The Becoming of Boats

Craft Practices in Southern Norwegian Boatbuilding (1050 - 1700 CE)

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, archaeological excavations in Oslo harbour have uncovered a significant number of shipwrecks. Together with other wrecks along the Viken coastline, these finds form a vital body of maritime archaeological evidence that, through research, sheds light on boatbuilding techniques, transport, and cultural interaction. This thesis operates on two interconnected levels. First, it addresses a knowledge gap concerning these understudied boats and ships. Second, it engages in a broader theoretical discussion relevant to craft practices and archaeological research.

This thesis focuses primarily on lapstrake-built vessels rather than carvel-built ships. Most of the vessels examined can be classified as 'nameless ships' as they cannot be identified through written sources. This is a common concern in shipwreck archaeology, particularly with large vessels often commissioned by the Crown. Instead, their identities are determined through alternative methods, including investigation of their find sites, technical features, and dendrochronological dating and provenance.

Methodologically, the technical characteristics of the vessels are systematically catalogued and subjected to statistical analysis (MCA). This analysis identifies key trends and technical attributes, which in turn inform the selection of four case studies. These case studies represent the dominant technical patterns and variations in function and size. They also serve as a foundation for further theoretical exploration.

One case study, the Sjøvollen ship (1280/90 CE), addresses the unique circumstances of the medieval period, where very few vessels engaged in trade and transport in the Viken region were constructed from locally grown oak. Despite suggestions that much of this coastal traffic was conducted on 'own keel', the material evidence points to a different reality. However, from the late 15th century into the early 16th century, many vessels, particularly those deposited in Oslo, were built from oak sourced in Southern Norway or Western Sweden. The Bispevika 16 (c. 1600) exemplifies this situation and is a typical example of cargo vessels from the period. Also, it presents an unusual feature: an additional layer of carvel planking on the exterior, highlighting changes in boatbuilding practices during the early modern period. This vessel also plays a vital role in the theoretical discussion, particularly involving the tendency to treat objects as static, finished objects.

The final two case studies focus on smaller rowing boats equipped with sails: Bispevika 14 (1532–1544 CE) and Portørenga (a. 1660). These were selected due to the lack of academic attention to such vessels, filling a significant gap between research on small vessels from the Iron Age and ethnographic studies of the 19th- and early 20th centuries.

In conclusion, this thesis makes a dual contribution to maritime archaeology: first, through the systematic mapping and analysis of the technical attributes of previously understudied ships from the Viken region, and second, by engaging with ongoing theoretical debates concerning the nature of material culture and things

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