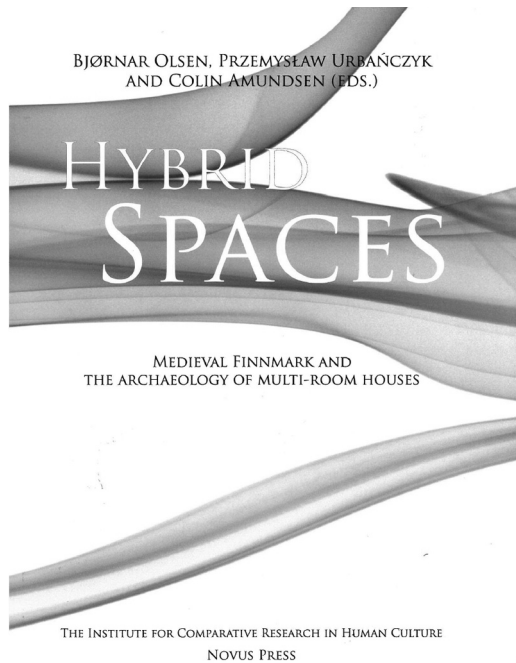


Bjørnar Olsen, Przemysław Urbańczyk & Colin Amundsen (eds.): *Hybrid Spaces. Medieval Finnmark and the Archaeology of Multi-Room Houses*. The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture & Novus Press, Oslo 2011.



Hybrid spaces – Medieval Finnmark and the archaeology of multi-room houses presents the results of the international research project *Cultural landscapes from the Iron Age and early historical times in coastal Finnmark*. Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway, is a vast sub-arctic coastal region bordering Finland to its south and extending until the Russian Kola Peninsula in the east. People, who are not very familiar with the culture and archaeology of this area, would easily describe this region remote or periphery. This well written, richly illustrated and scientifically composed book opens whole new perspectives to the dynamics of the area even for those who are more aware of the complexity of the cultures in the Middle Ages.

These northern shores inhabited by native Sámi tribes attracted foreign people from the 13th century onwards. The flow of newcomers, new things, and diversity of practises is manifested in the material evidence, which has fascinated scholars as well as laymen for many centuries. However, very little attention has been paid to the archaeology

of this area until the 21st century. The reason for this can be found in the distinct cultural heritage of the area, which has very few similarities with the general north European culture of the Iron Age and Medieval times.

The first interdisciplinary and international research project focused in this area was launched in 2000. The main purpose of the project was to study and understand the so-called multi-room houses, a complex and enigmatic settlement structure confined to the northernmost coastal fringe of Norway and Russia. This kind of house consists of a cluster of joined rooms or rather consists of a cluster of joined rooms or rather compartments, which are still well visible on the surface. The number of rooms ranges from four to twenty, and they are internally connected through inter-room doorways or intermediary corridors or passageways. Multi-room houses are very distinctive and differ from any other settlement types of Norway. The closest parallels to this house-type are found in Iceland and Norse West Greenland.

The fieldwork of the project composed of regional surveys, test excavations, and more extensive excavations on selected sites carried out during the summers of 2001–04. Archaeological activities were concentrated particularly on two sites, Skonsvika and Kongshavn, both of which can be located in eastern Finnmark, in the Berlevåg district of the Varanger Peninsula. One of the results of the project is that the multi-room houses date to the 1200–1500 AD, and thus the chronology of the houses coincides with the period when dramatic social, economic, and demographic changes took place in this coastal region of the far North.

In this book, the houses and settlement sites of the coastal area of Finnmark are reflected from different angles. The book consists of six parts including 24 chapters (articles) written by 19 scholars discussing the practical fieldwork of the project, empirical evidence as well as the history and interpretation of the subject.

The practises and results of the fieldwork are discussed in eight articles, which give detailed information of the archaeological evidence with interpretations and rich illustrations. The remains of houses and evidence of sites were also investigated with geophysical surveys in three sites prior to archaeological activities. The results of this method prove for the usefulness of the survey in planning archaeological excavations even

in difficult conditions, as Krzysztof Misiewicz states in his article.

For those who are more interested in architecture, formation processes and chronology of the houses, related information is served in three comprehensive articles. One of the main conclusions is that these houses were used by rivalling groups for different purposes and hosted both natives and newcomers. The distinct layout of the houses formed as the result of a mixture of local traditions, cultural adaptations, and borrowings. Consequently, the hybridity of the houses can be comprehended both in cultural and functional sense.

The interdisciplinarity of the project is manifested in several articles discussing subjects concerning i.a. zoo-archaeology, vegetation and environmental history and geography of the area as well as the ethnicity of the people. Although, the main interest of the project has been in settlement and environmental history of Finnmark in Medieval times with multi-room houses as the principal target of the study, the artefacts of the sites are not completely ignored.

Artefacts unearthed in Skonsvik and Kongshavn are presented with good-quality photos in one article with some comparison of the distribution of the finds between these two areas. Although the finds are connected with the places in the text in a separate article, their connection with the excavations and constructions is easily obscured for those who have not absorbed the information of the location of different sites.

The material is organized according to functional taxonomy in five groups: 1) fire, cooking and storing; 2) hunting and fishing; 3) procurement and constructions; 4) adornment and personal display, and 5) play and leisure.

However, the information provided on artefacts is very slender and can be disappointing for those whose main interest in archaeology lies in finds. The authors of this article (Jørn Henriksen, Camilla Nordby and Cora Oschman) are fully aware of this possibility, and admit that the knowledge of the material culture of this region is still rather poor and requires further studies and increase in number of finds.

The main target of the publication, the description and understanding of multi-room houses has been well achieved with many views, evidence and interpretations on the subject. The two main sites under study (Kongshavn and Skonsvika)

show interestingly that despite of obvious similarities in constructions and chronology, some clear differences between these areas can be detected. The differences are reflected not only by artefacts and environment, but as Ian A. Simpson's and W. Paul Adderley's article about the micromorphology of the soil points out, also archaeological sediments do contain intriguing information about the functions and activities of the site. Consequently, when one wishes to get a holistic view on a particular site, a comprehensive study on constructions and artefacts needs to be accompanied also by bio- and geoarchaeological analysis.

The differences between the two main sites are discussed and interpreted in the final chapter in a wider historical context, which offers intriguing aspects on the different character of the sites. The distance between Kongshavn and Skonsvika is only 8 km, but there seems to be a clear difference in the functions of the two sites. It seems, that Kongshavn was more associated with Norwegian economic and political interest in the area.

An interesting conclusion of the project is that the site was formed as a relatively permanent royal stronghold in the North including military, administrative and economic functions. Since the connections between Norwegian kings and Icelandic elite were strong in the Middle Ages, the speculations about the role of Icelanders are justified in the settlement of this area. On the other hand, the evidence from Skonsvika refers rather to a Karelian and/or Russian or Novgorodian permanent trade station than to Norse origins. As the writers of the article (Olsen, Henriksen and Urbańczyk) point out, the investigations and results of these two sites – no matter how detailed and justified they may be – can not be generalized too easily, but further research on the subject needs to be carried out including also investigations of relevant sites in Russia and Iceland. Consequently, the research project has opened up new questions for further studies and the results concerning the character and chronology of multi-room houses have laid foundations for new research questions.

The publication makes up a versatile and comprehensive ensemble of the practices and results of one research project with a specific aim, and acts as a good example for other archaeological research projects with interdisciplinary perspectives. The layout of the book as well as the Eng-

lish used in the texts is very clear and restrained equalling the scientific and professional contents of the articles. The monograph and especially the historical discussions and interpretations of the evidence indicate that the far North was a dynamic part of Medieval Europe and its trade,

economy, and settlement history. This history still has stories and links to be discovered and leads to be found.

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