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## Preface

This book has been several years in the making. The majority of the papers published here were originally presented at an exploratory workshop entitled ‘Actors and Affordable Crafts: Social and Economic Networks in Medieval Northern Europe’. This workshop, held in Bergen, Norway in February 2011, was organized by Steve Ashby, Gitte Hansen and Irene Baug. 24 material-culture researchers came together to enter into a dialogue about ‘actors’ engaged in ‘affordable crafts’. The participants were invited in Spring 2009, a considerable time before the workshop was due to take place, in order to ensure ample time for intellectual preparation ahead of the meeting. In the invitation, we challenged the participants to revisit their traditional fields of research and ‘find the actors’: the individuals behind the production, trade, and use of our various crafts. Pre-papers, distributed prior to the meeting, ensured that everyone was able to participate in a well-informed manner, and the result was an inspiring and productive meeting. It was agreed that we would publish a volume, and here it is! We would like to thank Clare Litt of Oxbow books for her support in seeing this volume through from start to finish.

# Chapter 1. Introduction

# Everyday products in the Middle Ages: Crafts, Consumption and the Individual in Northern Europe c. AD 800-1600: An Introduction

Steven P. Ashby, Gitte Hansen, and Irene Baug

This book is about people in the past. The book presents 21 case studies into the activities and identities of producers, traders and consumers in northern Europe and the North Atlantic region. While some of the studies draw lines back into the 7th century, and some push on well into the 18th, the majority deal with actors - individuals, groups, or representatives of institutions - in the period between the 9th and the 17th centuries. In detail, our focus is on the identity of the actors associated with crafts and industries that processed bone and antler, stone, fine and base metals, iron, wool, silk, glass, leather, and pottery.

Much research has been undertaken on production, trade and consumption in the past, whereas far less time has been devoted to study of the associated producers, merchants, and consumers themselves. The individuals - who we will refer to as ‘actors’ - that are the focus of this volume made up what we might call the ‘chain of operators’: producers, distributors and consumers who lived their lives extracting raw materials in the outfields, making everyday products at rural and urban sites, transporting goods by land, river or sea, exchanging raw materials or merchandise at markets, and consuming things in their households. The items consumed were everyday products: ‘affordable crafts’ such as household utensils and personal accessories, within reach for a large component of the general populace, and not exclusive to (for example) a secular or religious elite. Our attention is thus focused squarely on ordinary people, the oft-overlooked, ‘voiceless actors’ that are seldom visible beyond the archaeological sources, whether they be individuals acting under their own free will, bonded thralls and servants, or representatives of any of the institutions - from craft guilds to the Hanseatic League - that were involved in the production and trade of our various crafts.

It is, of course, no small task to isolate and study such individuals. The most troublesome confound, perhaps, is the issue of academic tradition. As members of the academe, most of us are trained to accept that, ultimately, our research is only socially relevant and justifiable if it can somehow contribute to an understanding of the *Big Important Questions*. Metaquestions such as the rise of towns, state formation, trading networks, and the introduction of Christianity have thus long set the agenda in studies of production, trade and consumption. Studies that address issues more focused at the level of everyday life, or studies that apply what one may call *bottom up* perspectives (wherein the nuances and variety in human lifeways are sought) remain less well recognised as fields of research, notwithstanding the degree to which such stories from below fascinate. Because of our academic training, a ‘twist’ of mindset is required for most of us in any attempt to identify actors, and to study their identity more closely.

Secondly, the actors themselves are difficult to find, namely because they are represented by few traces in the available sources for the past. A bottom-up study, based primarily on archaeological sources such that the identities of our actors are in focus, demands either highly resolved archaeological data, or very large datasets in which patterns in the material may be discerned. Even in these cases, interpretation is rarely straightforward. Fortunately, the spectrum of sources available to us is wide, while the contents of the methodological and theoretical toolbox from which we may draw our approaches are equally diverse, as will be clear from the papers that follow. To cite Mehler (this volume): ‘The people dealt with here are not without archaeology, we just have to look more closely to find them amongst our material’.

More broadly, the present volume may be seen as part of an analytical trend away from quantitative analyses of large datasets, toward more in-depth qualitative studies, wherein popularly accepted models are challenged and revised. Medieval and early historic archaeology is maturing as a discipline; material remains now set the agenda and themes on their own terms, fastening on those issues for which the archaeological sources are well placed to say something novel and significant. This has been an important development, and one fundamental to the production of volumes such as this. Another inspiration has been the realisation that holistic and coherent syntheses, however difficult, are a worthy goal for any scholar of our period. Traditionally, outfield, rural, and urban activities, as well as studies of transport and movement, have been discussed within discrete archaeological subfields. Here, not only are such contexts studied cheek-by-jowl, but they are often approached comparatively and synthetically. In what follows, we will briefly introduce some of the themes in focus.

It is vital that we remember that archaeological remains are material traces of *activities* carried out by *people* in the past. Human agents played a vital role in all episodes of an object’s biography, from the quarrying of stone and the hunting of reindeer in pursuit of antler, through production and distribution of finished objects, to their acquisition and consumption. As demonstrated in this volume, there is great potential to access the identities of actors through the study of such phenomena as (*i.a.*) raw material and product provenance, access to and control of resources, spatial distribution of production debris, and geographical patterning in object form and ornament.

Once we recognise the movement of objects (either over large geographical areas, or within more geographically constrained contexts), this triggers a range of important questions: who owned the raw material resources and controlled the means of production? Who actually carried out the production and distribution? Why were some objects distributed over large distances, while other show a much more limited spatial range? How did these objects or raw materials travel? Similarly, how were aesthetic ideas, types, and forms (fashions) transmitted? Were some artisans mobile, together with their knowledge and toolkit? Did, for instance, certain comb types circulate in the same networks as other artefact forms (such as textiles, millstones, steatite vessels, or affordable metal objects and jewellery)? Did the networks within which specific object types or raw materials circulated coincide with regions defined on social, cultural, religious, ethnic, or political terms? How did such spatial distributions change through time, and why? This volume will attempt to answer some of these questions, and will raise others as areas of potential for future research.

There is no single framework by which one may be granted access to the lives and identities of our actors, but the various approaches employed herein do share certain common theoretical precepts. As discussed above, much archaeological work on artefacts and crafts is typically characterised by metaquestions such as the role of iron extraction for state formation, or the role of craft or trade in the rise of towns. Equally common are discussions that deal primarily with technology and classification, such as the technical aspects of iron production, or the typological developments that characterise medieval shoemaking. As for consumption, this is most often seen as a consequence of trade, though in recent years consumption in its own right has recieved more attention (e.g. Cook et al. 1996 with references).

In the present volume, rather, perspectives from below are prevalent. In order to add nuance to our understanding of the past and its people, readers will note that an ‘actor’ perspective on activities runs as a red thread through the volume. Activity is thus perceived as initiated and carried out by knowledgeable (but not always successful) individuals, either acting on their own behalf, or representing an institution, but within the frame of a wider historical context. Here is not the place to present a detailed historiography of these issues, but if suffices to say that the volume is variously influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1977), Braudel (1980), Giddens (1984), and Latour (2005), among others. Once the centrality of our actors’ actions is acknoqledged, a natural next step is to address the identity of these actors.

But identity is a fuzzy and problematic term. If we ask the man or woman in the street to characterize themselves, He or she would be unlikely to answer ‘I am a person who is important in the rise of towns’, or ‘I am a catalyst of fundamental social change’ (unless we have stumbled into a politician). More likely, we would receive information on age and sex, occupation, social position, income, ethnic background, and religious affiliation. We may term such aspects of a person’s identity their s*ocial* identity. We mean to prioritise this social identity, to empower our actors by acknowledging who they were, and exploring the details of their real lives (to the extent that such details are available to us). We aim to see these people as individuals - as people with agency, but also with biographies - rather than simply as cogs in a machine. Of course, the fact that identity is flexible and constructed (if not unconstrained) need not be rehearsed here (see, for example, Barth 1969). Moreover, the difficulty of isolating the particular features of a given artefact that may tell us about either personal or group identity is well established (see, for example, Weissner 1983). These issues certainly confound straightforward analysis of our sources, but also allow us to write more interesting and socially enlightening narratives.

The study of identity has been in vogue since the 1990s, which means that there is no shortage of theoretical apparatus with which to investigate this problem. Indeed, the papers that make up this volume tackle the issue from a variety of perspectives. Nonetheless, within this broad, post-processual panoply, the reader may trace a number of common concerns and approaches running through the following chapters. First, one might note the frequent, though often indirect allusion to the *Chaine operatoire* approach*.* Several case studies are clearly inspired by the work of Leroi-Gourhan (1964), such that themes are elucidated all the way along the Chain of Operations from the exploitation of natural resources in the outfield, to the consumption of products in rural and urban settlements. The approach also gives rise to biographical studies of objects (after Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), and indeed industries (see Haggren this volume; Demuth this volume). There is little doubt that such approaches facilitate the production of a richer, more holistic understanding of the past.

Of course, the reader will also perceive an explicit *actor* perspective: the identification of actors involved in raw material extraction, -exchange and -consumption. The term *actors* is here applied broadly; we are interested in the actions of individuals, whether acting on their own initiative or representing larger groups, institutions or organisations. Such actors may be characterised in terms of social-, occupational-, ethnic –, gender-, or other group affiliation. Such an approach enhances the understanding of the past as created and populated by *people.* The approaches taken by a number of our authors are inspired by Latour’s (2005) Actor Network Theory (*e.g.* Baug, Preus Schou), which identifies communicative systems through the study of the distribution of artefacts and people.

The collection is also characterised by a *comparative* approach*;* the parallel pursuit of different ‘raw material-chains’ facilitates a number of insights. Hansen's paper delivers a focused application of this technique, bringing together diverse sources in order to address a range of questions related to the identities and demographics of craft workers. Neither are our sources limited to small finds and manufacturing waste; many of the studies in this volume are notable for the ways in which they situate production within the context of settlement topography (Hansen this volume), structures (Linaa this volume), and landscape (Preus Schou this volume). Such contextual coherence is no longer novel in prehistory (see Bradley 2000; Edmonds 1999), but does constitute an important step forward in medieval archaeology.

Finally, one will certainly note a common *long-term* perspective*;* we aim to trespass beyond archaeology’s traditional chronological divides, and muddy our feet in prehistoric as well as historical archaeology. The various contributions use case studies from across time and space, making it possible to identify phenomena characterised by both stability and change. Through the period with which the book is concerned, society was transformed in many ways, as were the actors involved in production and distribution. The transition from a prehistoric to historic context had implications not just in terms of the materials left for the archaeologist, but also for the actors themselves, as the accompanying political, ideological, and socio-economic developments were truly transformative. This is acknowledged in the contextual approach taken by many of the authors published in this volume, wherein both context and material are used together to answer questions that relate both to the immediate moment and the longue durée.

Notwithstanding these common perspectives, the volume is characterised by technical diversity. The authors have addressed the identity of actors through a variety of available sources, and by applying a range of methods. Most of the studies have their basis in detailed empirical studies of very large archaeological datasets, but written and pictorial sources also play an important role, particularly so as they become more abundant in the more recent past. Moreover, in reviewing the contributions, one is struck by another form of diversity. Of course, one will perceive an inherent temporal and spatial diversity. But the patterns that emerge are also diverse; it seems that the more knowledge about the past to which we are party, the greater the variation we may perceive. Take, for example, the issue of itinerancy among craftspeople.

Itinerancy is certainly not a new area of research focus, the organisation of crafts being a central factor in any discussion of the development of industry and the rise of towns (see Ashby this volume, Hansen this volume for references). Ashby, however, warns against ‘a default use’ of the ‘model of the itinerant artisan’ and calls for studies that apply an awareness of spatial chronological, economic and political contingency. In Linaa’s and Pedersen’s papers, which consider an itinerant lifestyle for the fine metalworkers of Viking-Age Kaupang, Norway (Pedersen) and a combmaker in medieval Viborg, Denmark (Linaa) we find such studies. Pedersen finds that both settled and itinerant lifestyles may have characterised activity in the different workshops encountered at Kaupang, and Linaa calls for a flexible view of craft organisation, which takes into account seasonal production. In a similar vein, Coulter points out that jet- and amber-working in the British Isles may not have been a full-time occupation in the tenth and eleventh centuries, though finds from York and Dublin suggest that artisans were residents with their own workshop areas, and in Dublin there are indications that business spanned several generations. Luik discusses itinerancy in connection with her medieval bone and antler workers in Viljandi, south Estonia, as does Jørgensen when dealing with the north Norwegian blacksmith, though neither find weighty evidence to sustain the lifestyle of their craftspeople, illustrating the challenges of this sort of interpretative endeavour. Answering Ashby’s call for appreciation of logistical diversity, a range of ‘itinerancies’ are encountered among Haggren’s late medieval Bohemian glassmakers and Demuth’s medieval and early-modern north German potters. An apprentice-journeyman-master system is thus suggested by Demuth as a component in the education of potters, while the transportation of glassware - from the upland, forested areas of Bohemia and northern Germany, to navigable rivers or ports for overseas transport of goods - was often the responsibility of heavily-laden peddlers, compelled to carry the products on their backs.

Studies that are able to draw upon a wide array of contemporary (or near contemporary) documentary sources may reveal details that an archaeologist could only dream of uncovering from the material culture alone. The further we travel to the south and west, and the more we close in on the early modern period, the greater the potential contribution of written and pictorial sources. Contributions by Demuth, Haggren, Harjula, Mehler, and Pohl benefit in this regard, and provide detail on issues for which the archaeological sources are uninformative. These studies thus serve as important points of reference for discussions situated in contexts for which only material evidence is available. Furthermore, new questions may arise from such informed analysis, such as the question of the demographic composition of workshops.

And some demographic groups are more reticent and resistant to analysis than others. Jørgensen addresses the ethnicity of the Iron-Age blacksmith in north Norway: a region inhabited by at least two ethnic groups: the Norse and the Saami. Later sources suggest that the Saami were involved in smithing, but the archaeological evidence for the industry is sparse, and cannot support firm conclusions. The same scarcity of sources applies to attempts to consider the presence of children and women among the producers. Haggren shows through pictorial evidence that later-medieval Bohemian glassmaking was a family enterprise in which young and old, man and wife were involved at various stages from production to sale. Demuth holds the same to be true for rural potters in Germany. In addressing the demographic composition of craftspeople in Viking-Age Kaupang, Norway, all that Pedersen finds is ‘a small finger’[print] - perhaps that of a woman or a young person - imprinted in a clay crucible. In 12th-century Bergen, Hansen finds misshapen combs: perhaps the products of young, incompletely trained hands. Archaeological hints as to the presence of women and the young are indeed few, and might perhaps, if seen in isolation, be dismissed as coincidental. As further observations come to light, however, such isolated finds no longer appear so isolated; unexpected patterns may emerge, and our evidence may find parallels across sites. Thus, with the late- medieval family-based enterprises of glass and pottery production in mind, the idea of Viking-Age or early-medieval travelling workshops being characterised by a diverse demographic profile no longer seems an overly bold suggestion.

Even in more ‘prehistoric’ contexts, a diversity of sources may be brought to bear on our efforts to identify the invisible actors of craft and trade; the key is a creativity of approach and robust methodological framework. Preus Schou’s focused study of steatite production provides an excellent example of the insights that can be gained through a close and critical survey of the archaeological, topographic and toponymic evidence relating to a well-defined parcel of landscape. More widely, engagement with the natural environment is a central theme in many of the papers in this volume. Ashby promotes the need to acknowledge the rural provenance of the materials needed for the combmaking craft, while the exploitation of natural resources on an industrial or near-industrial scale is an important consideration in discussions by Baug, Rundberget and Preus Schou. The markets for these products are of course equally diverse: some were targeted primarily at regional consumers, while others were aimed at a wide range of consumers, local to international.

For some raw materials, such as iron, one may perceive the chain of operations from extraction to finished product being traced through several papers. Actors involved in all the processes of extraction of bloomery iron in the outfields of medieval south-eastern Norway are treated by Rundberget, the surprising presence of primary smithies in 13th-/14th-century Swedish towns is discussed by Andersson, and the Iron-Age blacksmith of north Norway is addressed by Jørgensen. Together, these three papers span the period from the Late Iron Age to the High Middle Ages, and may be seen as something of an extended, pluralist essay on the subject.

Studies of iron production and stone quarrying have generally employed a technical, economic and descriptive approach to production. As a consequence, little is known about the activities and the various groups of people involved in the production and trade of stone and iron objects. In Baug’s, Preus Schou’s, Rundberget’s and Pohl’s contributions, perspectives and frames of analyses are broadened, such that the actors involved in the extraction, refinement and sale of stone products and raw iron are addressed. The studies thus provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of production, exploitation, distribution and consumption of outfield resources: something of a biographical approach. Resources in the outfield were exploited on a near-industrial scale, and a number of modes of organisation for production and distribution are suggested. People from multiple levels of the society were thus involved - directly or indirectly - in the different stages of the activities.

It is important to problematise some of the terms we have used in the volume: the degree to which items or materials may be said to be ‘everyday products’ or ‘affordable’ is of course subjective, and variable in time and sapce, depending upon social, economic, political, and environmental context. Mould brings to our attention homemade single-piece shoes of untanned leather, and suggests that these shoes - used by rural people - must be among the most affordable foot wear in prehistory and history. In contrast, tanned leather shoes and other leather goods seem to have been highly valued in 12th-century urban England. Mould and Cameron show that the repair and reuse of these items became increasingly common, suggesting that leather was valued as a raw material to the extent that products made of this material were cared for in an attempt to extend their use lives.Moving through time and space to late-medieval Finland, Harjula shows that consumers in Turku discarded their leather shoes even when only lightly worn, suggesting that tanned leather was quite affordable at this time and place. *In contrast, the silk textiles that travelled great distances before being interred in the high status Viking-Age grave at Oseberg in Norway were certainly not affordable, and hardly an everyday object even for the deceased in the burial mound.* Their study is included here as the biography of the material brings us into contact with a host of characters which stands in contrast to those encountered in many of the accompanying papers.In emphasising the trade and consumption of Viking-Age silk textiles from the east, Vedeler draws our attention to the role of Sogdian merchants as key actors and mediators of the value and inherent meanings attached to their goods. Finally, Rammo’s paper focuses on merchants and consumers of textiles, in this case study red-striped wool textiles provide the dataset. These textiles were used by a particular group of townspeople in late medieval multi-ethnic Tartu, Livonia (Estonia). The striped textiles were produced in western Europe in a range of fabrics from luxurious to cheap, but merchants appear to have focused on importing the cheapest forms to Turku. Here, active decision-making consumers seem to have expressed their identity through their choice of dress.

In sum, a wide range of actors have been uncovered; from powerless combmakers, through small-scale, enterprising producers of personal accessories, stone-hewing farmers, rope- and sail-makers, and fashion-mediating merchants; to representatives of powerful institutions such as the Hanse, The Teutonic Order, the King, and a number of ecclesiastical institutions. So what does all this have in common? An overarching theme in this volume, notwithstanding its breadth of approach and subject material, is the need for a particularist standpoint. An understanding of the significance of social, economic, political and environmental contingency is fundamental to the 21st-century project of medieval archaeology. While we may ultimately aim for generalising models, these must be emergent from the synthesis of detailed local case studies, and must ultimately be tested against further small-scale analyses. It is only through such appreciation of regionality that resolution can ever be granted to the development of a more global picture. Networks are useful conceptual tools, but they connect together real historical situations, and we need to ensure that we do not overlook the people in our search for systems. Generalising models should be remembered for what they are: approximations of the experienced world, a world made up of particular people, particular places, particular things. These particularities should be our quarry.

Finally, we should make an important note on the intellectual asymmetry of this project. In the Middle Ages, many crafts were organised into guilds. As researchers, we have tended, albeit informally, to arrange ourselves according to a similar logic, with ‘guilds’ of ceramicists, bone experts, prehistorians, early-medievalists, archaeologists, historians, and so on. In this book, authors with different specialities and academic backgrounds have come together to discuss a single theme: identifying the actors involved along the line from production to consumption of crafts, with a view to better understanding the social identity and networks of the actors. This is undertaken in a sequence of theoretically informed papers that also involve novel methodological approaches. Following this template, together with the diversity of objects, regions, and approaches being taken, we hope that the book will generate useful discussion.

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