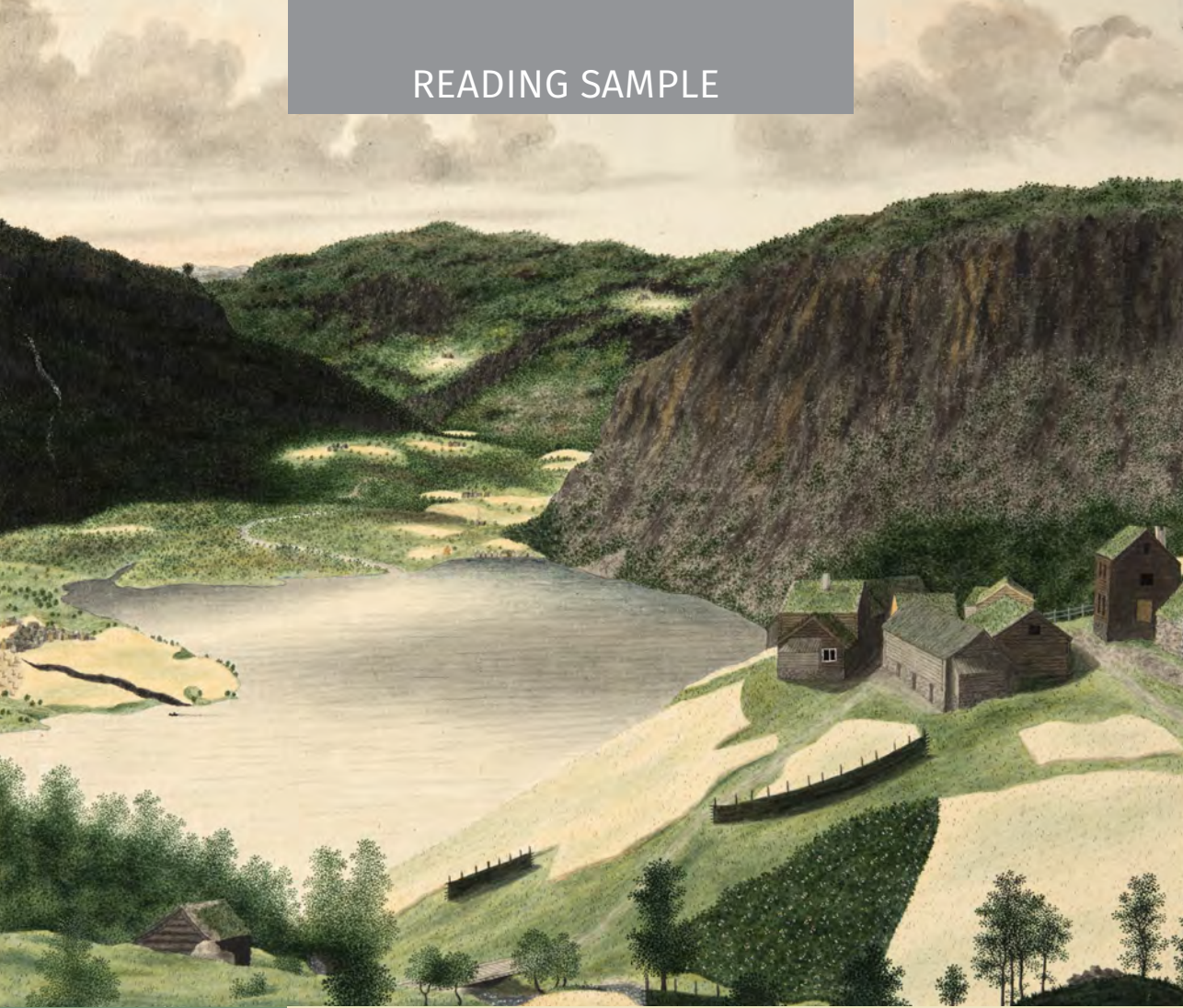


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The Farm as a Social Arena

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Introduction: The farm as a social arena

Liv Helga Dommasnes

During the last decades, social structure has been one of the most central research themes in archaeology. A gradual shift from focus on the prehistoric finds and monuments as such to the social life that they were parts of has developed within different academic traditions, combined with an increased awareness of the importance of using varied theoretical approaches.

As a consequence of this shift, the point of departure for formulating research approaches has also changed, from archaeological find categories to questions generated from theoretical considerations. This development has brought archaeology a long way forward into the common domain of the humanities. In such a process, something can be lost, however. In the case of the farm, the fact that it is not only an archaeological category, but was also a (pre)historic one, making up the framework of most people's lives and potential arenas of developments shaping history, has somehow fallen out of focus.

The background of this volume is a Norwegian research network focussing on the social arena aspect of the farm. Studies from Norway therefore dominate this volume, supplied with case studies from Sweden, Iceland and Germany, reminding us that farms were to be found under very different climatic and social conditions during both prehistoric and medieval times.

Why focus on the farm rather than on social structure? This is not a question of either – or. We need both, but in our opinion the farm where people did in fact live, is a good starting point – the farm was what Gutschmidt-Schumann in this volume refers to as people's "lifeworld" (after Schütz/Luckmann 1979). Such was probably the case in most settled agricultural pre-urban societies. Starting here therefore brings us close to the people and allows us to adopt a bottom up rather than a top down perspective, following processes instead of starting with the results. This approach is prominent in most of the papers in this volume.

Standpoint theories, which argue that knowledge is always socially situated, serve as a general theoretical background for the project. Some of these theories also claim that by taking on the standpoint of the underprivileged, one will be able to discover aspects of society that are invisible from top positions, either because they are considered irrelevant or because they represent experiences unknown to the upper classes (e.g. Harding 2004). Related to standpoint theories is the approach often referred to as "maintenance archaeology". Maintenance activities here refer to the many daily tasks that are needed to keep life going and uphold social stability. Although the term refers to practices rather than space, many such tasks were performed in the home sphere, e.g. on the farm, and were often referred to as domestic, and therefore unim-

portant. Domestic labour provides food and cloth, healthcare and protection against the weather, and has to be considered as essential for all societies. In the modern world, however, the main criterion of value is money, and as domestic work has often been unpaid, it has dropped out of focus in Western scholarship.

Some such tasks, often associated with women, have been found to have structural functions, however. First and foremost they have to do with upholding relations between people. They often entail specialised knowledge, and may have the potential to affect the long-term development of society (González-Marcén et al. 2008, 6; Montón-Subías 2010). Studying social dynamics on a small scale, it is claimed, has the potential to reveal previously unrecognised relations between the trivial activities of everyday life and important changes in history. We think that farms will most probably have been places where many such changes were set in motion.

What is a farm?

Common to social units called farms everywhere in the world, is that they produce food, by cultivation, or by keeping animals for meat and for secondary products as for example milk, wool and hides, and in some cases for their labour. Without these ingredients it would not be a farm. Most often we will find both cultivation and animals. In many parts of Norway animal husbandry will be more important than cultivation, due to climatic conditions. For the same reason, northern farms need houses for animals and crops as well as for people, and land for grazing the animals and for cultivation.

In addition to being family seats, the Nordic farm in prehistory and into modern times was home and workplace to the people who lived there, owners or tenants with family, relatives, guests, hired handicraft specialists, farm workers and slaves, crossing social divisions. It was also where children were socialised and educated and where old and sick people were cared for, and the venue for most of their social life from everyday life to feasts, funerals and religious cult.

No wonder then that the farm had a place in mental landscapes. In Old Norse cosmology the universe was conceptualised as three concentric circles. In the inner circle lived the gods, men in the middle and in the outer circle there were various dangerous species like giants, and chaos ruled. In all three parts of this universe there were farms. Historian of religion, Gro Steinsland, has suggested (2005, 107–108) that the Old Norse farm was organised along the same lines as the universe. The high seat (which was reserved for the couple owning the farm) is equalled with the home of the gods. The farmyard and infields were areas where humans and gods communicated through cult and rites, while the outfields were frightening and dangerous.

In sum, the farm was a safe haven in a dangerous world. In sparsely populated areas like most of the Scandinavian peninsula, this was definitely the social unit that

most people would relate to, probably more so than in densely populated regions as for example central Europe, where villages were common. – Most Norwegian farms were quite remote¹ (cf. also the front cover of this volume). Even if some farms would be parts of larger settlements, the nearest neighbour outside the farm would still be quite a distance away. There would be very little infrastructure, and travelling could be difficult, especially during winters. Where people live far apart from each other, they have to be self-sufficient. In northern Scandinavia, this has been the rule for people living on isolated farms in the countryside until the last century.

The farm was so central in people's minds that when some people in early medieval times started to live in market-places or small towns, the term followed the people, who moved to their *bygård* (literally: city farm). Until recently, almost everybody living in rural areas had to live on a farm, including civil servants and professionals. Even in modern times, a rural vicar or doctor would therefore have part of their income from the farms where they lived ("the vicar's farm" and "the doctor's farm"). Such farms were normally owned by the state and worked by a tenant, but could also be privately owned, as exemplified in Berglund's paper on Petter Dass in this volume. The knowledge of the need for self-reliance that is reflected in these arrangements has been an integrated part of research into the Norwegian farm from the very beginning.

Perhaps because of their position in mental as well as practical life, farms have also been important elements in the identities of people. Even today, most Norwegian family names are originally farm names, and until recently, country people introducing themselves always mentioned which farm they currently lived on.

Former research on the farm in Norway

The oldest literary sources describing farms and farm life in Norway/Scandinavia were written down in the Middle Ages (12th and 13th centuries). These were mainly sagas and skaldic poetry, purporting to describe life during the Viking Age, but there is no consensus about their value as sources to this earlier period. Old Norse laws ("Landscape laws") which were also written down in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages, although they were probably functioning from the late Viking Age onwards, have information about farms, rights and regulations and rules of inheritance, among other things.

These were the main sources that the 19th century scholars and writers had to Viking Age society and its structure. Archaeology was then in its very beginning as an academic discipline, and theoretical approaches to material culture as a source of information were not very developed. Even so, the idea of the farm as the basic unit in the early agricultural society of Norway goes back to this era, and is still accepted

1 In post-medieval times primarily, farms could be divided into two or more smaller parts (*bruk*), making room for more than one family with separate households.

by the majority of scholars in the field. The farm has since had a central place in the grand narratives of Norway, as a basis for food production, as a family seat and sometimes as seats of chiefs and later, kings, based among other things, on the above mentioned medieval sources.

The early research was dominated by historians. Archaeological investigations started with excavations of a few house-sites during the first decade of the 20th century. In 1927, the newly founded Meeting of Norwegian Archaeologists made a list of priorities for future archaeological investigations. On top of that list was the Iron Age farm with its houses, fences and fields.

When the 1927 projects were planned, Norway was still a society of small, independent farmers, many of whom sympathised with the socialist/social democratic movement now growing stronger all over Europe. In the Norwegian academic setting, the 1930s have been characterised as the decade of the farmer's sons, meaning that the sons of farmers now found their way into university in increasing numbers. There was still only one university, situated in the capital, Oslo, and we may suspect that some of the rural students felt a bit lost in this well-established academic atmosphere. In archaeological studies of the farm, however, some of them found a subject where their rural backgrounds were in fact an advantage. Many of these archaeologists kept close ties to their childhood communities, and contributed to the development of a strong tradition of publishing local prehistory. The first doctoral thesis based on an archaeological investigation of a farm was published in 1953 (Hagen 1953).

The work continued after World War II, now with an ambition to investigate the farm as part of a larger social structure. At this time, the farm was still conceived as a men's world. So was academia. Women of the past were almost invisible. The women of the present had to wait for another generation. During the 1970s, however, the daughters of the middle class found their way into the universities, where they became acquainted with standpoint theories like Marxism and feminism. Realising that there was still no place for them in the narratives of the distant past, the small but increasing numbers of women in archaeology set out to carve a niche for themselves and their foremothers. Numerous studies especially of Iron Age/Early medieval women were carried out, often supported by new theoretical approaches. Gendered divisions of labour as well as social roles and ranks were popular subjects. Burials came back into focus, mainly because this is where we meet the individuals of the past, and where gender, rank and work/responsibilities are often symbolised – or so we think.

From this point there was only a short road back to the farm. In the West Norwegian Iron/Early Medieval Age especially, burial mounds are placed very close to the farm houses, and burials have often taken place on the individual farms. Both women and men were buried here, and it is generally assumed that these were the owners of the farm (e.g. Skre 1997). Equally important when gender is an issue, is that the burials often contain tools and thus seem to indicate which tasks were considered

women's work and which were men's. The fact that Iron Age society in the North was gendered is evident not only from burials, but also from written sources, where some of the rights and duties of women and men are described. Even more important than gender was rank, however. A code of honour defined the rights and duties of the two genders and the top ranks.

Recent developments

Over time, it was realised that the development of a modern society's industry and infrastructure increasingly endangered protected ancient monuments, including farm sites. As archaeological excavation work in Norway was – and still is – the responsibility of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage and five regional archaeological museums/universities, investigations into the farms also continued locally, from north to south. While the earliest projects related to the farms aimed at *identifying* them and describing the houses and other structures of prehistoric and medieval farms, recent fieldwork has been concentrated on houses and house-types, cultivation, and to some extent, domestic animals.

The top priority within this modern framework has been houses and settlements. Numerous house-sites have been excavated all over the country during the last three to four decades, most of them identified as farm houses. While former investigations had focused mainly on Iron Age farms, the chronological framework has now been extended back to the Neolithic, showing a remarkable conservatism in house types through prehistory, although seemingly small changes in building traditions may reflect important developments in farm life, as discussed by Oma chapter 1 this volume. For the Christian Middle Ages, however, the finds are surprisingly few. This could be due to new building techniques that leave few traces (cf. Sørheim this volume).

The majority of these investigations have been rescue excavations. An exception is “The West Norwegian farm project” initiated by the University of Bergen and the University College of Sogn and Fjordane. This project was primarily aimed at dating the origin of the individual farm and the cultural landscape it produced rather than analysing its social role (Øye 2002).

Unfortunately, the technique that makes it possible to find the prehistoric houses, namely the systematic removal of topsoil in order to find traces in the underground, also destroys the remains – if any – of human and other activity at the level where the house floors used to be. The main focus has therefore so far been on the farmyard with its houses, and with the farm as the site of food production, which is admittedly the central function of any farm. But it also means that although the farm has for a long time had a central position in Norwegian archaeological research, some dimensions have been lacking.

The farm as a social arena

As far back as one can see, farms tended to be scattered in the Norwegian landscape in such a way that they only in exceptional cases made up something resembling a village. Often, and even into modern times, the farm *was* the local community. In isolated settings, thralls and masters lived together, worked and learned from each other, and were dependent on each other. Over time and as social stratification developed, the different strata of society were reflected at the individual farms, especially the larger ones, and between farms. While a medium-sized farm would house the nuclear family or maybe two generations, a large farm would, in addition to family, have a household consisting of hired help, slaves, sometimes guests and artisans. Every need had to be catered for on, or through, the farm, from food and housing to the education of children and religious needs. From this point of view the farm becomes a social arena, and the people who lived there were agents on this scene. And, as pointed out by Gutschmidl-Schumann this volume, “the space in which people are living and communicating with each other, is the space where social reality is constructed.” Understanding the past starts with understanding the dynamics of its basic structures and agents. Farm communities would be tight-knit, but by no means closed. Visitors were the rule rather than the exception. As there was no alternative accommodation, any farm would now and then house travellers. Another social aspect of the larger farms from the Late Roman period through the Middle Ages was the feasts that were sometimes held by chiefs/warlords for their allies (Enright 1996; Sigurdsson 2010) in order to strengthen their alliances.

Generally speaking, the people of the farm would live very close together, especially during the long and dark winters when almost all work had to take place indoors. Different kinds of maintenance work were probably going on more or less continuously. Small-scale carpentry, weaving and needle-work would be winter tasks taking place in the common living-space² along with food-preparation and meals. Sometimes the craft production may have been of even greater social and economic importance than traditional farming activities, as suggested in the case of the Viking Age farm at Hopperstad, Vik in Sogn (Dommasnes/Hommedal this volume). The large common room was also where people on the farm would meet to exchange information, tell stories and keep the memory of former generations alive.

The relations between all those people of different origins, ranks and genders are among our foci. So is the relationship between people and animals. Generally speaking, people of the past, independently of their work and rank, lived closer to animals than we do. Everybody would have been surrounded by animals, while a modern person, whether living in a city or in a village, hardly ever meets one unless

2 Large-scale weaving probably took place in pit-houses, known from several places in Europe.

(s)he keeps pets. On the farm they lived together on a daily basis, for a long time even under the same roof. They also worked together, as for example man and horse. Cooperation was always necessary – when handling the sheep, milking the cow or collecting eggs from the hens. In transhumance, which is a practice going back at least to the Iron Age in the north, young girls moved to the summer pastures in the mountains with the cattle, and stayed there for several months. Smaller children acted as herders.

Modern research has shown that the thinking on the relationship between humans and animals has changed over time. Similarities rather than differences may have been recognised in other cultures and at other times. In Scandinavian Iron Age burials animals and people seem to have been cremated together and their bones treated in the same way (Mansrud 2005), and in Viking Age culture it is more than hinted that shape-shifting was a reality (Hedeager 2011, Price 2014). This familiarity with animals, domesticated as well as wild, leads us once again to consider the farm in mental landscapes – collective ones in the Iron Age cosmology or individual ones as in people's *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), in terms of who you socialised with, the familiarity with animals, the small community and its material manifestations. We have already mentioned that the houses where people lived changed very little over the centuries from the late Bronze Age until the Middle Ages. The same goes for the infields, which were organised with one or two parallel longhouses and a cattle lane leading from the byre part of one of the longhouses through the farmyard to the grazing area. To many people, this was their entire world, conditioning their thinking as well as their bodily reflexes – their (gendered) lifeworlds in Schütz/Luckmanns' (1979) terminology, which also provides the background for a person's practices and communications (Habermas 1981).

At least from the Roman Age onwards, the most prominent farm people – probably the owners – were buried on the farm infields, often in large mounds. Large farms, which would sometimes also be chief's farms, were also arenas for public cult activities and some of these again had churches raised on the infields in Early Christian times. Churches may in such cases have signalled both the coming of a new religion, continuation of religious leadership and of secular power.

Papers and approaches

In this volume, farms and related topics from the Bronze Age (starting c. BC 1800) through the High Middle Ages and into the 17th century are discussed. As a consequence of the Norwegian background of the project, the geographical setting is in the majority of the papers the coastal region of Norway, from Rogaland in the south to Lofoten in the North. Two more papers (Nordström; Carlisle/Milek) refer in general terms to the same (Norse) tradition while yet another two (Gutsmiedl-Schumann;

Bremer) discuss farms in German villages from the Early and High Middle Ages (5th/6th to 13th century) respectively. In addition to addressing topics common to all farms discussed here, the papers from geographical and social environments outside Norway serve as important reminders that whether isolated or spatially integrated; farms are always part of wider societies, and formed by their relations to the outer world and people that surround them.

Although generally tuned to the theoretical frameworks sketched above, approaches in the individual papers vary with the particular questions addressed and the sources available. The farm as the framework of people's daily lives is addressed in several papers. In the first paper of this volume, Oma takes as her point of departure the relationship between humans and animals when she tries to understand a seemingly small change in architecture, namely the transition from two-aisled to three-aisled longhouses. She finds the explanation in the secondary products revolution. When people started to keep sheep because of the milk and the wool, they also needed to handle them more often. This may have been why three-aisled longhouses became popular, as they made it easier to house animals indoors. Oma further sketches how the relationship between people and sheep changed during the Bronze Age at Jæren in Southwest Norway. The sheep moved in with their people, where they became household members and contributed to the household through wool and milk. As the relationship between humans and sheep developed, it became a relation of understanding and trust rather than domination, she claims.

In her second paper, Oma moves in time to the end of the Iron Age, when the now age-old three-aisled longhouse gradually went out of use, and was replaced by several smaller houses. Once again animals were involved. This time it was about religion and ontological status. With Christianity, Oma claims, the ontological status of animals was changed. In the Iron Age animal styles, animals and humans could be depicted as half human, half animal, and some humans were thought to be able to shift shape into animals. Some animals shared houses with humans and were sometimes buried with humans: basically, they had much in common. In Christianity, on the other hand, the differences were stressed. Humans were close to God, animals were not. They were seen as subservient to humans, no longer worthy of sharing our houses. Consequently, the age-old longhouse went out of use and the farm was divided up in several small buildings with different functions.

The very same medieval change into a new farm architecture is addressed from another point of view, namely a technological one, in Sørheim's paper, where he argues that a new technology was the reason why the age-old tradition of stave-built longhouses was replaced with smaller ones built in the corner-notching technique, which had long been known in other parts of Europe. This architectural change also led to a change not only in the housing of animals, but in the relations between *people* of the farm, in that they were from now on scattered in many small houses instead of sharing a large longhouse. One would think that this increased the mental distance

between people – servants and masters – as well. And whatever cause we accept for this architectural change, with Christianity the old farm was shattered not only in the sense that people and animals were separated. So were the generations. From now on, former generations were no longer buried at their own farms, but on communal graveyards connected to a church.

In our one Swedish case study, Nordström studies aspects of life on the farm through keys and locks on two Swedish farms, one in the central Mälaren area in central Sweden and one on the Baltic island of Gotland, dated to the Migration period and the Viking Age respectively. She discusses the finds of keys and their use at the farms, a topic that has not been addressed very often. Nordström focusses here on *the idea* of locking, and its implications for private property and identity. Generally, keys have been associated with mighty housewives and their roles in managing the farm resources. In her study, however, Nordström finds that keys have belonged to men and women both. Keys seem to imply private property and were possibly associated with people's identities. It is interesting to note that when looking at Roman Age warrior burials and men's burials in the Viking Age town Birka in Sweden, she found a possible link between weapons and locked chests.

Doris Gutmiedl-Schumann takes us to Bavaria in Merovingian times, which in this region means late 5th-8th century. Here, the farms were far from isolated, but rather so close that it is hard to decide “where one farm begins and the other ends”, and being close to communication lines seems to have been of the utmost importance – this is all very different from the Norwegian situation. Two settlements, Kirchheim and Aschheim, are focussed on. An even better source to social structure is the burials, however. While large cemeteries were the rule in the earlier part of the period in question, farmyard burials came into use towards the end of the 6th century. In both cases the burials were equipped with grave goods. This is of special interest seen in relation to the Norwegian discussion regarding the transition from heathen to Christian burial rites, as the lack of grave goods has been one of the criteria used to identify Christian burials in Scandinavia, and farmyard burials are supposed to end with the formal conversion and organisation of the church.

Burials are the main subject of two more papers. Berglund describes in detail two special graves at the Sandnes farm in North Norway, and finds that they were both collective graves used over a period of hundreds of years. One grave she identifies as that of the people of the farm, while the other one may have been reserved for women specialist workers – in her own words providing “a peephole into the social life of the coastal farms of Helgeland”. She comes up with surprising results: while one grave seems to house men and women with close connections to the farm, the other holds women only. Berglund concludes that these (five) women, who were probably only loosely connected to the farm, were a group especially skilled in crafts, and perhaps in (magic) runes and healing. For this, they were provided with a special burial place

on the outskirts of the farm. If so, this is new and interesting information about medieval farm life.

The other paper that takes burials as a point of departure is the long-term study by Dommasnes and Hommedal, following two farms in the Vik settlement on the Sognefjord, Western Norway, over a period of almost one thousand years (c. 200–1200 AD). Starting with ten monumental Roman Age burial mounds, interpreted as symbols of power, the farms and their inhabitants are followed through the Viking Age into the era of Christianisation, the formal conversion and the unification of the country with new symbols of power, the churches. Burials, especially those of powerful people as was the case in most of the examples mentioned here, are mainly public events, even if they are conducted on a farm. Another (semi-)public aspect of farm life was the feasts that chiefs and magnates regularly seem to have held perhaps from Roman times through the Middle Ages (Bårdseth 2009; Sigurdsson 2010) to secure the continued loyalty of their allies. When the first churches were built in medieval Norway, they were connected to individual farms. The development that this new religion set in motion was, however, one that led public worship away from the individual farms into the greater society, and ultimately to the universal Catholic church.

Although it is very probable that both the two Vik farms and the northern Sandnes farm referred to above had halls, these could hardly match the more than 80 metres long hall building excavated on the northernmost Norwegian farm discussed in this volume, namely the chiefly Borg farm in Lofoten, North Norway. This farm is the point of departure for Storli, who discusses the Borg farm, its environs, houses and the impressive finds from the site. Through archaeological and written sources, she discusses the local society and cultural environment, including how the Borg chieftain may have played a role in the politics of Viking Age Norway. Towards the end of the paper, she describes his (postulated) decision to leave Borg and the fight for sovereignty in order to look for a new life on Iceland. Storli also suggests that the posts that had been removed from the Borg house may have travelled with him, to be thrown on the sea so that they could guide him to his new land. And keep the memory of his old farm alive?

On Iceland, Carlisle and Milek take over, and introduce us to some interesting finds from Viking Age Icelandic farm houses, characterised as “structured” deposits or foundation deposits, tentatively interpreted as traces of house offerings, the Norse settlers’ way of adapting to their new environment and conditions of life. The deposits vary from a walrus carcass built into a wall to iron blooms and scattered finds of a human tooth and a wide variety of other small finds. In each case the structured deposits are taken to relate to sources of wealth on the farms in question. The authors suggest that the deposits may have been used in the negotiation of social standing in this brand new society.

In our second paper dealing with German medieval society, Bremer discusses the village Pier in Northern Rhineland, from the Roman period through High Medieval

times. While written sources have previously dominated the discussion of medieval social structures, landscape archaeology has now been developed into a forceful tool and a new approach to the exploration of the rural past in the area. From the Roman until High Medieval times there was an enormous population increase, accompanied by a very complex social structure. Towns influenced rural life, and in the rural areas farms and noble estates “were integrated in a complex settlement system and could not be regarded as isolated ‘small worlds’” (Bremer this volume). Studying individual farms in such a setting makes little sense, and the paper is an important reminder of the widely varying social conditions in medieval Europe. A feudal society as described here was never fully developed in Norway. However, after the unification of Norway under one king and the formal Church organisation developed, these institutions became great landowners, inspired by feudal Europe.

The chronologically latest paper in this volume is written by Berglund, and presents some of her results from an excavation of the North-Norwegian site of a vicarage, namely the one where the 17th century vicar, hymnist, poet and large personality Petter Dass (1647–1707) and his descendants lived. Petter Dass is still a household name in Norway, and his hymns are still sung in Norwegian churches every Sunday. The unique opportunity to follow how he used material culture to construct his European identity in the North of Norway is therefore of general interest, even more so as it also demonstrates the potential of archaeological evidence in such matters.

Why the farm?

The main objective of this volume is to draw your attention to a gap in the scholarship on the prehistoric and medieval farm, in that its social function has until now been more or less disregarded in archaeology. The sources may be less complete than one would wish for, but even so, concentrating on this aspect brings some new insights. First of all, focussing on the basic unit of society makes it easier to follow processes of continuity and change over time. In spite of many changes, the overall impression is stability: the farm was the social unit that almost everybody related to over the centuries.

One change was the position of the farm in the structure of society. Over time, it changed from ancestral site in the founding period of settled farming and chiefdoms, to farms of varying sizes and statuses, ending in the Middle Ages with clusters of farms (estates) controlled by institutions like the church and kingship. Architectural conventions changed, although slowly, and following this, the structure of the farmyard. With changing farm houses and yard, the relations between those who lived on the farm, humans and animals, were also altered.

The farm in mental images is an aspect following us explicitly or implicitly through most of the papers, and we have been able to identify some of the ideolo-

gies behind the development. Among such ideological changes were probably the conceptions of animals – and the farm itself – in myths and religion, in connection with burial rites, and in ontological statuses. The farm's central place in the human mind is also expressed through cult activities and farmyard burials, both in heathen and in Christian times.

This again brings us closer to the people of the past, and enables us to consider the relations of these people, how they interacted with each other and influenced each other's lives and history. Some of our authors have followed small-scale events and developments on the farm, or looked very closely at events and processes, discovering unexpected connections and relations, or demonstrating that seemingly small changes may have profound consequences. Some farms have been home to mighty people, whose rise and fall we have been able to follow. The physical and mental frameworks of people's lives were also parts of the interaction: the surrounding nature, neighbours or lack of neighbours, the farm infields with the houses, animals, people and deities. This was the architecture that formed social life at the farm.

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