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## **The economy of Norwegian towns c. 1250–1350**

*A comparative study of the economic functions of towns in Norway,  
Denmark and England*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

When Lewis Mumford wrote his influential book *The City in History* (1961), he opened by asking the simple question “What is the city?”.<sup>1</sup> In the fifty-four years that have passed since, the question has received much attention. Historians have amassed a wealth of knowledge about cities and towns through historical studies and archaeological excavations, and many questions that at the time were unresolved, have since received answers or at least thorough discussion. However, some questions and topics remain open for debate, and one such topic is the elusive Norwegian towns. Norwegian towns were different from their European counterparts both in appearance and function. They lacked walls, for instance, which was a common European town feature, and they were generally quite small. They were also all seaports, except Hamar, which was situated on the shore of an inland lake, Mjøsa. More importantly, as this thesis aims to show, they had a different economic function than European towns.

Much of the attention Norwegian historians have accorded towns come in the form of town monographs, but some research has also been done on general town development and urbanisation in Norway. The origins of towns have enjoyed a particularly prominent place in the discussions, and a recent publication, *De første 200 årene – nytt blikk på 27 skandinaviske middelalderbyer*<sup>2</sup> (2008) edited by Hans Andersson, Gitte Hansen and Ingvild Øye, shows that the debate around this issue is still alive and thriving. Most town histories, while usually being well researched and oftentimes including some comparative elements, are generally of a local character. Few have tried to look at Norwegian towns in the High Middle Ages as a single unit. One exception is *Norsk byhistorie* (2006), which will be discussed further down.

In general, the medieval economy has seen plenty of research and debate. The role of towns in the Norwegian economy has also received attention, usually in the context of long-distance trade. Few, however, have tried to compare the economic function of Norwegian towns with those of other European countries. In the thirteenth century especially, there was a massive urban growth in Western Europe. Old towns were given charters defining their rights and liberties, and new towns were founded rapidly. Behind the new towns were often local aristocrats who saw towns as a potential source of profit.<sup>3</sup> One reason for the profitability of towns was that they had a market where goods were traded and from which the lord of the town

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<sup>1</sup> Mumford 1961: 3.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. “The first 200 years – a new look at 27 Scandinavian medieval towns”

<sup>3</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 270.

could exact a profit. Much of the goods traded were commodities produced in the town itself, which peasants living nearby found essential. Most spectacular was the trade in textiles, which, far from being only high-quality luxury items, became more and more diversified in their quality and were usually produced in towns for a local market. Norwegian urbanisation, it has been alleged,<sup>4</sup> did not follow this pattern. Therefore, an examination of the differences between Norwegian and other European towns is needed.

The towns chosen for comparisons are those of Denmark and England. Denmark shared strong ties with Norway, culturally, linguistically, and politically, making it a fit object of comparison as one can expect to find some economic similarities or, at the very least, some shared challenges. The differences between Norway and Denmark, such as Denmark's proximity to the continent as well as their climate and topography, also provides us with some starting points when trying to analyse certain aspects of the urban development. England, on the other hand, had a much larger population, a larger urban production sector and a much more commercialised society. Research on English urban history and especially urban economic history, has been going on for a long time, with many solid publications with both theoretical analyses and empirical observations. This has led to an increased understanding of towns in general, and provides an empirically based counterpoint when the source material for Norwegian towns is lacking.

### **1.1: Research questions**

There are two hypotheses behind this study: First, Norway's urbanisation stopped developing along the same lines as Danish and English towns, with regard to population and number of new towns. Second, this was because commercial production in towns was underdeveloped and never took hold in Norwegian towns, making their growth dependent on institutions such as the church, crown and aristocracy, and their ability to draw unprocessed commodities such as dried cod to towns to be sold and exported.

The aim of this thesis is to attempt to validate these hypotheses; to answer the question of *why* differences arose, if they did; and to consider how this affects the way we think about Norwegian towns.

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<sup>4</sup> Holt 2007: 147.



## 1.2: Geographical and chronological delimitation

The period is loosely defined as the century before the Black Death, c. 1250–1350. This is done to be able to draw upon as many sources as possible to shed light on different functions of towns, while avoiding pitfalls that may befall historians trying to use sources from completely different periods. Naturally, sources from outside the period are from time to time used as they form the basis for much knowledge about medieval town, as, for instance, the population estimates for Bergen is an example of.<sup>5</sup>

Geographically, this study is limited to Norway, England and Denmark. There are different conventions within each country when it comes to what geographical area is considered in their study of towns. In Norway and Denmark, towns from areas that were part of the countries in the Middle Ages (often c. 1300) are included. This means that Konghelle, for example, in present-day Sweden, is included in this study as a Norwegian town, and Lund, also in present-day Sweden, is considered a Danish town. In England, however, towns in present-day France or Ireland that were then under the English crown are not included in English historians' studies of English towns. This has little impact on this thesis, and the concentration of the English towns is in fact helpful when, among other things, the effect of geography on town development is considered in Chapter 5.

## 1.3: Sources

Documentary sources, narratives and archaeological evidence form the backbone of most historical research. Unfortunately, few narratives cover the period; the only Norwegian narratives are Håkon Håkonsson's saga and the very brief and taciturn saga of Magnus the Lawmender (1263–1280), both written by Sturla Tordsson.<sup>6</sup> These sagas are also rather unhelpful; they simply do not say much about towns or the economy. One saga that was written before the period, and which will from time to time be used, is Sverre's. It contains several interesting references to towns and trade, such as in the speech king Sverre (1177–1202)<sup>7</sup> held in Bergen in 1186, where he presented some of his thoughts about trade and economy.<sup>8</sup> The single most important documentary source that is used for Norwegian towns is the Town Law of Magnus

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<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that population estimates from 1645 form the best basis for an estimate of the population in Bergen c. 1300, Helle 1982: 487.

<sup>6</sup> Magerøy 1979a: 7; Magerøy 1979b: 345.

<sup>7</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 116.

<sup>8</sup> *Sverres saga*: chapter 104 (p. 155).

the Law-mender.<sup>9</sup> The law code contains passages detailing specific locations for different crafts, who were eligible to pay the town tax, and other, crucial information about town activities. It is of course problematic to use normative sources to describe reality, but through careful use some valuable information can be gleaned. Nonetheless, the nature of these written sources makes it hard to say anything about how many craftsmen there were and how much was produced – vital questions for this study – even when we can find references to a craft. Luckily, archaeological sources can be of more help than documentary sources in this regard.

Archaeological excavations from medieval towns in Norway have resulted in many publications, such as the “Bryggen papers” series from the excavations at Bryggen in Bergen and the “Meddelelser” from the excavations at “Folkebibliotekstomta” in Trondheim. These have both uncovered new knowledge and confirmed old assumptions. Smaller places, such as Veøy, Vågar and Borgund for example, have also been excavated with published results, which has enlarged the historians’ knowledge of smaller central places. In Vågar, for example, remains of shoes have been found, and shoemakers probably had their workshops in the centre of Vågar.<sup>10</sup>

#### **1.4: Previous research**

Generally, however, this thesis will draw upon the work of others. As mentioned, many town monographs focusing on a single town have been written for Norwegian towns. Knut Helle, for example, has written the first book in the four volume history of Bergen, called *Bergen bys historie 1. Kongssete og kjøpstad: Fra opphavet til 1536* (1982). Arnved Nedkvitne and Per G. Norseng have written *Oslo bys historie 1: Byen under Eikaberget: fra byens oppkomst til 1536* (1991), and Erik Schia has also written a book on medieval Oslo called *Oslo innerst i viken* (1995). Trondheim has a multiple volume town monography, called *Trondheims historie: 997–1997*, the medieval volume being called *Hellig Olavs by. Middelalder til 1537* (1997), written by Grethe Authén Blom.

Smaller places also have written town histories, for instance *Stavanger bys historie: Bispeby og borgarby – frå opphavet til 1815* (2012) by Geir Atle Ersland and Arne Solli. Ersland wrote about the period up to c. 1680, and the following discussion concentrates on his contribution to

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<sup>9</sup> *Magnus Lagabøters bylov*, translated into Norwegian by Knut Robbestad, (1923), from here on shortened to MLB.

<sup>10</sup> Bertelsen 2009: 203.

the book. The book is quite ambitious as it explicitly states that it wants to be considered both as a book on Stavanger in pre-modern times, and as a more general history of towns in pre-modern northern Europe.<sup>11</sup> In practice, however, it means that he uses comparisons with other towns, both in Norway and elsewhere, to highlight certain aspects, for example how other episcopal towns, such as Copenhagen, fared. Some of these comparisons have been criticised for not being quite on-target,<sup>12</sup> and, while it has many comparative elements that are truly enlightening,<sup>13</sup> it is perhaps not quite correct to describe it as a general town history. When he does try to incorporate general European town history into the text, his discussions are sometimes very brief, and perhaps a bit too interested in understanding how Stavanger fits in, rather than how it stands out.<sup>14</sup>

This is not an exhaustive list of Norwegian town monographs. The point is simply to show that there has been, and still is, a great interest from historians in writing these single town monographs. It is not a new phenomenon. Grete Authén Blom, for instance, wrote one of the volumes in the previous town monography, *Trondheim bys historie* (1955–1962), so the book she published in 1997 seems simply to have been an opportunity for her to update previous work. Edvard Bull wrote *Kristianias historie bind 1* on medieval Oslo in 1922, for the 300-year anniversary of the establishment of Kristiania (Oslo) municipality in 1924. In other words, the topic has fascinated historians, and especially, it must be said, as anniversaries draw close, it is a topic popular enough to gain funding from local politicians.<sup>15</sup>

The local histories combined form a considerable pool of knowledge on Norwegian towns in the Middle Ages. For the most part, they are only interested in the subject town and its immediate surroundings, though most contain some observations on Norwegian urban centres in general and comparisons with towns in other parts of Europe. Still, they rarely dedicate a significant amount of space to other towns. *Norsk byhistorie* (2006) is different in that it does exactly this. Knut Helle is the general editor as well as the author of the section on Norway's medieval towns, and he tries to incorporate the body of knowledge, which had accumulated, and give a general description of the Norwegian towns. He had, together with Arnved

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<sup>11</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 9.

<sup>12</sup> Eliassen 2014: 322.

<sup>13</sup> His discussion on the connection between Copenhagen and Stavanger, and the political situation it sprung from is one example of this, Ersland and Solli 2012: 67–71.

<sup>14</sup> He is, or seems to be, very interested in presenting Stavanger as an episcopal town and consequently place it in a tradition of considering episcopal towns “som eigen kategori”, Ersland and Solli 2012: 74–75.

<sup>15</sup> Ersland has a rather amusing survey of the bickering in local papers over the founding of Stavanger, which ended with the local council inviting historians to “gjennomføra ein brei studie for å avdekkja Stavangers alder på grunnlag av alt relevant material”, Ersland and Solli 2012: 29–32.

Nedkvitne, written something similar earlier, in a paper called “Sentrumdannelser og byutvikling i norsk middelalder”,<sup>16</sup> but the chapters in *Norsk byhistorie* contain up to date material which was not available in 1977, for example from archaeological excavations.

The book contains a lot of information on for example what evidence there is for different towns, how the town houses looked, who owned property and what institutions were present. The economy, central to this thesis, receives some attention, but the discussion around it – such as the “byfyllere” (“town-fillers”) or “bygrunner” (“town-founder”) dichotomy<sup>17</sup> – is both brief and somewhat outdated, relying heavily on Werner Sombart’s work from a century ago. Other topics are also covered, but one problem diminishes its usefulness. Simply put, the book suffers from being quite short. The first volume of *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume I 600–1540* (2000) covers approximately 940 years in about 750 pages. *Norsk byhistorie*, on the other hand, is only about 500 pages and covers a period of thirteen hundred years. The section on Norway’s medieval towns is 101 pages, wherein only approximately 60 pages are on the High Middle Ages; the rest is on the origin of towns and towns in the Late Middle Ages. Naturally, with the small amount of space available, a selection has to be made. Apparently, it was supposed to be both a synthesis and a handbook of Norwegian towns. However, the book is closer to a handbook than a synthesis of Norwegian urban history, as was also argued by Ola Alsvik in a review of the book.<sup>18</sup>

This thesis’ focus on synthesis, town industry and economic development draws much inspiration from two articles on Norwegian towns by Richard Holt: “What if the sea was different? Urbanisation in medieval Norway” and “Medieval Norway’s urbanization in a European perspective”.<sup>19</sup> Their main topic is differences between Norwegian and other European towns, and, especially, what caused these differences. As with *Norsk byhistorie*, length is an issue: neither article dives deep into the source material, and their focus is on shedding light on some key factors, with the perhaps unavoidable result of pushing other factors to the background.

Thus, the topic for this thesis, and its approach to the subject, has been missing from most of the historical writing on towns, and what has been written on it has, perhaps, been too brief to do the subject justice.

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<sup>16</sup> Helle and Nedkvitne 1977.

<sup>17</sup> Helle 2006: 86–88.

<sup>18</sup> Alsvik 2007: 137–138.

<sup>19</sup> Holt 2007; Holt 2009.

## 1.5: Method

In order to understand the Norwegian towns and their development, I have chosen to compare them with English and Danish towns. Comparative history is not new and one could argue that every explanation is based on comparison.<sup>20</sup> Still, making explicit the methodological background for this study has an inherent value for the reader and the writer, in that their visions for the thesis align. Not everything gains by being compared, and a sloppy comparison may lead to more confusion than enlightenment. The application of comparative methods depends entirely on what information is sought from the data. Skocpol and Somers list three, analytically different logics that comparative history might follow. First the “parallel demonstration of theory”, then the “contrast of contexts” and last “macro-causal analysis”.<sup>21</sup> On the subject of the “contrast of context” model, Skocpol and Somers wrote:

But scholars such as Clifford Geertz, [...] James Lang, [...] and Reinhard Bendix [...] make use of comparative history to bring out the unique features of each particular case included in their discussions, and to show how these unique features affect the working-out of putatively general social processes.<sup>22</sup>

In this particular study, the idea is to try to understand how towns grew and what their function was in different contexts, in order to say something about the societies they existed in, and how such societies in turn effected the development of towns. This study, then, follows the comparative method or logic of “contrast of contexts”, which aims at procuring new knowledge through comparison.

The objects in this thesis existed within different political entities and were different in a number of ways. To make good objects of comparison, it needs to be possible to compare them in a meaningful way.<sup>23</sup> As Kjeldstadli wrote on the comparative method, “målet blir å velge objekter som har den interessante blandingen av likhet og ulikhet”.<sup>24</sup> By our very use of the word “town” we accept that there were obvious similarities between the Norwegian, English and Danish objects, but this is also something that will be returned to later in the discussion on

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<sup>20</sup> Kjeldstadli 1988: 436.

<sup>21</sup> Skocpol and Somers 1980: 175.

<sup>22</sup> Skocpol and Somers 1980: 178.

<sup>23</sup> Kjeldstadli 1988: 440.

<sup>24</sup> Kjeldstadli 1988: 440. “The aim is to choose objects that has the interesting blend of similarities and differences.” (my translation).

how to define towns.<sup>25</sup> For now, it may suffice to say that they had many similarities, making them fit objects for comparison, and also had some differences around which the central theme of this study hinges. Naturally, this means awareness of the different situations – politically, culturally, economically, geographically – that affected the development of towns in the different countries, is paramount.

Since this is an historical study, source criticism will naturally form one methodological leg for this thesis to stand on. In general, the immediate questions that need answering dictate which method will be applied. If, for example, answers to questions that are by nature quantitative are sought, such as how many coins there were, quantitative methods are naturally particularly useful. However, qualitative methods may also be of use in such situations, especially in a period that has few sources – though significantly more than preceding periods. Therefore, qualitative and quantitative methods will often be used in conjunction with one another. Most of the original sources already form part of the discussion of particular themes – such as the coinage – and have been discussed in detail in previous publications. Much, but not all, will therefore come from what other historians have already written on the subject matter. To go through all the original sources, for all Norwegian, Danish and English towns, would be an undertaking far too great for a master's dissertation. Nonetheless, where it has been possible, consulting with primary sources – or at least translations of primary sources – and archaeological reports have been done, especially for Norwegian towns.

## **1.6: Structure of the thesis**

The hypotheses and questions posed earlier have dictated much of this thesis' structure. Chapter 2 aims to give a general introduction to what Norwegian, English and Danish towns were, how Norwegian towns were written about in the sagas, who lived there and what institutions were represented. The main object, however, is the problem of defining towns, which is discussed there in some detail. In Chapter 3, production in Danish, English and, primarily, Norwegian towns is examined. The goal is to gain a clear understanding of what the sources and archaeological evidence do and do not say regarding town production. The following chapter, Chapter 4, is also empirical, but deals with the question of how monetised the Norwegian towns, and the Norwegian society, were; how much trade there was, both long-distance; and, generally, with how commercialised the Norwegian towns and society were. This, while not explicitly

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapters 2.1 and 6.1 for more discussion on the definition of towns.



mentioned in the hypotheses and research questions, is vital for the arguments put forth in the last two chapters.

Chapters 5 and 6, while similar in some respects, perform different functions. In Chapter 5, it is attempted to explain the differences or similarities found in English, Danish and Norwegian towns. To do this, different factors are presented and their relative importance assessed, in an effort to provide a more holistic explanation of the economic development of Norwegian towns. The last chapter has the double goal of presenting a summary of the findings, and to build upon this to answer the questions and hypotheses posed in Chapter 1.1.

## Chapter 2: Towns in Norway, Denmark and England

The eleventh to the fourteenth century was a period of urban expansion in Europe. New towns were founded and old towns grew larger. In England, there were approximately 110 towns in the late eleventh century, compared to over 500 in the early fourteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In Denmark, the most populous country in Scandinavia, the number of towns grew from 20 to over 70 during the thirteenth century.<sup>27</sup> A striking difference can be seen between the number of Norwegian and Danish towns (figure 1), and it is worth noting that a difference also exists between the number of Norwegian and Swedish towns – though one that will not be further explored in this thesis. The urban expansion was also echoed in other peripheral areas of Western Europe. Scotland, which had no towns before the twelfth century, had 56 in 1306.<sup>28</sup> The vast majority of the new towns were relatively small, with populations of less than 5 000 and often less than 2 000. In England, it has been suggested, half the urban population lived in towns of less than 2 000 inhabitants.<sup>29</sup>

Historians have estimated the town population for each country, and it has been suggested that 20% of England's population, 5% of the Danish population, and 5% of the Norwegian population lived in towns.<sup>30</sup> The estimate for the relative town population for Danish towns is surprisingly close to that Norwegian towns, but should be taken with a grain of salt. The Danish town population estimate comes from Jacobsen and Madsen, who write that “forholdet her [i.e. in Denmark] har nok mere mindet om England, hvis byer menes at have rummet ca. 5% af befolkningen”.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the 5% comes from their assumption that Danish and English urbanisation was similar in many aspects, similar enough that both countries had about the same percentage of people living in towns.

The data this builds on is not disclosed, and is quite outdated. They are not the only ones to make the same mistake with the English town population. Imsen wrote that “England lå så vidt over gjennomsnittet med 4,5% byboere”.<sup>32</sup> The number is outdated, and throughout the study, 20% is used as an estimate of the English town population. The quadrupling of the estimate –

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<sup>26</sup> Swanson 1999: 14.

<sup>27</sup> Christensen 2004: 20; Helle 2006: 64.

<sup>28</sup> Swanson 1999: 11, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Holt 2000: 103–104.

<sup>30</sup> Dyer 2002b: 5; Jacobsen and Madsen 1999: 139; Helle 2006: 110.

<sup>31</sup> Jacobsen and Madsen 1999: 139. “The conditions here [in Denmark] are more likely to have resembled those of England, whose towns supposedly held c. 5% of the population.” (My translation).

<sup>32</sup> Imsen 2000: 24. “England was just above the average with 4,5% town-dwellers.” (My translation).



Figure 2.1: Map of medieval towns in Scandinavia, from Helle 2006: 65.

from about 5% to roughly 20% – is largely due to an increased appreciation of how many small towns there were, and how many people actually lived there.<sup>33</sup> Imsen writes that about 26% of the Tuscan population lived in towns with over 3000 inhabitants,<sup>34</sup> so it is quite likely that he similarly dismisses smaller towns from his estimate of the English town population. Thus, if Jacobsen and Madsen persist in their belief that English and Danish towns were similar, they are actually arguing for a much higher town population in Denmark than in Norway. While 20% of the total population in Denmark might have lived in towns, it is perhaps more likely that it was somewhat less. Tentatively, I would suggest that Denmark had perhaps double the relative town population of Norway but in the end it can be no more than a suggestion.<sup>35</sup>

Between 1250 and 1350, no new towns were founded in Norway. According to Helle<sup>36</sup> fourteen towns existed in Norway in the High Middle Ages: Bergen, Trondheim, Oslo, Tønsberg, Skien, Stavanger, Borg, Borgund, Veøy, Kaupanger, Vågar, Hamar, Konghelle and Marstrand. The towns were of varying size: Bergen may have had between 6 000 and 10 000 inhabitants while others, such as Borgund, Veøy, Hamar, Vågar, Kaupanger, Skien, Borg, Konghelle and Marstrand may have had as few as 200–500 inhabitants. The other, large towns – Oslo, Trondheim and Tønsberg – were somewhere in between with populations of around or slightly below 3 000, somewhat less perhaps for Tønsberg. From the population estimates alone one can begin to question what is meant by “town” in a Norwegian context. This does not get any clearer when we consider the relative town population. The four largest towns in Norway had close to 80% of the whole town population (see figure 2), and Bergen, the largest town, had over 40% of the whole town population. The character of Norwegian towns, considered as a whole, was different from the character of English towns where, as mentioned above, close to 50% of the town population in small towns.

## **2.1: Defining Norwegian towns**

The problematic nature of defining these small Norwegian places can be seen with the latest addition to the Norwegian urban landscape before our period. Marstrand, located in the southeast of Norway, seems to have originated in the early thirteenth century. According to the

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<sup>33</sup> Dobson 2000: 275; Holt 2000: 103–104. In addition, the population estimates of large English towns have also been adjusted upwards, with London in the early fourteenth century now assumed to have had between 80 000 and 100 000 inhabitants, Dobson 2000: 275; Dyer 2000b: 283–285.

<sup>34</sup> Imsen 2000: 23.

<sup>35</sup> Hybel and Poulsen discusses the problematic nature of previous Danish estimates for the town population and arrives at about 13% as a plausible suggestion for Schleswig in the Late Middle Ages, Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 251–252.

<sup>36</sup> Helle 2006: 66.

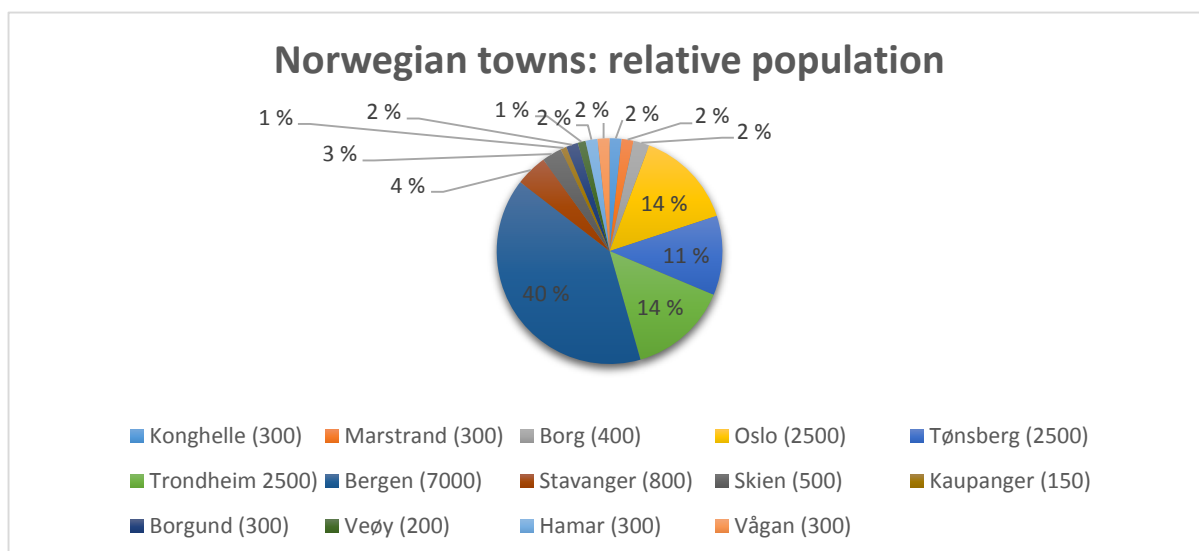


Figure 2.2: This figure is to give an idea of how many people lived in small towns versus large. The estimates were taken from Ekroll 2006 and Helle 2006, who do not always agree. It is important to note that these numbers are often averages; Bergen, for example, is given as 6 000–10 000 by Ekroll, but the pessimistic average of 7 000 is used here, in an effort to take account of the fact that the highest number is probably in large due to seasonal merchants. In addition, historians discussing the populations of small towns often resort to vague phrases such as “a few hundred”. However, Veøy is given as smaller than Borgund, and Kaupanger – called “Lusakaupanger” in Sverre’s saga – is portrayed as even smaller than Veøy by Helle, and so a hierarchy can be established even though all the small “towns” are referred to in similar terms when not explicitly compared. The main purpose of this figure, however, is not to give perfectly accurate population estimates, but rather to highlight the obvious dominance of a few, large towns.

saga of Håkon IV Håkonsson, he built the town, “og mange andre øde øyer i Viken”.<sup>37</sup> The reference to other uninhabited islands may indicate that his “founding” of Marstrand was not necessarily intended as such. It may have simply been part of a policy to expand his control over a contested area by settling previously unsettled land. That this place became a small community with trade was mostly due to its function as a port for the nearby fisheries.<sup>38</sup> Even so, it never grew past a few hundred inhabitants, and archaeologists have not found any significant urban traces from before the fifteenth century. Whether we should call it a town or not is highly debatable. That the number of towns is uncertain is clear. Grethe Authén Blom, for instance, wrote in her history of Trondheim that while there were fifteen places that had been mentioned in terms commonly related to towns, “av disse kan vi krysse ut Vågan, Steinkjer, Veøy, Borgund og Kaupanger i Sogn. De ble aldri egentlige byer.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Håkon Håkonssons saga: chapter 333 (p. 342). “And many other uninhabited islands in Viken” (My translation).

<sup>38</sup> Helle 2006: 68.

<sup>39</sup> Blom 1997: 17–18. “Of these we can cross off Vågan, Steinkjer, Veøy, Borgund and Kaupanger in Sogn. They never became real towns” (My translation).

Discussions on how to define a town are often unproductive, and I will try to be brief. In recognition of the differences between towns as well as the inconsistent nature of the medieval state, historians have moved away from defining towns in legal terms and instead often operate with a set of structural and functional requirements. Knut Helle defines towns in relation to four structural and four functional aspects.<sup>40</sup> The structural aspects that have to be in place in order to call something a town are: physical structure, economic structure, social structure and legal-administrative structure. This means that a town has to have a structure that separates it from the surrounding countryside; an economy that is more diversified and specialised than the country; a society that is different and more characterised by specialisation than the country; and that it often has its own legal and administrative structure. To these structural requirements, he adds four functional requirements. A town is often an economic centre, a ruling centre, a religious centre and, sometimes, a cultural centre. In stressing the administrative and cultural aspects, as well as the structural differences from the countryside, this definition is slightly different from a “British” definition. Heather Swanson states that “British towns can best be defined in economic terms: they were places with a concentration of population, however small that population might be, where the majority were engaged in a diversity of non-agricultural occupations”.<sup>41</sup>

However, there is one requirement which seems crucial for Helle, but is not explicitly listed as one; towns had to be *thought of* as towns in the Middle Ages. In his introduction, he seemingly accords this little value and writes that it is difficult to use when the people felt that they were inhabitants of a town as a criterion since it is hard to find sources of this from the earliest towns.<sup>42</sup> Here, he seems to move away from what he and Nedkvitne wrote in 1977, when they stressed how the foundation for believing a place to have been a town, could be laid by scouring the sources for certain terms indicating a town.<sup>43</sup> In practice, Helle anno 2006 seems to be actively searching the records for terms that may be associated with towns, and using this as justification for calling very marginal places towns. In his discussion of when Stavanger became a town, for example, he puts a great deal of weight on the use of the word *bæen* in the thirteenth century document acknowledging a previous “gift” of Stavanger to the bishop from “King Magnus”, as well as the use of the words *bær* and *bæiarmenn* in sagas.<sup>44</sup> Erslund, who has a

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<sup>40</sup> Helle 2006: 13–17.

<sup>41</sup> Swanson 1999: 1.

<sup>42</sup> Helle 2006: 19.

<sup>43</sup> Helle and Nedkvitne 1977: 192.

<sup>44</sup> Helle 2006: 68.



more

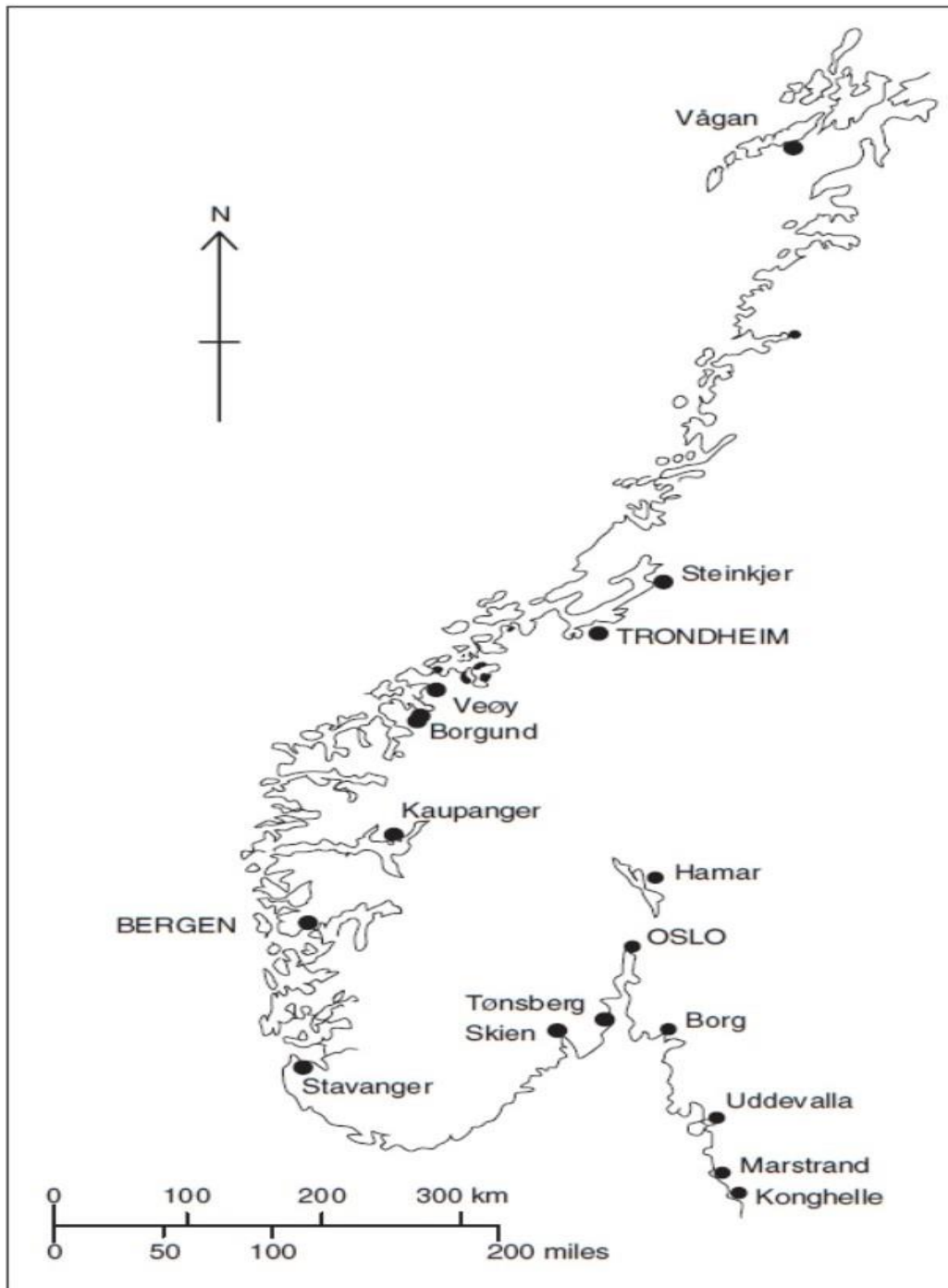


Figure 2.3: Map of Norwegian towns from Holt 2005. This map includes Uddevalla, which only became a town in the late fourteenth century and is therefore excluded from this survey, and Steinkjer, which is excluded from the onset due to lack of evidence.

thorough discussion of these sources, follows in Helle's footsteps and argues that these terms clearly indicates a place that was thought of as a town.<sup>45</sup> Another place, Veøy, is in some sources called *kaupbær* and *bær*, and is said to have *byjar-menn* – town men – and is, seemingly, mostly on that basis considered by Helle to be a town.<sup>46</sup> The functions and structures that can be

<sup>45</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 72. «Det avgjerande spørsmålet er likevel kva samtida oppfatta som byar.»

<sup>46</sup> Helle 2006: 71.

attributed to these places, usually comes second to identifying “town-terms” used in association with the places.

This is at times problematic. Ersland writes that the term *innan bæar* – inside the town – which is used in the “gift document” to the bishop of Stavanger, is never used to denote anything but towns in medieval documents.<sup>47</sup> However, an immediate objection to this must be that if we find terms such as *innan bæar* or *kaupangr* or even *bær* describing more and more marginal places as towns, then obviously our understanding of the words must change. Steinkjer is fascinating in that regard. Described in the sagas as a *kaupangr* – a place of trade – only once, no traces of the town has been uncovered by archaeology, though it must be mentioned that the place was bombed in 1940 making previous settlements hard to discover.<sup>48</sup> Even Helle dismisses Steinkjer as nothing but a small place, all the while using the fact that Hamar was described as a *kaupang* as a reason for suggesting it was a town,<sup>49</sup> even though we know little else except that it was the seat of a bishop. The word *bær* is also problematic – meaning both farm and town,<sup>50</sup> and finding these terms in one or two sources describing a rather small place does not necessarily indicate that the place was *commonly* thought of as a town. Other criteria than “what people thought was a town then” – usually argued for on the basis of a few scattered mentions in sagas or diplomas – must be given precedence; the fact that a *skipan* dated 19 August 1384, mentions Vågar as a *kjöpstad*, does not make it a town.<sup>51</sup>

A focus on economic activities, in accordance with British historians’ definition of towns as mentioned above, may lead to some interesting observations about Norwegian towns, since many of the small Norwegian “towns” differ in character from small English towns. Veøy, a small town on the west coast, was sacked in 1206 according to the Bagler saga. This brief mention has been accorded some attention, because the writer says that they *rannsaka bæinn*, which, along with two other mentions in Snorre – where Veøy is described as *kaupboenum* and having *byjar-monnum* – has been taken to mean that Veøy was a small town.<sup>52</sup> Veøy also clearly had some administrative functions. Additionally, metalworkers seem to have come to the island in connection with the building of a stone church, and are often used as an example of the economic activity on Veøy. Overall, however, there is very little evidence for economic

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<sup>47</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 73.

<sup>48</sup> Ekroll 2006: 130.

<sup>49</sup> Helle 2006: 53; 70. “Kaupang-betegnelsen går igjen i de mer eller mindre samtidige sagaberetningene fra den følgende tiden, og tyder i såpass sen bruk på at stedet hadde bykarakter i samtidens øyne.”

<sup>50</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 72.

<sup>51</sup> NGL III nr. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Solli 1999: 41.

specialisation, and when explaining Veøy's *raison d'être* one tends to focus on its function as an administrative centre where the Church and the local aristocracy collected its tithes and rents.<sup>53</sup> In other words, Veøy is not understood to have been a town on the premise of it having been, primarily, a centre of diverse economic activity where most were engaged in non-agricultural activities. This is similar to what we know about the small places that were the seats of bishops, Stavanger and Hamar. They were primarily religious and administrative centres, not centres of medieval industry or trade. Many inhabitants were engaged in non-agricultural occupations, but it is a stretch to say that there was a great diversity of crafts.

So why include these small and unimportant places in a survey that focuses on economic growth in towns? The answer is three-fold. First, they obviously did distinguish themselves from the hinterland with regard to economic specialisation. Shutting the small Norwegian places-that-Helle-calls-towns out because their occupational diversity wasn't as great as in small English towns, is akin to exempting weak students from standardised tests because they would drag the average score down. Naturally, a case can be made for the difficulties of comparing schools with different curriculums, which is applicable to a comparison of Norwegian and English towns, but one must not forget that the world of the Norwegian towns and the world of the English towns was very much the same. They would often compete in the same political and economic arena.

Second, the towns were economically interconnected, making it difficult to understand growth or economic specialisation in one town, without looking at others. A lot of the rent collected in Veøy was likely shipped to Bergen to be sold there, and the same goes for rents or taxes collected at other small towns. For that reason alone they make very interesting research objects. Last, a case can be made that some of the small towns were more dependent on trade than has been suggested here. Skien, while likely developing under heavy influence from the Bratsberg family who founded Gimsøy abbey,<sup>54</sup> was very dependent on trade. Vågar, which became important due to the role it played in the Lofoten fisheries, was very dependent on fish exports which was channelled through Bergen. It is, in other words, difficult to exclude these small towns on the premise that their smallness or differentness makes them unfit to be compared to other European towns. David Palliser wrote that "a definition is, fortunately, no more than an aid to thought: it has no intrinsic value"<sup>55</sup> a sentiment we would do well to remember. The fact

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<sup>53</sup> Solli 1999: 96.

<sup>54</sup> Ekroll 2006: 127.

<sup>55</sup> Palliser 2000: 5.

that the small Norwegian towns were different from some of their European counterparts is in itself interesting, and excluding them from the definition of “town” is perhaps an overreaction, especially when another term is lacking. Nonetheless, the term “small place” is used in this study for the places that are smaller than the four towns we can be quite certain of. The question of definition will be returned to in the final chapter, to see if this study – which generally is concerned with economic matters – has yielded any insight that can be used to ascertain the nature of Norwegian towns.

## 2.2: Norwegian towns in the sagas

Towns often feature as political arenas in the Norwegian saga literature. From our period, c. 1250–1350, we unfortunately only have one Norwegian saga, namely that of Håkon Håkonsson. However, towns are mentioned frequently in other sagas and their descriptions can illuminate some functions and structures of towns that are not always clear from Håkon Håkonssons’ saga. Descriptions of the town structure or the people living there are for the most part lacking. Some information can be gleaned from authors actually taking their time to describe what was happening in detail, though the information is often quite accidental. In 1155, for example, a battle broke out in Bergen between the forces of King Inge and King Sigurd. “Da kom de mot garden, kong Inge ovenfra Smedbuene, Arne kongsmåg ute fra Sandbru, Aslak Erlendsson fra garden sin, men Gregorius fra stretet...”<sup>56</sup> From this passage, we gather that Aslak Erlendsson owned a townhouse, that there were smithies in the town at this point – which were later moved due to the fire-hazard they presented – and that a regular street had been laid out. It does not say anything about the people living and making a living there, nor does it say much else. The lack of interest in townsmen in general and merchants in particular is palpable in Sverre’s saga. When Sverre met a fleet of merchants sailing to Trondheim in a chaotic situation while being pursued by fifty ships, the saga writer made it clear that Sverre would never harm any merchants, so long as they kept to themselves.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this was due to his lack of knowledge about what merchants did. In 1186 Sverre gave a speech in Bergen, where he praised the merchants from England, Orkney, Shetland and the Faroe Islands for bringing goods that were “indispensable”.<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, he attacked the German merchants, claiming that they only

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<sup>56</sup> *Snorre*: Inges saga: chapter 28 (p. 611). “Then they went to the townhouse, King Inge from Smedbuene (the smithies), Arne kongsmåg from Sandbru, Aslak Erlendsson from his town house, but Gregorius from the street...” (My translation).

<sup>57</sup> *Sverres saga*: chapter 15 (p. 40).

<sup>58</sup> *Sverres saga*: chapter 104 (p. 155).

brought alcohol into the country, while carrying off butter and stockfish, which, according to Sverre, was a loss to the country. As Professor Holt has pointed out, what Sverre believed the English merchants got in return for their goods remains a mystery,<sup>59</sup> and perhaps his disinterest in merchants was fuelled by his lack of knowledge about how trade works.

The low level of detail about town governance in the sagas can be exemplified by this passage from the saga of Magnus Erlingsson: “Nikolas var ofte i Kaupangen[Trondheim], og han styrte med alt for bymennene.”<sup>60</sup> Towns in the eyes of the saga writers were places important military and political incidents occurred, and they had little interest in those who lived there except when they were involved in political or military affairs.<sup>61</sup> When King Inge died in 1217 and his followers were discussing whether they would take the later Håkon IV Håkonsson as king, they did so in Trondheim. Those who wanted Håkon to be their king gave an ultimatum, stating that if he was not recognised there, they would take him to Bergen where they were sure he would be acknowledged as king.<sup>62</sup> Towns, obviously, were common places for discussions of who had the rights to the kingdom.

The upper classes often spent a lot of time in towns, and kings, aristocrats and churchmen often wintered there. After Erling Skakke won Tønsberg by threatening to burn it, scaring the townsmen and thereby reducing his opponent’s force significantly, he travelled around, seeking to enforce his rule everywhere he could before finally deciding to winter in Bergen.<sup>63</sup> Sixty years later, the first winter of Håkon IV Håkonsson’s reign was spent by the king in Bergen, and his earl Skule Bårdsson, later to become a most quarrelsome duke, was fighting rebels in the east, often using Tønsberg as his chief base of operations.<sup>64</sup> An Icelandic saga, The Saga of Bishop Arne, demonstrates the nature of towns as natural meeting places. When the Icelandic bishop Arne tried to discuss the problem of secular ownership of churches with Magnus Lagabøte and, later, Erik Magnusson, he continually sent his representatives, as well as going himself, to towns, chiefly Bergen.<sup>65</sup> Whether or not he found the king, at least he would find some members of the *hird* or administration to whom he could present his case or discuss

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<sup>59</sup> Holt 2012.

<sup>60</sup> *Snorre*: Magnus Erlingssons saga: chapter 38 (p. 659). “Nikolas was often in the *kaupang* (Trondheim), and he fixed everything for the townsmen.” (My translation).

<sup>61</sup> For example when a fight broke out in Bergen that involved some important housecarls, or when Birkebeinerne attacked the residence of Nikolas in Trondheim, *Snorre*: Håkon Herdebreis saga: chapter 12 (p. 625); *Snorre*: Magnus Erlingssons saga: chapter 40 (p. 660).

<sup>62</sup> *Håkon Håkonssons saga*: chapter 12 (p. 37).

<sup>63</sup> *Snorre*: Magnus Erlingssons saga: chapter 2 and 4 (p. 636–637).

<sup>64</sup> *Håkon Håkonssons saga*: chapter 38 (p. 55); chapter 74 and 75 (p. 80–81).

<sup>65</sup> *Biskop Arnes saga*: passim.

strategies with. Additionally, he could be quite confident that the king would eventually return to the town, and this predictability was likely of the utmost importance for a foreigner who had his own lands to look after.

Even the small places were important seats of power and of great political and military importance. King Magnus Lagabøte spent the winter of 1260–61 in Stavanger,<sup>66</sup> presumably increasing the population of the town quite dramatically with his entourage. An interesting episode in the struggles between Duke Skule and King Håkon reveals some of the economic interest that towns held for the rulers. The author of Håkon Håkonsson's saga wrote that the king sent some men to Borgund where they ambushed the *sysseimann* of the rebels; they took the "leidang" or taxes that had been collected, but gave amnesty to the rebels pending a meeting with the king.<sup>67</sup> The ephemeral nature of tradesmen in the saga's can be seen when, for a short while in 1161, Erling Skakke made – or tried to make – it illegal for traders to travel north of Bergen for fear that they would bring news of his position to his enemies.<sup>68</sup> Traders and townsmen were usually only considered in the sagas when they were of military or political value, and many of the prohibitions promulgated or the short glimpses the sagas give us must be read with this in mind.

The role of towns in large national political and military events was perhaps somewhat smaller in Denmark and England, though still important despite of the prominence of castles. In Denmark, for example, a large number of castles were built in the twelfth century, mostly due to internal unrest which left the aristocracy feeling threatened.<sup>69</sup> The combined function of castles as protection and as a means for controlling the population made them very important political arenas, in a period where politics and war often went hand in hand. In Norway, though castles such as Akershus and Ragnhildsholmen were built in the period, they were usually built by royal initiative and in hotly contested areas such as south-eastern Norway, and in near proximity to towns. Consequently, Norwegian towns retained much of their political and military importance throughout the period in more pacified areas.

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<sup>66</sup> *Håkon Håkonssons saga*: chapter 303 (p. 304).

<sup>67</sup> *Håkon Håkonssons saga*: chapter 208 (p. 197).

<sup>68</sup> *Snorre*: Magnus Erlingssons saga: chapter 5 (p. 637–638).

<sup>69</sup> Rasmussen and Madsen 1999: 95.



### 2.3: The town structure: Buildings and governance

Having established that Norwegian towns were not necessarily similar to other European towns, particularly considering their economic functions, I will try to describe how the towns appeared and were governed.

Most people lived in what are usually called *bygårder* – from here on simply called town houses – which were large housing complexes. The town houses were often owned by either rich tradesmen, or – more often – by aristocrats, royal officials or ecclesiastical institutions. These complexes could take on different shapes depending on the town, and even within the towns themselves there were differences. In Bergen, for example, they were usually built as two parallel rows of houses oriented towards the bay.<sup>70</sup> Some of the town houses in Oslo and Trondheim were likely very similar. However, if you moved away from the quay and further into the town, the town houses in these two towns usually consisted of a front building placed adjacent to the street, and other buildings placed behind them creating an enclosure. The front buildings often had a small shop and warehouse, and it is probable that many of these houses were built two storeys high. The town house often had its own, separate building for cooking, eating and drinking because of the constant danger posed by fire, as well as some general storage buildings. While structured complexes may have dominated the town centre, the further from the heart of the town you moved, the more likely it is that the buildings you encountered had been placed in small clusters.<sup>71</sup>

Churches and monasteries, often with impressive architecture and towers stretching towards the sky, dominated the landscape of the Norwegian towns as they did in all the towns of Western Europe. The founding of churches is often considered as going hand in hand with the founding of towns, and the number of religious buildings in a town – especially friaries – has sometimes been used as a measure of urbanity.<sup>72</sup> This approach will not be used here because of the large uncertainties surrounding it concerning both identification of buildings and applicability in Norway – and elsewhere for that matter.

The town churches were not necessarily parish churches with rights to perform services such as baptism and receive tithes; often they were chapels, subordinate to their mother church. Saint Ib's Church in Horsens, Denmark, a large stone church completed around 1250, was

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<sup>70</sup> Helle 2006: 98–99.

<sup>71</sup> Helle 2006: 98.

<sup>72</sup> Andréén 1989: 594–595.

subordinate to Our Lady's church, which lay outside of the town.<sup>73</sup> The Holy Trinity church in Hull, which grew to be one of the largest churches in England, was actually a chapel under the extramural parish Hessle.<sup>74</sup> This was common for towns founded in the thirteenth century in England, Denmark and Norway.<sup>75</sup> Towns that had developed before c. 1200 had more parish churches than towns that developed later, who may have had only one parish church or even sometimes no parish church at all inside the town, as the town may have been founded within an already existing parish. Towns in the Danelaw – Norwich for example – had a church structure that resembled that of early Danish towns, characterised by many parish churches, whereas towns in other areas of England, such as Bath, had a few parish churches and a large number of chapels, though this is by no means a universal pattern. Around the beginning of the thirteenth century, a transformation towards something that more strongly resembled the organisation of churches and towns in central and southern parts of Europe occurred in northern Europe, characterised by a small number of parish churches controlling many chapels in a hierarchy.<sup>76</sup>

Setting aside the question of which churches were parish churches and which were merely chapels – which is somewhat peripheral to this survey – a look at the number of churches in some towns may enhance our appreciation of their impact on the urban landscape. Norwich, the second largest town in England with a population of 15 000–25 000, had 56 parish churches though the total number of religious buildings was likely much higher.<sup>77</sup> In Trondheim, the seat of the Archbishop, there were 12–14 churches and chapels, 1–2 hospitals and 4–5 monasteries,<sup>78</sup> giving us roughly one religious building for every one hundred and sixty inhabitants, with an estimated population of about 3 000. This is not intended as a measure of urbanity, but, while likely inaccurate, gives us a general idea of the relative number of churches to inhabitants and therefore some perspective on the importance of the church in towns. On this note, it is interesting that when the Town Law of Magnus Lagabøte was rewritten to fit Trondheim, the description of the watchmen's route frequently uses churches as landmarks.<sup>79</sup>

Oslo had six churches, 1–2 hospitals and four monasteries while having roughly the same population as Trondheim. Tønsberg, with a slightly smaller population than Oslo and

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<sup>73</sup> Nyborg 2004: 141.

<sup>74</sup> Nyborg 2004: 145.

<sup>75</sup> Palliser, Slater and Dennison 2000: 181; Nyborg 2004: 145.

<sup>76</sup> Nyborg 2004: 146.

<sup>77</sup> Swanson 1999: 14; Nyborg 2004: 146.

<sup>78</sup> Helle 2006: 79.

<sup>79</sup> Blom 1997: 240–242.

Trondheim, had two chapels, three churches and two monasteries.<sup>80</sup> The small town of Skien had four churches and a monastery, while Bergen, the largest town in Norway, had over 20 churches and chapels, 5 monasteries and two hospitals, giving it a ratio of religious buildings contra population of 1:270, using a very uncertain population estimate of 7 000. Without reading too much into these numbers, one can state that the religious buildings had an important place in the Norwegian towns, as they did in Danish and English towns.

The structure of governance in Norwegian towns is confusing. The *gjaldker* was a royal official whose responsibilities consisted of policing, organising the town meetings as well as the *leidang* and collecting taxes and small fines, from which he could claim one third.<sup>81</sup> The title changed in the fourteenth century to that of *byfogd*, similar to the bailiff in England, coinciding with the office's loss of importance. He was subordinate to the *sysselmann*, who seems to have had an overseeing function. There are no traces of the *gjaldker* in the smaller Norwegian towns, and one must presume that these were in large dominated by either a representative of the Church, as in Stavanger, or by the local aristocracy. The town meeting, *bymøtet*, became the highest court in the towns, where one could bring suits, complaints and settle difficult cases, although it has been suggested that many cases were settled in ad hoc commissions, or even by individual councilmen.<sup>82</sup> However, the small number of documents relating to town governance makes this seemingly clear-cut picture uncertain. Some important questions still remain: What was the role of the *bymøte* in small towns? Who was eligible to participate? Was the *gjaldker* often dominated by the *sysselmann* or did he have a large degree of autonomy? Unfortunately these questions lie outside the scope of this thesis.

What is clear is that the Norwegian towns were, to a much greater extent than the towns of Denmark and England, under royal influence. In Denmark, the lord of the town, be it a bishop or the King, usually had a resident *byfogd* in the town to collect taxes, but the real power lay with the *byråd*, i.e. the town council, who appointed a mayor.<sup>83</sup> Although the *byfogd* was part of the council, he was one of twelve or thirteen council members. The English towns also experienced a larger degree of autonomy than the Norwegian, though the picture is not necessarily any less ambiguous. Boston, for instance, had less formal liberties than the minor town Grimsby.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, some large towns, notably London, as well as some of the smaller

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<sup>80</sup> Helle 2006: 79.

<sup>81</sup> Helle and Nedkvitne 1977: 265.

<sup>82</sup> Helle and Nedkvitne 1977: 269.

<sup>83</sup> Jacobsen and Madsen 1999: 147.

<sup>84</sup> Rigby and Ewan 2000: 292–294.

towns developed a large degree of autonomy that was unmatched in Norway. The degree of independence was often defined in charters of liberties, which a significant number of English towns obtained in the thirteenth century.

## **2.4: Townspeople**

Diversity – occupational and economical – were common features of medieval towns. Norwegian towns were on the surface no different. There are numerous references to occupations in Norwegian towns. From Oslo, for example, we know of shoemakers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, tinkers, comb-makers, tailors, bakers, masons, furriers and many more up to a total of 22 different occupations.<sup>85</sup> In Stavanger, shoemakers, a mason, a gilder, a decorative painter, a brightsmith named Nils and many more are known to have lived and worked.<sup>86</sup> Bergen, the largest city by far, had over thirty different named occupations.<sup>87</sup> In England, a high number of crafts have been found even in small towns such as High Wycombe, from where over twenty crafts are known.<sup>88</sup> In London, England's largest town, over a hundred different occupations are known to have existed at roughly the same time.<sup>89</sup> Given the scarcity of sources, we can expect that several occupations escaped the written record, and these numbers only provide us with a minimum. For people from the countryside the diversity must have been a very distinguishing feature. It must have been hard for professions such as gilders or decorative painters to establish themselves in any other places than towns; perhaps they could work on some parish churches, but the greatest churches were often built in towns. Many of these professions were not foreign to country people by any reckoning. Some of the shoemakers, for example, are likely to have been itinerant craftsmen, as were some blacksmiths. Additionally, many of these professions, such as tailors or comb-makers, were perhaps nothing more than, quite simply, more professional approaches to industry usually carried out in the countryside. Nonetheless, specialised occupations, such as goldsmiths, sword grinders, moneyers, bakers or locksmiths must have given the town population a sense of living at the economic and technological pinnacle of society.

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<sup>85</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 268.

<sup>86</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 211.

<sup>87</sup> Helle 1982: 427.

<sup>88</sup> Hilton 1995: 54.

<sup>89</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 324.

In Denmark, the largest group of town dwellers were day-workers and craftsmen.<sup>90</sup> Another large group, the poor, is hard to quantify, but did perhaps surpass both day-workers and craftsmen from time to time in numbers, and in general constituted a significant group of townsmen. They are discussed in more detail further down. Danish and English towns both had a group of resident merchants, who often constituted the ruling elite.<sup>91</sup> They could be small-time retailers – which was also a common side occupation for craftsmen – or merchants involved in regional or even long-distance trade. In some regards, Danish and English towns were quite similar when it came to who lived there. However, English towns also had a considerable group of people engaged in town industries such as weaving, an industry that never took hold in Denmark.<sup>92</sup>

Women in towns are an oft-neglected group. Perhaps because they are not as visible as men in the documentary evidence; perhaps because they often did not act collectively as a group and it therefore may be hard to justify looking at them as such; or perhaps because historians, for the most part male, have been less inclined to interest themselves with women in history. Likely, it is a combination of all three. However, if one does not describe what women actually did, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that they did not partake in any economic activities or do anything significant. It is worth mentioning that one of the times a group of women worked, managed economic matters and prayed together, namely as nuns or abbesses, they had a rather prominent position in towns. Nonneseter owned the Søstergård property in Bergen, as well as a number of properties in the countryside, and its abbess was naturally among the leading ecclesiastics of the town.<sup>93</sup> Gimsøy, Skien must have dominated the town, and had close connections to Bratsberg manor. The first abbess, Baugeid, was the daughter of the monastery's founder Dag Eilivsson, owner of Bratsberg, and sister to Gregorius Dagsson, a leading figure in the dynastic struggles of the twelfth century.<sup>94</sup> Clearly, women could, and did, hold economically and spiritually important offices in towns.

If we look for signs of women engaged in crafts, however, the picture is unclear. There was one occupation where the name itself implied female dominance: *ølkone/mjødkone*, literally “ale-

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<sup>90</sup> Bøgh 2004: 33.

<sup>91</sup> Hilton 1995: 92; Bøgh 2004: 33.

<sup>92</sup> See Chapter 3.1 for further discussion on weavers in Denmark.

<sup>93</sup> Helle 1982: 454.

<sup>94</sup> NBL, “Gregorius Dagsson”.

/mead-wife”.<sup>95</sup> Helle has suggested that they did not brew the ale or mead themselves,<sup>96</sup> but it may be unfair to suggest that women were never involved in brewing, especially when we have many references to brewsters in towns in other countries. In Denmark, for example, the oldest still existing town law mentions a *mulier tabernaria*, and, brewing being a well-regulated profession, there are many references clearly indicating a female dominance.<sup>97</sup> The lack of references in the Norwegian material to craftswomen is, however, suggestive of low participation in occupations by women. For example, the only reference to a female pursuing a craft in Oslo is to Arngerd Sømkkone, a tailor.<sup>98</sup> The lack of sources makes it difficult to determine whether the amount of women engaged in crafts was as low as suggested here. However that may be, what is certain is that a significant amount of traditionally female work was carried out in the town house, from weaving to knitting to embroidery, all of which served to make the household more independent.

As traders, women were less restricted in towns than elsewhere. The Town Law states that women were allowed to sell and buy what they wanted, except houses or land for which they needed their husband or heir’s permission.<sup>99</sup> While they are well represented in the local-retail trade, they were, however, a marginal group among merchants engaged in long-distance trade.<sup>100</sup> A significant number of townspeople were engaged in commerce, and the Town Law even contains the statement: “Det er nu dernæst at vi Bjørgvins- [Tunsberg-, Nidaros-, by-] mænd kommer til at leve meget av handel.”<sup>101</sup> Certainly, merchants were important in the economic life of the towns, perhaps especially in Bergen, although they ranged from very poor street vendors to rich merchants specialising in overseas trade.

The destitute in towns were often widows, prostitutes, beggars and unemployed labourers. Sources frequently mention this group, and laws were passed to regulate the responsibilities of the town community towards the poor. In Norway, town houses were required to provide the poor or infirm with lodging for one night,<sup>102</sup> whereafter they would be moved on to the next house. An oft-cited regulation from Bergen describes in detail the route which was to be taken

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<sup>95</sup> MLB, bolk 3, chapter 8.

<sup>96</sup> Helle 1982: 417. Helle refers to an ordinance making the guild of brewers, *heitumenn*, illegal, and suggests that these were not the same as the *ølkoner* and that they did not brew themselves. However, he does not necessarily imply that there were no female brewers, although the *-menn* ending does suggest that it was a male occupation.

<sup>97</sup> Jacobsen 1983: 17.

<sup>98</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 269.

<sup>99</sup> MLB, bolk 7, chapter 6.

<sup>100</sup> Swanson 1999: 45.

<sup>101</sup> MLB, bolk 7, chapter 6. “It is so that we townsmen of Bergen [amended to Trondheim and Tønsberg in other versions of the law] will mainly live off trade”. (My translation).

<sup>102</sup> Helle 2006: 106.

when the poor were to be moved from one town house to another.<sup>103</sup> However, the problem seems to have grown unwieldy and the Church in the latter part of the thirteenth century accepted a larger burden, creating multiple hospitals for the poor.<sup>104</sup>

Poverty was rife in the Middle Ages, and afflicted perhaps as many as fifty per cent of the rural population in Denmark in the early fourteenth century.<sup>105</sup> Specific percentages of poor, even on a town-to-town basis, is more problematic. Anecdotal evidence may, however, give us an appreciation of the scale of the problem. In 1322, when alms were given out at the Dominican Friary in Ludgate, London, fifty-two people were crushed to death in a crowd of destitute men and women, desperate for food and clothes.<sup>106</sup> Naturally, the larger the town the more poor people there were, but it is likely that this was a problem in smaller towns as well, at times when land was scarce and rent was high.

The aristocracy, royal officials and the clergy also left their mark on the towns. They were undoubtedly the most powerful group in the Norwegian towns, at least until they were challenged by the Hanse in the course of the fourteenth century. Their income from rents and taxes were often collected and stored, since they were mostly paid in victuals, in towns.<sup>107</sup> Much of this income probably went to private consumption. The monasteries, for example, had to organise food for a large number of dependants, and the aristocracy often had large households that needed to be taken care of. The fact that rents were overwhelmingly paid with foodstuffs indicates that the development that had taken place in England and Denmark, towards payment in cash, had not taken hold in the Norwegian society. This, and its effect on the economy, is something that will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

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<sup>103</sup> NGL III, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Helle 2006: 106.

<sup>105</sup> Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 401.

<sup>106</sup> Swanson 1999: 116.

<sup>107</sup> Helle 1982: 342–346.

## **Chapter 3: Town industries**

Sources describing production of commodities such as shoes, leather jackets, pots, tools, swords, toys, combs or – perhaps most importantly – clothes, can be found for many medieval European towns. The towns were home to a multitude of crafts, which in turn meant that they were literally the homes of a large group of master artisans, apprentices, merchants, rich and poor, and their families, primarily owing their existence and wealth to the production of goods and trade. Interestingly, large-scale production of goods did not only take place in the great cities of Flanders or northern Italy, or large capitals such as London and Paris. Lincoln, Norwich and Stamford, much smaller than the previously named cities – but large compared to Bergen, the largest town in medieval Scandinavia – were also centres of textile production.<sup>108</sup> Indeed Beverly, Stamford, Lincoln and Northampton produced high quality textiles of great renown.<sup>109</sup> These luxury textiles could be sold to local aristocrats, to larger towns or to merchants at great fairs. Other items, such as those mentioned above, were also often produced in towns but not in the same scale as textiles. They do, however, warrant a closer look. First a brief survey of commodity production in England and Denmark, followed by a closer look at the textile industry in Norway, before we look at commodity production in general in Norway.

### **3.1: Commodity production in England and Denmark**

The large, English towns mentioned above were not unique in their focus on textile production. Small towns also commonly had some textile production.<sup>110</sup> One such town was Halesowen, located close to Birmingham, with a population of less than 1 000. This was not uncommon; Northallerton, Pickering, Pontefract and Leeds, all small towns in the thirteenth century, had some textile production.<sup>111</sup> Textiles were not the only commodity produced either, though it had a dominating presence in many towns. Manufacturing crafts such as leather working, pottery-making and metalworkers as well as occupations such as millers, bakers, brewers, butchers etc., are all represented in English towns. The economic significance of the producers of food and drink tends to be overshadowed by textile production in the literature, even though they are some of the most visible occupations in the sources. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>108</sup> Steuer 2007: 127.

<sup>109</sup> Carus-Wilson 1944: 211.

<sup>110</sup> Hilton 1995: 54.

<sup>111</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 115.



The profitability of the textile industry was usually high and thus attracted enterprising merchants and producers. Some of the profitability came from the innovations employed in the production, such as the horizontal loom, which came into use in North-West Europe in the mid-eleventh century, and the fulling mill, which, according to John Munro, “was the one and only major process of woollen cloth manufacturing that underwent powered mechanization before the modern Industrial Revolution”.<sup>112</sup> The fulling mill became common in the English cloth industry during the thirteenth and fourteenth century, and was a major step forward in terms of efficiency and economisation of the textile industry. From traditional foot-fulling the cost of which accounted for about 20% of the pre-finishing price, to mechanised fulling which only accounted for about 5% of the price, which meant a 75% cost reduction in the fulling process and a larger degree of profitability.<sup>113</sup> Likewise, the horizontal loom was a large step forward in terms of efficiency, creating finer woollens at a much quicker pace than with the traditional warp-weighted loom (see figure 3.1 for illustrations).

The manufactured goods were not always of high quality. In fact, many towns produced low-quality textiles meant for the lower classes. For example, *burel*, a cheap, low quality textile was mass produced in London.<sup>114</sup> Towns did not always produce goods that were to be sold in larger towns or at great international fairs. In fact, the local market was the most important market for industrial weavers in small towns. Peasants looking to sell some of their surplus production for cash usually did so in towns, where they had the opportunity to buy cheap manufactured goods. This is not to say that textile manufacturing was restricted to towns. Textile manufacturing in the countryside was widespread and must have represented a challenge to the town industry. However, countryside manufacturing, in combination with the textile industry in small towns especially, appears to have been capable of satisfying the needs of a growing English population,<sup>115</sup> without relying on imported goods.

Industry in Danish towns took a different turn; the first mention of professional – male – weavers stem from the sixteenth century, though the profession is known from the late fourteenth century.<sup>116</sup> In general, there was little production for a wider, international market in Danish towns, and the focus of the production in towns was for the rural hinterlands.<sup>117</sup> The result of this was that the same occupations could be found in most towns, servicing the same

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<sup>112</sup> Munro 2009: 6.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Carus-Wilson 1944: 213.

<sup>115</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 114.

<sup>116</sup> Fentz 2004: 156; Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 269.

<sup>117</sup> Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 288–290.

needs of the local hinterland. One craft strongly present in Danish towns, especially in Jutland, that was geared towards a larger market was pottery making. The production of ceramics for a market had roots in the early eleventh century but grew to prominence in the thirteenth century.<sup>118</sup> There is little to suggest, however, that this fulfilled the same role as the textile industry did in English towns. This difference in mind, the production for a small, rural market is nonetheless similar in English and Danish towns. As towns grew, professions became more and more diversified, and from the workshops of comb-makers in Lund, there is evidence of both an increase in the volume of production, and a diversification in the goods produced from the twelfth century; game pieces, ice-skates and buttons have been found in addition to combs.<sup>119</sup>

### **3.2: Textile production in Norwegian towns**

The dominating presence of textiles in English towns renders a thorough look at the Norwegian textile industry necessary. The Town Law of Magnus the Law-mender describes in detail where the different craftsmen and traders in Bergen were supposed to stay. The goldsmiths and the combmakers, for instance, were to be opposite each other on the street between the furthest part of the churchyard of St Martin's Church and the gate of the Stone Church's churchyard.<sup>120</sup> Tailors were also mentioned in the law and had their designated area specified in the same way.<sup>121</sup> Weavers, who created the textiles upon which the tailors put their finishing touch, were not mentioned, which may be an indication of their lack of importance in Bergen. We find a similar situation in Oslo, with tailors and even a seamstress, the only craftswoman we know of from Oslo, being mentioned, but no weavers.<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, the Town Law explicitly mentions weavers as having to pay a "town fee" every year.<sup>123</sup> This may simply have been a perfunctory measure, and should not be taken as an indication of a well-developed industry. Other evidence must to be considered.

The import of textiles to Norway was carried out on a large scale, and textiles were one of the leading import articles after wheat and barley, and the most important import article from England around 1300.<sup>124</sup> The customs' accounts from English ports reveal that high quality

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<sup>118</sup> Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 262.

<sup>119</sup> Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 262.

<sup>120</sup> MLB, bolk 6, chapter 8.

<sup>121</sup> «Alle skræddere med deres haandverk...» MLB, bolk 6, chapter 8.

<sup>122</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 268–269.

<sup>123</sup> MLB, bolk 3, chapter 8.

<sup>124</sup> Nedkvitne 1983: 46.

textiles were sought after by Norwegian merchants.<sup>125</sup> This presumably reflects the demands of the upper classes, rather than the lower. Most lower class households probably spun their own yarn and wove their own clothes. Some of the imported textiles were, however, of rather poor quality. In fact, Arnved Nedkvitne suggests most of the textiles imported to Oslo were of the cheapest quality.<sup>126</sup> Even so, it is likely that this was still too expensive for most people; the likely market was merchants, artisans, the lower aristocracy or well-off peasants. While some less well-off peasants could possibly acquire it, it is not certain that they always sought it out; maybe it was viewed as more of a luxury item than a necessity.

Production of low-quality textiles was important for many English towns, and is evidence of a rather specialised economy. This production was not aimed at the rich nor was it necessarily aimed at export, but rather the local peasant, who in this way was integrated into the economic life of the towns. If the imported low-quality textiles were too expensive for peasants in Norway, and there was no evidence of significant local production of textiles for sale, one may be inclined to ask where most Norwegians got their clothes. The answer, of course, is that they were produced at home.

The archaeological evidence for this is uncertain, but tends to confirm the written record. The production of textiles required many tools and thus left us much to find. From the first processes in the transformation of wool into clothes we can find shears for the shearing of sheep, as well as drop-spindles and distaffs for making yarn out of raw wool.<sup>127</sup> Other items such as cards for carding of wool and needles for sewing are also often found. From the later stages of production parts of looms such as sword beaters or loom weights, which were fist-sized stones with holes that were tied to the warp-threads at the bottom of the loom to keep them taut, have been found.

Distaffs, spindle-whorls, drop-spindles, sword-beaters, shears, loom weights and needles were all found during the excavation of the Bryggen area in Bergen.<sup>128</sup> A possible upright, which is a long wooden pole that formed part of the warp-weighted loom, has also been found.<sup>129</sup> Naturally, there are some difficulties in identifying the different material; the loom weights, for example, of which 792 were found during the Bryggen excavation, may also have served as weights to hold down fishing nets.<sup>130</sup> Finds of needles, of which there were many, are also

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<sup>125</sup> Helle 2006: 82.

<sup>126</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 190.

<sup>127</sup> Córdoba 2007: 208–209.

<sup>128</sup> For an exhaustive discussion of the material connected to textile production found during the Bryggen excavations, see Øye 1988.

<sup>129</sup> Øye 1988: 59.

<sup>130</sup> Øye 1988: 60.

difficult to link directly to textile production as they have many areas of use. However, examining the context in which they were found, as well as their general shape, revealed that most of the fist-sized stones with holes in them were most likely used as loom-weights, and there is no reason to doubt that a substantial amount of the needles found have been used in the process of making clothes.

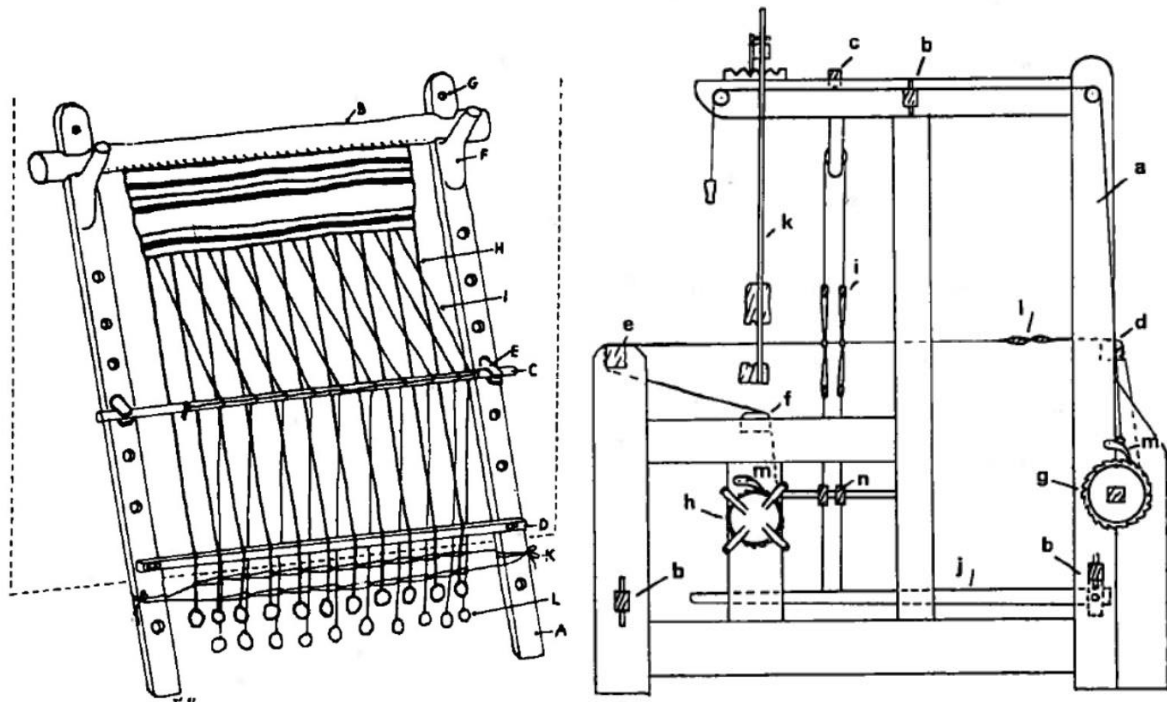


Figure 3.1: Left: An upright or warp-weighted loom. Right: A horizontal loom. From Øye 1988.

The technology these finds bear witness to makes it even less likely that there was any substantial production of textiles in the Norwegian towns. The main divide in medieval textile producing technologies is between the warp-weighted loom and the horizontal loom. The warp-weighted loom, which all of the loom-related evidence discussed above is from, is less productive than the horizontal, which “[...] provided the basis for a professionalisation of the weaving industry.”<sup>131</sup> The horizontal loom made it possible to produce very long and wide lengths of cloth, known as broadcloth. Thus, the horizontal loom is usually seen as an indication of a marked-oriented production, while the warp-weighted loom is taken as a sign of domestic production primarily serving the needs of the family. When this transformation towards

<sup>131</sup> Øye 1988: 73.

manufacturing with the intention of selling the product occurs, weaving changes from being female dominated household production to a male dominated profession, though women could have minor or even major roles in professional production as well.

Pulley-blocks, paddles and reed-hooks, all of which could have come from a horizontal loom, were discovered during the Bryggen excavation.<sup>132</sup> The possibility that some such looms were used in Bergen can therefore not be discounted. Nor is the lack of horizontal looms in any way definite negative evidence; horizontal looms have not been found in Scotland, but historians still consider it highly likely that there was some marked-oriented production of textiles in the Scottish towns.<sup>133</sup> Authén Blom, on a somewhat less firm ground than the Scottish historians, concludes that no written sources can confirm the presence of professional weavers in Trondheim, but warns against interpreting this as firm evidence for the non-existence of professional weavers.<sup>134</sup> Still, the evidence from the Norwegian towns is extremely weak, and the items discovered in the Bryggen excavations that may have come from the horizontal loom were not securely identified;<sup>135</sup> they could just as easily come from something else. As for archaeological evidence from smaller towns, there are even fewer indications of possible production for more than the household. Loom-weights, needles and other items indicating textile production have been found in Skien for example, but all the evidence pointed at upright looms, not horizontal, and was by Myrvoll placed in the context of household production.<sup>136</sup>

While wool has received much attention here, as it was the most common textile fibre, other fibres, such as hemp and flax were also used. Linen cloth was quite fine in contrast to the coarse homespun woollens, and we know of both imports of such cloth and farms with names that suggest they either grew flax, spun linen or both.<sup>137</sup> Textile equipment that may have been used in the linen making process, such as flax beaters, have been found in Bergen as well as Borgund, but their identification is uncertain, and no equipment for large-scale production has been found. Hemp is quite coarse and so was often used for ropes. While we know it was grown in

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<sup>132</sup> Øye 1988: 74, 76–77.

<sup>133</sup> Spearman 1988: 138. Spearman does admit no towns in Scotland came close to the large cities of northern Europe, such as Brùge or Lübeck, with regards to production and population, Spearman 1988: 134.

<sup>134</sup> Blom 1997: 257.

<sup>135</sup> Considering the evidence for horizontal looms at Bryggen Øye writes that: «It cannot, therefore, be definitely proved that there are remains of horizontal looms at Bryggen, but the possibility, on the other hand, cannot be entirely excluded.», Øye 1988: 77.

<sup>136</sup> Myrvoll 1992: 245.

<sup>137</sup> Øye 2002: 325–326.

Norway, it was also frequently imported from the Baltic, suggesting a small scale of cultivation in Norway.<sup>138</sup>

Overall, the evidence from the archaeological excavations and the written record agrees. The large import of foreign textiles, of both high and low quality suggests an underdeveloped local textile production. At most, a small market-oriented production of textiles in the Norwegian towns that escaped the written record, and is merely hinted to by the archaeological record, may have existed. Natural resources may have been one of the reasons for the lack of a developed textile industry. Norwegian sheep were much smaller than they are today, though on average the same height as English sheep.<sup>139</sup> However, the quality of the fibre is determined by the length, strength, softness and colour of the wool.<sup>140</sup> The Norwegian wool was of a poorer quality than the English, which was generally acknowledged to be of the finest quality.<sup>141</sup> It is obvious that most households made do with wool of native sheep, and there are few indications that the Norwegian wool would have been unfit for textile production in large-scale. If it was, they still could have imported English wool like the textile industry in the low-lands did in large quantities.

### **3.3: Leather workers – Shoemakers in Norway**

Textiles, however, were not the sole material used for clothes in the middle ages. Leather was also important and was used to make clothing articles such as leather jackets, hose and shoes. Leather was made by taking the hide of animals such as horses, cattle, goats or sheep and refining it by way of the process known as tanning.<sup>142</sup> Part of the process involved soaking the hides in water, which they often stored in partly buried barrels, of which archaeological traces have been found all over Western Europe.<sup>143</sup> Since this process required a lot of water, tanneries were usually placed near reliable water-sources, such as the Hugaå river in Bergen.<sup>144</sup> The process was, at the same time, foul smelling,<sup>145</sup> which was the reason these tanneries were

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<sup>138</sup> Øye 2002: 327.

<sup>139</sup> Øye 2002: 352.

<sup>140</sup> Øye 1988: 24.

<sup>141</sup> Munro 2009: 4.

<sup>142</sup> Wubs-Mrozewicz 2005: 16.

<sup>143</sup> Córdoba 2007: 209.

<sup>144</sup> Helle 1982: 428.

<sup>145</sup> The use of manure and urine in the tanning process may explain some of the bad smell, Larsen 1992: 87.

usually placed in the outskirts of towns. In Winchester the smell led to the tanners being relocated to places down-wind of the town centre.<sup>146</sup>

Leather shoes have long been a favourite subject of investigation for many historians and archaeologists. Shoes were needed by all, not just the upper classes. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, there are examples of merchants from Lübeck giving away large quantities of shoes to the poor in their testaments. Mathias Burden, for instance, gave away 200 pairs of shoes to the poor in Bergen.<sup>147</sup> It was likely seen as a fitting gift to poor people who were, perhaps, more exposed to cold winters, but at the same time it reveals that a wealthy merchant could buy an incredible amount of shoes. It has been estimated that a person could, on average, wear down four pairs of shoes per year.<sup>148</sup> This, along with the *relative* cheapness of shoes, means that they were marketable commodities that could potentially be bought by a large number of people, though perhaps not four pairs of shoes for everyone in the family, every year.

Shoemakers are a well-documented feature of the Norwegian medieval towns, not only in Tønsberg, Bergen, Trondheim and Oslo, but also in the smaller towns such as Vågar, Borgund, Skien and Stavanger.<sup>149</sup> Shoemakers were very much like tailors; they worked with an already processed material and usually had no hand in that process. In Norway, however, the shoemakers did the work of tanners as well, which suggests a very underdeveloped division of labour. The Town Law's regulation of crafts, which we touched upon earlier, contains similar instructions for shoemakers as they did for tailors. Unlike the tailors, shoemakers were to stay out of the town centre, beyond the churchyard of St Hallvard's where they could set up shop on either side of the street.<sup>150</sup> This was about as far from the centre of town you could get and still be in the town, and probably not what the shoemakers wanted. In the second half of the fourteenth century, German shoemakers complained that other shoemakers had broken the laws and were making shoes closer to the town centre.<sup>151</sup> The placement of the shoemakers is probably due to the foul smell of the tanneries; the leather-making process and the making of shoes were likely carried out within the same premises.

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<sup>146</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 57.

<sup>147</sup> Larsen 1992: 80.

<sup>148</sup> Wubs-Mrozewicz 2005: 18; Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 270.

<sup>149</sup> Helle 2006: 87; Ekroll 2006: 129; Myrvoll 1992: 251.

<sup>150</sup> MLB, bok 6, chapter 8. The shoemakers were not supposed to work "længer ute i byen med sine varer end til den ytre del av Halvardskirkegaarden, baade ovenfor og likesaa nedenfor gaten."

<sup>151</sup> *Regesta Norvegica*, vol. 7, No. 288.

Shoemakers had existed in Norway for centuries before the German shoemakers started making inroads into the Norwegian towns.<sup>152</sup> The German shoemakers, however, came to dominate the craft at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century,<sup>153</sup> a development that is commonly attributed to their superior organisational skills. In 1330 they rented a royally owned townhouse in Bergen, and it seems likely that they had something close to a shoemaking monopoly.<sup>154</sup> German shoemakers were likely in a similar position in Oslo,<sup>155</sup> and shoes, often of high quality, have also been found in the smaller towns. The relative prevalence of shoes in the archaeological material indicates their necessity for the medieval population. Their quality, however, was often very high, which indicates a production that mainly catered to a rich upper class.

The small scale of low-quality shoe production can perhaps be explained by an abundance of local shoemakers, lack of efficient production techniques or organisation favouring centralisation and the simple fact that many peasants were perfectly capable of making their own shoes. It may also have been seen as something of a luxury; a significant number of peasants may have used wooden clogs, or shoes made of bark as *birkebeinerne* had to do when they faced extreme hardship. The largest group of customers was likely from the upper class, which is reflected in the high quality of shoes found in archaeological excavations. The conclusions drawn from these excavations, however, contains large elements of uncertainty and new finds could alter the picture drawn here. Still, as it corresponds with what we know from the written sources, it is at least reasonable to suggest that the production of shoes in towns was mostly for the richer townsmen and not for a broader market.

### **3.4: Production of other goods**

Even though the production of textiles and shoes was lacklustre, indicating a relatively underdeveloped industry in the Norwegian towns, it is conceivable that other items such as combs, whetstones or items made by metalworkers may have usurped their place. Combs, and needles for that matter, were often made out of animal bones or antlers, and the combmaking process left a lot of bone-waste for archaeologists to find. There are many references to comb-makers in Norwegian towns.<sup>156</sup> They are, for example, mentioned in the Town Law as one of

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<sup>152</sup> Larsen 1992: 86.

<sup>153</sup> Wubz-Mrozewicz 2005: 9; Helle 1982: 429.

<sup>154</sup> Helle 1982: 482–429.

<sup>155</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 269–270.

<sup>156</sup> Helle 1982: 436; Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 269.



the crafts that have to pay a special tax.<sup>157</sup> Comb-making may have required a lot of technical knowledge making it difficult to replicate by laymen. However, it is difficult to map what technical knowledge laymen did and did not have in the period, and the possibility that they made their own combs can't entirely be dismissed. The quantity in which the manufactured combs were sold is, however, indicative of a professional comb production. The unit *storhundre* (120) was used when combs were sold, which has been taken to indicate a commodity that was "masseprodusert til alminnelig forbruk."<sup>158</sup> Based on this evidence, it is likely that there was some mass-production of combs.

The economic importance of comb-making in smaller places, on the other hand, is less clear. Jens Rytter conducted an in-depth study of waste-material connected to bone working in Konghelle.<sup>159</sup> In the period from ca. 1250–ca. 1350 there was a drastic reduction of waste-material, which may be due to a decline in production, or, just as likely, may be due to poor preservation of the material. However that may be, the production in the latter part of the twelfth century may give an indication of the quantity produced: "Tolkningen er at avfallsmaterialet fra kammermakerens innsats i Konghelle representerer en produksjon på ca 100–150 kammer i denne fasen [1160–1200]."<sup>160</sup> This indicates low-scale production and it is likely that what is seen here is the waste from an itinerant craftsman who did not necessarily live in the town. Substantial amounts of bone fragments were found during excavations at Veøy.<sup>161</sup> It is possible that some of these fragments are waste from comb-makers, though to my knowledge it has not been identified as such. It may just as easily have come from other processes involving bones. In other words, there is little to suggest a large professional comb production in the small towns. On the other hand, from excavations in Skien, there are clear signs that a specific area had multiple workshops that contained evidence of crafts using antlers as raw material.<sup>162</sup> The situation is even clearer in the larger towns.<sup>163</sup> For instance, remains of combs have been found in large quantities in Trondheim and evidence points in the direction of a more stable production associated with specific workshops as the thirteenth century progressed.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> MLB, bolk III, chapter 8.

<sup>158</sup> Helle 1982: 436. "Mass produced for consumption" (My translation).

<sup>159</sup> Rytter 2001.

<sup>160</sup> Rytter 2001: 107. "The interpretation is that the waste-material from the combmaker's effort in Konghelle represents a production of about 100–150 combs in this phase [1160–1200]." (My translation).

<sup>161</sup> Solli 1999: 80.

<sup>162</sup> Myrvoll 1992: 251.

<sup>163</sup> Bergen, for example, clearly had some comb-production, Helle 1982: 436.

<sup>164</sup> Blom 1997: 224–225.

One of the most interesting commodities produced in Norway was whetstones, made of sandstone and used to sharpen blades of both weapons and tools. “Eidsborg” whetstones have been found all over Europe, indicating their popularity.<sup>165</sup> Though the stones were quarried and produced at Eidsborg, a small inland village, Skien is usually associated with this production and trade. The place is something of an outlier in medieval Norwegian town history; it looks like trade formed much of the basis for the founding and its subsequent growth.<sup>166</sup> However, it has been pointed out that the local aristocratic family living at the nearby manor Bratsberg without a doubt dominated the economic activities in Skien.<sup>167</sup> Too much emphasis should therefore not be placed on trade as an autonomous agent; rather, the place developed because of an aristocratic interest in trade, among other things, much like other towns developed because of royal interest, or the interest of the Church. The whetstones were transported from Eidsborg to Skien on frozen rivers in the winter and the *trade* in whetstones was likely important for the development of Skien, something that should not be downplayed. In the excavations carried out on the “Handelstorget”-area, whetstones were ubiquitous, suggesting it’s importance for the development of Skien.<sup>168</sup> On the other hand, Skien never grew to be anything but at most a small Norwegian town, and the lack of production in the town itself may be one of the reasons why.

The industry of metalworkers – blacksmiths, goldsmiths, whitesmiths, locksmiths *et cetera* – left archaeological as well as written evidence that suggests they existed in large numbers in Norwegian towns. Their wares were essential commodities sought by all groups of people, from peasants wanting new knives, ploughs, scythes or locks to merchants or other prosperous citizens wanting jewellery or weapons. Goldsmiths in particular enjoyed a prominent position, likely due to their wealth; the first craftsmen we hear getting elected to the city council were goldsmiths.<sup>169</sup> In Trondheim, a large group of metalworkers settled on the northern outskirts of the town around the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>170</sup> They were likely deliberately placed there because of the fire-hazard they represented, and it is telling that the evidence of metalworking closer to the town centre ceased to exist at the same time. The same arrangement can be found in other towns; in Oslo they were slowly moved out of town during the thirteenth century,<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Sindbæk 2007: 311.

<sup>166</sup> Helle 2006: 61.

<sup>167</sup> Ekroll 2006: 127.

<sup>168</sup> Myrvoll 1992: 264.

<sup>169</sup> Helle 1982: 458.

<sup>170</sup> Blom 1997: 225.

<sup>171</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 269.

and the Town Law explicitly states that smithies should be “moved out of our town”.<sup>172</sup> Even in small places such as Veøy, the smithies were placed in the outskirts “completely in accordance with the Town Law”.<sup>173</sup>

The commodities were undoubtedly easily tradable; metal rusted, rings were lost, knives needed new edges and swords, armour and shields were in constant demand. Some of these items were almost exclusively produced in towns, while others could be produced in the countryside. Indeed, most farms or villages had their own, local blacksmith who could produce commodities needed by peasants in their everyday life.<sup>174</sup> This was normal in European countries; in general, metalworking was democratised and not monopolised by towns, perhaps even more so than textile production which often managed to outcompete homemade clothes. Still, some highly specialised metalworkers, such as goldsmiths, probably catered to a sizable market outside of towns, though it was limited to the upper classes. One difference between the production of luxury metals and luxury textiles is the scale of employment and production. While textile production employed spinners, weavers, dyers and associated apprentices and produced relatively large amounts of textiles, goldsmiths, however wealthy, did not. Goldsmiths may have had apprentices and so provided work-opportunities for some, but not in the same degree as the textile industry, nor did they normally mass produce gold items in the same scale as textiles.

Wooden toys, cups, bowls and game pieces, as well as larger items produced by carpenters, falls into the same pattern as has been observed above. Much could be – and was – done by peasants. Carving toys for children or game pieces was a normal pastime, as was playing with them. Professional carpenters, in Norwegian medieval sources called *koppere*, *kardreiere* or *lagger*, using different techniques, all made bowls, cups and wooden plates, remains of which have been found in large numbers during the Bryggen excavations.<sup>175</sup> In Oslo, evidence of professional carpentry is small; Nedkvitne writes that the few references to a carpenter may be an indication of a travelling artisan and contextualises this by pointing out how normal it was for people to produce the necessary wooden articles themselves.<sup>176</sup> Evidence of barrel makers, *bøkkere*, has not been found despite the importance of barrels for merchants.<sup>177</sup> Coffin makers, on the other hand, are clearly attested to in the Town Law, and we must, sadly, expect that

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<sup>172</sup> MLB, bolk 6, chapter, 10.

<sup>173</sup> Solli 1999: 96.

<sup>174</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 268.

<sup>175</sup> Helle 1982: 435.

<sup>176</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 269.

<sup>177</sup> Helle 1982: 435.

business was brisk.<sup>178</sup> That they were a large and important group, is more doubtful and one may suggest that they had little interaction with the hinterland. On the whole, carpenters seems to have been a modest crafts group and may have lacked a large market due to the prevalence of homemade wooden articles.

### **3.5: Summary**

The different medieval industries we have considered – textile, leather, combmaking, whetstone, metalworking and woodworking – did not add up to much in the Norwegian towns. This is especially true for the most prominent medieval industry in Western Europe, weaving, but less so for the other crafts. While metalworking and combmaking in Norwegian towns certainly never took the position weavers had in for example English towns, they were prominent crafts and produced goods in large quantities that were primarily sold locally. The whetstone production, while not primarily producing for a local market, is also interesting. The large export of Eidsborg whetstones, found everywhere in Western Europe, is reminiscent of the large export of high-quality textiles. However, the similarities are somewhat outweighed by the differences, chief among which is the place of production. While luxury textiles were produced in towns before being sold, the Eidsborg whetstones were produced far from any town, and the only interaction between them and Skien was in the selling/exporting process.

Crafts and industries had a different role in Norwegian, Danish and English towns. Where even the smallest towns had some manufacturing, primarily producing for a local market in Denmark and England, the industry of small towns in Norway seems to have been non-existent, or extremely marginal. The comb-makers in Konghelle were likely itinerant craftsmen, and the material may even suggest a cessation of production from the middle of the thirteenth century, though this is likely just a result of bad conditions for preservation. In larger towns and cities combmakers were a more permanent addition, and the Town Law specifies, as it did for other crafts mentioned above, where in Bergen they could set up shop.<sup>179</sup> Other crafts, such as weavers, were likely not present in the small towns at all, and their presence in larger towns was very limited or non-existent. Competition with imported textiles was possibly either too hard for new native entrepreneurs, or an arrangement where Norwegians sold their produce – stockfish – in return for textiles and other items was seen as unproblematic. Pietro Querini wrote

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<sup>178</sup> MLB, bolk 6, chapter 8.

<sup>179</sup> MLB, bolk 6, chapter 8.

in 1432 that the people of the small fishing community at Røst wore foreign made manufactured clothes, and a member of his crew added that the clothes were cheap and coarse.<sup>180</sup> Writing almost a century after the period we're interested in, it nevertheless reveals the dominating presence of imported textiles in Norway, and the Norwegian towns' incapacity to compete.

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<sup>180</sup> Wold 1991: 141; 166.

## Chapter 4: Commercialisation

Why was the production of commodities so underdeveloped in the Norwegian towns? Some insights into the different economic functions of towns in Norway contra towns in England and Denmark, can perhaps be gained by looking at the level of commercialisation in Norway. The lack of source material makes it difficult to establish how commercialised towns were in the beginning of the period compared to the end. The focus will therefore be on how commercialised the Norwegian society was in general, rather than the process of commercialisation. The insight of Rodney Hilton, that towns cannot be separated from the society that surrounds them,<sup>181</sup> also holds for economic matters, and makes looking at commercialisation of society potent when explaining why the Norwegian towns functioned the way they did.

Before discussing the commercialisation of Norwegian towns, two important questions must be raised. The first, naturally, is a question of definition. Commercialisation can, according to Richard Britnell, be defined as a “growth in the total amount of commercial activity over a period of time”.<sup>182</sup> This, however, he calls the weaker definition of commercialisation, partly because nobody doubts that medieval society became more commercialised in this sense, and partly because it does not necessarily reflect a qualitative change in society; as a population grows, one can naturally assume that commercial activity will increase. He consequently moves on to what he calls the stronger definition of commercialisation, which will also be the definition used in this thesis. This definition expands upon the scope of the weaker definition, by stating that “commercialisation signifies that commercial activity was growing faster than population”.<sup>183</sup> In this sense, the focus is on fundamental changes in society, namely whether it became more common to specialise rather than being self-sufficient, and, further, whether money came to be used more often.

The second question concerns what our sources can tell us about commercialisation. It is, of course, not possible to write with the same certainty on matters of medieval economics as it is to write about modern economy. There is nothing close to an aggregate statistic like GDP for medieval Norway nor, for that matter, medieval England or Denmark, though round estimates have been made for England.<sup>184</sup> Nonetheless, other evidence must be looked at. In this chapter,

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<sup>181</sup> Hilton 1995: 9.

<sup>182</sup> Britnell 1996: xiii.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> See Bolton 2012: 15.

we will look at numismatic evidence, which is an important but not all-telling measure of commercialisation, as well as patterns of trade. There is, unfortunately, little in the way of manorial accounts for medieval Norway, at least compared to England, and much information will therefore come from archaeological evidence. This is not necessarily a problem due to this thesis' main research object being Norwegian towns, many of which have been at the very least partially excavated with published reports. Since coins and the use of coins are naturally connected with commerce, and may therefore be regarded as an indication of the level of commercialisation, although indirectly, we will begin by examining how monetised Norway's economy was in the period.

#### **4.1: Coins in Norway in the High Middle Ages**

The issue of medieval Norway's level of monetisation is controversial. A recent debate, between Kåre Lunden<sup>185</sup> and Svein Harald Gullbekk,<sup>186</sup> illustrates the complexity of this controversy. The debate has been going on for over a decade, with Gullbekk arguing for a revision of the orthodoxy established by Lunden, namely that there were few coins in circulation in Norway in the Middle Ages and that taxes and rents were mostly paid with commodities. This debate concerns Norway in general, not just towns, but is nonetheless so fundamental to how we understand the economic interactions in Norway that a thorough look at the debate is warranted.

Lunden's argument is that even though money in the form of coins existed, and was used as payment, they were relatively few in number, perhaps only amounting to two million coins around 1300, and that the medieval Norwegian economy was mainly characterised by payment in kind. His estimate of two million coins is based, among other things, on a special papal tax ("seksårstienden") collected between 1276 and 1282, when the money was sent to Rome and counted there.<sup>187</sup> The velocity of circulation, i.e. how often coins changed hands, is regarded by him as being quite low.<sup>188</sup> To show why he believes two million coins to be a very small amount, he argues that as much as 274 million coins may have been needed to pay taxes ("korntienda" and "leidang"), rents ("landskyld") and fines at a given year around 1300.<sup>189</sup> With only the estimated two million coins in circulation this means that coins could cover less than 1%. He

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<sup>185</sup> Lunden 1999; 2007.

<sup>186</sup> Gullbekk 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2011.

<sup>187</sup> Lunden 2007: 20.

<sup>188</sup> Lunden 2007: 26.

<sup>189</sup> Lunden 2007: 21–22.

argues further that much of the written evidence for coins, especially when the term “forngild” is used, actually refer to an abstract “money of account”, rather than evidence for payment in coins.<sup>190</sup> After a thorough search of some of the documents used by Gullbekk, he argues that even when money is mentioned in documentary evidence, there is little proof that it was actually paid with coins, and indeed, there is often proof to the contrary, thus suggesting that Gullbekk has been misinterpreting the documentary evidence.<sup>191</sup>

Gullbekk answered the charge of misrepresenting the evidence by pointing out that Lunden took many of those documents out of context, and that some of them had in fact been included to show that Gullbekk did not doubt that some fines were paid with commodities.<sup>192</sup> Gullbekk’s main argument is that the use of coins was extensive and that the value of coins in circulation was much higher than Lunden’s estimates. He calculates that there were about 8.5 million coins in circulation at any given year in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, four times higher than Lunden’s figure, arguing that the papal tax collectors would not have “hoovered [...] the kingdom for coin”.<sup>193</sup> Gullbekk also shows that accounts from the bishops of Oslo, Hamar, Bergen and Nidaros, are clearly concerned with hard coins, mentioning for example that they are counting specific sacks of coins.<sup>194</sup> However, he does not provide any convincing reasoning for his estimate, nor does he seem to appreciate the fact that the special papal tax Lunden based his estimate on was collected over several years, which strengthens estimates built upon it.

He also argues that the velocity of circulation was much higher than is supposed by Lunden, and calculates that coins changed hands between 3 and 15 times a year,<sup>195</sup> although without seemingly giving any clear indication where he gets these numbers from, other than his own perception of one of them as low and one as high. Such a rapid circulation of coins would mean that a substantially larger share of the taxes, rents and fines could be paid with coins. However, Lunden commented that a lot of the previously mentioned taxes, rents and fines were paid once every year,<sup>196</sup> usually in a very concentrated period, which renders this argument moot.<sup>197</sup> One

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<sup>190</sup> Lunden 2007: 14.

<sup>191</sup> Lunden 1999: 254ff.

<sup>192</sup> Gullbekk 2005b: 12. Though he does go on to discuss of how feasible it really would be to pay large fines in butter, which is a valid but somewhat strange point when we know that many large fines were paid with land, a much larger unit than butter, as he does indeed admit himself. Gullbekk 2005b: 13.

<sup>193</sup> Gullbekk 2011: 516.

<sup>194</sup> Gullbekk 2005a: 557–558.

<sup>195</sup> Gullbekk 2011: 517.

<sup>196</sup> Lunden 2007: 24–25.

<sup>197</sup> Gullbekk 2011: 528.



argument in favour of a high velocity of circulation is the fact that the usage of coins was much higher in towns, where one might suppose that a lot of everyday trade was done with coins – an issue I will return to.<sup>198</sup>

The primary use of coins in the countryside is also a point of contention. Lunden writes that “a very large proportion of the *penningar* seems to have ended up as religious offerings, placed deliberately through the cracks of the church floors.”<sup>199</sup> He substantiates this by pointing out how small the flow of coins from the city to the countryside was, and thus how likely it is that they became precious objects to be given as offerings, rather than objects with a daily use. Gullbekk is more sceptical and finds that since a disproportional amount of coins found in the cracks of the church floors are of the smallest size and least value, it is likely that a lot of them were in fact merely lost.<sup>200</sup> The same seems to hold for coins found in Denmark.<sup>201</sup> Small coins of little value are perhaps more likely to have been used in day-to-day transactions and may indicate a more monetised rural society than has been assumed. The interpretation should, however, be taken with a grain of salt and there is little evidence to support it.

Gullbekk contradicts himself in what I perceive as one of his main arguments, that the wear and tear of coins can be measured and provide information about the velocity of circulation. In an article from 2011 he alters between statements such as “vitenskapelige kriterier for slitasje og hvor stor slitasje som avspeiler bruk [...] krever komplekse modeller [...] Å utvikle slike metoder ligger utenfor rammene av denne artikkelen”<sup>202</sup> and “femti eierskifter alene avstedkommer ikke bruksslitasje i særlig grad. Norske museumssamlinger inneholder mye mynt som bærer spor etter bruksslitasje som nødvendigvis må avspeile langt flere eierskifter enn et femtital” indicating that he is indeed in possession of a model for determining the circulation indicated by wear.<sup>203</sup>

Dubious methods notwithstanding, there is a theoretical problem in need of being addressed here. Velocity of circulation is directly tied to GDP, a relationship Gullbekk neglects to comment. The relationship is described in the Fisher equation which states that  $MV=PT$ , where

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<sup>198</sup> See Chapter 4.2.

<sup>199</sup> Lunden 1999: 264.

<sup>200</sup> Gullbekk 2005a: 566–567.

<sup>201</sup> Grønder-Hansen 1994: 110.

<sup>202</sup> Gullbekk 2011: 526. “Scientific criteria for [establishing] how much wear indicates a certain amount of usage [...] demands complex models [...] to develop such models is outside the boundaries of this article” (My translation).

<sup>203</sup> Gullbekk 2011: 519, 521–522. “Fifty changes of owners wouldn’t result in much wear. Norwegian museum collections contain many coins for which the wear must necessarily indicate far more changes in owners than fifty” (My translation). It feels like Gullbekk is merely paying lip-service to the idea that his reasoning must have some scientific foundation.

M= total money in circulation, V= velocity of circulation, P= average level of prices of all goods traded for money, and T= total volume of monetary transactions.<sup>204</sup> Quite simply, this equation isolates some key factors that are important to understanding the economy. It also shows how hopeless Gullbekk's project is. While M is, as we have seen, debatable, for the sake of argument we may accept Gullbekk's estimate of about 8.5 million coins. P and T, which can be equated with the modern concept of GDP, represented as Y,<sup>205</sup> is still needed to determine the velocity of circulation. Or, conversely, V is needed to provide Y. There is no basis in Norwegian sources from which one could make an estimate of such a thing, and any attempt at taking the velocity of circulation from another country is fraught with dangers due to the vast differences in economic structures.

Estimates done on the English economy illustrate the difficulties one are faced with when trying to quantify the velocity of circulation and the amount of money in circulation in a medieval economy. Based, primarily, on the Domesday Book, historians have arrived at an estimate for English GDP in 1086. They estimate it at £300 000, and the coinage has been estimated at £37 500, or roughly nine million coins.<sup>206</sup> Since  $V=M\div Y$ , the velocity is 8. Using this as a "guide" to what the velocity of circulation in the Norwegian economy might have been is, however, a dangerous endeavour. First of all, the amount of coins in circulation has been disputed. Allen, for example, writes that "the continued use of precise estimates such as Dolley's [who estimated it at about £37 500] without further qualification cannot be justified on the available evidence", and has suggested a more cautious estimate of £10 000–£25 000.<sup>207</sup> The highest and lowest estimate for V is then 30 and 12 respectively. These fluctuations show how hard it is to say anything with certainty even about an economy we know significantly more of than the Norwegian.

Second, economies change over time. The English economy around 1300 was very different from 1086, a fact that had an effect on for example the velocity of circulation. Estimates from 1290 puts V at 3.5, which is what one would expect in an economy with a good money supply.<sup>208</sup> To determine which fits the Norwegian economy, one would have to assume that it was more economically similar to country X at time Y, and so give reasons which do not build upon economic data – for that is what one is trying to procure. In other words, in order to

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<sup>204</sup> Bolton 2012: 6.

<sup>205</sup> Bolton 2012: 15.

<sup>206</sup> Bolton 2012: 15. The nine million coins is based on an assumption of 240 pence to each pound.

<sup>207</sup> Allen 2012: 321. Bolton 2012: 125.

<sup>208</sup> Bolton 2012: 15.

determine which country, or period, one should base estimates of the velocity of circulation on, *a priori* assumptions will have to be made about the Norwegian economy. Building on such “evidence” will inevitably lead to circular argumentation. Last, it does not follow that a well monetised economy has a high velocity of circulation; the reverse is in fact true, as we have seen with estimates of *V* dropping from 8 to 3.5 from 1086 to 1290 in England.

Gullbekk agrees with Lunden that Norway was in many ways backward compared to other countries such as England and Denmark.<sup>209</sup> The problem is that neither of the authors manages to present a coherent interpretation that takes into account all available data, and the polemical tone<sup>210</sup> does not help. Lunden is probably right in stating that when the term *fornigild penning* occurs, it is often a reference to “money of account”. He is also correct in bringing into question how much the millions of coins postulated by Gullbekk – in reality, a quantity not *that* far from what is accepted by Lunden – was actually worth when looking at the total value of taxes, rents and fines. However, Gullbekk does raise some interesting points that Lunden never quite manages to refute: Coins existed in Norway in such quantities that it was in fact readily available for at least parts of the population, and sources – for example the previously mentioned accounts from the bishoprics of Oslo, Hamar, Bergen and Nidaros – from time to time refer to actual coins, not just “money of account”.

## 4.2: Coins in towns

Moving on to the primary object of inquiry, towns, we are luckily somewhat more certain of the role of coins there than in the countryside. The function of towns as mercantile centres and as administrative centres for the crown and church resulted in a resident class of clergy and officials, major as well as minor, and meant that a large amount of wealth was concentrated in towns. In addition, many wealthy landlords owned urban property and spent a lot of time in towns. It is therefore not surprising that both Lunden and Gullbekk agree that the situation in towns was not like the situation described, perhaps confusingly, above.<sup>211</sup>

In the Town Law fines in silver are often mentioned, indicating a familiarity with cash, although this does of course not necessarily reflect the reality of how the fines were paid. However, there are suggestions that coins were in fact commonly used as payment of fines. In an order from

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<sup>209</sup> Gullbekk 2005a: 570.

<sup>210</sup> Like when Gullbekk writes “From this one could very well argue that Norwegian towns were monetized in the high Middle Ages, very much in contrast to traditional views.”, without even trying to specify what he means by “monetized”. Gullbekk 2005b: 9–10.

<sup>211</sup> Lunden 2007: 30; Gullbekk 2011: 529.

Magnus Erikson in 1343, it is explicitly stated that all fines paid to the town in cash were to be put in a chest and divided every month as was customary.<sup>212</sup> The reference to a chest makes this rather strong evidence for use of coins. Regarding trade, the Town Law states that if a person buys an item but does not have the silver to pay for it, and goes home to get it, the merchant cannot sell the item to another person without incurring a fine.<sup>213</sup> The remark about going home to get silver is quite unambiguous in its reference to hard coin. The situation described in this law suggests that it was mostly concerned with transactions of lesser value; the law seems to refer to impulse shopping, not premeditated purchases of expensive goods. The low value<sup>214</sup> coinage from the reigns of Eirik Magnusson and Håkon V Magnusson, would perhaps be particularly useful in such transactions.<sup>215</sup>

The usefulness of small coins is known from English sources, where Edward I made it illegal for sellers to reject halfpennies and farthings made by cutting, in addition to minting halfpennies and farthings himself.<sup>216</sup> High value coinage may in fact have presented a problem for trade. When the English gold currency system was established in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, wherein the smallest coin had the same value as five days' wages, it seems to have resulted in the use of lead tokens and jettons in retail transactions a few places.<sup>217</sup> Theoretically, if the value of the smallest coin was too high, the usefulness of the coins in smaller transactions was diminished. If, for example, the smallest available coin has the value of two lumps of butter, how do you go about buying one? The example is crude, and the issue is not insurmountable in any way as the inventive use of lead tokens bears witness to. However, it suggests that low value coins were perhaps especially useful in towns, where small retail purchases may have been a bigger part of everyday life than in the countryside.

Low value coinage, and the deterioration in silver content that seems to have hit bottom in the late thirteenth, early fourteenth century, are usually explained by pointing at the lack of silver.<sup>218</sup> Kings often re-issued coins with a lowered silver content, and the motive is usually assumed to have been profit, which Gullbekk calculated to have been between – certainly at an extreme – three and four hundred percent for coins minted in the 1290s.<sup>219</sup> While that certainly had an

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<sup>212</sup> *Regesta Norvegica*, vol. 5, No. 628.

<sup>213</sup> MLB, bolk 7, chapter 9.

<sup>214</sup> The value fluctuated but was generally quite low, and reached a bottom around 1290, when they contained only 6–7% silver. Gullbekk 2003: 84.

<sup>215</sup> In his doctoral dissertation, Risvaag stresses how an increased money supply facilitates small-scale trade, Risvaag 2006: 302; 307.

<sup>216</sup> Britnell 1996: 102.

<sup>217</sup> Britnell 1996: 179–181.

<sup>218</sup> See for example Holt 2007: 139.

<sup>219</sup> Gullbekk 2003: 163–165.

impact on the silver content, another possibility for the massive deterioration exists: a growing economy with a need for an increasing money supply.<sup>220</sup> Profit was likely part of it, but the result of minting coins with ever-smaller silver content when the silver supply is limited and, possibly, stable, is to increase the volume of coins in circulation. Credit, which is more elastic than minted coins, was underdeveloped in Norway, and only came into general use with the emergence of the Hanseatic domination from the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>221</sup> It is not unlikely that the devaluation of coins was intended to facilitate trade in addition to being a source of profit for the crown.

When it came to transactions of larger values, the picture is somewhat less clear on the use of coins. Gullbekk presented an interesting statistic based on 88 recorded land transactions in towns, which shows that coins were used fully or in part in 77% of the transactions.<sup>222</sup> As land transactions are usually of a much larger value than retail transactions, and one could therefore perhaps expect them to be paid with units of higher value than coins, such as cattle. This statistic would indeed suggest a highly monetised town economy. On the other hand, it is hard to tell whether the references to coins actually refer to what was being paid, a point raised by Lunden,<sup>223</sup> Gullbekk's use of the term "utredet i mynt"<sup>224</sup> can be interpreted as a sign of the author's uncertainty, and the level of precision with which it is possible to say anything about money.

Other items than coins were, however, commonly used in towns as payment, perhaps especially when it came to land transactions and other large payments such as dowries. It was specified in the laws of Magnus Lagabøte that no more than a third of the dowry should be paid with personal clothes, indicating at a minimum that it was more or less accepted that part of the dowry was paid with other objects than coin. The dowries of two women in Bergen around 1320 shows that clothes, bed sheets, table cloth, textiles as well as butter and silver jewellery could be, and was, used as dowry.<sup>225</sup> From the sale of a town property in Oslo we know that the price of 24 marks was really paid for with a cape, a hood from Bruges, cloth, a mug, wax and only three marks in coin.<sup>226</sup> Likewise, when Orm Svarte Toresson bought part of the Bellgard

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<sup>220</sup> Lopez 1986: 338–339.

<sup>221</sup> Helle 2006: 86, 131–133.

<sup>222</sup> Gullbekk 2003: 266.

<sup>223</sup> Lunden 2007: 33.

<sup>224</sup> I.e. the documents stipulates that the sum was to be paid with coins, rather than that they actually were paid with coins.

<sup>225</sup> Helle 1982: 467.

<sup>226</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 374.

property in Bergen, he paid the price of 90 *forn* mark mostly with wool and skins.<sup>227</sup> These examples indicate that even if the sum to be paid was given in coins, and coins were used as part of the payment, it was in no way always the bigger part, nor necessarily even a very significant part.

The degree to which the towns were monetised compared to the countryside is different in Norway compared to other European countries. In Denmark the evidence may seem to point in the same direction as in Norway, with more coins found in towns than in the countryside.<sup>228</sup> However, one can easily interject that perhaps the reason more coins are found in towns than in the countryside is because towns, covering a small and confined area, are more easily excavated than the countryside. It was also where peasants would go to spend a lot of their money, so it is not surprising that more coins were lost there, and subsequently have been recovered by archaeologists. This issue of representativeness makes it difficult to ascertain whether a certain town was more economically developed than another on the basis of findings of coins.<sup>229</sup> A crucial difference between Norway and Denmark is that coins were used to a much larger degree to pay taxes and rent in Denmark. This is true for the countryside as well as towns, and evidently came about after pressure from the crown in the form of new laws and a change from services, both military and labour, to payments which were increasingly paid in cash.<sup>230</sup> In England the situation is much the same, with coins becoming increasingly widespread in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.<sup>231</sup> The reason for the differences between Denmark, England and Norway with regards to the proliferation of coins will be analysed in the next chapter of this thesis.

Town and country were necessarily connected through transfers of wealth in the form of rent, taxes and trade, but the uneven distribution of coins suggests that trade between town and countryside was less of a factor in Norway's internal economy. Coins were most likely readily available in towns and were used as payment for fines, retail purchases and, partly at least, larger purchases such as town houses. The heterogeneous character of the Norwegian towns makes it necessary to add a nuance to the town-countryside picture that has been drawn here. It is, for example, quite clear that the economic characteristics of towns such as Tønsberg and Bergen were different from the characteristics of a town like Trondheim, which again was

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<sup>227</sup> Helle 1982: 274.

<sup>228</sup> Poulsen 1979–80: 284.

<sup>229</sup> Grindler-Hansen 2000: 211.

<sup>230</sup> Grindler-Hansen 2004: 202–203.

<sup>231</sup> Britnell 1996: 102.

different from Stavanger, Oslo and Hamar. From Trondheim we only know of one document where coins are specified, and while many documents concerning land transactions have survived from Stavanger, none of them mention coins.<sup>232</sup> However, Trondheim was periodically a place of minting and it seems unlikely that its economy was bereft of coins. Trondheim was likely more similar to Bergen than to Stavanger, but even in Stavanger the evidence for an extremely weak monetary economy is not conclusive as the documents mainly concern themselves with high value transactions, which – as has been shown – was perhaps not the area of the economy where coins had the greatest function.

### **4.3: Trade**

A basic requirement of trade is an arena where buyers and sellers can meet. In medieval towns these arenas were usually annual fairs where people from near and far could meet; markets where, mainly, the country people could meet and sell their surplus; or regular shops where townsmen could trade on a daily basis. This is, at least, an idealised and simplified version of how it could have functioned. The reality was far messier and with no clear boundaries, but it does say something about some of the chief functions of each of these arenas of trade. The importance of the large annual fairs can be seen in Denmark, where fairs and markets were numerous, and the annual Danish “Skånemarket”, at which the main produce sold was herring, was the focus of a large part of the Danish merchant population who were connected with this enterprise in one way or another.<sup>233</sup> The development of new arenas to meet new challenges can be seen in England with the establishment of new markets, which was partly in response to a population growth creating a surplus population looking for work, partly in response to a growth in overseas trade,<sup>234</sup> but mainly because the landlords found it profitable.

It was different in Norway. There were no new town or market creations between 1250 and 1350, nor were any new fairs created. In Oslo, for example, it is doubtful that there were any annual fairs, nor is there mention of a regular market where the local peasants could sell their surplus, although Saturday has been mentioned as a market day in the Late Middle Ages.<sup>235</sup> It has been suggested that the reason for this was that taxes and rents, mostly paid with foodstuffs, were enough to sustain the population of Oslo, and the peasants of the hinterland were to a large

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<sup>232</sup> Gullbekk 2003: 268. Gullbekk also mentions that Stavanger tended to pay the “Rome tax” in commodities.

<sup>233</sup> Grinder-Hansen 2000: 27–28.

<sup>234</sup> Britnell 1996: 81–85.

<sup>235</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 187; 262.

degree self-sufficient. Next, we will consider medieval shops, stalls and carts; trade in the market place; and trade during regular fairs or market days, in order to understand how developed local, regional and international trade was in medieval Norwegian towns.

#### **4.4: Shops, stalls and carts**

Oslo was probably underdeveloped as a commercial city compared to other Norwegian cities.<sup>236</sup> But it is a mistake to believe that just because formal institutions such as regular markets and annual fairs were underdeveloped, there was no trade in this town. Many craftsmen in Oslo had their own workshop from which they conducted trade, which suggest that trade between townsmen, visitors and possibly some neighbouring peasants, was great enough to allow some to live from trade. In Oslo, twenty-two crafts have been identified: in Bergen, over thirty.<sup>237</sup> Some of these, for example bakers, are likely to have had their greatest base of customers in the town itself. They made bread or other types of food that could be bought retail from their small shops or carts, or they could be employed by a large household such as the archbishop's or King's.

The word shop comes from the Old English *schopa*, and means both workshop and retail shop.<sup>238</sup> Determining which buildings were shops, which were workshops and which were used for other purposes is difficult. However, craftsmen often sold retail from their workshops, and it is no great leap to suggest that many of the buildings facing the street were used for commercial purposes.<sup>239</sup> Often, shops can be identified by lack of access to other rooms in the complex they are part of. From England, we have evidence of bazaar-like outlets in London, as well as rows of shops in York, Beverly and Hull.<sup>240</sup> Dealers in luxury goods are likely to have had pure retail shops, more reminiscent of today's shops than the workshops of the craftsmen. Others, such as bakers, "ølkoner" or perhaps even butchers, would have pushed their carts around, selling to weary craftsmen or interested passersby.

It is reasonable to think that dealers in retail drink and food, mostly sold their product to townsmen in the off-season, while visiting merchants were big customers in the summer. The Town Law mentions grocers also, who were designated the area between the Stone Church's

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<sup>236</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 189.

<sup>237</sup> Helle 1982: 427; Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 268–269. See also Chapter 2.4.

<sup>238</sup> Palliser, Slater and Dennison 2000: 184.

<sup>239</sup> Schofield and Vince 2003: 162–163.

<sup>240</sup> Palliser, Slater and Dennison 2000: 185.



churchyard and *Nikulaskirkealmeningen* in Bergen.<sup>241</sup> This covers a small area, but the group probably consisted of a sizeable portion of ambulatory traders selling wares from carts, though many of them were perhaps well established and had their own shop from which they could sell. At the very least, they needed somewhere to prepare the food or drink, or, if they bought it from other merchants, somewhere to store it. Quite possibly, this was a family operation, as many medieval businesses were, with someone preparing the food and drink, and someone pushing a cart around. The great increase in population in the summer months meant that trade was likely especially good in that period. The primary customers of this type of retail trade, however, were likely townsmen who lived there all year round.

Another group of retail merchants, mongers, was mentioned specifically in the Town Law.<sup>242</sup> These made a living buying from ships as they docked or peasants as they entered the town, and then selling it to the townsmen. They could set up shop almost wherever they wanted, possibly renting space from landlords in buildings facing the street (see figure 4.1 for how the shops in the streets might have looked in medieval Trondheim). In 1302, a royal decree put an end to much of this enterprise, or at least tried to limit it severely, by making it illegal for mongers to buy goods for retail before others had had their pick.<sup>243</sup> This may be seen in connection with an earlier decree, from 1299, against the practice known as forestalling.<sup>244</sup> Interestingly, this practice, i.e. merchants buying from peasants or other merchants before they had entered the city, was also made illegal at around the same time in England.<sup>245</sup>

These decrees were means to protect customers from what was assumed to be merchants seeking to profit by buying cheap and selling dear. Although Chaucer, himself a townsman, presents the reader with a favourable view of merchants in *The Canterbury Tales*, they were often portrayed as greedy in the middle ages, as in Langland's *Piers Plowman*.<sup>246</sup> Those who condemned merchants buying in the countryside or from recently docked ships and selling for profit, ignored the organising work done by these merchants, focusing instead on the increased price of the goods. As the Kings and aristocrats were naturally big consumers, they gained by

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<sup>241</sup> MLB, bolk 6, chapter 8.

<sup>242</sup> MLB, bolk 6, chapter 8. The whole group of «kremmere» had a rather wide area where they could sell their goods.

<sup>243</sup> *Regesta Norvegica*, vol. 3, No. 41.

<sup>244</sup> *Regesta Norvegica*, vol. 2, No. 1011.

<sup>245</sup> Britnell 1996: 93.

<sup>246</sup> Hilton 1995: 107.

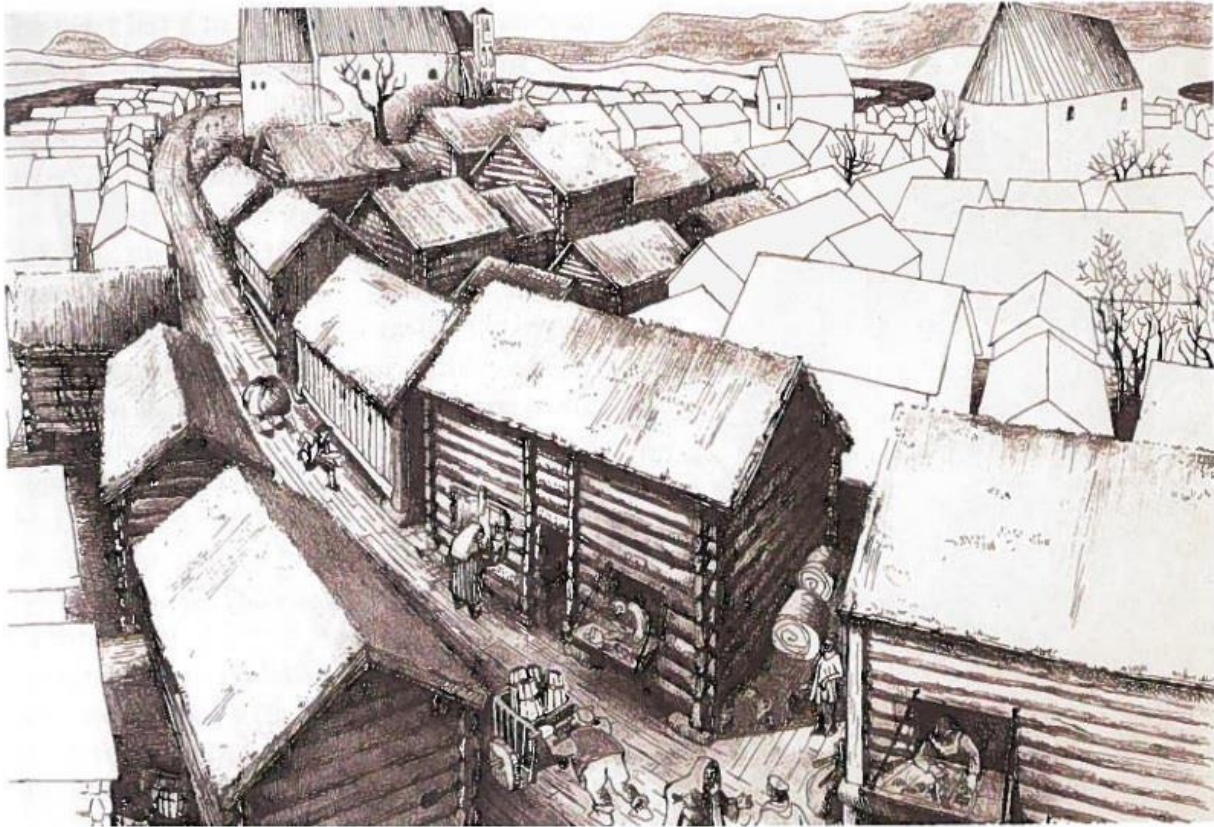


Figure 4.1: Artist's rendition of shops in medieval Trondheim, based on excavation results from "Folkebibliotekstomten". From Authén Blom 1997: 237.

keeping the price as low as possible by forcing peasants to travel to towns to sell their produce directly to them and thus had good reason to enforce laws that ensured low prices.

Others professions, such as masons, shoemakers, swordsmiths, goldsmiths or tinkers, are likely to have most of their customers in the town, but with substantial customer groups among the aristocracy outside of the town itself and visiting merchants. Some of these were retailers, others – for instance masons and dockworkers – sold their labour. From English sources, we know that labourers were sometimes paid in kind and sometimes in cash, though this was more common for labourers working for a manor.<sup>247</sup> It is not unlikely that many labourers in Norwegian towns were paid with food, though it is likely that an increasingly larger share was paid with cash. The *skipan* of 16 September 1282 for instance, in addition to stating how much each craftsman could charge for his goods, specified the craftsmen's wages in cash.<sup>248</sup> If they were paid in cash, it meant that craftsmen could participate in the local trade, and probably constituted a significant consumer group, though possibly less significant than the group of aristocrats, church officials and royal officials that also resided in towns.

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<sup>247</sup> Britnell 1996: 108.

<sup>248</sup> Helle, Bagge and Smesdal 1973: 173–178.

How many shops there were, or how they were organised, may give some indications of how commercialised the towns were. The proliferation of shops is hard to quantify in Norway, but archaeological studies have given us a vague sense of how common shops were in some towns. In Trondheim, for example, excavations have shown that there was a rapid growth in the number of so-called frontage buildings, that is, buildings that are adjacent to the street and which were likely used as shops, in the second half of the thirteenth century.<sup>249</sup> The organisational structure, with long rows of buildings facing the street that probably had shops in almost all of the available space on the ground floor facing the street, has been best documented in Bergen though it is likely to have existed elsewhere as well. Tønsberg, however, provides us with evidence that there were no uniformity in Norwegian towns. Buildings similar to those in Trondheim and Bergen dominated the area close to the waterfront, but other areas, especially in the northern part of Tønsberg, were built more openly, with clusters of buildings haphazardly spread around.<sup>250</sup> The shops were not as neatly lined up there as in Bergen, and perhaps this reflects a different economic structure, with little emphasis on trade between townsmen. However, it may simply reflect a growing town that had been slowly expanding and incorporating buildings and farms that previously were not part of the town.

Overall, we know little about shops in smaller places. The Hamar chronicle, written in the sixteenth century and interested in giving Hamar a glorified medieval past, mentions that signs hanging outside of buildings were used to indicate what was sold there, suggesting shops were present in small places as well.<sup>251</sup> From written sources, we know the names of seven town houses that may have existed in Veøy between 1250 and 1350.<sup>252</sup> Because some of these sources are products of a later time, we cannot be sure the town houses named existed in the period we're interested in. The letter giving name to "Skraapsgard", for example, is from 1438.<sup>253</sup> However, Veøy had been in decline for most of the time since the Black Death, meaning there was little reason to build new town houses. In addition, the scarcity of sources means that there were likely some town houses that have escaped the record, and seven may stand as an absolute minimum for Veøy. It is, however, difficult to ascertain what the buildings were used for, and consequently determine how many shops there were. While the number of town houses is

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<sup>249</sup> Christophersen 1989: 123.

<sup>250</sup> Helle 2006: 98.

<sup>251</sup> Pettersen 1986: 27.

<sup>252</sup> Solli 1999: 43–45.

<sup>253</sup> Solli 1999: 45.

indicative of how many shops there could have been by drawing a comparison with shops in towns such as Bergen, lack of evidence makes this suggestive rather than definitive.

Lack of firm evidence also makes it hard to determine whether there were any qualitative differences between small places, though there was likely some difference between Vågar – a marginal place owing much to seasonal trade – and Stavanger, the seat of a bishop. Ersland, who wrote a detailed history of Stavanger, found some evidence of local trade, but has a pessimistic view of its role.<sup>254</sup> According to him, the “degree of self-sufficiency was too high and the town population too low” to create a local market between townsmen.<sup>255</sup> In general, local trade was less developed in small places than in towns.

Obviously, the relationship between commercial buildings and commercial activities is important; a high concentration of shops within a town is likely to mean that there was a substantial amount of trade conducted there and that it constituted a livelihood for many townsmen. Nonetheless, the picture is anything but clear-cut. For example, the Town Law gives evidence of a group of petty mongers not renting or owning shops, but selling from carts.<sup>256</sup> They were to pay one *ørtug*<sup>257</sup> every summer (15 June), as were all other craftsmen and traders. The timing likely reflects custom and, importantly, was probably a date when the authorities believed that the tax was most easily collected. The Danish town tax, *midsommer-* or *arnegæld* was also collected in the middle of the summer, as its name attests.<sup>258</sup> It seems likely that the group of petty mongers was more numerous in the summer, but they could have been a significant factor in local trade the whole year.

Unrecorded trade makes quantification of commodities moved between townsmen impossible, and while physical evidence of shops may give us a rough sense of whether there was little or much trade, even that is difficult to draw conclusions from. For example, during the rapid growth of frontage-buildings in Trondheim, the total built-up area expanded.<sup>259</sup> The correlation between the built-up area, i.e. the area containing buildings, and the increase in frontage buildings, suggests that the increase in shops was generally proportional to the increase in population. Later, in the beginning of the fourteenth century, the total area kept expanding, while the area of the frontage buildings decreased. Christophersen attributes this to a growth in

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<sup>254</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 209–210.

<sup>255</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 210.

<sup>256</sup> MLB, bolk 3, chapter 8.

<sup>257</sup> *Ørtug* was the smallest unit. 1 mark burnt silver = 3 mark *forngild* = 8 *øre* = 24 *ørtug*, from Moseng *et al.* 2007: 419.

<sup>258</sup> Bøgh 1999: 70.

<sup>259</sup> Christophersen 1989: 123–124.

population, though he briefly mentions an increase in volume of trade requiring more storage area as one possible explanation.<sup>260</sup> The latter explanation seems unlikely when considering the decline in trade Trondheim experienced because of Bergen's growth.<sup>261</sup> Another explanation for the decline in frontage-buildings is that a fundamental change seems to have occurred: a decrease in commercial activity compared to the population level. Such a decrease may have been because of the aforementioned realignment in long-distance trade, which perhaps resulted in fewer merchants wanting to own stalls. The landlords would then be pressed into finding new use for the space, perhaps as lodgings. The evidence is hardly conclusive, however, and the lack of it severely limits our ability to firmly establish the relationship between commercial activity and shops.

While we may abandon hope of finding firm quantifiable evidence for local trade, qualitative evidence, as we have seen, suggests the presence of small-scale local trade in towns. One line of inquiry that underlines this is ownership of townhouses. Orm Svarte Toresson bought, as I mentioned earlier, a part of a town property in Bergen, Bellgard, around 1310. He was a merchant and could have invested the money into rural property, as, for example, the canons and bishop at Kristkirken did.<sup>262</sup> It has been calculated that if he had invested the money, 90 *for mark*, into rural property, he could have bought 5 or 6 farms.<sup>263</sup> Buying an urban property gave him a both a warehouse and a shop for his own merchandise. He had to take an active part and invest a good amount of time into making it profitable, but it is likely that the he could increase his income significantly compared to rent from rural property.

Owning urban property gave income in the form of rent from frontage-buildings or shops. From the Late Medieval Period, we know that the owners of similar properties calculated rent based on the number of stalls.<sup>264</sup> If this was the same in the period we're concerned with, it would indicate that an increase in the number of shops or stalls would have increased the income of the landlord. Since the ability of the artisans or merchants who owned the shops or stalls to pay rent depended on commerce, and the income from this rent could be comparable and likely much higher than the income from rural property, this does suggest a high degree of commercial activity and profitability in Bergen at least. It was not necessarily true for all Norwegian towns. In Oslo, according to Nedkvitne and Norseng, "urban property was a less tempting investment

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<sup>260</sup> Christophersen 1989: 124.

<sup>261</sup> Holt 2007: 137; Risvaag 2006: 41

<sup>262</sup> Helle 1982: 275–277.

<sup>263</sup> Helle 1982: 277.

<sup>264</sup> Helle 1982: 276.

object for landowners than farms in the countryside”.<sup>265</sup> It may be that urban property in Bergen, and especially at Bryggen, and the level of trade this represents was something of an anomaly compared to urban property in other Norwegian towns.

#### 4.5: Markets and fairs

While shops often sold goods intended for – though never limited to – local customers, the products sold at market places were intended for a larger group of customers. The term “market” may take on different meanings depending on the context. On this occasion, we are interested in markets as physical places, i.e. “market places” and “market days”, not market as an abstract concept.

In the intricate network of trade that arose during the Middle Ages, markets and fairs were two of the most dominating institutions. They were also increasingly among the most formalised, with market grants becoming more and more common in the thirteenth century in England.<sup>266</sup> However, too much emphasis should not be placed upon legalistic evidence – the economic function of the market is what is of interest here. While the trade in markets in England was often of a local or regional character<sup>267</sup> it is hard to find evidence for such trade in Norway. Indeed some urban historians simply conclude that there was little regional and local trade, and towns got their supplies from rent and occasionally from peasants selling produce in towns.<sup>268</sup>

While Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim and Tønsberg are likely to have had market places, the exact locations of these are still uncertain. In Oslo the market was likely next to St Hallvard’s church, not far from the Bishop’s palace and in a wide opening where several streets met.<sup>269</sup> At the market, townsmen could buy surplus from the neighbouring countryside and *vice versa*. While direct evidence for the location of the market is lacking, what we know points to this place as the strongest contender. In the neighbouring town of Tønsberg, a city far more dependent on trade than Oslo, the market place was likely situated next to St Mary’s church.<sup>270</sup> In Bergen, the location of the market has been stipulated to have been at the bottom of the Nikolaikirkealmening, on the quay.<sup>271</sup> In fact, the author of the Town Law obviously assumes

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<sup>265</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 276. “Bygårder var et mindre fristende investeringsobjekt for jordeiere enn gårder på landet.”

<sup>266</sup> Britnell 1981: 209–210.

<sup>267</sup> Britnell 1981: 211–214.

<sup>268</sup> See for example Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 187; Ersland and Solli 2012: 210.

<sup>269</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 262–265.

<sup>270</sup> Helle 2006: 91.

<sup>271</sup> Helle 1982: 199.

that the towns all had market places, as we can observe from passages such as this: “Men om nogen blir overbevist om at han sælger dette slags vare fra skib eller paa andet sted end i hus eller på torv”.<sup>272</sup> Nonetheless, the Town Law was in many ways written for Bergen, and cannot be used as evidence for a market in small places such as Veøy, Borgund, Hamar, Stavanger, Borg, Kaupanger, Marstrand etc.

The market place was obviously an important part of the economic life of the towns, and the trade there must be assumed to have been one of the most important ways for cash to flow into the countryside. However, as we have observed, the amount of cash in the countryside was very small, which one can use as an argument for supposing that the trade in the market places was rather limited. A lot of the produce that was sold at the markets may have come from taxes or rent in the form of foodstuffs, which were sold by ecclesiastic or royal officials, or even agents of wealthy landowners, in order to raise cash. The transfer of stockfish that came to the archbishop of Nidaros as tithe, to Bergen, is one example.<sup>273</sup>

While regular markets are hard to find evidence of, from English sources we know that a lot of trade was done on church steps or in churchyards.<sup>274</sup> This informal institution of trade has largely gone unnoticed and is difficult to quantify. Much points in the direction of it being very important – even when formal market structures were underdeveloped. The large gathering at Sunday services possibly provided ample markets for sellers and easy access for buyers. In Denmark it was common for markets to arise in connection to religious feasts,<sup>275</sup> which of course would have drawn many customers. The stipulated market places in Oslo and Tønsberg – close to landmark-churches – are testament to the importance of a location that made it easy for customers to kill two birds with one stone, though the role of the church as a wealthy landowner with produce of its own to sell was probably as large a factor. It is quite possible that other, less distinguished churches saw some trade in their churchyards, without ever leaving any traces. In that sense, much local and regional trade could have gone unnoticed.

The fairs were regular, annual markets for a given time period, that drew large numbers of merchants, often selling and buying in bulk. In Denmark, the previously mentioned Skånemarket had an enormous impact on trade, both between merchants residing in different

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<sup>272</sup> MLB bolk 6, chapter 16. “But if someone becomes convinced that he is selling such wares from ships or in other places than from houses or in the market...” (My translation).

<sup>273</sup> Helle 1982: 342; 346.

<sup>274</sup> Britnell 1996: 10.

<sup>275</sup> Roesdahl 2004: 192.

Danish towns, and between Danish and foreign merchants.<sup>276</sup> The herring sold there attracted merchants from other countries and could attract as many as 40 000 people.<sup>277</sup> The English fairs were much more numerous, and though most were much smaller affairs than the Skånemarket, some were quite large affairs. At St Ives, Winchester, Bury St Edmunds, Boston, Stamford, Westminster, Northampton and King's Lynn, large fairs were held for a week or, as at St Ives, three to four weeks every year.<sup>278</sup> While these are striking examples of mercantile activity – the quantities sold and bought, and the exotic goods are fascinating – the small fairs also attest a much more commercialised economy than what we find in Norway. The fairs were often formalised and the owner of the fair could collect a handsome profit from rents of stalls, grazing for animals, accommodation, tolls and profits from courts.<sup>279</sup>

Despite the rarity of fairs in Norway, they were not unheard of. In Bergen the most important meeting place between buyers and sellers was the summer fair, possibly split into multiple fairs but most likely just one long trading season lasting from 3 May to 14 September.<sup>280</sup> In this period, particularly from July to August, the most important export article, stockfish from Northern Norway, was brought to Bergen and sold. The fish from Northern Norway was bought at *Vågastemne*, which may be described as a regional fair. Thus, the concept of fairs was not alien to Norwegians, indeed it would have been strange if it was when considering the involvement of Norwegian merchants in trade with highly commercialised areas such as England and the cities of northern Germany. The relative paucity of small fairs is interesting, as is the seeming lack of involvement of the local countryside in this fair. It does not seem like the fair in Bergen had much effect on the economy of the immediate countryside. However, if we include the northern countryside, i.e. Northern Norway, as a part of Bergen's countryside, then clearly the summer fair and the trade in stockfish had a profound effect on the economy of the countryside.

Furthermore, one could argue against this pessimistic view of the involvement of the immediate countryside with one that looks at involvement in a less direct way. Many of those who traded and were active in town life were also important landowners, such as Munkeliv monastery, which was the richest monastery in Norway, and owned property in Bergen, as well as land in the nearby country.<sup>281</sup> A lot of its rents and tithes was brought to Bergen and sold, and that the

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<sup>276</sup> Christensen 2004: 30–31.

<sup>277</sup> Enemark 1999: 156.

<sup>278</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 170.

<sup>279</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 168.

<sup>280</sup> Helle 1982: 404.

<sup>281</sup> Helle 1982: 285–286; 335–336.



institution's part in trade, and its profits would have no effect on the estate it managed is difficult to imagine. However, there is not much evidence that these institutions tried to change the economic activities of their dependants to suit the need of the nearby market. Similarities to the growing focus on wool on certain English demesnes to meet export demands, such as when the flocks of sheep of the countess of Devon and Aumale were organised into one flock with the purpose of selling them centrally,<sup>282</sup> is as far as I can tell non-existent. The maximisation of efficiency to create larger profits as a way of thought had apparently not penetrated the financial thinking of large institutions such as Munkeliv.

#### **4.6: Import and export**

The export of stockfish is considered a driving motor in the Norwegian medieval economy. Large quantities of stockfish was fished, hung to dry by local fishers who subsequently transported the fish from the northern parts of the country, particularly from the area around Lofoten and Vågar, to Nidaros and Bergen. At the end of the thirteenth century, around three thousand tonnes of fish was sold annually in Bergen to foreign merchants, who had come to dominate the trade, in return for wheat, corn and barley.<sup>283</sup> The term export may conceal the real nature of the economic interactions that we are looking into, and give a false image of a streamlined operation similar to today's export industries. The reality around year 1300 was a system of multiple independent intermediaries who bought and sold produce, sometimes to retailers, other times to other intermediaries. Only the ones who bought it, or received it in form of rents or taxes, and subsequently transported the goods to a port in a different country, engaged in what we would call export.

The route by which stockfish from Lofoten ended up in England in the first half of the fourteenth century may serve as an example of the concealing nature of simply calling it export. Fishers in Lofoten would often sell their produce to merchants, both local and from other parts of the country – especially from Bergen – at the previously mentioned Vågastemne, and would then proceed to transport the stockfish to a larger town, usually Bergen.<sup>284</sup> In Bergen, the produce could be sold retail, but was increasingly sold to foreign merchants of the Hanse in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, who then proceeded to export it to England or, in some

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<sup>282</sup> Britnell 1996: 118.

<sup>283</sup> Helle 1982: 308.

<sup>284</sup> Bjørge 1982: 57.

cases, to continental ports.<sup>285</sup> When the stockfish arrived at the port of destination, it would have to be sold again to the final consumer through independent intermediaries or established partners. Most of this is best described as trade rather than export, and is part of a complex system of exchange.

In England, the export or “overseas” trade was dominated by wool. Much of the trade done at fairs was done with the intention of exporting wool, and while English merchants partook in the export, especially to the Low Countries, Flemish merchants – enjoying a particularly strong position towards the end of the thirteenth century – overshadowed them.<sup>286</sup> Merchants from other countries and areas, such as Italy and Lombardy, were also heavily invested in this trade: in 1275–1276 merchants from Italian companies exported 52% of the wool that was channelled through the port town Hull.<sup>287</sup> This trade was an enormous source of revenue for the King, who imposed taxes on wool export. In Denmark also, exports were important for the economy. In addition to the previously mentioned herring that was bought at the Skånemarket and exported, there was large-scale export of cattle overland from Denmark and south. While it is difficult to quantify and almost impossible to find archaeological remains of such export, it is likely to have been great: as many as 13 000 cattle passed the toll-place Gottorp in 1485.<sup>288</sup>

Norwegian towns other than Bergen also had merchants who specialised in long-distance trade. Interestingly, Tønsberg, while smaller than Oslo, had a larger share in this trade.<sup>289</sup> Many of the merchants we encounter in the toll records from English ports were agents of wealthy landowners. The custom rolls from King’s Lynn and Ravensere from 1303–1308 contains remarks such as “the ship of Nidarholm monastery” and “the King of Norway’s ship”<sup>290</sup> along with the names of merchants that were likely a mix of agents for rich institutions or enterprising merchants renting space in the cargo hold. Interestingly, the merchants who have been most securely identified as agents had significantly less goods than merchants who are likely to have been independent.<sup>291</sup> On the other hand, from Trondheim only the archbishopric was represented annually in the custom rolls, an indication of the importance of ecclesiastical institutions in the economic life of towns.

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<sup>285</sup> Helle 1982: 385.

<sup>286</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 197.

<sup>287</sup> Miller and Hatcher 1995: 202.

<sup>288</sup> Roesdahl 2004: 192.

<sup>289</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 189.

<sup>290</sup> Blom 1997: 211.

<sup>291</sup> Blom 1997: 212–215.

Smaller places also had a role in the long-distance trade. As we have seen, merchants from Bergen and merchants living in Northern Norway probably met with sellers in Vågar, bought their produce in exchange for goods that had either been bought in England or Germany by merchants intending to sell it in Norway. Two ships from Stavanger have been recorded in the custom rolls of Ravensere, both connected to the bishop of Stavanger.<sup>292</sup> These ships, like those from Trondheim, also had merchants on board, renting cargo space for their own goods. Interestingly, the first ship had two merchants from Bergen, while the second had six German merchants. From this it has been suggested that the ships, while possibly originating in Stavanger, stopped in Bergen to sell and buy goods, and pick up merchants.<sup>293</sup> In this way, Stavanger was a part of Bergen's trading network, the same way as Vågar – and likely most of the other small places on the western coast.

#### **4.7: Norwegian towns – places of consumption or commerce?**

While the Norwegian economy in general was dominated by payment in kind, this was not necessarily the case in the Norwegian towns, which were more commercialised than the countryside. The problem is that the lack of a commercialised countryside must necessarily have affected the towns by restricting their markets – here used in a more “modern” economic sense – and thereby freezing the development towards more economic specialisation between town and country, and hindering the growth of towns. The rich consumer base living in the larger towns made occupational specialisation possible, but not on a scale that is comparable to English or Danish towns, and the lack of involvement of the countryside is likely one of the main reasons for this. On the other hand, we have seen that owning urban property with rent from stalls was considered profitable in Bergen, testament of the importance of commercial activities in towns.

The picture is less clear when we look at smaller places, but is perhaps not that different from for example Oslo. Finds of shoes in Vågar<sup>294</sup> can be read as evidence that there was a permanent settlement of shoemakers there, although it is hard to establish whether this was to trade with a permanent town population, high-status visitors or local, seasonal fishers. The high quality of the shoes indicates that it was not something used by common fishers – though it is not entirely out of the realm of possibility that some of them could have traded fish for fine

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<sup>292</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 203–204.

<sup>293</sup> Ersland and Solli 2012: 204.

<sup>294</sup> Bertelsen 2009: 203.

shoes – and may be taken as evidence of an elite living there, perhaps with strong positions within the trading system. In Vågar, there is little evidence for trade in other periods than around *Vågastemne*, though to rule out all trade is to go too far.

Another small town, Veøy, was an administrative centre on the coastline between Bergen and Trondheim, with three churches, and one of them in stone. The large number of smiths who settled on the island likely did so when building the stone church.<sup>295</sup> This suggests that specialisation was a result of demand from the town. The town likely had some trade – especially with Bergen: influx of rent and taxes not only to ecclesiastical institutions, but also to rich landlords such as the baron Bjarne Erlingsson of Giske and Bjarkøy, who likely had an urban property named after him,<sup>296</sup> must have created a surplus of wealth. In this sense, Veøy as a “kjøpstad” was, like Oslo and Stavanger for example, dependent on rents rather than trade with the surrounding country, although that does not mean that no trade between country and town occurred, or that it was entirely negligible.

Helle writes that “småkjøpsteder som Kaupanger, Borgund, Veøy og Vågan fungerte sammen med islandske handelsplasser som oppsamlingssteder for varer som ble sendt videre til Bergen”.<sup>297</sup> Without a doubt, some of the goods that were shipped to Bergen from these small places were traded. The biggest share, on the other hand, probably came from rents and taxes that were collected at these small places and then shipped to Bergen by the landowner where he could sell them and buy other commodities that he wanted, such as foreign manufactures.

The towns of Norway were commercially underdeveloped, although Bergen does stand out as an exception.<sup>298</sup> Denmark had a much more developed money economy, and the large number of Danish towns, about 70 compared to the likely overly optimistic estimate of 14 for Norway,<sup>299</sup> is indicative of a very different economic structure than we find in Norway. Interestingly, many of the Danish towns founded in the thirteenth century were very small, and were centred on the market place.<sup>300</sup> These were market towns, which – in the late thirteenth

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<sup>295</sup> Solli 1999: 95–96.

<sup>296</sup> Solli 1999: 42–43.

<sup>297</sup> Helle 2006: 83. “Small places, such as Kaupanger, Borgund, Veøy and Vågar functioned in collaboration with Icelandic market places as places where goods were gathered before they were shipped to Bergen.” (My translation).

<sup>298</sup> Nedkvitne wrote that the only area of the Norwegian economy to be commercialised was the export of stockfish, and that “Norge i høymiddelalderen er således et eksempel på en overveiende selvbergingsøkonomi der en enkelt sektor av økonomien ble kommersialisert utenfra.”, Nedkvitne 1983: 61. “Norway in the High Middle Ages is therefore an example of an economy based primarily on self-sufficiency, where a single sector of the economy was commercialised from without.” (My translation).

<sup>299</sup> Helle 2006: 64–66.

<sup>300</sup> Kristensen 2004: 69.

and early fourteenth century at least – had a formalised market place where peasants could sell their surplus and buy other commodities. The participation of peasants in this trade, and the connection established thus to other patterns of trade, meant that the Danish peasants were much more directly involved in the commercial life than their Norwegian counterparts.

In general, both Denmark and England were more commercialised than Norway. The result of a commercialised society was that commodities that require specialised knowledge to produce found their way into many peasant homes. Knives, horseshoes, door fittings, bronze buckles, hand-mills, whetstones and pottery, have all been found in the houses of English peasants.<sup>301</sup> The benefits commercialisation brought are not always easy to identify, but Knut Helle remarked that towns that relied more on trade than their functions as administrative centres, such as Tønsberg, Skien and, of course, Bergen, not only do not show signs of decline following the Black Death, but in fact may have grown in the late fourteenth century.<sup>302</sup> Perhaps it is the right place to caution that commercialisation does not necessarily imply an increase in standards of living for everybody, or even most. Britnell found that even though English society became more commercialised in the period 1180–1330 the main beneficiaries of this were the upper ranks of society.<sup>303</sup> However, this changed after the Black Death, when the qualitative change that had occurred in the English economy also became a quantitative change of income per capita, and was the reason that people, even peasants, were generally better off in the sixteenth century than in the eleventh.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Dyer 2002a: 173–174.

<sup>302</sup> Helle 2006: 126.

<sup>303</sup> Britnell 1996: 150.

<sup>304</sup> For an increase in the standards of living after the Black Death see Britnell 1996: 164. See also Chapter 6.2.

## Chapter 5: Fundamental causes

The previous chapters have documented that Norwegian towns were part of a different economic structure than their English and Danish counterparts. Urban commodity production was underdeveloped, as was commerce, and though the latter was quite developed in Bergen, the Norwegian towns and small places had less trade and were more dependent on rent in the form of commodities in general than towns in England and Denmark. In other words, the economic functions of towns were different in Norway.

There are many possible reasons for the divergent economic functions, and in an attempt to avoid the fallacy of monocausality, multiple causes will be considered and their connection to each other and their relative importance will be assessed. However, for the sake of coherency a selection has been made of the most important causes for the economic divergence in Norwegian towns.

### 5.1: Natural limitations and possibilities

Geography, climate, topography and population are unavoidable when explaining differences between Norway, Denmark and England, simply because they represent the most eye-catching differences there are. England and Denmark, with flat land well suited for farming, are strikingly different from the rough Norwegian fjords with steep terrain and inland mountains covered in snow. The marginal land on the mountainsides used for farming in Norway stands in stark contrast to the large manorial-based agricultural communities on fertile soil in Denmark and England. The small Norwegian population of perhaps five hundred thousand around the year 1300 was only a twelfth of the English population and a third of the Danish.<sup>305</sup> It is important to remember that the long distance from north to south meant that not all Norwegians were living in the same climatic conditions, and, while there are some differences between the north and the south of England and between Jutland and Zealand in Denmark, it is harder to generalise about climatic conditions in Norway. Nonetheless, agriculture was generally more challenging in Norway than in Denmark and England.

The effect on economic development of these differences in geography and population is unclear. Richard Holt, for example, has argued that the differences of geography were real, but that it was not geography directly that influenced the economic structure of the Norwegian

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<sup>305</sup> For population estimates of Norway, Denmark and England around the year 1300, see Moseng *et al* 2007: 234; Bøgh 2004: 26; Britnell 1996: 102. Bear in mind that these are estimates with considerable margins of error.

towns; rather, it had an effect on social structures that again had an effect on economic structures.<sup>306</sup> The effect of the geography, according to him, was that it led to a weak aristocracy with little power, which thus was unable to exert pressure on the peasantry and force them to give larger shares of rent in the form of cash. While this is in essence, I believe, correct, in his paper, while isolating some key factors in the role of social relationships' effect on the economy that will be discussed in detail further down, Professor Holt downplays geographical factors other than the most obvious and tries to present others in the best possible light even when their overall impact is uncertain.

Climatic differences, with long, cold winters as the most obvious, did, as Holt is right to stress, facilitate overland transport and are therefore not necessarily negative.<sup>307</sup> In England and Denmark, autumn, winter and spring meant muddy roads that provided a continuous problem for overland transport. In Norway, however, the winter season lasted longer and provided opportunity. The transport of whetstones from Eidsborg in Telemark to Skien on ice-covered rivers and inland lakes is one example of this. In Oslo's hinterland the cold winter weather froze marshes, rivers and even the Oslofjord, creating greater opportunities for overland transport than elsewhere.<sup>308</sup> The cold weather could, however, also negatively affect transport. Rivers and frozen seas could be dangerous to cross as bishop Jens Nilssøn discovered when he tried to travel over the ice-covered Oslofjord in February 1596, which ended with him having to take a long detour due to the thin ice.<sup>309</sup> Large amounts of snow and winter storms must also have made it difficult to travel overland in winter. The most common way of transport, by ship, was extremely hazardous in winter months due to the winter storms.

Agriculture suffered the largest negative effects from the climatic and topographic conditions. The paucity of good farming land and the climatic restrictions on the number of months of cultivation of this land had an adverse effect. In modern times, less than three per cent of the

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<sup>306</sup> Holt 2007: 141. While acknowledging that this was a short paper written in a book for Rodney Hilton, a Marxist historian, and the theme and arguments chosen by Professor Holt were probably coloured by this, in pushing climatic and other arguments to the background and focusing so much on class struggle as the prime mover in the Norwegian towns' economic development, some critique is warranted.

<sup>307</sup> Holt 2007: 141.

<sup>308</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 182.

<sup>309</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 183–184.

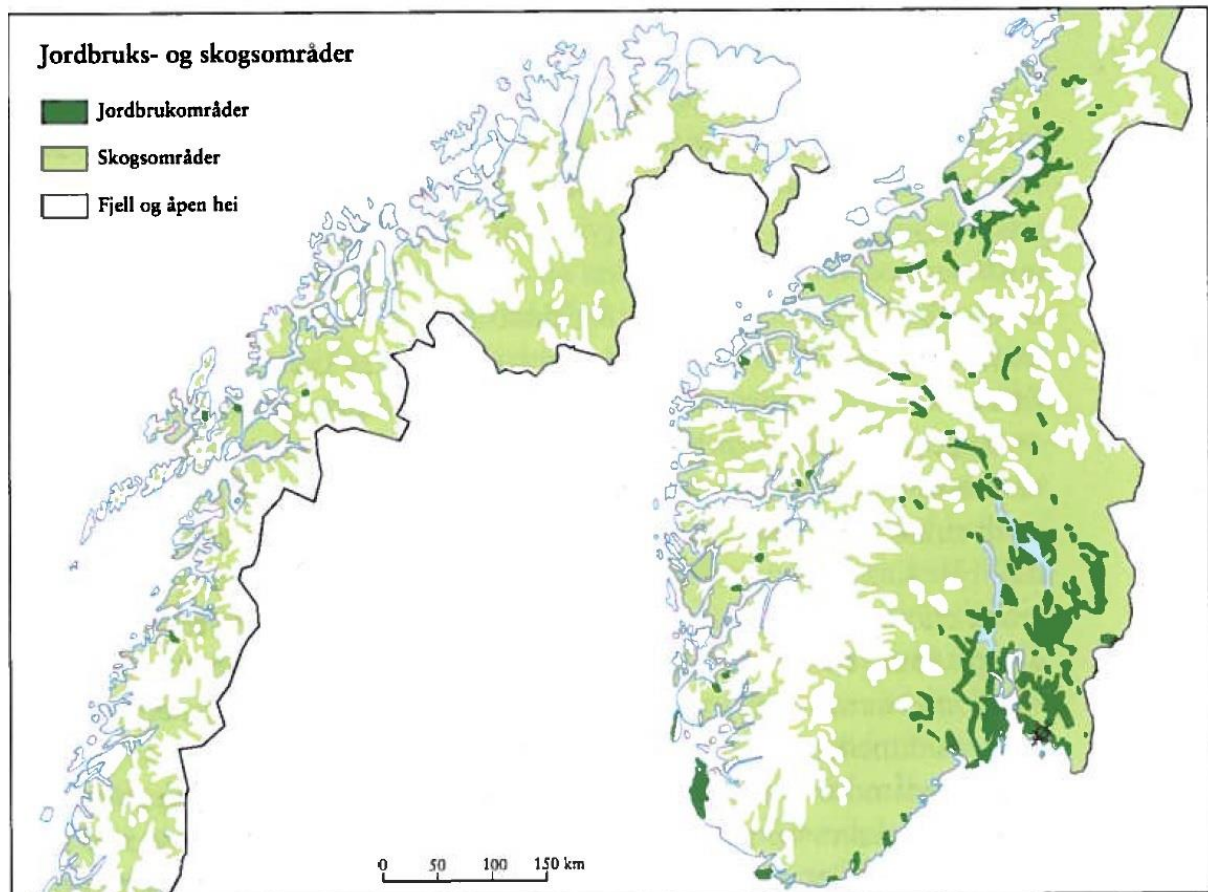


Figure 5.1: Map of woodland (light green) and agricultural land (dark green), from Øye 2002: 233.

Norwegian mainland is used for farming.<sup>310</sup> Since peasants farmed more and more marginal land in the High Middle Ages,<sup>311</sup> the percentage was probably higher, perhaps double, but still did not amount to much. The long winters meant a shorter growth season, and made it impossible to sow winterseed. Håkon Håkonsson's saga will have it that the year Håkon was chosen to be king, the trees bore fruit twice in a year – though qualifying it by stating that this happened in many parts of the country, probably being aware of the implausibility of this happening in the north – signalling that multiple harvests were very rare in Norway.<sup>312</sup> Additionally, crop failure was frequent, often due to heavy rain, though this was not in any way a problem restricted to Norway; failing crops could hit everywhere.

Primarily, this led to a much smaller population in an area that is roughly three times larger than England (discounting England's continental holdings and Norway's overseas *skattland*). It also meant that a great diversity on a subsistence level within the family unit, was necessary,

<sup>310</sup> Øye 2002: 234.

<sup>311</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 238.

<sup>312</sup> *Håkon Håkonssons saga*: chapter 25 (p. 47).



possibly hindering agricultural and occupational specialisation. The Norwegian population was so thinly spread that it simply did not reach the critical mass that was needed for towns to grow, unlike the more densely populated England and Denmark. On the other hand, geographical differences should not be exaggerated. Two very populous areas of Norway, Trøndelag and Østlandet, were not that different from England, with hilly terrain, large forests and reasonably good farming opportunities that resembled those of northern England, and Jæren, an area not far from Stavanger, had exceptionally good farming land.<sup>313</sup>

It was common in England and Denmark for some townsmen to own land outside the town walls, as it was in Norway.<sup>314</sup> In the small, market town Halesowen, England, about 17% of burgesses held some of the nearby manorial land, and other burgesses kept animals.<sup>315</sup> It provided some family units with food and perhaps also some surplus which they could sell. Importantly, many of the dominating institutions – such as monasteries – owned rural property, but did not farm it themselves, and these farms provided the monks and nuns with food and profits. A large number of such institutions required a correspondingly large agricultural area which – while not forgetting the importance of fish in their diet – may have put limits on the number of institutions a town could sustain, and thus the town population.

It is perhaps telling that the smaller places in Norway were situated on marginal land, chosen more for their ease of access and control of the surrounding countryside or fjords, than for the concentration of population and arable land. The fact that Tønsberg, Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim, who all had good, arable land surrounding them, developed into towns can also be taken as evidence for the importance of topography. However, lack of access to food from agriculture can't have been that detrimental. The sea provided amply, and Veøy, a very small island with limited potential for agriculture, was located in the middle of a fjord which makes it likely that some of the people living there were fishers, though perhaps for some, or most, it was not their main source of income. Borgund, not far from Veøy, was right next to a fjord that was recognised for its abundance of fish.<sup>316</sup> In addition, most of the food in towns usually came from peasants who sold it in return for commodities produced in the town or, perhaps more commonly, owed rent which they paid in foodstuffs. The only easily discernible impact that

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<sup>313</sup> Øye 2002: 234–235.

<sup>314</sup> How many townsmen owned how much land is difficult to say. Dyer noted that while food sometimes came from strips of land that townsmen owned or garden plots behind their houses, “the bulk of the food consumed in towns came from the market”. Dyer 1989: 196.

<sup>315</sup> Hilton 1990: 77.

<sup>316</sup> Helle 1982: 307.

lack of agricultural opportunities had, then, is probably on the concentration of population living in the vicinity of the town.

If the population of a country is in any way proportional to how many towns it could sustain, Norway should have had about forty around the year 1300 if we use England for comparison and slightly above twenty if we use Denmark.<sup>317</sup> It had fourteen according to Helle and, as we have argued previously, most of those were places with very different functions from the commodity producing, small market towns of England and Denmark. The differences in the population-to-number-of-towns ratio were partly due to climatic and geographic factors. The Norwegian population was thinly spread over a vast area, excepting a few areas with concentrated populations that also saw relatively large towns emerge; this in itself may have hindered the growth of small market towns. It does not follow, however, that geography, climate and population were the only reasons for the economic structure we can observe with very little commodity production and peasants that were not integrated in the town economy through markets as in England and Denmark. Bergen, for example, developed into a much larger town than Oslo, Tønsberg and Trondheim, and certainly did not have better agricultural conditions.

As pointed out earlier, there was a certain concentration of population in areas with good arable land, such as Trøndelag. A question that quickly arises is why, if all one needs is a favourable climatic and geographical location to have a density of population enough to sustain towns, was there only one town in that area? Other factors must have been in play. In the fertile land around Oslo, the same question arises, but is complicated by the proximity of several small places such as Hamar, Borg and even a proper town, Tønsberg. The latter town was, however, about 74 km away by air, Hamar was primarily a bishop's residence, and we know too little of Borg<sup>318</sup> to say anything with certainty except that it was quite small. As we saw in Chapter 4, there was little regional trade between the towns in south eastern Norway; on the other hand, in England and Denmark merchants in towns traded between themselves, and commodities were moved in a pattern resembling the "network pattern" laid out by Hohenberg and Lees.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> This is based on population numbers of about 6 million for England, 1.7 million for Denmark and five hundred thousand for Norway. See Britnell 1996: 102; Bøgh 2004: 26; Moseng *et al.* 2007: 234.

<sup>318</sup> "I Borg mangler foreløpig arkeologisk grunnlag for å vurdere byutviklingen i høymiddelalderen", Helle 2006: 67.

<sup>319</sup> For a short introduction to this pattern, the "network theory", see Helle 2006: 15–16.

## 5.2: Class relationships

One factor that climate did not have a direct but rather an indirect effect on, was the availability and use of money. It is significant that Norway never developed a strong money economy, and that the use of coins was not great. This was a crucial reason for why a more developed manufacturing economy did not emerge in the Norwegian towns as it did in Danish and English towns, but the question still remains of the mechanisms that brought – or failed to bring – this on. A look at the difference in power between peasants, aristocracy and the crown – i.e. the fundamental social relations – in Norway compared to England and Denmark may further our understanding of the lack of a developed money economy in Norway. This line of inquiry is heavily influenced by the arguments put forward in the previously mentioned articles by Holt.

In the beginning of the fourteenth century, about 10–15% of the peasants in Denmark owned land.<sup>320</sup> This was the product of a gradual decrease in the amount of peasant-owned land, and a corresponding increase in church and aristocratic landownership, that had been going on from at least the twelfth century. The decrease can be explained by some privileges that the aristocracy gained in the course of the late thirteenth century. The aristocracy and the king had a very troubled relationship in the century before the Black Death. Traditionally, the aristocracy, or *herremænd*, had been a warrior caste, tied to the king.<sup>321</sup> Throughout the late twelfth and early thirteenth century the Danish crown had carried out a policy of expansion against the Baltic pagans, securing income for the crown and opportunity for the aristocracy.<sup>322</sup> This came to an end in the middle of the thirteenth century. The king had never been particularly wealthy, owning only about five per cent of the land, and owing most of his income to taxes such as *leding*, *stud*, *midsommer-* or *arnegæld* and the plough tax.<sup>323</sup> Towards the middle of the thirteenth century, it became apparent that he was unable to keep paying the *herremænd*, and was forced to give great concessions.<sup>324</sup> The aristocracy's loss of opportunities in the Baltic was compensated by the Crown with new privileges and rights. Aristocrats, and the peasants on their land, no longer had to pay the *ledingskatt*, a tax that had replaced the general levy or *leding*, nor did the aristocracy have to pay taxes to the king for any land they owned.<sup>325</sup> They

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<sup>320</sup> Bøgh 2004: 31.

<sup>321</sup> Bøgh 1999: 69.

<sup>322</sup> Ulsig 1999: 32. "Uden tvivl hjalp her [i.e. to strengthen aristocratic loyalties] den succesrige udenrigspolitik, som var indledt med vendertogene under Valdemar den Store og kulminerede med Valdemar Sejrs herredømme i Nord-tyskland og erobringen af Estland i 1219."

<sup>323</sup> Hybel and Poulsen 2007: 304; 309–310. The plough tax was introduced by Erik Plovpenning in the middle of the thirteenth century.

<sup>324</sup> Bøgh 1999: 69, 73–74.

<sup>325</sup> Bøgh 1999: 74.

also obtained the right to fines paid by their peasants. The aristocracy owned about 35% of the land, and since their peasants also were excused from many taxes, the number of peasants under their domains grew.<sup>326</sup> This was due to the economic burdens on self-owning peasants, which resulted in the number of peasants paying taxes to the king dwindling as they sought protection under the wing of the aristocracy.<sup>327</sup> Another great landowner, the Church, in which many prominent positions were held by members of aristocratic families, owned about 40% of the land.<sup>328</sup>

In 1282, the aristocracy forced the Danish king, Erik Klipping, to sign a statute limiting his power.<sup>329</sup> When the king tried to hold on to some of the power by insisting that the *herremænd* were to be stationed at royal castles, he met with such opposition that in 1284 he had to back down. Furthermore, their military obligations were renegotiated; from 1320 they only had to serve when the enemy were on their soil, and from 1326 they were to be reimbursed for every service. The strengthening of the aristocracy roughly coincided with the change in terms by which they were known. From *herremænd*, representing a relationship characterised by service, to *ridder*, knight, with fewer obligations and more privileges and rights.<sup>330</sup> While the crown was of great importance in late twelfth and early thirteenth century as an establisher of premises for basic social relations, it was replaced by the aristocracy from the middle of the thirteenth century. Around 1300, about 90% of the land was owned by the Crown, the Church and the aristocracy, and about 80–85% of peasants worked on someone else's land.<sup>331</sup>

In England, while the relationship with the aristocracy could be quite volatile, the king usually enjoyed a relatively strong position, perhaps especially under Edward I – on the surface the opposite of the Danish situation. While it aptly describes the relationship between the English aristocracy and king, in general at least, the primary interest of this chapter is the relationship between the major landlords – church, aristocracy and crown – and peasants. In this regard, similarities between England and Denmark are not hard to find, though some important differences exist. Long before the thirteenth century, English landlords other than the crown had developed independent jurisdictional power as in Denmark.<sup>332</sup> They had, however, gone further in limiting the amount of land owned by peasants. Technically, the crown laid claim to

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<sup>326</sup> Bøgh 2004: 29.

<sup>327</sup> Rasmussen and Madsen 1999: 84; Ulsig 1999: 36.

<sup>328</sup> Bøgh 2004: 28.

<sup>329</sup> Rasmussen and Madsen 1999: 84.

<sup>330</sup> Rasmussen and Madsen 1999: 83.

<sup>331</sup> Bøgh 2004: 31.

<sup>332</sup> Britnell 1996: 136.

all land, and so even freeholding peasants, who were legally free, had to pay rent, though it was often quite low for the upper strata of the peasant class who often had other peasants working their land for them.

In contrast, peasants owned about a third of the land in Norway, the King about 7%, the aristocracy 20% and the church 40%.<sup>333</sup> The aristocracy never achieved the same privileges in Norway as in England and Denmark. There are many reasons for this. The peasantry did not live on manors or in communal farming villages as they did in England and Denmark, and so were harder to control. Social mobility was perhaps greater in Norway; when the saga writes about Dagfinn Bonde, who rose to become Håkon Håkonsson's *stallare* and *syslemann*, the writers keep the last name even though the Icelandic annals recording his death call him Dagfinn syslemann, indicating that in Norway there was little stigma attached to his lowly birth.<sup>334</sup> The ties between the upper strata of the self-owning peasants and the aristocracy and king were perhaps so close that it was difficult to impose new taxes or higher rents on the peasants.

Social status in the Middle Ages can also be inferred from the role social groups played in war. Norwegian peasants owed military service to the king throughout the period as part of the *leidang*.<sup>335</sup> As warriors, they could partake in an activity that was usually reserved for the aristocracy in other parts of Europe.<sup>336</sup> Neither English nor Danish peasants enjoyed such a status – though for the Danish peasants this change had only recently been completed, coming as it did in the middle of the thirteenth century with the *Codex Holmiensis* in 1241.<sup>337</sup> The reason for this shift from military service to a tax, was probably a combination of a response to new tactics involving heavy cavalry with specialised equipment that was expensive, and a concession to peasants who did not want the risks military service brought.<sup>338</sup> The status of warriors in medieval society is neatly summed up in the, albeit simplified, division in three classes: those who fought, those who prayed and those who tilled the soil.<sup>339</sup> Even though not all peasants participated in the *leidang*, as a class they had a role that greatly increased their status.

The differences observed between England, Denmark and Norway in terms of strength of the peasant class, correspond to the level of commercialisation and urbanism found in the respective

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<sup>333</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 244.

<sup>334</sup> NBL, "Dagfinn Bonde". *Håkon Håkonssons saga* also contains numerous references to Dagfinn Bonde.

<sup>335</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 206.

<sup>336</sup> Ersland and Sandvik 2008: 19–22.

<sup>337</sup> Ulsig 1999: 32.

<sup>338</sup> Ersland and Sandvik 2008: 19.

<sup>339</sup> Bagge 2009: 143.

countries. In itself, it may seem like nothing but an indication of the possible importance the relationship, in terms of strength between peasants and aristocracy, may have had for the process of commercialising a society. A mechanism explaining how the one affected the other can, however, be established. The mechanism subscribed to when explaining the effect of class relationships on urban growth is quite straightforward.<sup>340</sup> Landowners increasingly demanded their rent in cash, a change that seems to have been underway in the twelfth century in both Denmark and England, but which took hold in earnest in the thirteenth century. To be able to pay their rent in cash, peasants had to convert some of their surplus into cash by selling it at the local market. This drew them into a pattern of trade that laid the foundation of urban commodity production of goods not only for a wealthy upper class – though certainly getting their rent in cash must have made it easier for them to acquire their desired products – but also for peasants. This led to increased specialisation, both because peasants could exchange their surplus for other commodities, which meant they did not have to produce a wide variety of necessities for themselves, and because it opened up a new market for urban industrial workers, which greatly contributed to the growth of towns.

The Danish and English landowners were in a much stronger position than the Norwegian, and so were able to demand payment in cash. It is problematic to find sources detailing this transition. It is, however, difficult to contemplate that it was the other way around, i.e. peasants demanding to pay rents in cash, as it involved much more work for them to transport produce to the local market, sell it and then pay their rent, instead of simply paying their rent in foodstuffs. The English landowners were in an even stronger position than the Danish, which is perhaps reflected in the larger number of towns to population ratio. The weakness of landowners in Norway resulting in no transition to cash rent in Norway, explains the lack of large-scale production for a domestic market, simply because the purchasing power of the peasants was put on the side-line – they were not well integrated in the economic system of towns.

The weak Norwegian urban growth seems to have been affected by a strong king and a weak aristocracy through the lack of possibilities the founding of new towns offered the aristocracy. Danish and English aristocrats were interested in founding and governing towns, and the profits they could derive thereof, something the Norwegian aristocracy was seemingly not. When the Bishop of Worcester acquired a charter for a weekly market at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1196,

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<sup>340</sup> See for example Holt 2007: 142.

he gained the right to take profits from rent of stalls and pitches, tolls on the goods sold or bought and dues for the use of standard measures.<sup>341</sup> By then dividing the land into so-called *burgage* plots, he also increased the land-value greatly. While a farm of perhaps thirty acres would have a rent of three or four shilling, the Bishop charged one shilling per *burgage* plot of about a quarter acre, meaning the land-value increased thirty or forty times over.<sup>342</sup>

Market towns also served a less direct, but still vital, economic function for landlord as a place where they could dispose of surplus goods from their demesnes.<sup>343</sup> The king and queen were the lords of many towns in Denmark, but aristocratically owned towns also existed there. A prime example is the Bishop of Roskilde, who was the owner of Copenhagen, a small town in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century.<sup>344</sup> The Danish crown could give away the rights to taxes, such as *midsommer-* or *arnagæld*, tolls, and fines as in England.<sup>345</sup> In Norway, the aristocracy also profited from towns, but then as owners of property or in the indirect manner described above, as a place where they could sell some of their surplus. The only town lord was the crown, who took from Bergen a fixed sum of forty marks per annum in *leidangskatt*.<sup>346</sup> The officials, such as the *gjaldker*, were representatives of the crown and the Norwegian towns did not achieve a large degree of autonomy. The expectations of profit was one of the reasons so many towns were founded by lords in the thirteenth century, but this seems not to have been the case in Norway. Here, while the king and his officials holding positions could reap some profit, there does not seem to have been any drive towards the creation of new sources of profit through the founding of new towns or markets.

### 5.3: Hanseatic domination

External factors may also have affected the development of the Norwegian town economy. Stephen Epstein has, in an article from 1989, drawn into question the validity of characterising the relation between the medieval cloth trade in Sicily and the foreign textile industry as “colonial”, a characterisation that had, according to him, been quite common.<sup>347</sup> What had been alleged was that all attempts at creating urban industries failed in Sicily, and that “the island had no other option but to import foreign cloth, which it paid for principally with grain

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<sup>341</sup> Carus-Wilson 1990: 53–54.

<sup>342</sup> Carus-Wilson 1990: 54–55.

<sup>343</sup> Dyer 2000a: 518.

<sup>344</sup> Jacobsen and Madsen 1999: 147.

<sup>345</sup> Jansen, Nyberg and Riis 1977: 72.

<sup>346</sup> Helle 1982: 542.

<sup>347</sup> Epstein 1989: 141.

exports.”<sup>348</sup> It is remarkably similar to the situation that has previously been described in this thesis, with exports of stockfish paying for imports of foreign manufactures, primarily textiles. For Sicily, however, Epstein found that many of the imports were for a small elite group living primarily in towns; that cotton was much more common than wool; that internal production of wool was enough to satisfy most of the internal demand; and that far from being a sign of weakness, industrial production in the countryside was the type of manufacturing with the highest growth potential.<sup>349</sup> In other words, the expectations of economic historians had led them to mischaracterize the economic backwardness of Sicily.

It is therefore perilous to claim that a “colonial” relationship may have been one of the reasons Norwegian towns never developed their own, domestic industry. Nevertheless, that is what I shall endeavour to do. Hanseatic and English merchants brought manufactured goods for which they in turn primarily received stockfish. Access to finished products and control of capital meant that foreign merchants could potentially exert pressure on Norway in such a way as to hinder the development of domestic manufacturing. While use of the term “colonial” to characterise this relationship is quite simply wrong, it is important to mention because many of the same mechanisms that appear in so-called “colonial relationships” can be found in the relationship between Norwegian towns and the Hanse.

An example from India can illustrate the mechanisms of this relationship and its negative effects. The traditional hand-loom weaving which had been carried out on a commercial scale was crippled by the introduction of free imports of mechanically produced cotton textiles from Britain, and the subsequent ban on protective tariffs effectively blocked India’s possibilities of developing their own industry<sup>350</sup> – even though India had many natural advantages both in terms of cotton, which they exported,<sup>351</sup> and cheap labour. The same can be seen in African colonies. Traditional handicraft industries enjoyed a strong position at the beginning of colonial rule. Due to the import of industrially produced commodities, some, perhaps underdeveloped, occupations were destroyed. These societies did not have the technology to replace these jobs with new ones in factories, and so peasants had to return to agricultural labour, in contrast to Europeans who underwent much the same in the beginning of the industrial period.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Epstein 1989: 142.

<sup>349</sup> Epstein 1989: 169–172.

<sup>350</sup> Fieldhouse 2007: 282.

<sup>351</sup> Eriksen 2011: 385.

<sup>352</sup> Rodney 2007: 298–299.



By the middle of the thirteenth century, Hanseatic merchants had obtained privileges that put them on equal footing with native Norwegian merchants.<sup>353</sup> This was uncommon by European standards.<sup>354</sup> Townsmen had special privileges in the towns they belonged to; it was rare for them to obtain privileges in other towns. London merchants, for example, fought a long and hard battle with Bury St Edmunds to have their “ancient rights” accepted, meaning that they were exempt from tolls, which the rulers of Bury St Edmunds strongly disagreed with.<sup>355</sup> Still, even in England the Hanse obtained some tax advantages over native merchants, but their presence was limited and trade was increasingly, not decreasingly as in Norway, coming in the hands of denizen merchants.<sup>356</sup>

The reason authorities promoted merchants from other countries, and especially Hanseatic merchants, was because they were primarily interested in protecting the consumer, as described in Chapter 4. Landowners were the greatest consumers of tradable goods, and by promoting as much free trade as possible, they could lower the price of the goods they consumed.<sup>357</sup> In Norway, the Hanse obtained further privileges in 1278, relieving them of duties that normal townsmen had, such as the *leidang* tax and pulling ships on land.<sup>358</sup> Interestingly the Norwegian crown at times tried to implement a restrictive policy towards foreign – Hanseatic – merchants, but faced great difficulties. Between 1283 and 1285, the Hanse flexed its muscles and effected a trade boycott.<sup>359</sup> The boycott followed the council of the newly crowned king Eirik II Magnusson’s misguided attempt at ensuring enough corn be brought to Norway, by making it illegal for foreign merchants who did not import corn to buy butter, hides or cod.<sup>360</sup> In 1285, the Hanse emerged victorious from the conflict and these restrictions were lifted. In other words, it was not, primarily, because the crown wished to promote trade through local merchants that they tried to implement some restriction. Rather, it was to ensure that they had access to the goods they wanted, at a reasonable price.

The strong position in which the Hanse found themselves in the late thirteenth century as a result of political gains as mentioned above, effectively perpetuated the trade pattern wherein manufactures were imported to and foodstuffs were exported from Norway. By the year 1300,

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<sup>353</sup> Helle, Bagge and Smesdal 1973: 92–95.

<sup>354</sup> Nedkvitne 1983: 198.

<sup>355</sup> *Jocelin of Brakelond* 2008: 67–68.

<sup>356</sup> Swanson 1999: 44.

<sup>357</sup> Nedkvitne 1983: 199.

<sup>358</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 258.

<sup>359</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 258.

<sup>360</sup> Nedkvitne 1983: 202–203.

merchants from the Hanse controlled 75% of the stockfish export from Bergen to ports in eastern England.<sup>361</sup> In a recent master thesis, their role in the local trade in Bergen has been examined, though inconclusively.<sup>362</sup> If their role was prominent, they would have had close to complete dominance over all trade in Bergen, and so had considerable influence over what was produced there. Still, even if they had a very limited interest in the local trade, which seems quite possible, it still doesn't undermine the fact that they controlled the export and import trade, and could, as we saw, contend politically and militarily with the Norwegian crown if they felt themselves wronged.

Norway's long-distance commercial activities were dominated by the Hanse. However, they were clearly not in a position equivalent to that which European colonial powers later found themselves in especially during the nineteenth century. They did not destroy previously important commercial production through the import of new, cheaper commodities. There was simply no large-scale production in the Norwegian towns for the Hanse to destroy. Clothes, for example, was generally had through household production which existed long before and continued to exist throughout the period. The effect of the Hanseatic control of important commercial activities, then, was that it hindered the new technological achievements that had especially changed the textile production, from gaining a foothold.

#### **5.4: Causes working in conjunction – and against to each other**

These causes – or group of causes as in the case of the climatic, geographic and topographic factors – obviously influenced each other. It is undeniable that weather, a scattered population, and the Caledonian mountain range that covers large areas of Norway laid some restraints on the development of aristocratic power. Unfortunately for the historian trying to assess their relative importance, the effects are often both positive and negative, and influenced each other in a myriad of ways.

For example, we have claimed that the small scale of the use of coins was primarily affected by the problems that the land-owning classes had in exacting rent in coins from their tenants. This was perhaps affected by geography through an altogether different mechanism as well: lack of bullion from silver mines. Norway lacked silver mines throughout the period; the first silver

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<sup>361</sup> Moseng *et al.* 2007: 258.

<sup>362</sup> Skaar 2014: 88.

mine was opened in Kongsberg in 1624.<sup>363</sup> This was, according to Lunden, one of the reasons Norway had such a small amount of coins in circulation. The effects from both the relationship between the aristocracy and peasants, and the inherent possibilities offered by geography, thus seems to have worked together in such a way as to retard the development of a more monetised society in Norway.

While silver mines likely had some effect, comparison with England's bullion supply allows for a "reality check". Most of the bullion that entered the English coinage came not from English mines, but from trade. The wool trade with Flemish merchants was likely one of the greatest reasons for the availability of silver coins in England. When the Flemish wool-trade was disrupted in the 1270s, a major decline in the Canterbury mint can be observed: From a yearly output of £5 798 in the period 1266–1270, to £337 in 1270–1272, and £430 in 1272–1275, before finally being closed for a period of three year from 1275–1278.<sup>364</sup> In the twelfth century, it has been remarked that England, while having many lead, tin and iron mines, lacked silver, but that it presented no problem because through trade England acquired enough bullion for money to be more abundant in there than in Germany, which had many silver mines.<sup>365</sup> Thus, it seems impossible that the lack of silver mines forced Norway into a predetermined track where money, in the form of coins, was chronically short. In other words, while some factors influencing the monetisation of the Norwegian society pulled in a negative direction, this could be offset through other mechanisms such as trade. That this did not happen in Norway is obvious from the weak monetisation that occurred there, but nonetheless serves to illuminate the complexity of the interactions between the forces in play.

Other areas than money were also affected by factors that pulled in different directions. The most important of which is one of the central topics of this study, production of commodities in towns. Urban production has some obvious preconditions: Supply of raw material, technology that makes it profitable, capital to invest, access to labour, and a market interested in the commodities. Raw material was unproblematic. Even supposing that Norwegian wool was of so poor quality that no one would buy textiles made of it – which goes against what we know about the prevalence of homemade woollens – they could, as previously argued, have imported raw wool from other countries with higher quality wool. Obtaining and putting to use new, industrial technology seems not to have happened, probably because Hanseatic import of

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<sup>363</sup> Lunden 2007: 26.

<sup>364</sup> Allen 2012: 258.

<sup>365</sup> Allen 2012: 254.

foreign manufactures, such as clothes, made it more difficult and thus less enticing to invest in the production of the same manufactures in the Norwegian towns. Even though Norwegian peasants were possibly better off than their Danish and English counterparts,<sup>366</sup> and the population of Norway was thinly spread over a vast area, access to labour in towns seems to have been quite good. Poverty was a large problem in Danish, English and Norwegian towns, as discussed in Chapter 2, and poor people in towns constituted a labour mass that could have been employed in market oriented production.

Capital to invest seems not to have been lacking. There were many merchants in Norway who acquired substantial wealth through trade, either as agents of an institution or on their own. In England, merchants could have a direct stake in production through the so-called “putting-out” system, wherein merchants brought raw material, and sometimes lent tools, to craftsmen, who processed it and returned it to the merchants, who then sold the finished products.<sup>367</sup> Possibilities for investment existed, but perhaps Norwegian merchants were afraid to tie so much of their capital up in projects that they did not have much experience with, and did not know would pay dividends. Likely, their knowledge of the internal market for commodities such as manufactured woollens – which was limited to an upper class – probably also made them sceptical of such endeavours. The commercialisation of society, which had taken greater hold in England and Denmark than in Norway, allowed for a local market that could buy specialised products for money. The lack of a monetised economy, caused, as has been argued, by a weak aristocracy unable to exact money rent from their tenants, reduced the internal Norwegian market for such commodities, and hampered specialisation.

If we accept that there was little production for the market in Norwegian towns, as has been argued for throughout the thesis, we can see that while some preconditions for large-scale production in towns were in place, others were not. The arguments put forward by Richard Holt that a weak aristocracy and a strong peasantry led to a poorly monetised society, which again led to Norwegian towns with both fewer and weaker economic functions, generally still stands. However, it must be modified in some regards. The role of geography, climate and topography was not just that it led to a thinly spread population that was hard to control, among other things. The small, thinly spread population was also by itself one of the reasons why Norwegian towns

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<sup>366</sup> Paying only about one-sixth of what they produced in rent, compared to the one-third common elsewhere in Europe, see Holt 2007: 146; Moseng *et al.* 2007: 215.

<sup>367</sup> Swanson 1999: 54–55.

were so small and few; there were few places that had the “critical mass” of people needed to sustain towns.

Furthermore, the unfavourable trade pattern was probably just as important as a force that hindered the development of local industry. But this, like all other factors, had both positive and negative effects on the economy. The lack of silver mines in Norway could, and was, offset by the influx of bullion through trade, and the Hanse was the primary trading partner in most towns and so may have had a positive effect on the commercialisation of society. At the same time, the “colonial” mechanisms that has been described earlier, which were detrimental to the development of greater economic diversity and large-scale production of goods, and which I have argued is actually somewhat applicable to the relationship between the Norwegian towns and the Hanse, meant that the overall effect on the Norwegian economy was negative.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

I will begin this chapter by returning to the two hypotheses posed in Chapter 1.1. The second hypothesis stated that because commercial production in towns was underdeveloped and never took hold in Norwegian towns, growth was dependent on institutions such as the church, crown and aristocracy, and their ability to draw unprocessed commodities such as dried cod to towns to sell and export. Chapter 4 especially has shown how little trade there was in Norwegian towns compared to their Danish and English counterparts, and how central the institutions mentioned were to the trade that did exist. That an underdeveloped commercial production had an impact on the development of Norwegian towns, is obvious. The nature its effect, and on how large a scale it was, is more problematic. Building on the first hypothesis, however, we can perhaps make the assumption that this underdevelopment had an effect on the number of towns and the number of people living in these towns.

The first hypothesis was quite straightforward: Norway's urbanisation stopped developing along the same lines as Danish and English towns with regard to population and number of towns. In Chapter 5, the town-to-total-population ratio was estimated, giving, perhaps unsurprising, evidence of the weak urbanisation of Norwegian towns. Additionally, I put forward some estimates for how large portions of the total population lived in towns for each country in Chapter 2. There, we could observe that about 20% of the English, 5% of the Norwegian and possibly 10% of the Danish population lived in towns. The Danish town population was perhaps the most uncertain – though I should qualify that statement by adding that all population estimates for the Middle Ages are very uncertain. However, it fits with what we know of how commercialised it was and the total population-to-number-of-towns ratio for Denmark, which was higher than the Norwegian but smaller than the English. Nonetheless, perhaps Denmark could serve as a weak check upon the presumption that just because there is a correlation in England between the level of commercialisation, the number of towns and the percentage of the population living in towns, one should not automatically expect to find the same everywhere.

Still, it is clear that both in England and Denmark, a larger share of people lived in towns and there was a higher number of towns than in Norway. The population-to-number-of-towns ratio was much higher in England, and slightly higher in Denmark which suggests that there were fundamental differences between the level of urbanisation that is not explained by simply point at differences in populations. Cautiously, one might even suggest that the ratio is wrong and that there could be an even larger difference, due to the uncertainty surrounding the number of

Norwegian towns, many of which have simply been called “small places” here. From this, and the preceding arguments, it follows that both hypotheses are reasonably well verified, but not immune to future adjustments should new research change either the number of known towns, the population in towns or criteria for what we understand as towns.

In Chapter 5, we addressed what was perhaps the central question this study hoped to be able to answer, namely *why* the Norwegian towns developed different functions from the English and Danish. Simply put, a myriad of factors acted together and against each other in a way that resulted in a weakly developed urban production, and a generally weak urban sector. The factors that seems to have had the most decisive impact were trade with the Hanse and the relatively weak aristocracy. The effect of geography, climate and topography often runs in different direction. What is clear is that it had an effect on the relationship between the peasants and the aristocracy, and so had an effect on Norwegian urbanisation.

### **6.1: How we think about Norwegian towns**

The last question, which was raised in Chapter 1 and again in Chapter 2, was whether this study could, perhaps, provide greater clarity in the question of what Norwegian towns were, or, put differently, whether the places that are sometimes<sup>368</sup> defined as towns actually deserve that label. Fourteen places have been suggested as towns, a comparatively low number, but perhaps it is still too high. Two problems arise when trying to determine whether small Norwegian places can be described as towns. The first is how we define towns, a problem which was discussed in Chapter 2.1. It was left largely unresolved as the small places also formed an important part of this study. The second problem is that very little is known about the small places, or their inhabitants.

To return to the debate of definition, the continued use of the term “small places” throughout the thesis in truth signifies nothing but my discomfort with describing for example Veøy, Vågar and Marstrand with the same term as I use to describe Bergen, Oslo, Tønsberg and Trondheim. However, the discomfort, is not without its reason, and that reason is not just size – though that is naturally also part of the consideration.

The economic function of small places was quite limited and qualitatively different from for example Bergen. Bergen saw much trade, and while its incorporation of the hinterlands into its

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<sup>368</sup> See for example Helle 2006: 66.

economy was weaker and less important than for English and Danish towns, it still had significantly more mercantile activity than any other Norwegian town. Not only its volume, but there were arenas of trade which in other towns or small places seem to have been close to completely absent. Bergen was obviously a town,<sup>369</sup> as were Oslo, Trondheim and Tønsberg. The economies of the latter towns were closer to Bergen than say Hamar, but at the same time they were not that different from smaller towns. Earlier, in Chapter 4.7, it was suggested that Oslo resembled smaller places with regard to their dependence on rent and the lack of trade with the countryside. This was perhaps also true for Trondheim and Tønsberg, though long-distance trade in Tønsberg was significantly larger than in Oslo<sup>370</sup>, despite it being a smaller town.

By accepting Trondheim, Tønsberg and – especially – Oslo as towns, we are not forced to accept smaller places that were qualitatively, if not quantitatively similar to them, such as Stavanger, Hamar and Kaupanger. This leads us to the second problem, namely our lack of knowledge about these places. For some, like Stavanger, a convincing case has been made for accepting its urban character from the late twelfth century<sup>371</sup> but we still know very little about how many lived there and what they did, with the exception of the chapter and the Bishop's officials. The economy was, as Oslo's, almost entirely driven by the rent and tax income of the bishop, though trade was conducted on a much smaller scale in Stavanger than in Oslo. Additionally, the argument for accepting Stavanger as a town from around 1200, rests almost entirely on scattered mentions of Stavanger as “bæen” and having “bæiarmenn”, terms I have raised some objections against in Chapter 2.1.

It seems to me that it is profitable to attempt to avoid a watering-down of the term “town” if it is to have any function. Thus, perhaps we should revert to what seems to be the practical way of handling this for most historians, a separation between towns on the one hand, and “kjøpsteder” – from *kaupstadr*, related to the old English *ceaping*<sup>372</sup> – on the other. In *Oslo bys historie* (1991), Nedkvitne and Norseng has a map of all the “byer og viktige handelsplasser i Norge i høymiddelalderen (omkr. 1320)”<sup>373</sup>, in which only Bergen, Trondheim, Tønsberg and Oslo are marked as towns. Still, as I have argued that even the small places often owed their

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<sup>369</sup> Ersland actually writes that Bergen was the only Norwegian town “av europeisk format”. Ersland and Sandvik 2008: 101.

<sup>370</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1992: 189.

<sup>371</sup> See Ersland and Solli 2012: 74.

<sup>372</sup> For the use of *ceaping* in connection with English place names, see Britnell 1996: 13.

<sup>373</sup> Nedkvitne and Norseng 1991: 189. “Towns and important market places in Norway i the High Middle Ages (c. 1320).” (My translation).



existence more to rent and taxes that would be gathered there than trade – which is not to say that trade was non-existent – designating them as “market places” would perhaps reinforce an assumption about their function that is likely far from the truth. In England, over 2500 market places existed alongside towns. They had a function that differed from the Norwegian small places in that they were primarily places for peasants to sell their surplus and engage in the market.<sup>374</sup> “Small central places” is perhaps a more correct – and ambiguous – term for Norwegian settlements such as Borg and Vågar, but in the end it depends on what one is trying to convey to the reader. In comparative works especially, the term should be defined in such a way as to encapsulate all the objects that are relevant for the hypothetical study.

## **6.2: Norwegian towns: A failure? For whom?**

In an article from 2007, Holt alleged that Norwegian towns failed to develop a large urban sector and failed “to commercialize beyond a rudimentary level”.<sup>375</sup> The use of the word “fail” implies that there was something wrong with the way the Norwegian towns developed, perhaps even that a large urban sector was something Norway should have strived to develop. While Chapter 5 especially has considered why Norwegian towns developed as they did, the question of whether this represents a failure is still open. Certainly, if one has a model or idea of how towns should develop – perhaps mostly based on English towns – then it is not difficult to see that medieval Norwegian towns represent a failure to comply with that model. A better question, however, would be for whom this actually was a failure.

Norwegian towns did not involve peasants into their economic lives other than to a very limited degree. This was not necessarily a bad thing, at least not for the peasants themselves. Increased specialisation led to production of more standardised commodities, of high or low quality, the production of items that were beyond the capabilities of non-professionals to make, and increased interactions between villagers. In England, the increased sophistication of pottery, it has been argued, was due to “an increased and more discerning demand”.<sup>376</sup> There is nothing, however, to suggest that Norwegian peasants suffered greatly from their lack of access to these mass-produced wares. Homespun clothes were more common among Norwegian peasants – though homespun was by no means uncommon in England and Denmark – and pottery was

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<sup>374</sup> For the number of markets, see Astill 2000: 46–47.

<sup>375</sup> Holt 2007: 141. He also wrote that “Norway’s failure to develop a large urban sector has implications not only for our understanding of the Norwegian economy but also of the factors promoting urban growth elsewhere.”

<sup>376</sup> Astill 2000: 47.

perhaps not as common; they often made do with wooden articles. Nonetheless, testaments and archaeological finds show that the material culture was diversified and perhaps because Norwegian rent and tax levels were less arduous than English and Danish, they could keep more of what they produced for themselves.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, it was only after the Black Death commercialisation brought some improvements into the lives of English peasants. The money per capita has been estimated to have been £0.72 in 1086, £0.78 in 1300, and £1.52 in 1470.<sup>377</sup> Before c. 1350, the main beneficiaries of commercialisation were lords, not peasants. For most people, the commercialised society, and the urbanisation it brought, had no impact on their standard of living. In fact, up until the middle of the fourteenth century, there was an increase in the number of smallholdings, indicating that people lived more marginally than before, and the income disparity within the peasant community widened.<sup>378</sup> The urban sector, while creating new work places in manufacturing – which could provide work for a significant part of the town population – also saw its share of poverty as we observed in Chapter 2.4. There is little to suggest that peasants living in poverty was more common in Norway than in Denmark and England.

Returning to the term “failure”, we may suggest that while Norwegian towns did not develop a large urban sector, this was not inherently bad. I would actually argue that for most Norwegians, life was possibly better than it was in more heavily urbanised areas. While there are some signs of urban decline before the Black Death,<sup>379</sup> the only clear failure I can see arose after the Black Death, when most of the small, Norwegian places disappeared as well as some of the larger towns. This is where our clearest indication of Norwegian towns’ otherness comes from, as towns in England and Denmark were not as negatively affected.<sup>380</sup> A few Norwegian towns, most notably Bergen, but also Skien and Tønsberg, seems not to have been too affected by the Black Death, but in general there was a marked urban decline.<sup>381</sup> Thus, one could, facetiously, suggest that the failure of Norwegian towns was that they did not manage to predict the worst

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<sup>377</sup> Britnell 1996: 229.

<sup>378</sup> Britnell 1996: 233. Titow argues that, even though it is impossible to estimate the percentage of people living in poverty in rural England in the High Middle Ages, when we are in a position to check it, “the indications are invariably of growing impoverishment rather than greater prosperity”. Titow 1969: 96.

<sup>379</sup> Trondheim seems to have been in decline since the late thirteenth century, probably because Bergen started to increase its share of the stockfish trade at the expense of Trondheim, Holt 2007: 137; Risvaag 2006: 41. See also Chapter 4.4.

<sup>380</sup> Danish towns especially seems to have had a favourable period after the Black Death, Poulsen 2004: 224–225. The effect on English towns is debated, but as Dobson writes, “urban reactions to such marked population decline were extremely diverse and not always completely inadequate”, Dobson 2000: 276.

<sup>381</sup> Helle 2006: 124–126.

disaster to befall Europe in the Middle Ages. More to the point, while they did not develop as the English and Danish towns did, which had some negative consequences in the end, for the people living in the century before the Black Death, there is little to suggest that Norwegian towns “failed” them.

### **6.3: Closing remarks**

This study has shown that the economic functions of Norwegian towns and small places, were dissimilar to those of both large and small towns in England and Denmark. As with all studies, in the future, new theoretical approaches may always be able to further or change our understanding of towns, even in the most fundamental ways. Research into towns of other countries may also indirectly benefit our understanding of Norway’s towns, as the English ones especially have done for this study. The research area that has the most potential for changing how we perceive towns, however, is archaeology. As professional philologists have increasingly made what written sources exist available through translations, archaeology has become a central provider of new empirical knowledge. The knowledge it can provide is, of course, limited, and on some subjects – such as marriage, law and diplomacy – it can say very little indeed. On themes central for this dissertation, wherein archaeological evidence has been frequently used, it can, however, say quite a lot. In a presidential address to the Society for Medieval Archaeology, by Christopher Dyer, which was subsequently published with the title “The Archaeology of Medieval Small Towns”,<sup>382</sup> Dyer looked at how urban archaeology could help us understand small towns in a new way. In this paper, he looks at what newly uncovered archaeological evidence can tell us about not just the origins<sup>383</sup> of small towns, but also about how we define<sup>384</sup> towns. Additionally, he was able to conceive of a very useful table which provides some benchmarks for how documentary and material evidence can be used to create an urban hierarchy.<sup>385</sup>

As more and more ground is covered – or, perhaps, uncovered – by archaeologists, at least one fundamental assumption for this thesis may be challenged. In Britain, a project that aims at advancing knowledge of small archaeological objects found by amateur archaeologists – especially metal detectorists – by allowing them to sell what they find but having their finds,

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<sup>382</sup> Dyer 2003.

<sup>383</sup> Dyer 2003: 88ff.

<sup>384</sup> Dyer 2003: 98.

<sup>385</sup> Dyer 2003: 102.

often coins, photographed and recorded by professionals, has yielded an incredible amount of new knowledge. The project is called the Portable Antiques Scheme, and is administered by the British Museum.<sup>386</sup> They have an online database which contain records of over one million objects, most of them coins.<sup>387</sup> If a comparatively large database was compiled for medieval Norwegian coins, the understanding of the money economy presented in Chapter 4 might be fundamentally challenged – or perhaps placed on firmer ground. Such projects offers exiting possibilities for the future, but based on the available data, it is quite clear that the economic functions of Norwegian towns were different.

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<sup>386</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/about>

<sup>387</sup> <https://finds.org.uk/database>

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