

Outline of the PhD-project

Borders, Assemblies and Power:

the Administrative Landscapes of Western Norway 800-1200 AD

Concepts and objectives

The aim of PhD-project is to study the development of the administrative landscape in western Norway during the transition from pre-state societies to emerging kingdom/state in the period 800-1200 AD. The starting point of the analysis will be an archaeological study of the counties Sogn og Fjordane and Hordaland, i.e. the main part of Vestlandet, western Norway, and through recent research established as the geographical starting point for a supra-regional kingdom in Norway (Krag 1991 and 1995, Bjørkvik 1999, Helle 2001). The organisation of a political-administrative system capable of dealing effectively with defence of territories, law and order etc. was crucial in this transitional process, and here the naval defence (*leidang*) was of great importance. This was probably first established in Vestlandet (Ersland 2000, 49-52), and has by historians been attributed to king Haakon the Good in the first part of the 10th century. King Haakon was raised at the court of the Anglo-Saxon king Athelstan, and on this background it is suggested that the establishment and organization of the *leidang* was based on Anglo-Saxon models (see e.g. Ersland 2000, 47-51; Helle 2001, 32-36).

The spatial organization of the *leidang* was built on *skipreider*, i.e. territorial units in which the inhabitants were obliged to build, maintain and man a warship. The *skipreider* also functioned as administrative units for taxation and judicial purposes, where each *skipreide* had its own local assembly (*skipreideting*). While the military role of the *skipreider* dwindled before the end of the medieval period, the two latter functions were retained well into early modern times. The *skipreider* are thus territorial units of central importance, but has despite this not been studied from an archaeological perspective. This project aims to conduct such an analysis, where the *skipreider* will be studied in a spatial archaeological perspective integrating archaeological material and sources as well as landscape studies. This will be combined with written sources, primarily medieval documents and laws, and linguistic data. Together, all of these sources provide rich data material from western Norway.

In southern England multi-disciplinary research has shown that the localization of different types of assembly sites, execution sites, royal manors etc. to a large extent are related to boundaries in the territorial units *hundreds*. These were the smallest administrative units in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, serving both military and taxation purposes, and were in function from the 10th century, if not earlier (Reynolds 1999,75). Both the functions of and the establishment of the *hundreds* have major similarities to the Norwegian *skipreider*. One objective of PhD-project is therefore to investigate whether there are parallel patterns and tendencies in the archaeological material from western Norway, and thereby to map, analyze and discuss the physical structures and functions of the *skipreider* in relation to contemporary sources, among them archaeological remains in their spatial context.

In the analysis, the identification of the physical manifestation of administrative systems will be central. Speaking of the Norwegian material, farms of kings and magnates, large boat houses and recently some possible assembly sites have to a certain degree been

investigated archaeologically. However, these aspects of power and administration have not been studied from an overarching perspective to provide knowledge about the emerging administrative landscape during the transition to kingdom/early state. Which patterns will be discernable when these sources and places are considered together, in space and time?

Thus, the study aims at investigating the relations between cultural heritage sites, archaeological remains and boundaries of territorial units (*skipreider*). What are the relations between territorial boundaries, assemblies (i.e. *thing* sites of different status), places of power attached to the king and prominent people as well as other sites with functions in the administration and power structures emerging in the period? Which types of archaeological remains within the *skipreider* relate to these administrative units, and where are they placed? May these potential spatial patterns shed light on the formation of administrative systems in the actual period, and on the relations between emerging central power and the local/regional communities involved in the volatile process of state formation?

Research area

Based on medieval sources, Hordaland county encompassed 32 *skipreider*, while Sogn og Fjordane consisted of the two counties Sygnafylke and Firdafylke with 16 and 15 *skipreider* respectively (Helle 2001,164). The total number of 63 *skipreider* represents a large area, but studying many *skipreider* coherently is important to discover spatial patterns and localisation of sites in border areas between them. This last aspect is of great value to assess varying status of assembly sites within and between the administrative units. The extensive research area also makes it possible to investigate possible differences between inner and outer coastal areas, which are shown to have differing property structures (Bjørkvik and Holmsen 1972, Øye 2002a, Iversen 2004). Property and land rights are interesting aspects relating to the establishment and organisation of *skipreider* and other components of the administrative systems, making it important to study both the inner and outer coastal landscapes. From my master thesis I have experience with collecting and processing large amounts of data (Hobæk 2008), and I consider the size of the research area manageable within the time and resources available for the PhD-project.

Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane was not only the core area for the developing kingdom of Norway in Viking and Medieval times, it was also the core area for *Gulatingssloven*, the oldest known law body of Norway. *Gulatingssloven* encompassed this area before 930 AD, later to be extended to all of Western Norway (i.e. the regions Sunnmørafylke, Rygjafylke and Egdafylke) after the middle of the 10th century and to the whole country in 1247 AD (Helle 2001,27). The priority of this project will be to study Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane as the core area for both emerging royal power and expanding judicial-administrative organisation, but as the work proceeds the possibility for limited studies in selected areas of the later incorporated regions (Sunnmørafylke/Rygjafylke) will be considered.

Previous research

A number of archaeological studies relevant for the PhD-project have been conducted on material from the research area. Some examples include graves and burial customs

(Dommasnes 1976), manors and power structures (Iversen 1999), agrarian landscapes (Skrede 2002, Øye 2002b, Stang 2003, Lia 2005, Sivertsen 2006, Foyen 2008, Sætre 2008), introduction of Christianity and church sites (Buckholm 1998, Brattekværne 2006, Gabrielsen 2007, Skipstad 2009), roads and communication (Haugen 2006), and outfield resources such as quarries (Baug 2001, Baug in prep.). Also very valuable are the surveys undertaken by Per Fett, offering an (in a Norwegian context) unique overview of archaeological material in the form of visual cultural heritage sites.

Concerning more direct manifestations of administrative systems – such as assembly sites, executional sites, power centres, large boat houses and more – Frode Iversen's study of manors and property in Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane is of high relevance (Iversen 1999). In addition, studies aiming to identify power centres by looking at specific groups of objects in archaeological finds provide valuable information on socio-economic structures (Myhre 1987, Ringstad 1992). Assemblies have been identified and discussed by historians (Bugge 1920, Taranger 1924, Helle 2001, Myking 2007), but on a macro scale and mainly focusing on the medieval period. Recently assembly sites have become an area of interest also among archaeologists (see Friðriksson 1994, Pantos og Semple 2004, Sanmark 2004), and in a Norwegian setting it has been argued that so-called *ringformete tunanlegg* are to be interpreted as assembly sites (Bruen Olsen 2005, Storli 2006). Two such sites have been identified in Sogn og Fjordane (Bruen Olsen 2005, 340).

Sources, methodology and research design

The project is based on a multi-disciplinary approach, combining a number of different sources and material. The starting point is archaeological material (including cultural key features in the landscape such as burial mounds and sites, standing stones and more), combined with place names and historical material. The written medieval sources are mainly documentary sources, diplomas (*Diplomatarium Norvegicum*) and property registers (*jordbøker*), as well as younger material on property and land ownership used retrospectively. I have extensive experience working with all these types of sources during my master project. In addition normative texts will provide important source material, especially *Gulatingsloven* concerning the older organisation of the *leidang* and *skipreider*. Place names have also been proved useful in shedding light on the organisation of Iron Age societies (see f. ex. Brink 1999, Reynolds 1999). Both Oluf Rygh's compilation of Norwegian farm names (*Norske Gaardnavne*) and the database for place names at the archive of Sogn og Fjordane county represent valuable sources.

Speaking of the archaeological material, sites such as farms belonging to kings and magnates, large boat houses, assembly sites, borders and other physical manifestations will be important – particularly graves and burials from the later Iron Age, standing stones and stone crosses. Younger church sites, often connected to power centres or older meeting places, are also relevant. Identification of such physical manifestations of administrative systems will be a central task in the project, to make it possible to discuss and analyze them coherently.

To map and analyze spatial patterns and relations, the analysis will be based on GIS (i.e. ArcGIS from Esri). The first step will be to establish accurate borders for the *skipreider* in the research area, based on the farms belonging to each *skipreide* in 17th century sources

(*Skattematrikkelen av 1647*). These borders will be mapped in the system ArcMap, which I am familiar with from my master project. The next step will be incorporating relevant archaeological material into the maps (extracted from excavation reports, survey registers from cultural heritage management, and more), as well as place names and relevant information from written sources. In addition the PhD-project will undertake surveys along the mapped *skipreide*-borders. In the English material, there is a tendency for places with administrative/judicial functions to be located on the shared borders between administrative units. To find out if this is also the case in Western Norway, and enable a systematic consideration of the sites in a landscape context, particular stress will be laid on surveying areas with shared *skipreide*-borders and borders close to main communication routes.

The combination of different sources and mapping of the material is expected to produce good visual overviews both on the level of individual *skipreider* and the larger region, and sufficient basis to analyze spatial patterns and social functions in the landscape(s). Internal relations between places and cultural heritage sites and their relations to the borders of the *skipreider* can then be considered and hopefully linked to dated structures, thus shedding light on the research questions concerning the establishing and functions of the *skipreider*.

Work plan

The table below gives the work plan and time line for the PhD-project. The plan is based on the general work plan of the TAP-project, and is of course open for adaptations to changes necessary for the research group. Mandatory seminars, lectures etc. will be undertaken in accordance with the framework for PhD-candidates at the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

Task	Where	Year 1												Year 2												Year 3											
Data collection	Oslo/Bergen	█																																			
PhD courses	Oslo													█																							
Making GIS projects, maps etc.	Oslo	█												█																							
Field work (survey)	Western Norway													█																							
Analysis	Oslo													█												█											
Workshops	Oslo, Durham, Vienna, Orkney	█												█												█											
Article based on PhD	Oslo																									█											
Contribution to TAP-synthesis	Oslo																									█											
Monograph	Oslo	█																																			

Table 1. Work plan for PhD-project

List of outputs:

- 1 monograph
- 1 article
- 1 contribution to the synthesis of the TAP-project