

Old Oslo*

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THE growth of the Norwegian towns in the 11th century must be looked at in the context of the emergence and consolidation of the national kingdom and of the progressive conversion of the Norwegian people to Christianity. The buildings designed for the use of King and Church also formed the heart of the city, contributing an entirely new character to the whole settlement. Better than any other of the Norwegian towns, Oslo provides an opportunity to study this important phase, not only because its history is well attested in the sagas, annals and other medieval documents, but also, and above all, because we can rely on evidence derived from archaeological investigations carried on almost without intermission for the last hundred years. Before, however, we undertake a closer examination of the different aspects of the city, it will be wise to cast a brief glance at the general history of Oslo.

ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE TOWN

The official foundation of the city is to be placed around the year 1050 during the reign of Harald Haardraade (Harold the Stern), who came to the throne in 1046. The saga relates: 'King Harald caused a merchant town to be built in the eastern region, at Oslo. There he often resided, as supplies were easy and men available for soldiering. Also he found it a favourable position both for the defence of the realm against the Danes and for making raids upon them. This he did often, although he did not have great forces at his command.' During the early years of his reign the threatening attitude of the Danes obliged him to construct a secure naval base in the south-western part of Norway. Oslo appeared particularly well suited for this purpose, owing to its position at the N. end of the deep and narrow Oslo-fjord, well in the centre of this part of the country. The site formed by the sand-bank at the mouth of the River Alna was reserved by the king for himself. Limited by the seashore on one hand and the river-bank upon the other, the city grew up on the sloping hill to the north-east of the estuary (FIG. 14).

The annals of the following centuries throw some light on the evolution of this little community. Among other incidents they record the incessant fires which devastated the city, as well as the never-ceasing efforts of the citizens to rebuild their houses. With the exception of the churches, the king's castle and the bishop's palace, the town was throughout constructed in timber, and therefore liable to be entirely consumed once the fire got a hold.

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The Black Death carried off almost three-quarters of the total population. The survivors were scarcely able to keep their own houses in repair, and the rest of the city consequently fell into rapid decay. The end of Old Oslo came in 1624, when a disastrous fire destroyed everything. The original site was then abandoned and a new town built below the walls of the castle of Akershus (FIG. 14), situated some three kilometres to the west on a cliff jutting out into the Oslo-fjord. The new city was named Christiania after its royal founder, King Christian IV.

Christiania was laid out in the renaissance tradition with streets at right

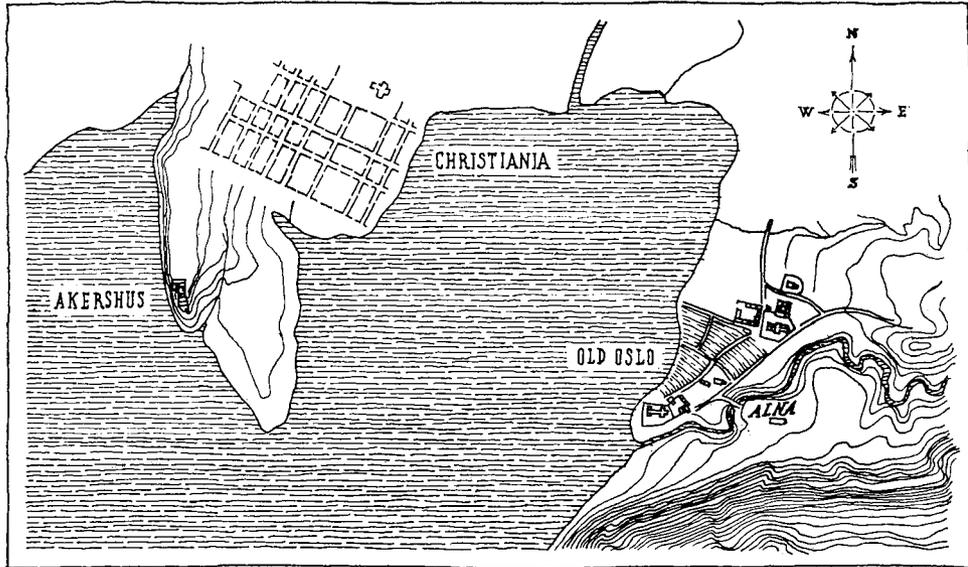


FIG. 14

SITE OF OLD OSLO AT MOUTH OF RIVER ALNA (pp. 45 f., 48, 52)

To the left, on a cliff jutting out into the Oslo-fjord is Akershus Castle, erected *c.* 1300. After the great fire in 1624, Oslo was abandoned, and the new town, Christiania, laid out in the renaissance tradition below the walls of the fortress.

angles in a chequer-board pattern, the whole surrounded by ramparts. When in the 19th century the city began to extend beyond the walls, new apartment houses grew up covering the site of Old Oslo. The name of the ancient town itself was revived in the present century. The 17th-century grid-plan still decides the layout of the core of modern Oslo, while remains of the medieval city survive in the district of the 'Old-Town'. The site of medieval Oslo had been allowed to remain as green agricultural land until the 1860s, when most of it was built over. In addition to builders and contractors, historians and archaeologists were also busy, starting a record of activity practically unbroken for the last hundred years. Thanks to their efforts we are today able to draw a map of the area once covered by the old city, in which the remains of the many buildings and streets uncovered combine to form a coherent picture of ancient Oslo. The main streets



FIG. 15

PLAN OF OLD OSLO

based on excavations that have taken place during the last hundred years (p. 48)

are traceable as a system of lines extending down towards the mouth of the river, while side streets branch out in the direction of the seashore.

Two groups of stone buildings stand out on the map (FIG. 15), the first situated at the river's mouth, the second higher up in the city. The former constructions belong to the king's castle. With this as its starting point, the city extended in the only available direction, along the sloping hill between the shore and the river-bank north of the king's land. Outside the royal territory we are met with streets and small timber constructions belonging to the citizens, and then, some 400 metres further up the hill, we come on the other group of stone buildings. It was here, round the 12th-century cathedral, that an ecclesiastical nucleus grew up. With the gradual extension of the city northwards, this part came to form a new town-centre.

In following the varying fortunes of a city such as Oslo throughout 600 years we are reminded in many ways of the growth of a living organism. Houses are burned down or demolished, and new buildings erected in their place. Increased activity brings with it the need for expansion and a demand for more space, new streets and quays. Thus a town presents a kind of continuous building-ground, always in process of transformation, and therefore hardly to be studied as a static entity. Nevertheless, at the risk of appearing somewhat abstract, it is not unreasonable, in examining the architectural evolution of Oslo, to divide its development into convenient segments according to the main events of its history.

Around the year 1100, about half a century after its foundation, Oslo appears as a small but concentrated community, situated on the N. bank of the Alna estuary. The projecting area, reserved for the use of the king, still contained some timber building. Recent archaeological investigation in parts of this area reveals the existence of constructions going back to about 1050. These unfortunately were almost entirely obliterated by later building on the site. We can, however, postulate a sort of earthwork defence-system, surrounded by ditches and palisades. Our present knowledge does not permit conclusions about its precise character, but it certainly served as a naval base for King Harald Haardraade, a man of considerable warlike ambition and enterprise.

The only building deriving from the earliest period of Oslo's history of which clear remains survive is St. Mary's Church. This sanctuary, which was dependent on the royal court, stood between the king's castle and the shore (FIG. 16). At the time of Harald Haardraade, it was still a wooden structure of stave-church construction, consisting of rectangular nave and square chancel. We shall return to this building later.

To the north of the king's land the townsmen built their timber cabins, and in the course of the 11th century they also erected the two parish churches of St. Clement and St. Nicolas (FIG. 16).

The very commanding position of the castle and the churches in the panorama of the first city of Oslo provides a telling illustration of the significant rise of the new central, governing authority in 11th-century Norway. It was largely due to the efforts of the successive kings that the country finally became Christian. Royal power strengthened the Church by legislation and enriched it by liberal

donations. Through the influence of royal patronage, the Norwegian Church developed into an institution embracing, in its unifying sphere, the entire country. Thus, conversely, the Church became of the greatest assistance to the king in his attempts to mould a diverse and divided land into a coherent whole, and the royal castle of Oslo and the church of St. Mary came to represent the centre, not only of the city, but of the entire eastern part of Norway. Significantly Oslo became the seat of the East-Norwegian bishopric around 1100, St. Mary's serving as the episcopal cathedral until a more suitable church was erected later.

The opportunity came in the first quarter of the 12th century, when the bishop was granted a large site outside the town. There, at the highest point of the whole area, the new cathedral was raised (FIG. 17). We must picture it as a typical romanesque basilica. It was dedicated to a local saint, the blessed Hallvard. Between the cathedral and the shore the bishop placed his palace and general quarters, but since all the efforts and the chief financial resources were concentrated on erecting the cathedral, the episcopal residence was simply built in timber. Not until the 13th century could the bishop allow his palace to be rebuilt in stone.

The alliance between Church and King is a common enough feature of European history of the early middle ages. In the initial process of expansion, the Church had to rely on the support of the local royal authority. But once established the Church rapidly found its dependence on secular power intolerable, and was moved to seek autonomy. This conflict, so typical of the European scene in the 11th and 12th centuries, finds its counterpart in the history of Norway. The early close relationship between ecclesiastical and royal power was rife with tensions, and the civil war which divided Norway in the course of the 12th century provided the Church with a welcome opportunity for strengthening her position. When the bishop actually elected himself head of the anti-royalist party, the Church was naturally drawn into secular struggles as an active partner.

If the Church in a certain sense now became a state within the state, the Church in Oslo, as represented by the ecclesiastical centre, resembled a town within the town. The Church and King, the two poles round which medieval life revolved, found their symbolical counterpart in the twin centres of the city of Oslo. In addition to the former settlement close to the king's castle at the river's mouth, there now grew up a second nucleus, grouped round the cathedral and the bishop's palace (FIG. 17).

It was in this field of tension between the poles of Church and Court that the citizens of Oslo settled. In both centres a feverish building activity went on. Old timber structures were replaced by larger stone buildings. The many disastrous fires obliged the citizens to undertake frequent reconstruction as well, but they continued to employ timber as their material, so this part of the city preserved as a whole its original character. Thus gradually the white stone walls, the high towers and steeples of the churches and palaces came to dominate the city scene, towering above the dark and low timbered houses. The remains of these wooden dwellings have been discovered lying gable to gable, forming uneven rows of tarred, log structures closely packed on either side of the narrow streets. The pave-

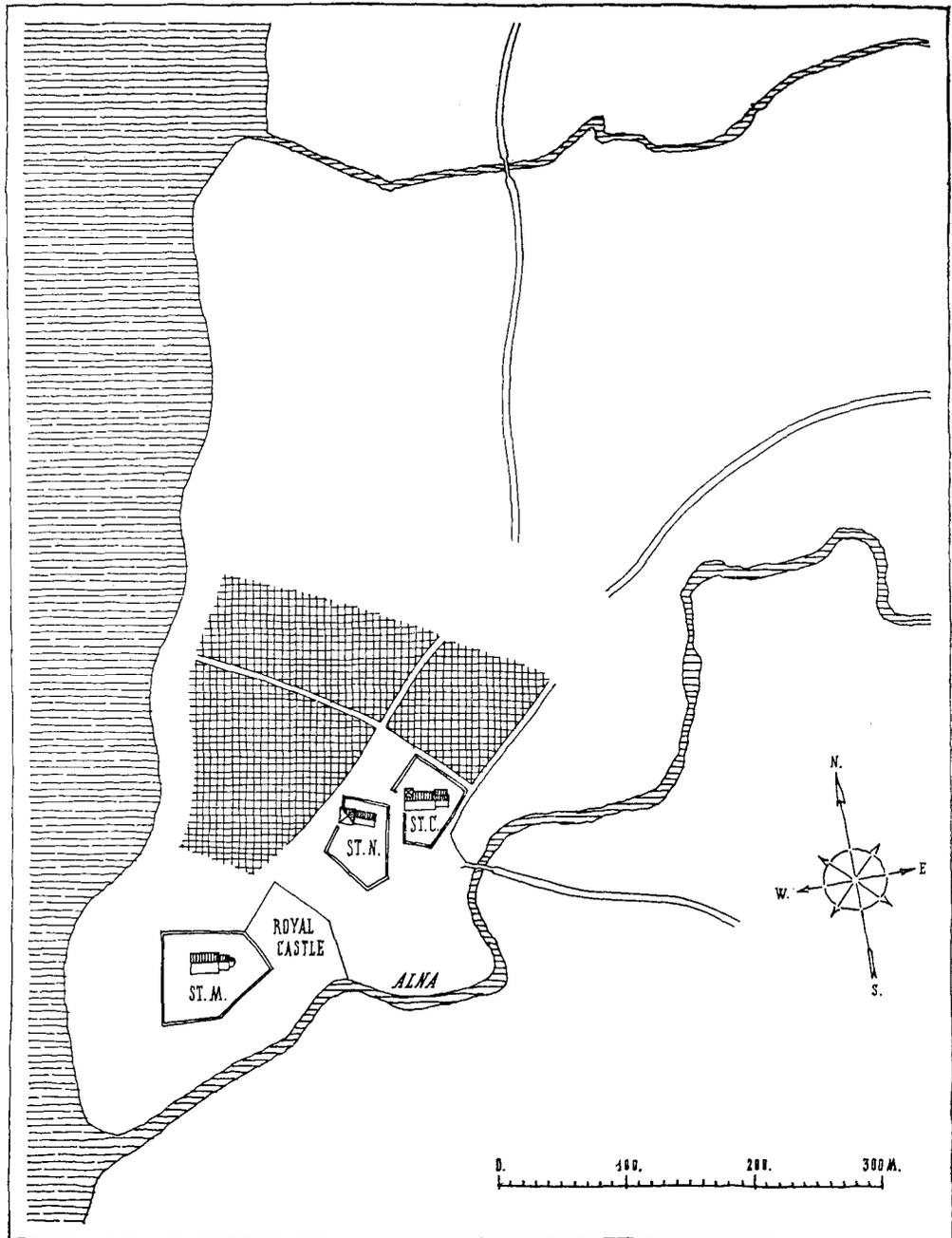


FIG. 16

OLD OSLO ABOUT 1100 (p. 48 f.)

The king's castle with St. Mary's Church at the river mouth; houses for the townsmen and the two parish churches of St. Clement and St. Nicholas to the north of the king's land

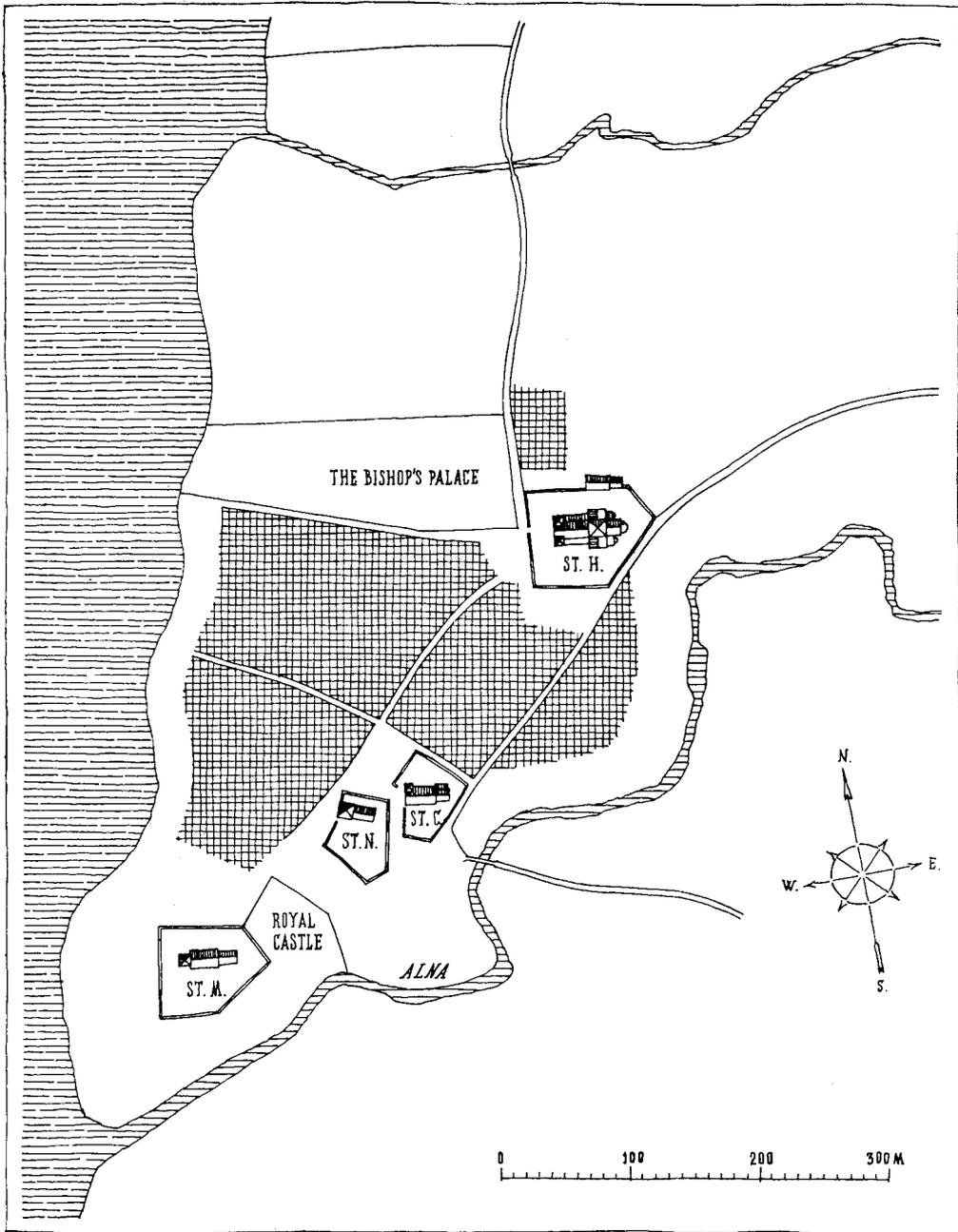


FIG. 17

OLD OSLO ABOUT 1200 (pp. 49, 52)

St. Hallvard's Cathedral was erected at the highest point of the area in the first decades of the 12th century.

ments of the roads are usually composed of split tree-trunks laid side by side on sturdy log foundations. The streets led on to the quays, and these again jugged out into the water with warehouses built up on either side. The numerous finds in this part of the town include household chattels and private articles, as well as items belonging to traders and workmen.

In time the built-up quarter of the town between the two main centres became overcrowded and, in consequence, the growing population began to erect houses to the north of the bishop's palace. Here the citizens soon founded their own parish church dedicated to the Holy Cross on a site contiguous with the ecclesiastical centre (FIG. 18). Thus the church centre, owing to this extension to the north, in time became the geographical focus-point as well. This development was hastened by an event which was to leave this part of the town the principal, indeed the only real, centre. The king decided to build a new castle at Akershus, the cliff some three kilometres to the west of the city (FIG. 14). The formation of the rock favoured the plans of the king, who wished to raise there a modern fortress, comparable with the best European examples. If in 1050 military convenience and other considerations had dictated the choice of the mud-flats at the mouth of the River Alna for the site of the royal headquarters, it was again strategy and new methods of defence which 250 years later were to lead the king to abandon the former situation for the inaccessible cliff of Akershus Castle.

The plan of Old Oslo is thus able to offer us a revealing picture of the history and development of the city. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible for a visitor to the site today to obtain a true impression of what the town formerly looked like. The whole district is now dominated by late 19th-century blocks of flats, and transected by railways and modern roads. Yet, owing to the untiring efforts during the last century of all those devoted to the preservation of our past, at least some remains of what once gave medieval Oslo its character still survive. Vestiges of the royal centre may be seen isolated between the railway-lines, while remnants of the stone buildings belonging to the former ecclesiastical centre are now laid out as a park. It is our hope and our intention that the park shall be extended towards the south so as to include the ruins of the church of St. Clement. (The remains of the church of St. Nicolas were demolished when a railway was built in the 1870s.) From St. Clement's a bridge crossing the railway will connect the park with another green belt including the ruins of the royal centre. In this way we hope that the remains will emerge sufficiently to give us an idea of the main outline of the old town and of some of the most remarkable buildings in it.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL CENTRE (FIGS. 18-19)

The oldest, as well as the most important, building belonging to the ecclesiastical centre was the church of St. Hallvard, which served as cathedral for the diocese throughout the middle ages (FIG. 19). It was begun as a romanesque basilica soon after 1100, and by 1130, when King Sigurd Jorsalfarer died, the building was far enough advanced for him to be buried under the S. wall. The church was pulled down in the 17th century and only the foundations remain

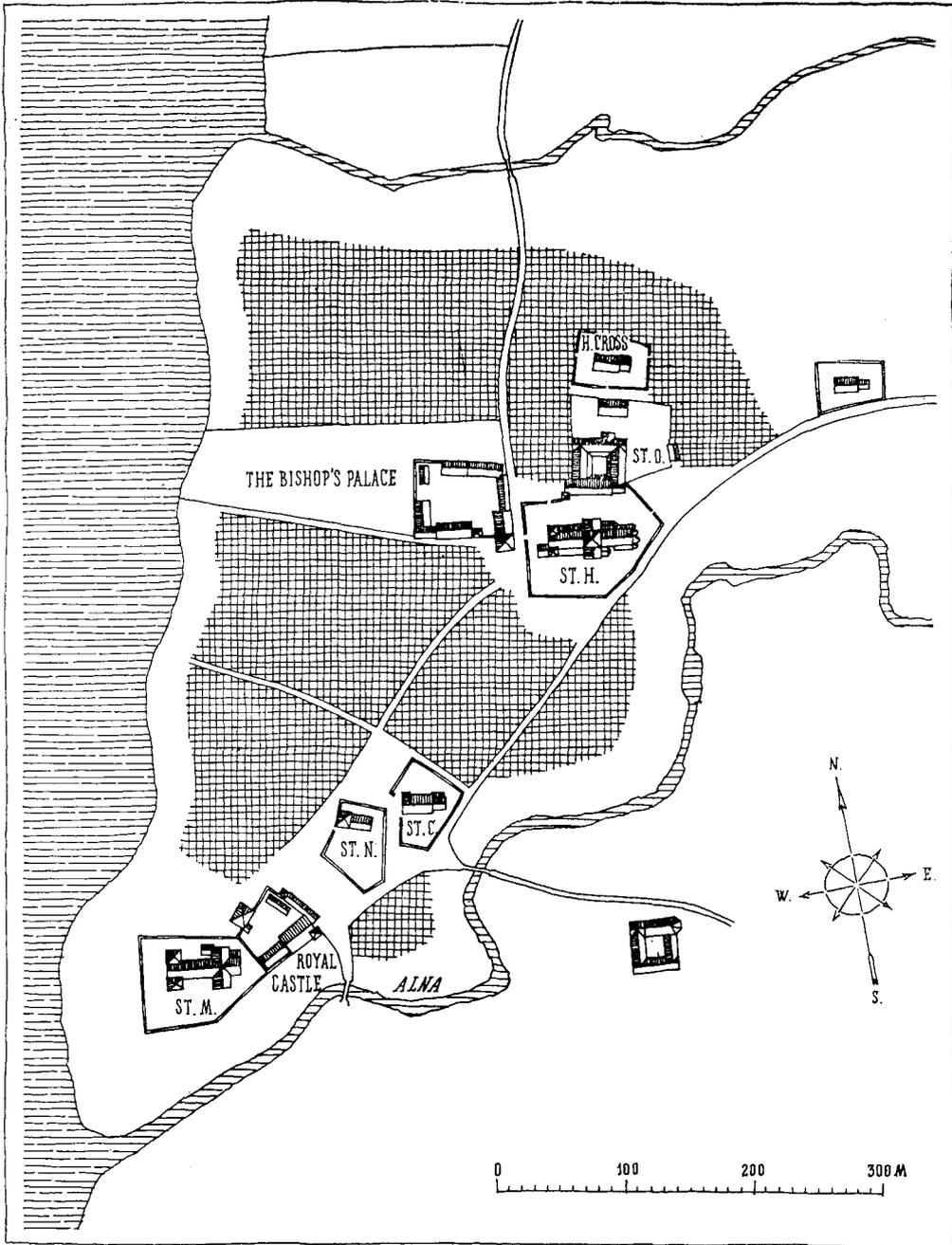


FIG. 18

OLD OSLO ABOUT 1300 (pp. 52, 56)

The cathedral is surrounded by the bishop's palace to the west and St. Olav's Priory to the north. The parish church of the Holy Cross lay in the new part of the city which had grown up outside the ecclesiastical centre.

today. The choir and the transept chapels all had apses. A powerful central tower dominated the crossing, while the W. front was flanked by a pair of towers. From the northernmost of these a wooden bridge resting on stone pillars crossed the street to the top floor of the eastern wing of the bishop's palace. This picturesque bridge, mentioned by the sagas in their account of certain brawls in Oslo during the 13th century, gave the bishop direct access to his cathedral. Later, the chancel was completely reconstructed and extended in conformity with gothic forms and building technique. The capitals of porches and windows as well as other salient architectural members were covered with a rich gothic foliage. The older parts of the church had been built in the local limestone of Oslo, but the gothic ornament was carved in the softer soapstone from the districts to the north and east, more appropriate for the richer stylistic demands of the new mode.

To the north of the cathedral, but bordering on the same churchyard, lay the church of St. Olav, built some time during the 12th century. Its original status is unknown, but it was taken over by the Dominicans, when their order came to Norway around 1250. Under their direction the church was altered and incorporated as the S. wing of the new St. Olav's Priory, the other three sides of which surrounded the cloister to the north of the church (FIG. 19). The walls of the church and the W. and N. wings are preserved almost up to a man's height, while the E. wing has survived practically complete, its three rooms spanned by the original brick vaults. This is probably one of the earliest Norwegian buildings in which brick was employed. Considering that there is no lack of stone in Norway, it may at first seem a little surprising that it should have been thought necessary to set up brick-kilns, but this should be interpreted as an expression of the desire to conform to the Danish and north German architectural traditions. Brick was used not only for the vaulting, but also, together with limestone, for the framing of windows and doors. This practice of mixing brick and limestone, with the ornamental members carved in soapstone, is characteristic of the gothic in Oslo and can be traced in eastern Norway wherever the influence of Oslo made itself felt in building during the last half of the 13th and the first half of the 14th centuries.

Remains of the foundations of a large wooden construction, the banqueting-hall of St. Anne's, have been uncovered in the open area to the north of the priory of St. Olav and bordering the S. side of the street named Geilene. To the north of the same street lie the ruins of the church of the Holy Cross surrounded by churchyard walls. This was a simple stone church of the usual Norwegian pattern, possessing a rectangular nave and a narrower and shallower square-ended chancel. It was erected in the northern sector of the ecclesiastical centre as the parish church of the town's extension during the 13th century; today it bounds the park-area to the north.

The bishop's palace was situated west of the cathedral on the opposite side of the road. Remains of several stone buildings have so far been uncovered, while recent archaeological excavations on the site reveal that the courtyard was surrounded by a wall enclosing stone constructions on all four sides. A renaissance

house covering the E. wing will, in a year's time, be opened as a museum for Old Oslo. Models of the ancient city and its most remarkable monuments will be

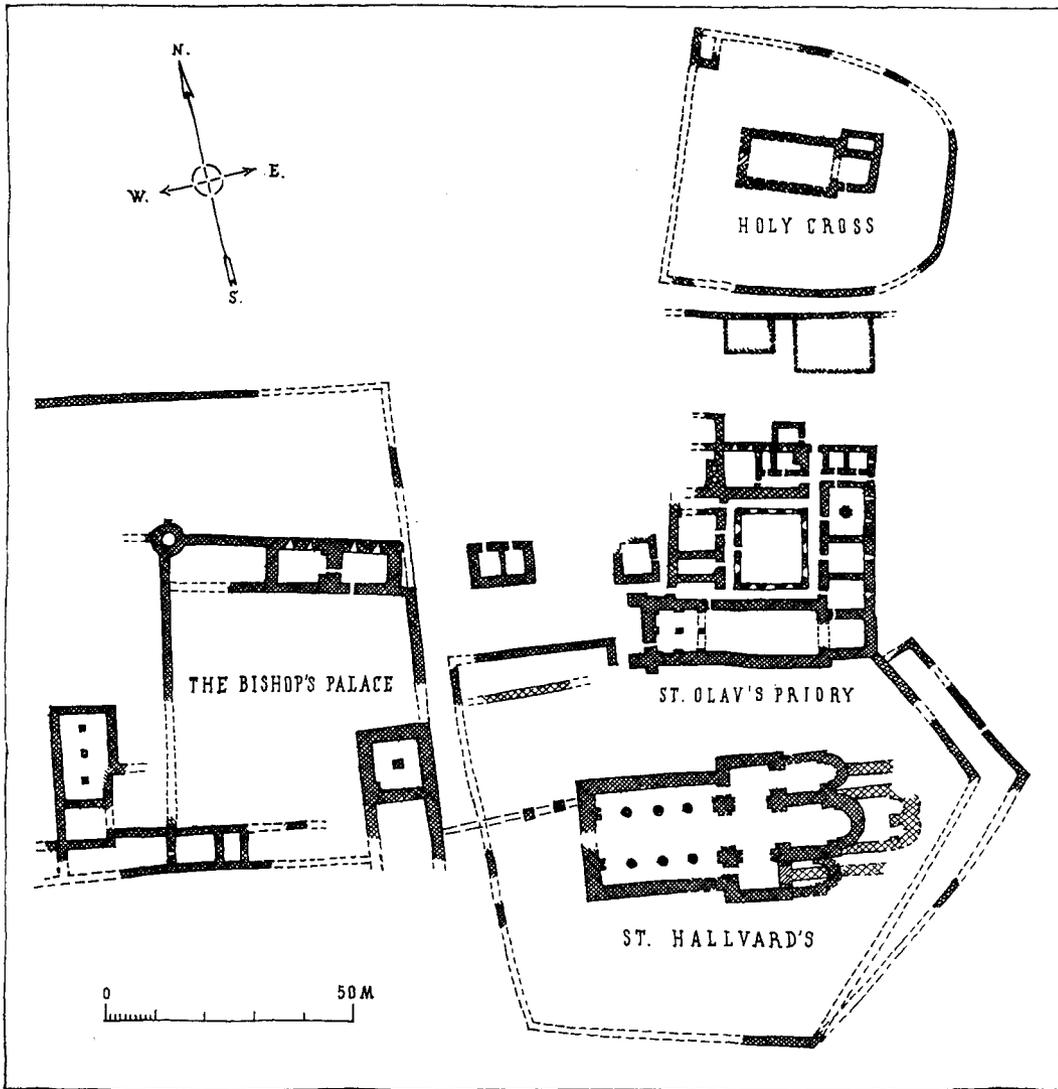


FIG. 19
 ECCLESIASTICAL CENTRE OF OLD OSLO (pp. 52, 54 f.)

shown, together with a selection of the finds illustrating the daily life and the varied activities of the medieval township. As far as possible, we want to make this museum part of the old city and a living link with its remains.

THE ROYAL CENTRE (FIGS. 18 and 20)

Railways have encroached on the site of the royal centre, but all the church and the chief part of the castle are preserved, and their layout, thanks to the archaeologists of the last century, ascertained in general outline.

The castle was encompassed by an outer wall reinforced by an entrance tower, and consisted within of a royal hall and several subsidiary buildings. These date from the 13th century and stand several feet above the ground. Vestiges of the

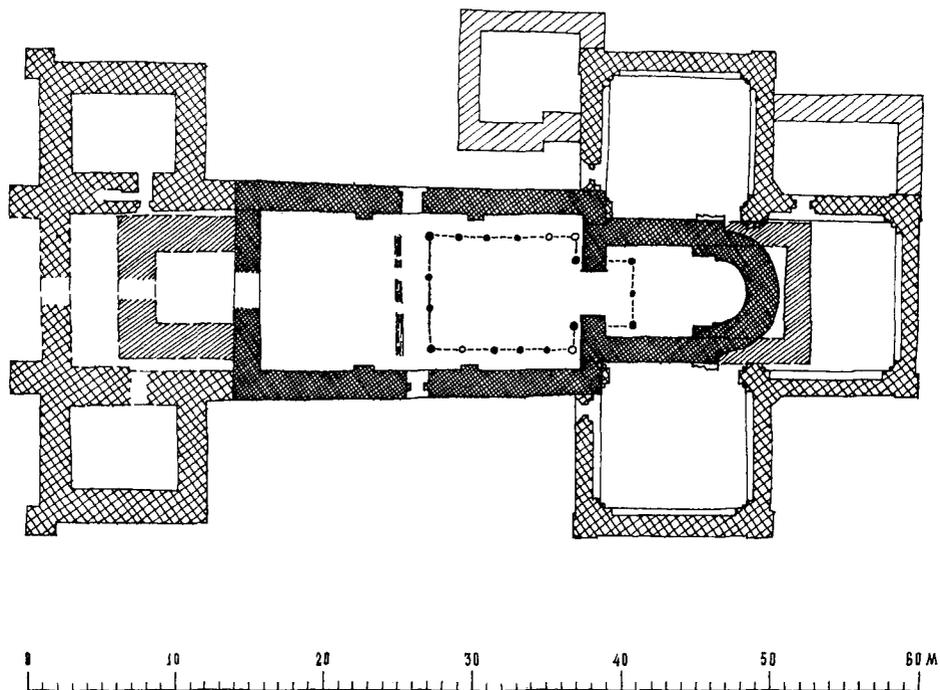


FIG. 20

ST. MARY'S CHURCH, OLD OSLO (pp. 56 ff.)

The first church on the site, a wooden structure with wall-posts planted in holes in the ground, was succeeded by a romanesque stone church with rectangular nave and square apsidal choir. Later the choir was enlarged and made rectangular, and a tower was added at the west. About 1300 this tower was pulled down to make way for an extension of the nave with two W. towers, and the E. end of the church was enlarged on a cruciform plan.

11th-century timber constructions and the earlier earthwork are traceable in the S. part of the courtyard.

Ruins of the church of St. Mary (FIG. 20) and its surrounding churchyard wall lie not far west of the castle. Around 1300 (see below) the west of this wall had to give way to an extension of the nave, while simultaneously the E. arm of the church was enlarged on a cruciform plan. Once more the reconstruction brought with it the change from the former local limestone to the use of brick employed in walls and vaulting, while soapstone was reserved for the ornamental parts of doorways, windows and vaults. The powerful twin-towered W. front

rose close to the seashore, a commanding element in the view of the town from the water.

When Haakon V made Oslo the capital of Norway about 1300, he also founded a chapter of canons to serve his chapel royal. It was in order to conform to this new dignity that the church of St. Mary was enlarged and made more impressive. The king and queen were later interred in the church and their burial-vaults have been discovered in the middle of the choir. Following his death, the king became the object of a cult; an altar was erected for the veneration of Saint Haakon and his feast-day duly celebrated.

Even before the time of King Haakon the church had seen alterations. A tower was added at the west, while the former apse was removed and the choir extended in the form of a rectangle. Originally St. Mary's possessed a square chancel with apse, and a rectangular nave. Two pilasters flanking a doorway divided the side-walls of the nave into three equal parts. The church seems to have been built on this pattern around 1100, probably in order to serve as the bishop's church until a more suitable cathedral could be erected.

Recent excavations at the W. end of the nave, however, brought to light certain tombs which appeared older even than the stone church itself and seemed to indicate the existence of an earlier sanctuary on the same site. Further investigations in the E. part of the nave and in the W. portion of the chancel uncovered traces of a timber church with walls composed of big posts. The floors of the stave-church and the stone church are on the same level, and in consequence the only remnants of the earlier structure are to be found below the ground. These indicate that the church was built round a framework of heavy posts planted two to three feet deep in the soil at intervals of approximately two metres. The rows of posts suggest that the church had a nave about 10 by 7.5 metres and a square chancel about 4 by 4 metres.

The posts of the chancel and the W. end of the nave were lodged in large holes in the ground, those of the sides of the nave in trenches. About 2 metres west of the W. end lay fragments of a beam, probably the remains of the sill of a narthex-gallery. The posts, the lower extremities of which still survive, were lifted into the holes and trenches, and the surrounding space was filled in with sand, which was then firmly pressed against the posts to act as a reinforcement. The posts themselves were sufficiently sturdy to carry the whole structure, so that the walls, which had no sustaining function, consisted only of a simple row of planks alongside each other. No trace of these has been discovered, but most probably the planks were embedded in a wooden sill at ground level.

The history of St. Mary's in many ways runs parallel to the evolution of the city as a whole, in its development from a cluster of timber dwellings at the river's mouth to the status of national capital 250 years later, and in its subsequent decline, until at the end of the middle ages it fell into ruin. Examination of the remains of St. Mary's reflects the various stages of this history, taking us back to the very beginnings. Neither the sagas nor the results of the excavations inform us whether a settlement already existed before Harald Haardraade decided to make Oslo his base. But most probably the stave-church was erected

by the king as his court-chapel, although it may also have been built as a missionary-church during the movement of evangelization which we know took place in this part of Norway in the second half of the 10th century. If so, it is not unreasonable to assume that a trading-post already existed on the site bordering the fjord, and that Christian missionaries, arriving here from Denmark, made it their headquarters.

The discovery of this early stave-church, therefore, provides a new element in the old controversy concerning the original foundation date for Oslo. Did Harald Haardraade, as is popularly believed, actually found the city, or are we obliged to seek further back for its origin? The question at present must remain open, and we can only hope that further excavations will help us supply an answer.