

Pre-urban Settlement: the Example of Skien

By Siri Myrvoll

1. General topography

The position and development of early urban settlements, such as central places, meeting places, markets etc., depend to a large degree on an area's topographical conditions as well as on its economic background and ready access to economic surplus and its power support. Various topographical factors – easy accessibility by land or water, good harbour facilities, a »comfortable«, sheltered and easily defensible site, good lines of communication between centre and hinterland and between centre and distribution area – will to a large extent determine the character of the settlement and its development within the local, national, or international distribution network. These factors are particularly important in a country with complicated topography, such as Norway, where settlements occur in clusters along the coastal fjords or inland valleys separated by often inaccessible mountainous terrain. In these countries inland communication is restricted, transport of goods took place by water, in barges on rivers or by ship along the coast. Indeed, waterways constituted the early inland road network, with fjords and sea routes as the main »highways«, tying together otherwise isolated communities and providing a link between countries.

The early Norwegian pre-urban communities were all centrally placed within the communication net-

work. In the first half of the Middle Ages trading centres of urban character but without urban administration or legislation appeared on the main coastal sailing route (fig. 1) or its »sidelines«: the fjords

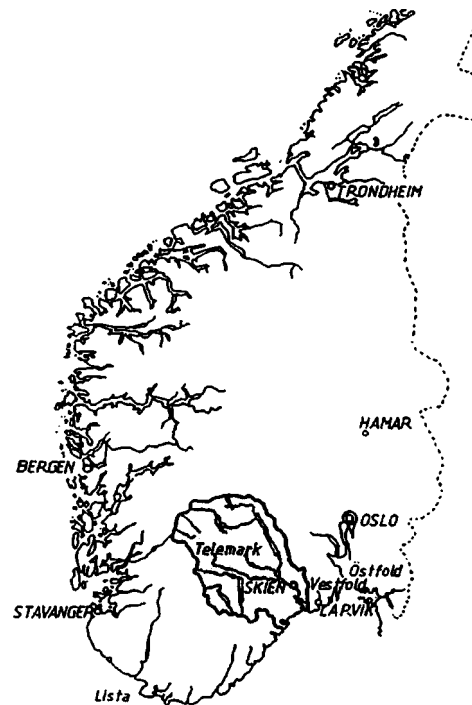


Fig. 1. Norway with Telemark and Skien.

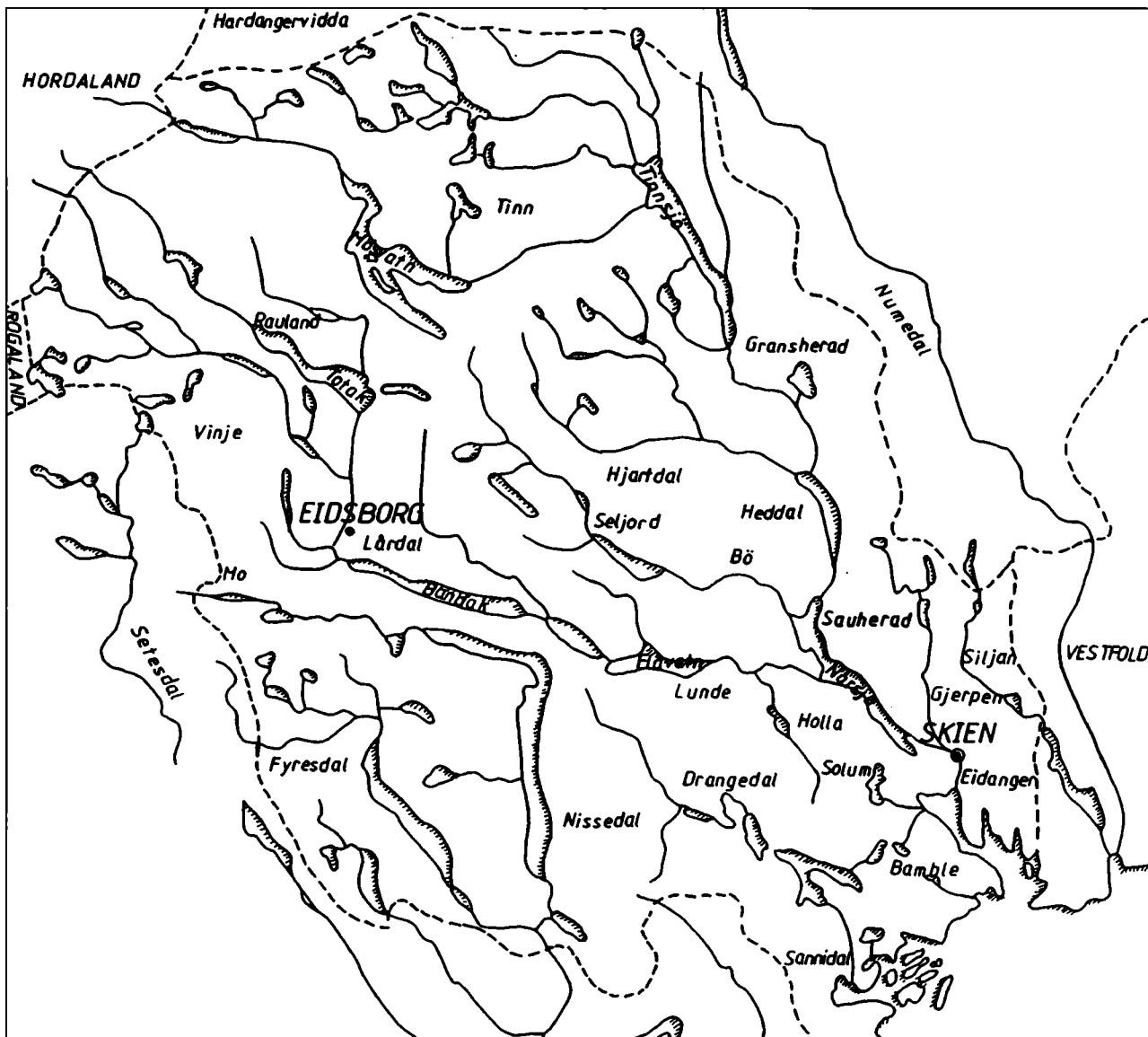


Fig. 2. The Telemark waterways.

or rivers. Most of these disappeared towards the end of the Medieval Period; some of these »kaupangs« (= markets) are known only by place-names (e.g. Koppang, Kaupang, -komp etc.) while others have been definitely located or archaeologically examined. Best known are the market centres of Borgund on Sunnmøre and Veøy in Romsdal, both identified and excavated by Asbjørn Herteig,¹ and more recently Vågan in Lofoten, excavated and published by Reidar Berthelsen.² The locations of several of these market centres show, however, a striking correspondence to areas of importance during the Iron Age. In his study of early power centres, Bjørn Myhre uses archaeological remains to postulate chiefdoms of high importance where later the Early Medieval market centres appeared.³

There is no space here to go into detail as to the early stages of all these centres so I shall concentrate on one: Skien, which differs from the rest in that it later grew into a town with full privileges. It is situated on the Telemark river network (fig. 2) where the waterways join the fjord in two lakes – Hjellevannet and Bryggevanne – today separated by waterfalls. In the Late Iron Age the present-day two lakes were one large lake with a string of islands and the waterfalls were nothing but small rapids. This lake provided a good harbour for ships from other districts and the waterways functioned as transport routes for surplus goods from inland to the coast. The location of Skien is particularly suitable for a market.

Archaeological excavations took place in Skien 1978-79 (fig. 3), on Rådhusplassen¹ and Handelstorget.⁵ The latter provided much information on the earliest settlement and original topography, and the results from this excavation is the basis for the following description of »pre-urban« Skien.

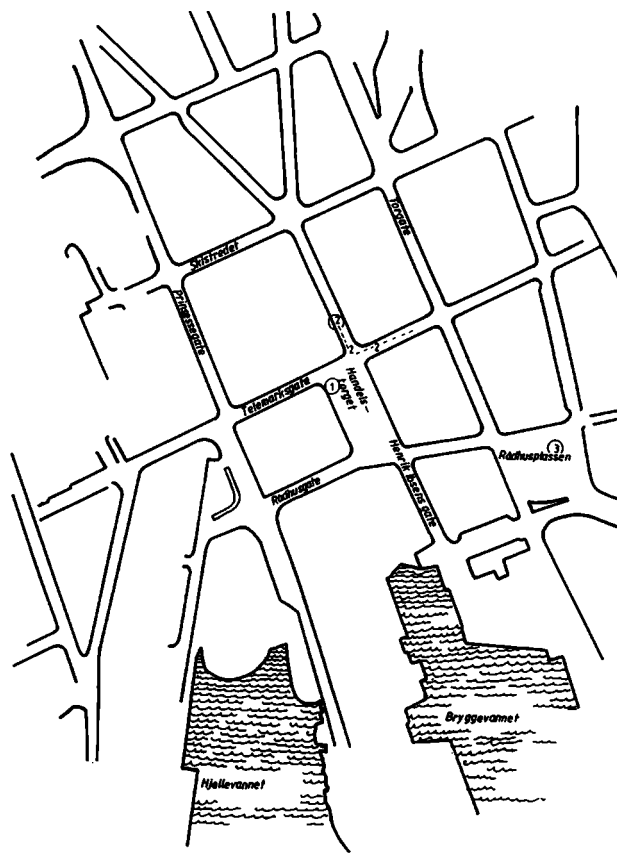


Fig. 3. Skien with the archaeological sites: 1 Handelstorget. 2 The Handelstorget ditches. 3 Rådhusplassen.

2. The topographical development

The original topography of Skien differed strikingly from that of the town of today, both as to shoreline and conformation. Sand and beach stones on the site indicate a shoreline and beach with a river outlet at 4-5m above present sea-level, a level consistent with the suggested land elevation for this area of 30-

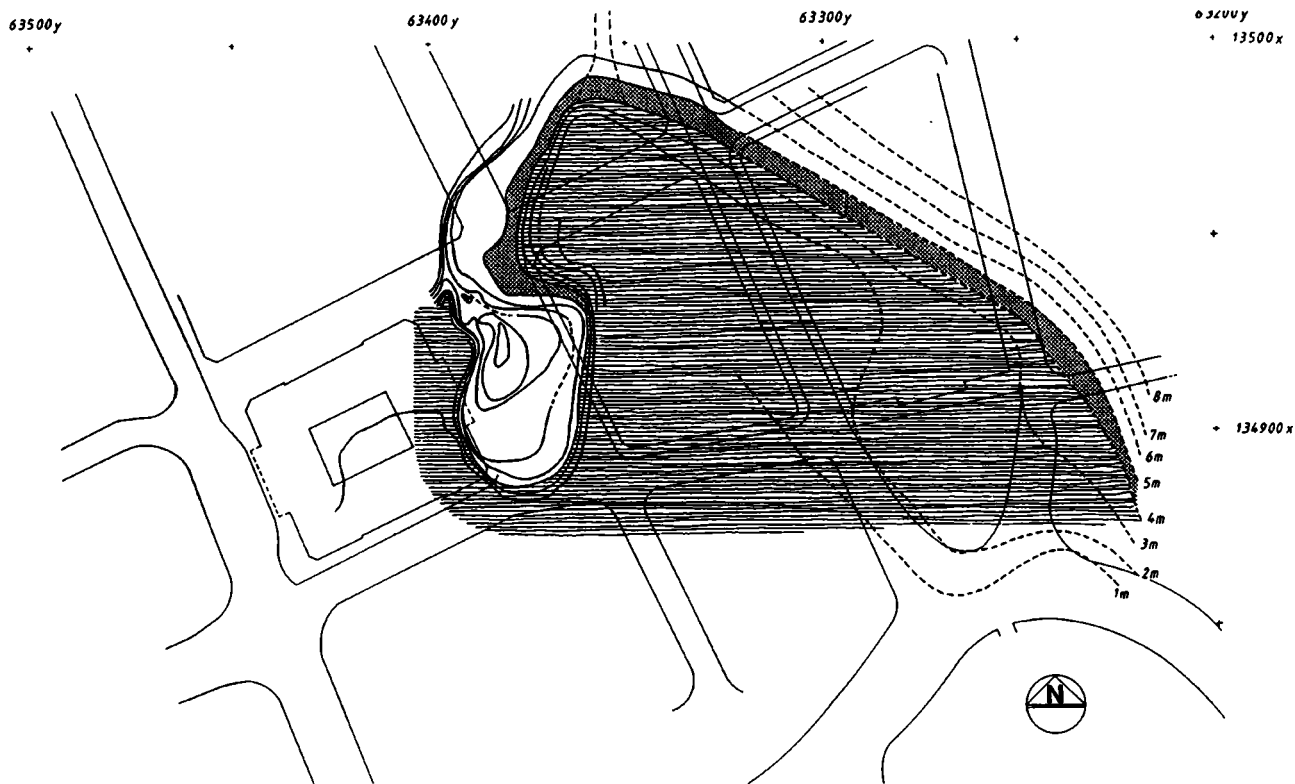


Fig. 4. Reconstructed shoreline and topography.

50cm per hundred years;⁶ thus the shoreline was 3-4m above present sea-level in AD 1000. The resultant configuration of the Skien shore shows a large, wide and shallow bay (fig. 4) between a rocky promontory rising to 8m above sea level on the west side of the bay and the high, steep cliff on the eastern shore. The bay was apparently divided in two by the outlet of the river Kverndalsbekken, now in conduits under Torvgaten but with an earlier course corresponding quite well with this hypothetical outlet

which is depicted on the 1796 map of Skien.⁷ The eastern bank of the river or brook must have been fairly marshy, with thick clay deposits under present day Landmannstorget, an area rather unsuitable for building land.

The rock from the promontory continues to the north-west and north in a semicircle, and from a sharp drop of 2m in the north the land between this rock and the bay forms a terrace at 5-6m above sea level with a gentle slope down towards the water and

up towards the southern promontory. It was on this terrace that the earliest settlement remains were found, and this eastern part of the bay in fact provided the only obviously suitable building land, with good harbour facilities for shallow-draught vessels.

The two wattle buildings of the first settlement, Phase 10, both stood by the rock, at the point where the terrace was at its widest (fig. 5). There were insufficient remains to show the details of the houses or their sizes but their orientation appears to have been determined by the shoreline and the shape of the terrace. The area down towards the beach was left open and two wattle fences cut the promontory off from the terrace. Some planks, including the bottom board from a small boat, were scattered between the two fences. The finds from this phase provided evidence for leatherworking and the use of small boats within the settlement, and unused honestones of the type quarried at Eidsborg in Upper Telemark were also present although there were no indications of workshops.⁸

Before the next building phase, Phase 9, there is evidence that the beach was levelled and brushwood in the open areas burnt off (layers of clay with burnt organic matter). The settlement was thus extended somewhat with the terrace being widened towards the east. At least two buildings, one of wattle and one possibly corner-timbered, were erected on the burnt area. Three contemporaneous buildings were found on the slope towards the promontory on the south-west side of the terrace, together with two »passages« following the 6.5m contour and forming the western limit of the settlement (fig. 6). The five buildings were all dug partly into the ground and grouped fairly close together. They formed a semi-circle on the terrace, surrounding an open area

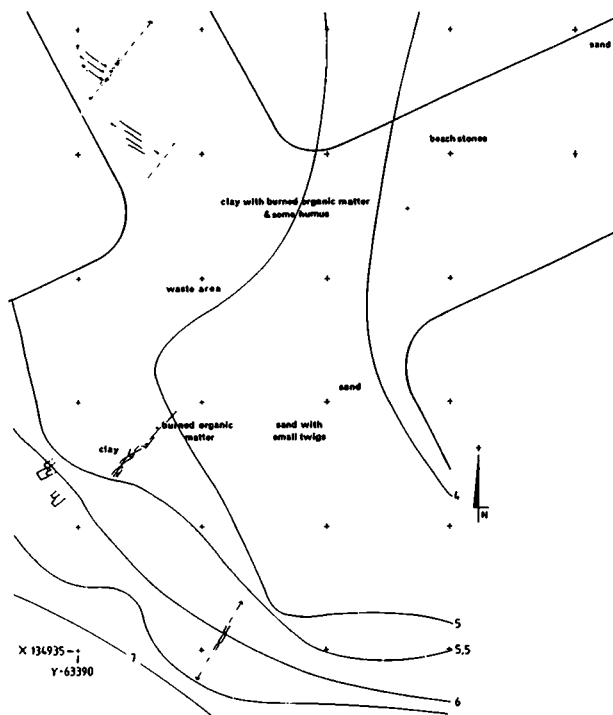


Fig. 5. Handelstorget and ditches, phase 10.

which appeared to have been divided by at least one, and perhaps more, wattle fences. This area was apparently used as a waste dump and the fence may have been associated with this. Two of the buildings had a hearth, suggesting dwellings; both may have been corner-timbered and were placed on the outer edges of the settlement. The small finds again indicate that, as in Phase 10, fishing and leatherworking took place within the settlement, and unused Eidsborg honestones were also found.

After the end of this phase there was a total change. The two northern buildings of Phase 9 were

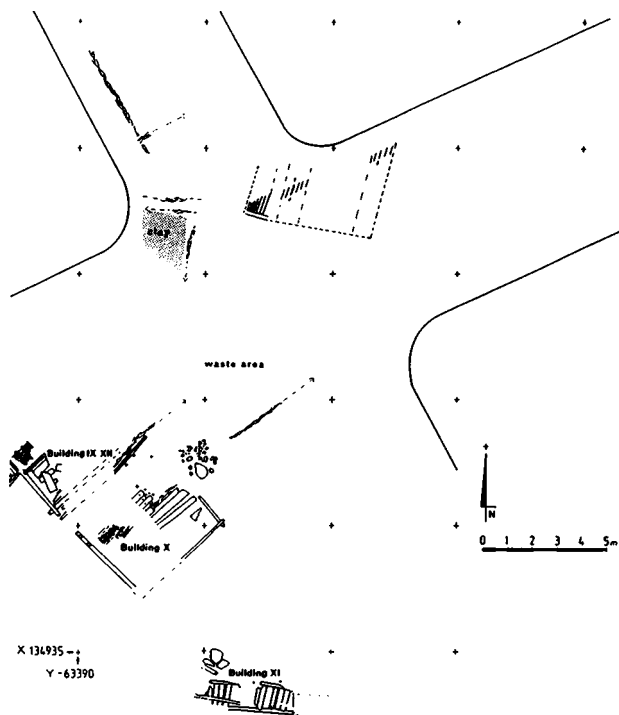


Fig. 6. Handelstorget and ditches, phase 9.

either left to collapse or were knocked down, and the area was overgrown. The vegetation was apparently burnt off and one new wattle building erected (fig. 7), being dug some 20cm into the ground. Several wattle fences were set up at right angles on the place where the corner-timbered building had been. Yet another building was dug into the ground further south and close to the former beach; it was of timber (or timber-framed) and had a wooden floor lying on joists. A third building, also timber-framed but with a clay floor, was found on the slope towards the promontory. The three buildings and

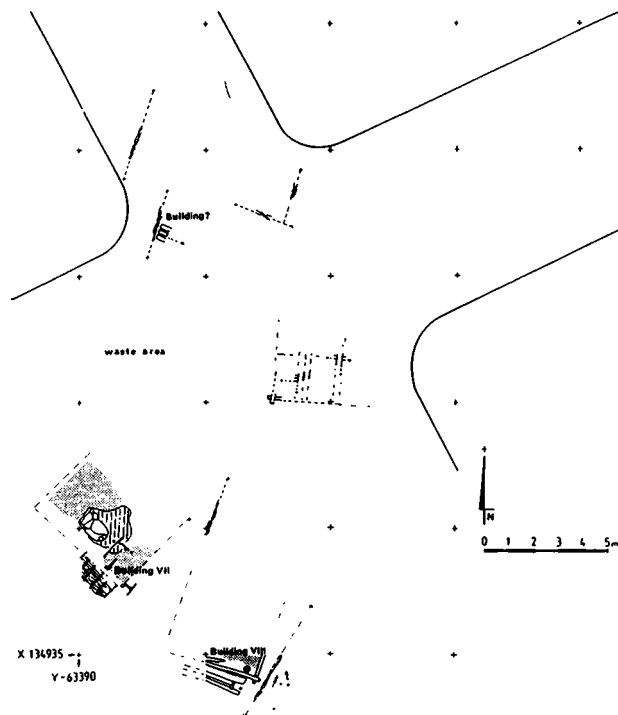


Fig. 7. Handelstorget and ditches, phase 8.

the wattle fences all have the same orientation, an orientation which in the southern parts differs strikingly from the previous phase. The last building on the site, Building VII, was of wattle with a clay floor and a large hearth as its main feature. It stood close to the highest point of the rock, at the south-western edge of the settlement, and was identified as a workshop for fine smithing.⁹ A waste dump lay immediately north of this area and the considerable quantities of antler waste and slag plus other finds (including unused Eidsborg honesstones) suggest that this area served the smithy and a nearby comb-maker, per-

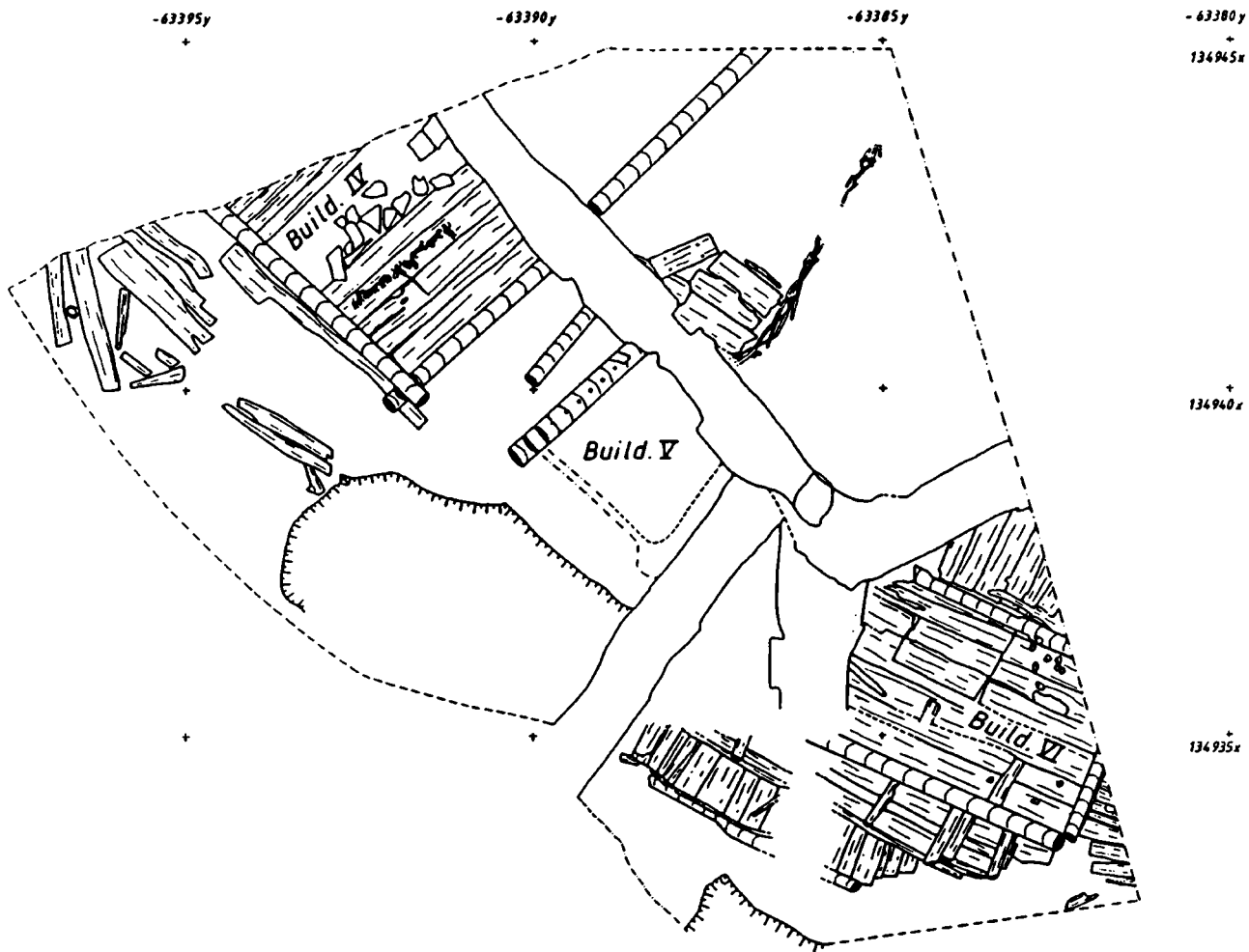


Fig. 8. Handelstorget, phase 7.

haps in the northern wattle building where a combcase was found in the surrounding layer. Boat building, fishing and leatherworking were also suggested by the finds.

Phase 8 represents a major change in the settlement, both as to building structure and economy. The new and uniform orientation of the buildings and fences may indicate the presence of some regu-

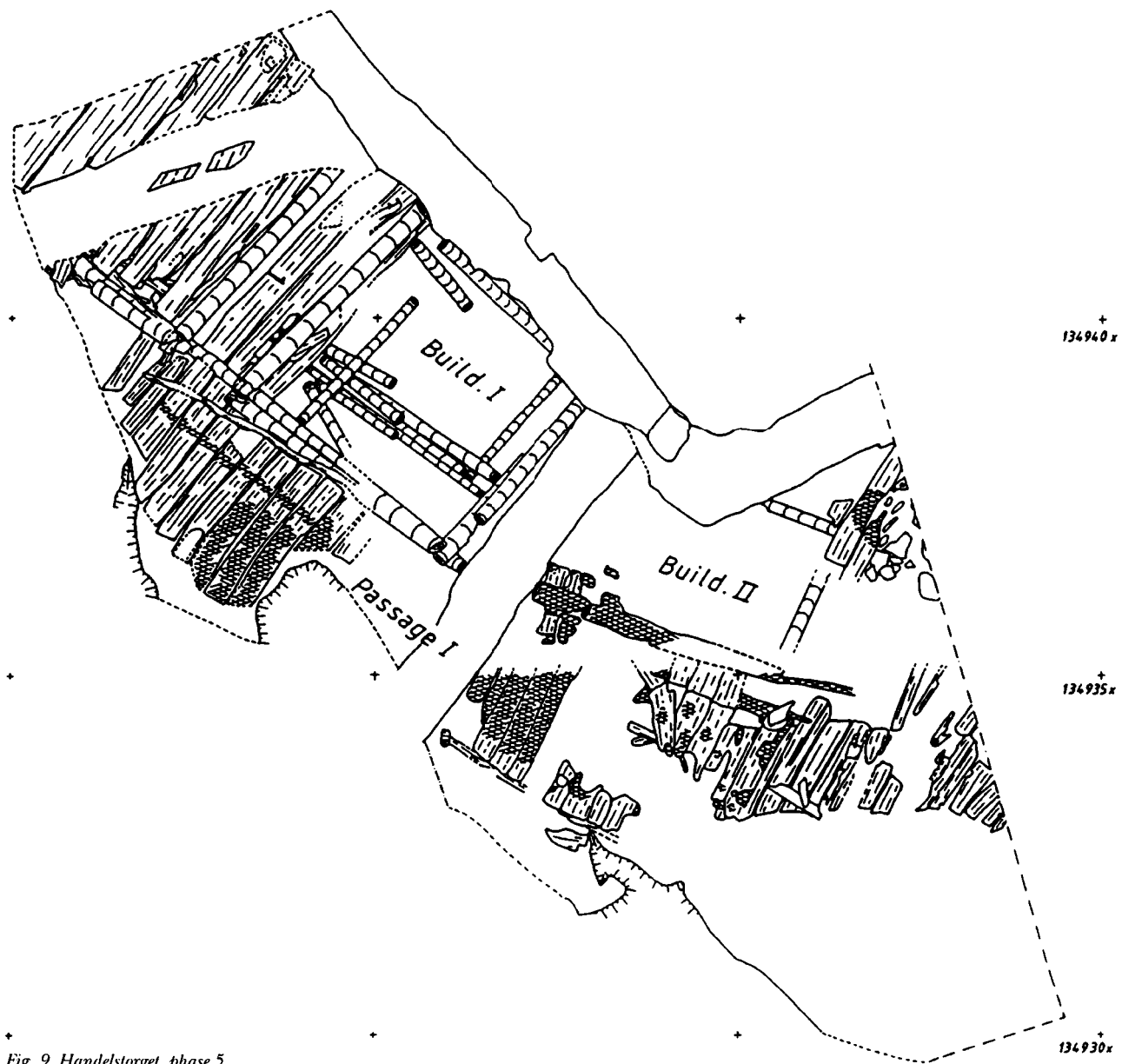


Fig. 9. Handelstorget, phase 5.

lating power, or perhaps a change of the shoreline and the alignment of the new settlement in conformity with the changes in the topography. Both factors may have been influential. Certainly, the new building structure suggests that part of the bay had been filled in and the shore straightened out, perhaps towards the eastern point of the promontory? The resulting shore would have had a beachline corresponding to the new orientation of the buildings and fences. The only inconsistency is that of the smithy where the orientation appears to have been dictated more by the line of the rock than by that of the beach.

A major change can also be seen in the settlement activities. Regular crafts other than leatherworking can be ascertained in the area for the first time: the smith's workshop, the comb maker and the boat builder. These crafts indicate a market economy of the same kind as that known from other Viking Age centres in which antler and metal crafts were practised, sometimes by itinerant craftsmen.¹⁰

Phase 8 in Skien was the last of the »wattle phases«. When it ended the buildings were demolished (or collapsed), the whole settlement was apparently levelled and the overgrown areas burnt off. The buildings were replaced totally, using more substantial materials – large corner-timbered buildings were dug into the levelling layers and disturbed the earlier building phases. The development to a Medieval town may be traced in the subsequent Phases 7 – 5 with the orientation of buildings and size of building plots remaining unchanged from Phase 7 (fig. 8). Several buildings had a hearth, and textile working, domestic activities, antler working and shoemaking are attested by the finds. Phase 5 contained a three-roomed shoemaker's workshop complete with lasts,

knives and various other tools (fig. 9). This last phase also had a wood-paved street 2m wide, and the fully developed Medieval town well known from other sites is indicated. Unused Eidsborg honestones were found in all phases and this type of stone obviously played an important part in Skien's settlement history.

The transition from Phase 8 to Phase 7 took place c. AD 1000, perhaps slightly earlier. Thus, the timber Phases 7-5 belong to the Early Medieval Period with the end of Phase 5 c. AD 1200 whereas the wattle phases belong to the last century of the Viking Age. The changes already discussed in Phases 8 and 7 suggest that events of great importance to the settlement of Skien occurred during the second half of the 10th century and a closer look at the settlement background may be of use in determining what these changes represented within the settlement.

3. The character and function of the early settlement

The archaeological background of Iron Age Telemark has been discussed in earlier publications¹¹ and there is no need to go into further details here. It is sufficient to state that the finds indicate a shift of power during the Iron Age from the district of Solum with the farm Bjørntvedt to Gjerpen, further north and across the river. Gjerpen includes the northern shore of the lake Bryggevanet, connected to the coast by the Skien river (more often called the Skien fjord). They and Hjellevannet constitute the end of the Telemark waterways, a network of rivers tying together most of Upper Telemark (fig. 2). At the northern end of Bryggevanet and the northeastern end of Hjellevannet, Skien stood in a strategic position for controlling the traffic on the Telemark waterways.

Analysis has shown that the small finds from Skien reflect the surplus products from Telemark and suggest that it was a community which was not self-supporting but one which depended on its hinterland for necessary supplies and raw materials: hides, antler, metal.¹² The production of honestones at Eidsborg was of special importance to Skien which obviously acted as a port from which the hones were shipped. Even in the earliest phases, most of the honestones found in Skien were unused and must, therefore, have been intended for redistribution; they were a »transit product« right from the beginning.

The strategic position of the settlement for river transport and trade, and the presence of Eidsborg honestones in all phases of the settlement suggest that Skien was a transit centre, particularly for trade in honestones; this could be the main reason for the emergence of Skien. The 10th-century distribution of Eidsborg honestones to Denmark, the Baltic Sea area and England¹³ illustrates the popularity of and demand for them – some have even been found on routes to Cracow in south Poland. Skien as a point of departure for honestones is not surprising and so it probably served as a transit centre and shipping port for Eidsborg hones; this must have been the main economic background of the settlement.

In the course of time a transit centre designed for the distribution of honestones, for example, would certainly attract other activities: commodities for exchange and raw materials for processing. Thus, it is logical that Skien as a transit centre should acquire some simple crafts in its earliest phases; these should then be followed by increasing specialization. This development is evidenced by the leather working and fishing in the two early phases and the metal

workshop and extension of the range of crafts in Phase 8. Comb making and metal working (e.g. bronze casting), both taking place in Phase 8, are some early crafts believed to be specialized. According to Kristina Ambrosiani, the comb makers of the Viking Age were specialists who did not remain long in one place but travelled from market to market, working their own designs in local raw material. Their customers were found in the gatherings in markets and fairs, and permanent comb-makers' workshops were found only in the Medieval towns with a larger, settled population.¹⁴ The evidence for a comb maker in 10th-century Skien, therefore, is a fairly certain indicator of a market place.

The craft of fine-metal working is also specialized. From the finds in Ribe; Brinch Madsen suggests craft activities in the open air, of brief duration and connected with a fair. He considers that the craftsmen were specialists, perhaps itinerant craftsmen travelling over a wide area between markets or fairs.¹⁵

The range of crafts in early Skien therefore supports the impression of a transit centre, with periodic assembly of people engaged in trade, which would attract specialized craftsmen. These people were well-travelled within the Viking Age cultural sphere and their products reflect this »international« circle of contacts. Several finds from the interior of Telemark document the contacts with this cultural sphere; for example, some brooches show the same design as on moulds found in Ribe and Hedeby.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that these finds came mainly from the part of the river network which connects the honestone quarries of Eidsborg with the rest of Telemark.

The three earliest phases in Skien had thin depo-

sits and light structures. In some instances charcoal-mixed layers were found covering unburnt structures or areas with no structures. These layers have been interpreted as the burning-off of undergrowth before building; they were found in connection with Phases 10 and 9, and also covered most of the site above Phase 8.

These features are important for determining the type of settlement found in Skien – whether it was of a permanent or seasonal nature. The very thin deposits, the light structures and the burning of overgrown areas suggest not a continuous settlement but rather a site which was periodically abandoned. There are, however, indications of a gradually increasing settlement-density and some of the charcoal layers may indicate reclaimed building land, as suggested for the beach in Phase 9. This interpretation does, however, presuppose an open area which was *left to grow*; this also suggests a gap in the use of the area which is particularly evident between Phase 8 and Phase 7. The lack of conclusive evidence for permanent households also strengthens the impression of settlement discontinuity.

The crafts and the natural topography suggest that the settlement was basically a part of the regional trading system. The evidence mentioned above seems to point towards a seasonal market-place in which some of the buildings may have been used over several years, but not necessarily all the year round. Phase 7 gives the first certain evidence for permanence. The fact that all Phase 8 was covered by a charcoal layer indicates the change from seasonal (or occasional?) market to permanent settlement;

there must have been total clearance of earlier debris and vegetation before buildings were constructed in heavier and more permanent materials.

The development of the early settlement may thus be as suggested below:

The two early phases, Phase 10 and Phase 9, indicate a non-permanent settlement connected with the trade in honestones, perhaps only a »waiting place« for the shipment of hones from the interior of Telemark. In Phase 9 the settlement expanded and must have been in use for some length of time, not just one season, as witnessed by buildings with timber-framing and hearths.

The whole building-structure of the settlement was rearranged in Phase 8, suggesting some regulation of building plots, and the crafts of metal working and comb making suggest a market place. If the two earliest phases are to be labelled »waiting place« Phase 8 might possibly be called a »meeting place«, a place where the farmers of Upper Telemark met traders from abroad, a place where goods were produced and exchanged. Again, there is no evidence of permanency but the structures hardly indicate a single-season market.

The transition to Phase 7 is quite dramatic and suggests a turning point in the history of the settlement – the change from occasional or season market-place to permanent settlement, later to be developed into a Medieval town. It is reasonable to assume that this change in character of the settlement was associated with events in the near vicinity, perhaps a change in power structure and organization in the Skien area.

Notes

1. Herteig 1954, 1975.
2. Berthelsen 1988.
3. Myhre 1987.
4. Myrvoll 1982.
5. Myrvoll 1983.
6. Fylkeskartkontoret for Telemark, pers. comm.
7. Myrvoll Lossius 1979; Rødseth and Gardåsen 1984, 28.
8. Myrvoll 1985.
9. Myrvoll 1988.
10. Ambrosiani 1981; Brinch Madsen 1984.
11. Myrvoll 1984, 1986.
12. Myrvoll 1986.
13. Myrvoll 1985.
14. Ambrosiani 1981, 157ff.
15. Brinch Madsen 1984, 95ff.
16. Myrvoll 1986, 172-4.

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