



Opinion

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# New Light on Stavanger Cathedral



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## Opinion

Stavanger cathedral is the best-preserved medieval basilica in Norway. The cathedral has been restored several times. A new restoration is now going on and will finish in 2025 [1]. The restoration is connected to the 900th anniversary of Stavanger as a town, which traditionally has been connected to the establishment of the episcopal see c. 1125. However, the archaeological evidence presents another chronology of the basilica and of the township. The present cathedral dates from the last years of the thirteenth century. After a devastating fire in 1272, its west tower was pulled down and replaced by a porch with a monumental new entrance. It lacked, and still lacks, a transept, but the walls and pillars of the old cathedral remain. Originally it was a Romanesque basilica, which was built for an itinerant bishop with no permanent see. Bishop Arne of Stavanger (1277–1303) restored the cathedral after a devastating fire, but considered the choir to be too small, and built a large new one.

In 1869, Stavanger cathedral was restored in the Gothic style and lost some of its interesting Romanesque features. Works in the 1930s uncovered the original plaster and made possible a thorough investigation of the walls and its details. The leader of the restoration work from 1941, the architect Gerhard Fischer, took a lot of photos and illustrated his monograph on Stavanger cathedral (1964) from this rich material. The ongoing restoration benefits from the unpublished photos in his archive [2]. Unfortunately, Fischer's work also meant damages: the masonry of the building remained exposed for several years, concrete was used as sealant and to repair the walls, and due to the wet climate the masonry has become more damaged [3]. Independently of Fischer, the English historian and archaeologist Christopher Hohler also published a monograph on the Stavanger cathedral in 1964. He and Fischer had discussed several points concerning the Romanesque basilica, but neither had read the other's manuscript before publishing his own study [4]. In general they agreed, but Hohler compared details in the capitals of the pillars with three Anglo-Norman churches. He established

that the best and apparently the only parallels to the cathedral in Stavanger are the cathedrals of Norwich and Ely, and Castle Acre. The building of Castle Acre started in 1089, Norwich in 1086, and Ely in 1081.

The first Stavanger mason presumably learned his craft on a building designed in the 1080's at the latest. The second mason would seem to have learned his at a date not earlier than the building of the nave of Norwich ... c. 1115. ... the first and second Stavanger masons were clearly for a time working side by side [5]. Hohler tried to sustain the argument that Stavanger's Romanesque basilica was consecrated between 1125 and 1150. However, the building of the basilica did not start with the pillars at the opposite end of the altar; the choir was always where the masons started, for the church could be used as soon as the choir was finished and the altar consecrated. Fischer used this as his chronology, although without dates, just stylistic periods. And after reading Fischer's monograph, Hohler agreed, reconsidered his results and dated the basilica to c. 1105 [6].

The Norwegian art historian Marit Nybø has established that the church of St. Alban at Selja, situated at the northernmost part of the west coast, was a basilica for a bishop; it is usually dated to c. 1100. She assumes that the Christchurch in Bergen and the oldest cathedral in Stavanger used masons from the same workshop [7]. From what we know about the monumental buildings of the last decades of the eleventh century, she suggests that King Olaf Haraldsson "Kyrre" (the Quiet, c. 1050–1093), started to build the basilicas in Stavanger and Selja. From his saga he is known for having started to build the Christchurch in Bergen. However, he died in 1093, and his son Magnus may have finished the projects in Stavanger and at Selja. Nothing remains of the Christchurch in Bergen, and the date of its consecration remains uncertain. We may conclude that the basilica of Stavanger was raised around the year 1100 as a church for an itinerant bishop with no permanent see or fixed bishopric. It was probably consecrated when the choir was finished.

In the twenty-first century, there have been excavations of the city, which allow for a better understanding of the role and purpose of the cathedral and of its influence on the town's development and growth. Combining the new archaeological material with written sources and previous archaeological findings allows us to see Stavanger as a central manor in the tenth and eleventh centuries. It was a regional nodal point for ships in naval defence, with an assembly (þing), and it was most probably also a seasonal trading port and marketplace [8]. Underneath the choir of the cathedral excavation has uncovered a layer of charcoal from a fire which seems to have been a wooden building. The finding of skeletons buried in the charcoal according to Christian custom suggests that they are remains of a churchyard. To suggest that the building over the graves was a wooden church is hardly too daring.

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