked out.

One possibility which is evaluated during negotiations is the extent to which disturbance can be reduced to protect archaeological deposits for the future or to reduce the costs. In Sweden they have tried to avoid excavation by building on a concrete raft placed on the ground, or supported by a few piles. In practice this can only be used for light buildings such as bungalows. In Norway such a method would hardly be acceptable. Another point is that it is difficult to calculate what damage occurs to the archaeological deposits when a building is placed on top of them. Future control of what happens within the house would also be difficult. Pile-driving is also a very dubious method. On slightly larger building projects experience has shown that piling is so extensive that the destruction caused can be compared with total excavation. Another factor is that when all the machinery moves on to the site and piling or trenching has started, the work is, as a rule, more extensive than was agreed on during negotiations. There is a lot of difference between discussion of a drawing and the actual work.

One method used to reduce expenses in some other countries is to excavate only a chosen part of the site. One gives priority either to a part of the area or to a special period which is to be examined more carefully, for example, the earliest layers. This is often a difficult decision to make, and presupposes that there is previous knowledge of excavations in the area. In Norway the present law forbids allocation of such priorities, but in any case it is obvious that our present knowledge is far too inadequate to permit such sampling strategies.

In order to make a more accurate calculation of the cost of an excavation it is often necessary to have a trial excavation. Similarly bore-holes can be useful in determining the thickness of the archaeological deposits. In Norway such trial excavations are only used in areas where we have no previous archaeological data. Such relatively summary excavations, often only a small trench, give information on the thickness of archaeological deposits, orientation of remains, and, if one is lucky, dating, but they often involve a hole which can make the interpretation of the other remains difficult. We have several unfortunate examples where trial excavations have destroyed the possibility of correlation with remains found later. Such trial excavations should, therefore, preferably be avoided as they often do more damage than they provide information, although they may be important in discussions during the negotiations.

In Norway a standard contract has been drawn up which includes the terms put by the Riksantikvar to enable an excavation to take place and the conditions which have to be decided on. This makes negotiations much easier as a number of limitations are thus given from the start. Of course the contract has to be adapted to

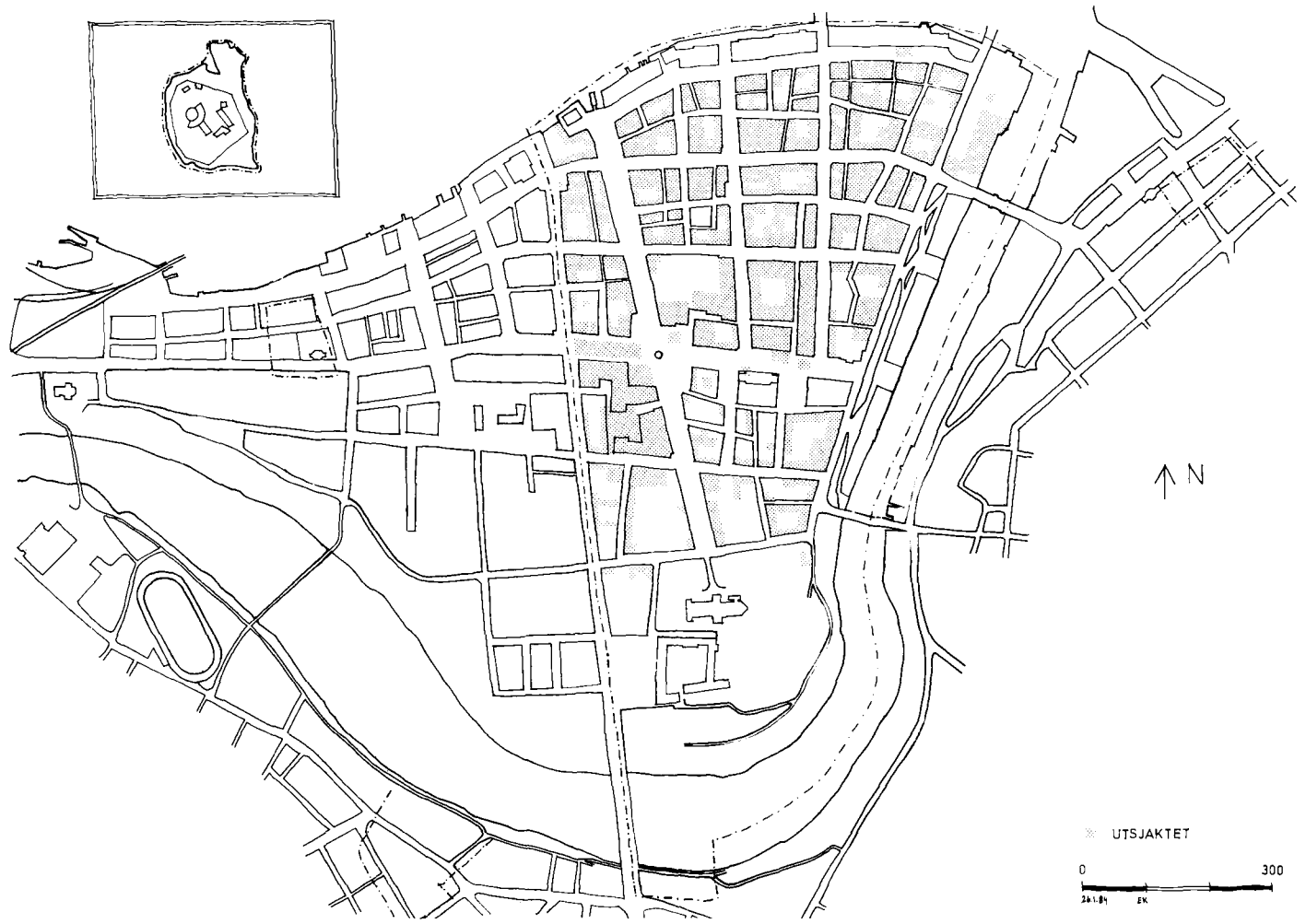


FIG. 4

Trondheim. Scheduled area (1984) showing sites where all archaeological deposits have been removed

every excavation with regards to time schedule, economy and special reservations, etc. When the contract has been signed by both parties, the work can begin.

Insurance against 'expensive archaeology' is something that is becoming standard. This is a part of the general property insurance which the owner can take out against demands from officialdom in case the property should burn down, and means that the owner must have the costs of an excavation calculated. The Riksantikvar does not wish to bind itself to costs for future negotiations, for it is not possible today to say what demands will be made by archaeologists in the future. This is solved by giving the thickness of the archaeological deposits together with an empirical price for a cubic metre of archaeologically excavated soil. In 1984 this 'standard cubic price' for 'hand digging' with all other statutory costs included, is kr. 3,000 per m³ (equivalent to *c.* £300). Areas where the archaeological deposits have been destroyed will reduce the cost, but the property owner must evaluate this himself and so give the insurance company the amount to be insured for.

PUBLICATION

One result of all the work done in the 1970s has been the accumulation of a large volume of documentation and finds often without a report being written because new excavations had to be started. Of the wealth of finds housed in the museums many are still unconserved or inadequately stored. This unfortunate development is now finally stopped — the report work and finds processing are now an integral part of the excavation project.

The excavation report must give a correlation and survey of all the new data and is primarily meant as an introduction to the material. But it should also contain a short presentation of the new knowledge gained and the interpretations possible. Any further processing of the material on the basis of the report falls outside the framework of the excavation project as it is financed in Norway. The report is included in the cost of the excavation which is paid for by the builder, but any further processing is government responsibility. It is not easy to finance this research which is absolutely necessary if the new evidence is to rejuvenate and even change our understanding of the towns' growth and history. It is also very important in the posing of questions and giving a diagnosis in advance of a rescue excavation.

In towns where substantial data have already been collected, it is even more important that new research is carried out, not least because different maps and descriptions will only keep up-to-date if new information is added. Constant updating and revision of earlier theories about the town will also provide town planners with more certain evaluations of the archaeological potential. Priorities can be established with a greater degree of certainty.

There has been no flood of publications after so many years work. Neither the reports nor the more detailed research work is published. The reason is, as mentioned earlier, that site work has been given priority. The Riksantikvar's permanent staff who could be used on such work can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The question of publication has, however, been under continual and lengthy discussion, both because society has the right to take part in the new knowledge that



FIG. 5

Trondheim. Map of the original ground surface with the presumed shore-line in the second half of the 10th century. The darkest zone shows the area submerged at extreme high tide while the lighter zones were probably dry except at extremely high water or when the streams were flooding. Neither zone was suitable as building land *c.* 1000. This map was drawn in 1976 and recent excavations have modified the picture; in particular, the two inlets flanking the small island to the south may never have existed: there may have been merely a N.-S. valley behind the 'island'

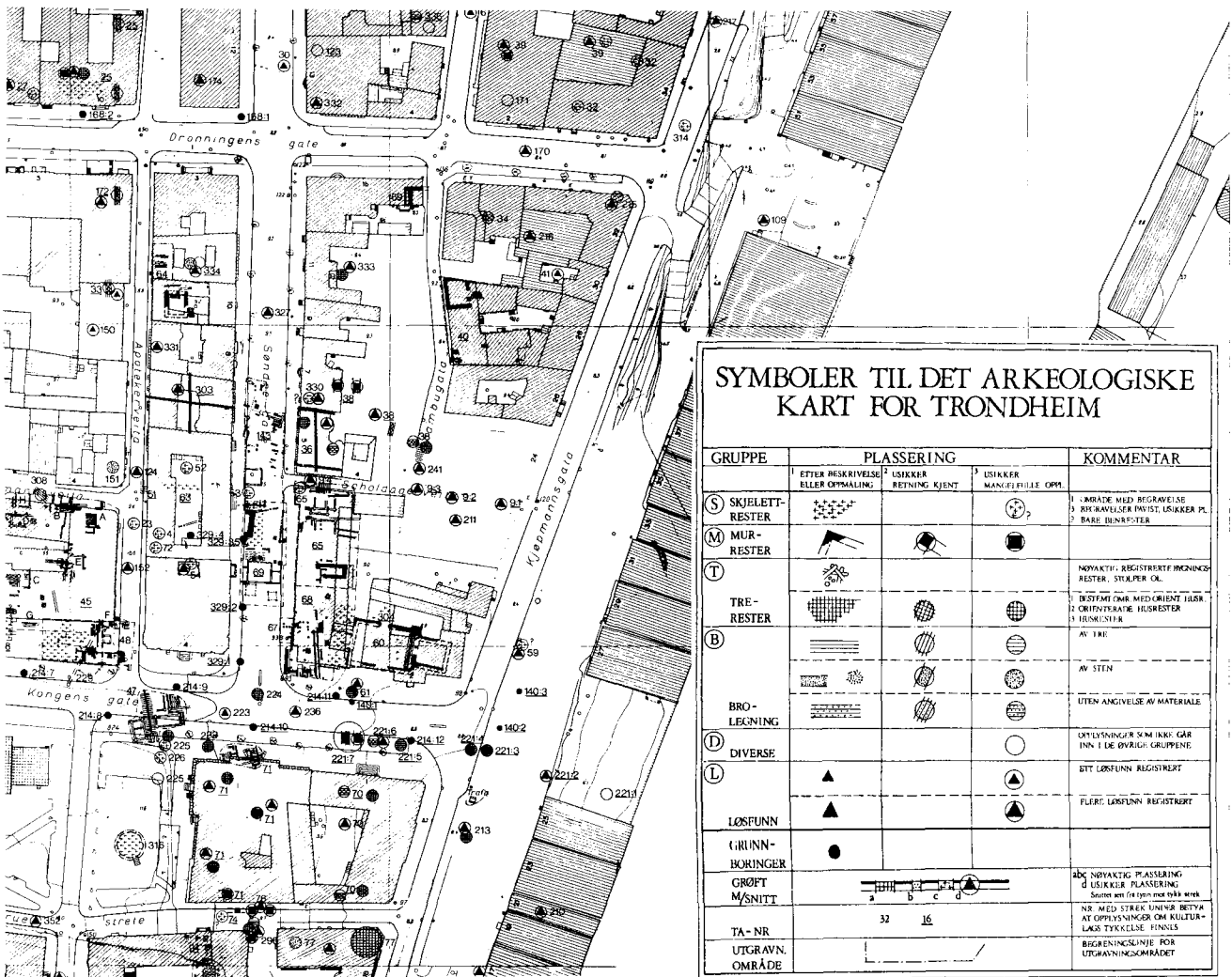


FIG. 6 Trondheim. Map of archaeological remains in NE. area, 1972

these expensive excavations have produced and because the archaeological world must have information on finds and results to be used in comparison with other material — something which is a condition of archaeological research. In this division lies a conflict of interests between the more popular publications and the more academic ones where weight is placed on the presentation of the material and discussion. There are, of course, now available some publications in a number of countries which give examples of both types and similarly there have been some happy attempts at a combination. This shows that instead of a continuing discussion, one should give priority to getting out more publications so that experience can gradually give the basis for alternative lines of guidance.

Processing of the excavated material and publication have the highest priority within the archaeological sphere of work. Above all the aim is to complete the many missing reports from the field work of the 1970s. This particularly concerns Trondheim and Tønsberg; in both these towns, together with Oslo and Bergen, publication projects and committees have been established to solve the problem. Oslo is well ahead with several reports already published, but also from Bergen one can anticipate rapid and continuing publication of the results from the many years of excavation at Bryggen.¹³

This is and will be for some years an activity which demands large-scale official resources. Even if the condition is made that those who work on these projects do not take upon themselves other projects, the present resources make publication difficult to achieve. We hope this work will be given even higher priority in the future than it has today, so that this uniquely rich material can come into its own, not only in the interest of town research, but for the future conservation of the towns.

NOTES

¹ For more on the development of market centres and towns in the Middle Ages in Norway, see G. A. Blom, 'Magnus Lagabøters bylov og Trondheim', *Trondheimske samlinger, BD.9, Hefte 2* (Trondheim, 1974), 99–145; and K. Helle and A. Nedkvitne, 'Sentrumsdannelse og byutvikling i norsk middelalder', *Urbaniseringsprosessen i Norden*, 1 (1977), 189–286.

² Early excavations in Trondheim were carried out by Victor Ronander, Sigurd O. Tiller and Ola O. Digre: (Ø. Lunde, 'Trondheims fortid i bygrunnen', *Riksantikvarens Skrifter*, 2 (1977), 27 ff.) and in Bergen by C. Koren Wiberg (K. Helle, *Bergen bys historie, bd. 1* (Oslo, Bergen and Tromsø, 1982). For early archaeological work in Oslo and Tønsberg respectively, see papers by E. Schia and J. E. G. Erikson in Ø. Lunde, 'Three medieval Norwegian towns in the 1970s', *Riksantikvarens Rapport*, 12 (1985).

³ The collection of early archaeological information is further described in relation to archaeological recording in Trondheim in 1972 in Lunde (1977), op. cit. in note 2, 251 ff.

⁴ C. Heighway, *The Erosion of History. Archaeology and Planning* (London, 1972) has been of great importance for the archaeology of medieval towns in many countries. There is only one comparable work, for the Netherlands: W. A. van Es, *Het bodemarchief. Archeologie en planologie in de binnensteden van Nederland* (Amersfoort and St Gravenhage, 1982).

⁵ A. E. Herteig, *Kongers havn of handels sete* (Oslo, 1969).

⁶ C. Long, 'Excavation in the medieval city of Trondheim, Norway', *Medieval Archaeol.*, xix (1975), 1–32.

⁷ See E. Schia's presentation of Oslo in Lunde (1985), op. cit. in note 2.

⁸ Eriksson, op. cit. in Lunde (1985), op. cit. in note 2.

⁹ The conference proceedings were published as *Middelalderske bykjerner — Den historiske betyding og juridiske status* (Bergen, 1978).

¹⁰ Lunde (1977), op. cit. in note 2: 'The archaeology of Trondheim before 1970 — the topography of the medieval city based on the archaeological material up to 1970'. Here is presented a systematic collation of data from earlier archaeological investigations: a discussion of methodological problems encountered while assessing the source value of the data; an attempt to reconstruct the various terrain levels at different times, based on information about the original ground surface and subsequent deposits; and a demonstration of how the analysis of archaeological data and its relationship to the original terrain can provide examples which may be taken as the basis for new interpretations of the written sources, thereby changing the general interpretation of the city's medieval topography.

Except for Skien (S. M. Lossius, *Skien i middelalderen. En antikvarisk registrering* (Oslo, 1978)), data from earlier archaeological investigation have not yet been published in Norway. In the other nordic countries national projects have been organized. The 'Medeltidstaden' started in Sweden in 1976 and has dealt with 70 towns (H. Andersson, 'The medieval town project', *ICOMOS Bull.* 6 (Uddevale, 1981), 200-02). In 1976 this was expanded to include four Finnish towns (*Åbo landskapsmuseum, Rapport 6* (Åbo, 1984)). Both projects are in their final phases. In Denmark a similar project has been in operation since 1977 (O. Olsen, 'Das dänische Forschungsprojekt "Die Mittelalter stadt"', *Lübecker schriften zur Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte*, 7 (1983), 225-27.

¹¹ Lunde (1977), op. cit. in note 2, 161 ff.

¹² Ibid., 46 ff. and 251 ff.

¹³ The Oslo project publishes its results in a series *De arkeologiske utgravninger i Gamlebyen, Oslo* which issued vol. 1 in 1977 and vol. 2 in 1979. Material from the Bryggen excavation is published in the series *Bryggen Papers*, but the latest excavations in Bergen together with Trondheim and Tønsberg will be published in *Riksantikvarens Rapporter* and/or *Riksantikvarens Skrifter*.