Material Culture on Display. Archaeological Accessory or Science-Based Medieval Mediator?

Sigrid Samset Mygland

The artefact plays a central role in modern medieval archaeology. "Things" have increasingly set the agenda within Scandinavian urban research, for instance throughout the discussion in the 1980s and 90s regarding research on the abundant find material that had been collected up until that point in time. Not least was the relatively small and limited use of the artefact as a source category discussed, among other things in light of the influence the subject of history has traditionally had on medieval archaeology.

The nature of the use of material culture as an exhibition object within that same period can also be questioned. This article engages with the first two permanent exhibitions at Bryggens museum in Bergen, from 1976 and 1986, respectively, Norway's first and only museum dedicated to medieval history. Despite the primarily archaeological expression, a large number of artefacts on exhibit, and the seminal Bryggen excavation, these exhibitions can be read as historical portrayals of the Middle Ages, where written sources form the theoretical framework and the archaeological artefact to a larger degree plays the role of illustration. Rather than being a conscious devaluation of the archaeological artefact as a source category, it is argued that this illustrative role first and foremost reflects an early phase of mediaeval archaeology in general – with a short research history and a substantial inheritance from the subject of history.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

As a key source material within modern medieval archaeology, the artefact has recurrently been at the centre of attention in Scandinavia. As a museological object, on the other hand, it has rarely made the headlines – perhaps because of the efforts that have been put into establishing medieval archaeological museums and producing medieval archaeological exhibitions. Among the former institutions is Bryggens museum in Bergen, which in 2020 introduced its third permanent exhibition since the opening of the museum in 1976: "*Below Ground. Medieval Finds from Bergen and Western Norway*". As might be expected of a medieval archaeological museum today, and within an academic and curated environment increasingly focusing on human experience past and present, the exhibition eagerly and enthusiastically explores both the archaeological artefact and the men, women and children behind it. And for good reason. By the time of the renovation, its 32-year-old predecessor did no longer cater to the demands of its visitors, the facilities were worn, and the integration of new research was long overdue. Not least, however, a less pronounced reflection lingered – illustrated by a characterization of the exhibition as "*a historical presentation of the Middle Ages, with archaeological accessory*" (personal communication: Knut Høiaas).

This somewhat cheeky statement is thought-provoking, raising questions concerning the archaeological artefact as medieval mediator at Bryggens museum prior to "*Below Ground*" (Figure 1). Has, as the quote indicates, the archaeological perspective played second fiddle to the historical one in the only Norwegian museum dedicated to medieval archaeology? Was the artefact – which may be said to represent the very essence of medieval archaeology – treated more as a prop and a means of illustration rather than an independent source material? And if so, how can this be explained? Approaching these questions, attention is drawn to a similar issue, also touching on the relationship between the disciplines of medieval archaeology and history. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a Scandinavian discussion on the use of material culture within medieval archaeological research took place, among other things in the historic archaeological journal Meta. At the centre of the debate was the use of the artefact and its seeming inability to generate new, preferably cultural historical knowledge. The utterance some decades later calling attention yet again to the unfulfilled potential of the artefact – but now within a museological context – calls for a closer examination and discussion of the role of "things" within medieval archaeological research and curation.

In the following, the medieval archaeological artefact on display at Bryggens museum is examined, represented by the closely related permanent exhibitions from 1976 and 1986. A brief – and far from exhaustive – backdrop on the use

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23



Figure 1. From "Below Ground. Medieval Finds from Bergen and Western Norway" (2020). Photo: Bergen City Museum.

and role of the artefact within medieval archaeological research primarily from the 1970s and towards the new millennium initiates the presentation and discussion of the two exhibitions. The analysis of the exhibition from 1976 is mainly based on unpublished archive material – like photos, drawings and documents – and reservations are made that not all content and design elements have been captured. The documentation from the 1986 exhibition, on the other hand, also includes first-hand experiences from my own work at Bryggens museum as senior curator. An inclusion of activities that have taken place in or in relation the exhibitions, other public events, as well as temporary exhibitions may contribute to a fuller understanding of the permanent exhibitions – as would the application of a pronounced museological perspective. However, this is beyond the frame of this article. Instead, the exhibitions are tentatively investigated in relation to and considering the development of modern medieval archaeology in Scandinavia. The relationship between the artefact as a showcased object and the development of modern medieval archaeology and its somewhat troubled relationship with history are stressed. The same applies to medieval material culture as an essential and independent source material and mediator between the present and the past.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

The medieval archaeological artefact towards a new millennium. Between the devil and the blue sea

Since its beginnings in the eighteenth century, medieval archaeology in Scandinavia has undergone a major transformation. Rooted in a "*diffuse research area with participants of diverse expertise ranging from architecture, history (history of art and churches in particular), ethnology and museology, as well as the occasional archaeologist*" (Nøttveit 2010: p. 24), it initially displayed limited interest in cultural layers and material remains of everyday life. This, however, changed with the introduction of modern medieval archaeology in the middle of the 20th century, bringing about new field methods and prioritizations – including a great belief in the artefact. In the following decades, systematic collection left museum storerooms all over Scandinavia bursting with medieval material remains, ranging from leather fragments and pottery shards to warp weights, wooden spoons and bone combs.

Yet, as the wave of urban excavations in the 1970s and 1980s in Scandinavia and Northern Europe withdrew, the medieval artefact apparently found itself in a troubled position. Not least, this concerned research beyond basic artefact studies, classifications and chronologies. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when one increasingly began reflecting on the status quo, a relatively limited use of the artefact as a source within urban medieval archaeological research was highlighted (e.g. Myrvoll *et al.* 1991). Swedish archaeologist Jan-Erik Augustsson (1994) claimed that material culture was a neglected research field within Swedish medieval archaeology. Both Augustsson and others also argued that so far, the artefact had been treated in a rather isolated manner, e.g. in relation to thematically limited issues like dating, descriptive artefact studies and classifications of large and complex artefact groups like pottery, combs and shoes (Nordeide 199, p. 117–118; Sigurdsson 1991, p. 156–157; Augustsson 1994, p. 34–35). Barely had the artefact been used as a source of general, historical knowledge, reflected in among other Norwegian archaeologist Britt Solli's call for analyses, syntheses and publications (Solli 1989, p. 133). Similarly, Swedish archaeologist Hans Andersson (1991, p. 109) underlined the potential of the medieval artefact and the need to use it more broadly: "*What I envision for Swedish urban archaeology in the 1990s is a stronger emphasis on exploring the archaeological material and its possibilities*" (my translation). Indeed, as Norwegian archaeologist Axel Christophersen (2000, p. 9) concluded: "*The urban excavations from the 1970s onwards produced a considerable amount of archaeological source material which potential is yet to be unfolded*".

The apparent shortcomings of medieval material culture studies

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

may, however, hardly be ascribed a conscious devaluation of the artefact. Instead, its relatively short history as an academic discipline needs consideration. Archaeological activity may be divided in stages, covering 1) excavation, 2) studies and analyses of the remains, and 3) reconstruction of past societies (Molaug 1992, p. 31–32). More specifically, where few or no previous archaeological examinations have taken place, basic investigations are called for – excavating and documenting the site, as well as collecting physical remains. The archaeological material may then be investigated more thoroughly in terms of material culture, like chronologies and typologies that may be used for dating. Only after the artefacts are organized in time and space may more complex issues be investigated (Schofield & Vince 1994, p. 204–214). At the time of the Bryggen excavation (1955–1968) – a pioneer excavation within modern medieval archaeology in Northern Europe – basic medieval archaeological knowledge was missing, concerning both cultural layers, artefacts and dating. The preceding orientation mainly towards ruins and other archaeological remains above ground also meant that there were hardly any comparable artefact studies to turn to (Schofield & Vince 1994, p. 204; Molaug 2002). The many urban excavations that took place in the decades following the Bryggen excavations further severely limited the time available to research, and one commonly lacked necessary resources and plans on how to include it (Molaug 2002, p. 8–9). Scientific projects aiming at processing the excavated material were eventually initiated (e.g. Andersen et al. 1971, Mårtensson 1976; *De arkeologiske utgravninger i Gamlebyen, Oslo*; *The Bryggen Papers*); however, they often turned out somewhat isolated artefact presentations rather than in-depth investigations of cultural historical issues (Christophersen 1980, p. 23–24, 1991: 86; Molaug 1991, p. 93–95; Schofield & Vince 1994, p. 204; Molaug 2002).

The absence of basic knowledge of material culture coupled with extensive excavation activity and a lack of resources were not the only challenges; general methodical and theoretical obstacles also played their part. Particularly, numerous issues of representativity complicated (and still complicate) research on medieval material culture – like its preservation conditions, possible re-use, diverging life-span, and degree of fragmentation – affecting particularly the feasibility of precise distributional and contextual analyses. The (in) availability of the extensive artefact material at the time due to incomplete post-excavation work, and digital data, documentation and tools, as well as few publications were other factors (Solli 1989, p. 133; Molaug 2001, p. 54, 2002, p. 9). The same applies to the low number of chairs in medieval archaeology throughout Scandinavia (Ekroll 1992). Adding a relative – yet, not complete (e.g. Christophersen & Nordeide 1994) –

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

absence of a theoretical framework, the vast artefact material may easily have been perceived as «*an unmanageable archive of unmanipulated or unsynthesised raw data*» (McLees et al. 1994, p. 3), effectively discouraging any large-scale research projects.

Last, but not least, medieval archaeology has traditionally been affected and heavily influenced by other academic disciplines. Long before archaeologists threw their eyes on this period, the Middle Ages were first and foremost considered the field of history in particular, but also of e.g. art history and architecture (Lunde 1991, p. 22–24). In these relationships, it was argued that modern medieval archaeological research had simply taken over traditional historical research issues and perspectives. These were related to what may be characterized as «*big history*» and «*big questions*» – like the emergence of towns and cities, trade and trading networks, and state formation – and based on written sources, the (male) social elite and a so-called "*perspective from above*" (Anglert & Lindeblad 2004, p. 8–9; Hansen 2015, p. 37; Hansen et al. 2015, p. 1–9). Archaeological sources, however, may tell other stories (Christophersen 1992), and, addressing the future role of urban medieval archaeological research, Christophersen claimed that:

> «the insights that empirical archaeological evidence has contributed to works on urban history in recent years are (…) on the whole limited to applying (…) to such areas that are at the outset defined by historians based on surviving texts. The remnants of the material culture of the past, and archaeologists' interpretations of these remains, have not to any relevant degree expanded the boundaries of the themes, research issues and interpretations that have been at the fore in overview works on towns and cities in recent years (…). To the extent that the results from urban archaeological research in recent years have had an impact on the overview works of historians, this role has been heavily mediated by other actors than the archaeologists» (Christophersen 2000, p. 9, my translation).

Indeed, it was argued that a division had developed between physical and non-physical history, in which historians took care of social history and archaeologists dealt with the physical aspect of this period (Sigurdsson 1991, p. 156). Apparently, this situation came to affect also the curation of the archaeological record.

Bryggens museum and the permanent exhibition

A direct result of the excavation at Bryggen was Bryggens museum. Now a part of Bergen City Museum, the institution was established by the University Museum in Bergen to house and showcase the finds from this excavation as well as later medieval excavations in Bergen and Western Norway (i.e. the present

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

county Vestland and the Sunnmøre region) (Øye 1989). The aim was to «*… care for the scientific interests and obligations arising from the law on ancient monuments within the medieval archaeology of Vestlandet*» and to be a "*…cultural activity-centre where exhibitions and other types of cultural activities may be presented in an integrated totality*" (Herteig in Øye 1989, p. 39). A scientific staff, affiliated with the University Museum and including the leader of the Bryggen excavation, Asbjørn E. Herteig, oversaw both research, collection management and production of exhibitions. By the middle of the 1990s, the scientific profile had indirectly been enhanced by the physical localization also of other key medieval archaeological institutions in Bergen – the medieval section of Department of Archaeology (today Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion) at the University of Bergen (including master- and PhD-students), Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage (NIKU), and the Directorate for Cultural Heritage (district office).

This unofficial medieval cluster enabled close bonds between the fields of excavation, research, management of cultural heritage, and curation. It has also contributed to many of the numerous temporary exhibitions that have been presented here – of which there were no less than 128 during the first decade (Lerheim 1986). Not before "*Below Ground*", however, was it involved in the production of a permanent exhibition. Nevertheless, the permanent exhibition has always been the very centre of attention, located on the basement floor and showcasing life in the approximately 500-year long medieval period in Western Norway based on the University Museum in Bergen's large and heterogenous archaeological collection. As mentioned, three such exhibitions have been made so far, opening in 1976, 1986 and 2020, respectively. In the following, the former two are presented with special regard to the role of medieval archaeology and the archaeological artefact.

"*Bergen – Norway – Europe c. 1300*". The permanent exhibition of 1976

The permanent exhibition is made up of two distinct parts, separated by a smaller, open area. The rear part – originally called the "*Building Historical Section*" – was (and still is) dedicated to a reconstructed part of the Bryggen excavation site. This gently sloping area both illustrates the archaeological site and presents the traditional urban tenement structure at Bryggen, comprising original remains of passages, eavesdrop gaps and buildings from the 12th century. It also relates to St. Mary's and the ruins traditionally interpreted as St. Mary's Guildhall and St. Lawrence's immediately outside the museum, separated by glass windows. All remains lie *in situ* on the same spot as they did when they

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23



Figure 2. The "Big Ship". Parts of the "Building Historical Section" is seen in the background, as well as St. Mary's outside the windows. Photo: University Museum of Bergen.



Figure 3. Diaroma: "The turner and the cooper" (workshop). Photo: University Museum of Bergen.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

were found, horizontally and vertically. The site further illustrates the original topography of the town and the original beach, the latter situated c. 130–140 m distant from the present shoreline. What is today generally referred to as "*the excavation site*" cannot be removed, only modified. Thus, it is practically part of the museum building.

The second part – the "*Cultural Historical Section*" – lies in front of the excavation site and the open area in front of it, and originally lay characterized by a showcase-based presentation. Titled "*Bergen – Norway – Europe c. 1300*", the exhibition focused on the Norwegian Middle Ages in general, based on Bergen and its national and international role. The aim was "*to present a cross-section of important aspects of life between c. 1270–1300*" (Herteig 1976a), and the main themes – including in all 48 "stations" – focused on seafaring and trade, the German Hansa, crafts and other activities in the town, local and national administration, the Church, and medieval culture, in addition to social aspects of medieval society. These themes were explored further in a handbook dedicated to the exhibition (Herteig 1976b). Where physical design and layout is concerned, a full-size, reconstructed cross-section of the so-called "*Big Ship*" – a locally built trading ship from the thirteenth century, which remains had been re-used in a passage at Bryggen (Hansen 2001) – had been raised in the part closest to the excavation site (Figure 2). Otherwise, the exhibition was characterized by movable walls with showcases presenting numerous archaeological artefacts (exact number unknown) in addition to some copies. Archaeological artefacts – typically different types of tools, production waste and kitchen utensils – did to a varying degree also furnish the seven full size dioramas primarily found along the innermost walls – workshops, a latrine, a shed, a so-called Norw. "*eldhus*" (a kitchen) and a Norw. "*skytningsstove*" (a common room) (Figure 3). In the innermost, secluded area, a statue of St. Mary and an altar frontal were also exhibited (Figure 4). In addition, an exhaustive number of elaborating texts, photos, maps and other illustrations featured prominently.

The intent of the exhibition was not a purely archaeological presentation of the Middle Ages, very much in line with the somewhat interdisciplinary approach aimed at throughout the Bryggen excavation (Herteig 1969). The exhibition focused on including all medieval sources, to present a selection of themes from a temporally restricted part of the Middle Ages – which had hardly been done before (Herteig 1976b, p. 7). Nevertheless, the opening lines of the exhibition stated that "*Knowledge of the Middle Ages is increasingly produced by things from the ground*" (my translation) and stressed the importance of archaeology and natural sciences (Herteig 1976a). This was seemingly reflected in the many artefacts, copies, reconstructions, and dioramas presented in

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23



Figure 4. The Church on display. Photo: University Museum of Bergen.

the exhibition. Artefacts and results from the Bryggen excavation were highlighted, as well as preliminary finds from the ongoing excavation of the small town Borgund outside Ålesund. Neither should the archaeological impact of the extensive excavation site and the impressive "*Big Ship*" be underestimated. In addition, the many colourful thematic stations filled with texts, drawings and other illustrations, as well as the in-depth handbook contributed to an overall impressively comprehensive and informative presentation of the Middle Ages and medieval material culture. Within this context, medieval archaeology and artefacts immediately strikes one as being a focal point and an essential part of the exhibition.

A closer examination of the actual presentation and integration of the artefacts, however, reveals that neither medieval archaeology nor the many showcased artefacts were explored and elaborated on to any depth. Although archaeological artefacts, dioramas and pictures were evenly distributed throughout the exhibition, only about 15–16 of the 48 stations may be said to focus primarily on archaeology – addressing in particular Borgund and archaeological structures like the *Big Ship*, the wharf and the physical settlement at Bryggen. Of these, even fever approached the archaeo-

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

logical artefact explicitly – neither in general nor as a source material. The "workshops", for instance, exhibited numerous archaeological finds, but was primarily accompanied by excerpts from the Urban Law of 1276, regulating the physical localization of craftsmen in Bergen. Indeed, this part of the exhibition largely focused on the historically well-known, but archaeologically poorly investigated craftsman street "*Øvrestretet*" behind Bryggen.

Many of the other stations as well made little or no references to archaeology or the archaeological source material whatsoever. These were generally presented without archaeological artefacts on display and focused on topics like the Hansa, as well as urban, regional and national administration. Neither did the objects that were exhibited in relation to the remainder of stations receive much attention. Relatively many objects – like children's toys, gaming pieces and gaming boards, remains of clothes, dress accessories, rune sticks etc – were showcased in relation to different aspects of medieval life and society in general. Yet, besides short labels identifying some – not all – of the artefacts, as well as translations of the runic inscriptions, the subject matters were consistently discussed within the context of written sources. The same applied to the stations related to law and order, the Church, and trade in general. Although showcasing archaeological photos and fascinating objects such as weapons, rune sticks, coins, weights, seals, and pilgrim badges, the stations refrained from commenting on the artefacts as source material. The first of these stations, for instance, primarily focused on the historically known Norw. "*leidang*" and King Magnus the Lawmender's *Laws of the Land*'s regulations of 1274 concerning military equipment, whereas the urban population was investigated in terms of social classes known from written sources. Indeed, unless relevant written sources were absent or incomplete on a subject matter, the 1976 exhibition remained silent of its archaeological additions.

Despite its overall archaeological design and interdisciplinary starting point, then, the exhibition apparently based on a historical perspective. It first and foremost revolved around written sources and so-called *big history*, with few explicit discussions on or references to the role and value of material culture, and indirectly reflecting the presumed division between physical and non-physical history. The overall historical bias is also evident in the handbook, which explicitly stresses the necessity of interpreting the archaeological material within a wider (presumably historical) context. Only then, it will "*make sense*" (my translation) (Herteig 1976b, p. 7). Within this context, the archaeological artefact first and foremost fulfilled an illustrative role, coming across as a secondary source to and depending on the field of history.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

"*The medieval City. Bergen around 1300*". The permanent exhibition of 1986

Considering the frequent change of temporary exhibitions in general, it comes as no surprise that the 1976 exhibition was renovated after just ten years. The excavation site was left unchanged but got a new name: "*The oldest urban Tenements – Building Remains from the first Century as a Town*". It was also tentatively joined to the "*Cultural Historical Section*" by a reconstructed quay in front of the now extended cross-section of the "*Big Ship*". In addition to an enhanced focus on seafaring and trade in the quay area, this layout aimed at a more pronounced connection between the building remains in the excavation site, the symbolic shoreline in front of it, and the bay. The biggest change, however, was the exhibition replacing *"Bergen – Norway – Europe c. 1300*" (Figure 5). Both thematically and artefactually, "*The medieval City. Bergen around 1300*" may be described as a revision of its predecessor, focusing more explicitly on Bergen and its national and international role and importance, as well as its physical, economic, administrative and social structure. Generally, the main themes and many of the numerous sub-themes from 1976 were carried forward, now concentrating on seafaring and trade, the urban tenement, the street Øvrestretet, and Bergen as an ecclesiastical, royal and cultural centre. In addition, the original accompanying texts – alongside the new handbook (Øye 1986) – had been revised, compressed and incorporated into the new environment.

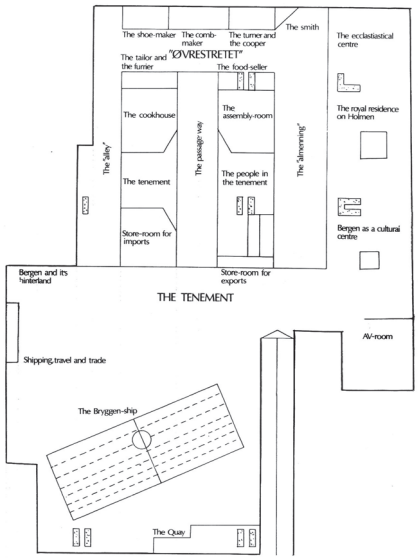


Figure 5. Plan of the 1986 exhibition (Øye 1986).

Physically, the 1986 exhibition as well was based on showcases and dioramas. Approximately 500 archaeological artefacts were exhibited, many of which had been presented also in the original exhibition. The overall layout and presentation were different, though. The concept of movable walls and stations had been replaced by an urban "tenement" with two parallel rows of houses joined by a passage in the middle, focusing on building structure and everyday life. The rooms in the "tenement" were more or less of the same types as earlier: a storeroom, a kitchen, a latrine and a common room, furnished with archaeological artefacts and copies, as

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23



Figure 6. Showcased kitchen utensils. Photo: Sigrid Samset Mygland.

well as a reconstructed interior, and now inhabited by plaster "mannequins" dressed in medieval clothes. The "tenement" also included built-in showcases with associated archaeological artefacts like toys, kitchen utensils, pottery, gaming pieces, tools, remains of clothes, jewellery and dress accessories (Figure 6). The rearmost part represented a revised and extended edition of "*Øvrestretet*" from 1976 including "workshops" presenting archaeological remains. Next to the "tenement", there was a relatively open area dedicated to Bergen as a royal, ecclesiastical and cultural centre. This also included a few showcases, the statue of St. Mary and the altar frontal from the 1976 exhibition, and some remains of columns. All parts of the exhibition and their associated showcases were like in 1976 complemented by texts, maps, photos and other illustrations. For some time, the exhibition also included a model of the royal area Holmen, next to Bryggen, as well as a digital installation where one could write runes. In addition, there was a film projection room and maps literally highlighting e.g. the historically known route of the town's watchmen.

As a revised edition – in terms of both design, content, and artefacts – the 1986 exhibition bore many similarities to its predecessor. It did, however, display a visually more distinguished archaeological look, again represented by a variety of artefacts, as well as large archaeological reconstructions. To this, a reduced textual appearance in the form of shorter and more compressed texts and fewer non-archaeological illustrations contributed. The archaeological aspect was also underlined by more explicit discussions and references to archaeology and to the archaeological finds

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

on display in general – including a more extensive use of labels identifying artefacts – focusing in particular on Bergen as documented by archaeological investigations. As a whole, then, the 1986 exhibition as well seemingly stressed medieval material culture, as well as the Norwegian Middle Ages in general and medieval Bergen in particular.

However, also in 1986, archaeology and the exhibited archaeological artefacts were left somewhat unexplored – in the exhibition as such and in the handbook. Despite an increased visual focus on material culture, the exhibition did not in actuality consistently approach the artefacts as an independent and essential source material. The archaeological record was primarily addressed in relation to urban physical structures and development, and neither did a later addition of a few archaeologically oriented texts change the general undercommunication of the artefacts on display. Again, more often than not, they were explained and accompanied by references to written sources – or barely commented on at all. The part dedicated to the craftsman street Øvrestretet and the associated workshops, for instance, continued to revolve around the Urban Law in particular, with little textual attention paid to the numerous accompanying artefacts. The same applied to the social aspects of medieval society, e.g. in which the medieval population continued to be approached in terms of social classes as known from written sources. Not least, archaeology and the archaeological artefact were more or less left out of the part of the exhibition dedicated to royal and ecclesiastical subject matters, focusing on organization, administration, defence, and ownership of land and other resources.

In short, the 1986 edition of the permanent exhibition offered more archaeology and correspondingly less history. Still, the historical perspective continued to be given precedence. Although also the 1986 exhibition must visually have been perceived as an archaeological presentation of the Middle Ages and medieval Bergen, the overall scientific framework still pointed in a historical direction. Indeed, both continued to be treated primarily as historical entities, approached in particular by means of laws, rules and regulations; thus at least partly leaving the interpretation and a more in depth understanding of the archaeological artefact to the imagination of its viewers.

Archaeogical accessory or science-based medieval mediator?

Despite all good intentions, then, it may be argued that the archaeological material exhibited both in 1976 and 1986 to some degree played the part of illustrations – "*accessory*" – in a historical narrative of medieval Bergen and Norway. Both exhibitions were as a whole based on so-called

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

"*big history*", commonly approaching the subject matters by means of written sources, and – at least in relation to the former – insinuating an inadequacy of material culture to operate independently as a medieval source. Whether this should be interpreted to the effect that archaeology and the archaeological artefact intentionally and consistently were singled out as a secondary source at Bryggens museum is another matter. Managing the legacy of the Bryggen excavation at the birthplace of modern medieval archaeology, so to speak, one was fully aware of the importance of the excavation and of medieval archaeology and material culture in general. To this, at least, the building of Bryggens museum itself bears witness, as well as the initial frequent change of both temporary and permanent exhibitions. Neither was there any lack of medieval archaeological expertise among the group curating the exhibitions, including archaeologists and researchers working with the collections on a daily basis. A conscious discrediting of material culture and/or an idea of visual quality being the most important trait of the archaeological artefact within a museal context thus seem unlikely.

Indeed, the historical perspective permeating and framing the medieval permanent exhibitions at Bryggens museum was apparently not restricted to a museum context, and the (limited) use and role of the medieval archaeological artefact both as a source material and showcased museum object at Bryggens museum have been exposed to similar criticism – addressed at different times but referring to contemporary issues. Despite its obvious value, presence and centre position, the artefact was in the investigated period roughly treated as an instrument of basic artefact knowledge and/or as an illustrative, yet silent relic from a long gone past, respectively. In both cases, it was also more or less hiding in the shadows of the field of history and under-communicated as an independent and essential source material where a wider understanding of medieval life and society is concerned. Across the full range of context – and as every exhibition is the product of prior research as well as contemporary assessments and circumstances – this may not necessarily be ascribed to an intentional devaluation of material culture, rather a somewhat unconscious approach to it. Considering the state of affairs in the 1970s and 1980s, one may perhaps wonder to what degree a persistently extensive use of the artefact in terms of cultural historical research or exhibitions would have been possible. In this respect, the initial pair of permanent exhibitions at Bryggens museum should perhaps first and foremost be considered reflections of modern medieval archaeology at an early stage; being based on a relatively short and limited research history and carrying the legacy of mixed academic traditions and perspectives – the historical in particular.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

The investigated exhibitions at Bryggens museum were made in a period in which reality had barely hit medieval archaeology. Completed before the discussion on the use of medieval material culture began in earnest, they did not capture the change of winds within urban medieval archaeology – nor what may be designated as a "rebirth" of the artefact as source material, and a gradual letting go of the parental hands of the field of history. Particularly after 2000, the call for an archaeological perspective in terms of cultural history was stressed, alongside the need of an alternative to the traditional historical issues associated with «*big history*» (e.g. Carelli 2001; Larsson 2006; Christophersen 2022). Now, the argument was made in favour of medieval archaeological research on its own terms, focusing on what these predominantly lost and discarded remains may truly be said to reflect: the people – or actors – who lived in the towns, the cities and the countryside, and their everyday life. Small histories and investigations from below increasingly entered the spotlight – analyzed based on cultural layers and material remains, and answering the call for a replacement of *longe duree* by an archaeology of the moment (Christophersen 2000, p. 13; Anglert & Lindeblad 2004, p. 8–9).

An archaeological Middle Ages

Today, there is a different awareness of medieval archaeology and of its distinct and unique source material. It has come to terms with what it is and grown confident as an academic discipline. Material culture increasingly sets the agenda, on its own terms and with a focus on issues that are particularly well investigated by means of an archaeological source material (Hansen et al. 2015, p. 2). This has enabled medieval archaeology to target new fields of research and less explored aspects of medieval society – like the social constructs of space, gender and ethnicity, illuminating among others "invisible" actors like women and children (e.g. Mygland 2007, 2023). Indeed, "things" have proved to be a unique source, offering glimpses of everyday life in a time and society that is long gone.

This development also is reflected at Bryggens museum. The permanent exhibition from 1986 stood almost unchanged for more than three decades. Yet, new perspectives and research were continuously incorporated into temporary exhibitions, and eventually also in the new permanent exhibition. "*Below Ground*" builds on years of cross-institutional and interdisciplinary research, collaboration and experience. Like its predecessors, it embraces the wide range of medieval sources (historical in particular); however, stressing an archaeological perspective, archaeo-

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

logical research, and an archaeological source material – in short, an archaeological Middle Ages. The more than 1,200 showcased artefacts – presented also between covers (Mygland 2024) – provide the framework for and the source of the stories about how Bergen became a town, life here and in Western Norway, medieval archaeology past and present, and how the medieval archaeological academic discipline transformed Bryggen from a blight on the city into an irreplaceable piece of world heritage. The exhibition presents few dates and fact boxes. Instead, focus is directed towards the artefact itself – an intriguing, independent and science-based medieval mediator within the fields of both research and curated experiences – appealing to the senses as well as to the mind.

Sigrid Samset Mygland
Senior Curator in Medieval Archaeology/
Senior Curator NMF
Bergen City Museum.
E-mail: sigsam@bymuseet.no

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

Bibliography

Andersen, H. Hellmuth, Crabb, P. J. & Madsen, H. J. 1971. *Århus Søndervold: en byarkæologisk undersøgelse*. Jysk Arkæologisk Selskabs skrifter 9. København.

Andersson, H. 1991. Reflexioner över svensk stadsarkeologi i ljuset av Projekt medeltidsstaden. *Norsk byarkeologi inn i 1990-årene*. S. Myrvoll, A. Christensson & Å. Bergset (eds.). Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr. 1. Riksantikvaren. Bergen. pp. 103–110.

Anglert, M. & Lindeblad, K. 2004. *Nya Stadsarkeologiska horisonter.* RAÄ FoU-projekt 2003. UV Syd Rapport 2004:4. Riksantikvarieämbetet Avdelningen för arkeologiska undersökningar.

Augustsson, J.-E. 1994. Medieval Artefacts – A Neglected Research Field. Thirteen Essays on Medieval Artefacts. Lars Ersgård (ed.). *Meddelanden från Lunds universitets historiska museum 1993–1994*. New Series Vol. 10, pp. 33–42. Lund.

Carelli, P. 2001. *En kapitalistisk anda. Kulturella förändringar i 1100-talets Danmark*. Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology 26. Almqvist & Wiksell International. Stockholm

Christophersen, A. 1980. Publisering av store byarkeologiske undersøkelser. Problem og strategi. *Meta 4*, 18–30. Lund.

Christophersen, A. 1991. «Noe om kunsten å beholde barnet i badevannet». Teoretiske og metodiske hovedpunkt i organisering og gjennomføring av forsknings- og publiseringsprosjektet «Trondheims fortid i bygrunnen. *Norsk byarkeologi inn i 1990-årene*. S. Myrvoll, A. Christensson & Å. Bergset (eds.). Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr. 1. Riksantikvaren. Bergen. pp. 85–90.

Christophersen, A. 1992. Mellom tingenes tale og tekstenes tyranni. Om faglig identitet og selvforståelse i historisk arkeologi. *Meta 4*, Lund. pp. 70–87.

Christophersen, A. 2000. Byen er død. Så hva gjør vi med historien? *Meta 2*, Lund. pp. 3–15.

Christophersen, A. 2022. High-Definition Archaeology, Small-Scale Narratives and Monetary Practice in Medieval Scandinavian Urbanization. *Journal of Urban Archaeology* 6, pp. 15–30.

Christophersen, A and Nordeide, S. W. 1994. *Kaupangen ved Nidelva. 1000 års byhistorie belyst gjennom de arkeologiske undersøkelsene på folkebibliotekstomten i Trondheim 1973–1985*. Riksantikvaren.

Ekroll, Ø. 1992. I ingenmannsland? Faget mellom arkeologi og historie. *Meta 4*, Lund. pp. 22–30.

Hansen, G. 2001. The "Big Ship" and "the Second Big Ship". Stratigraphical and Chronological Aspects. *Ships and Commodities. The Bryggen Papers. Supplementary Series No 7*, pp. 55–62. Fagbokforlaget. University of Bergen.

Hansen, G. 2015. Sko, kammer og klær – en nedenfra-studie av bergensernes økonomiske evne på 1100-tallet. *Inn i fortida – ut i verden – i museet!* J.A. Risvag, R. Berge & T. Brattli (eds.). Museumsforlaget. pp. 37–51.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

Hansen, G., Ashby, S. P. and Baug, I. (eds.) 2015. *Everyday Products in the Middle Ages: Crafts, Consumption and the individual in Northern Europe c. AD 800–1600*. Oxbow Books. Oxford.

Herteig, A. E. 1976a. Unpublished texts from the permanent exhibition "Bergen – Norway – Europe c. 1300", Bryggens museum. Archives of Bryggens museum/ Bergen City Museum.

Herteig, A. E. 1976b. *Håndbok i middelaldersk kulturhistorie som supplement til utstillinger i Bryggens museum. Erling Dekke Næss' institutt for middelalderarkeologi*. Bryggens museum. Bergen.

Larsson, S. 2006. Den mänskliga staden? Nya stadsarkeologiska horisonter. S. Larsson (ed.). Riksantikvarieämbetet. pp. 29–87.

Lerheim, M. 1986. Tale ved 10-årsjubileet for Bryggens museum fredag 25. april 1986. Unpublished document. Archives of Bryggens museum/Bergen City Museum.

Lunde, Ø. 1991. Når var det egentlig det begynte? Norsk byarkeologi inn i 1990-årene. S. Myrvoll, A. Christensson, & Å. Bergset (eds.). Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr. 1. Riksantikvaren. Bergen. pp. 21–28.

McLees, C., Nordeide, S. W. & Petersen, A. H. 1994. The production of archaeological knowledge: the theory and method of urban excavation. *Meta 2*, Lund. pp. 3–29.

Molaug, P. B. 1991. Gamlebyprosjektet – forskningsfront eller repetisjonsøvelse? Norsk byarkeologi inn i 1990-årene. S. Myrvoll, A. Christensson, & Å. Bergset (eds.). Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr. 1. Riksantikvaren. Bergen. pp. 91–102.

Molaug, P. B. 1992 Middelalderarkeologi eller arkeologi om middelalderen? *Meta 4*, Lund. pp. 31–37.

Molaug, P. B. 2002. Norske middelalderbyer – fra restanseberg til kulturminneforskning. I *NIKU Strategisk instituttprogram 1996–2001. Norske middelalderbyer*, redigert av Petter B. Molaug, NIKU Publikasjoner 117. Oslo. pp. 7–10.

Mygland, S. S. 2007. *Children in medieval towns. An archaeological analysis of child-related artefacts from Bergen*. The Bryggen Papers Main Series No 7. Bergen. Fagbokforlaget.

Mygland, S. S. 2023. *Women in medieval Bergen. Gender and material Culture*. The Bryggen Papers Main Series No 9. University of Bergen.

Mygland, S. S. (ed.) 2024. *Below Ground. Medieval Finds from Bergen and Western Norway*. Bergen City Museum. Bergen.

Myrvoll, S., Christensson, A. & Bergset, Å (eds.) 1991. *Norsk byarkeologi inn i 1990-årene. Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr.1*. Riksantikvaren. Bergen.

Mårtensson, A. W. 1976. *Uppgrävt förflutet för PK-banken. En investering i arkeologi*. Archaeologica Lundensia, 7.

Nordeide, S. W. 1991. Gjenstandsmaterialet fra bygravninger: Fokus på mangfold og kompleksitet. S. Myrvoll, A. Christensson, & Å. Bergset (eds.). Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr. 1. Riksantikvaren. Bergen. pp.117–127.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23

Nøttveit, O. M. 2010. *Sheaths and Scabbards from Medieval Bergen – In a Comparative Perspective*. The Bryggen Papers. Main Series No. 8. Bergen. Fagbokforlaget.

Schofield, J. & Vince, A. 1994. *Medieval towns*. Leicester University Press. London.

Sigurdsson, J. V. 1991. Arkeologi og historie, to sider av samme sak? S. Myrvoll, A. Christensson, & Å. Bergset (eds.). Nytt fra Utgravningskontoret i Bergen (N.U.B.) nr. 1. Riksantikvaren. Bergen. pp.155–158.

Solli, B. 1989. Norske middelalderbyer og bydannelse. Et arkeologisk utsyn. *Viking 1989* (52), pp. 133–143.

Øye, I. 1986. *Fører til de faste utstillinger i Bryggens museum*. Bryggens museum.

Øye, I. 1989. Bryggens Museum. From idea to international recognition. Archaeology and the urban economy. *Festschrift to Asbjørn E. Herteig. Arkeologiske Skrifter Historisk Museum No. 5*, Universitetet i Bergen. pp. 34–40.

Personal communication

Knut Høiaas, Museum Educator, Bergen City Museum.

Downloaded by 216.73.217.143 2026-11-04 08:35:23