



# Vestre strete: Medieval Oslo's most important and least understood thoroughfare

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The year 2022 marked the centenary of the first attempt by Gerhard Fischer at mapping medieval Oslo based on archaeological and written sources. Included in the map is a reconstruction of Vestre strete (Western Street), Oslo's main street in the medieval period linking the king's manor (Kongsgården) in the south with the bishop's manor (Bispegården) and St Hallvard's Church (Hallvardskirken) in the north. For over a hundred years there has been some debate around the northern section of Vestre strete which was assumed to have run from the medieval stone cellar of Belgen in the south towards St Hallvard's Church in the north. New archaeological evidence has emerged from the Follo Line and Bispegata tram line projects that challenges the accepted route of Vestre strete first proposed by Fischer and later by Hans Emil Lidén and Erik Schia in 1987. In this article I intend to show that the evidence used to support Lidén and Schia's route is weak. I will use the new archaeological evidence to propose an alternative route which not only incorporates Belgen and other stone buildings, but which also presents Vestre strete in a new light, as an important thoroughfare comparable to those found in other European medieval towns.

## **The birth of Vestre strete – of sagas and stone**

Vestre strete was probably the most important thoroughfare in medieval Oslo. It provided a direct link between the king's manor which later became the royal canon's residence, and the bishop's manor towards the northern end of the town. The street provided a visible diplomatic link between the king and the church, a link which cannot be underestimated at a time when the bishop and the crown were often at loggerheads. Diplomacy, however, was not the street's only function. Its main function was to provide a link between the main roads of Clemensallmenningen and Bispeallmenningen, and other unnamed thoroughfares that connected the town to the harbour. This link-up ensured the steady flow of goods throughout the town, something that was vital to a town that was reliant on trade for a large part of its income.

Originally the streets were narrow and poorly constructed, however as the city grew and trade developed, a need for wider and better constructed street network became clear. The wide streets and *allmenninger* (common roads) were constructed to specifications laid out in Magnus Lagabøtes town laws (Byloven) of 1276.<sup>1</sup> These routes provided ample room for the free flow of traffic whilst also forming useful firebreaks in a town almost entirely made of wood (Derrick & Sunde, in prep.).

The earliest theories concerning the location of Vestre strete were based mainly on descriptions contained within Byloven, and the sagas of King Håkon Håkonsson and King Sverre.<sup>2</sup> Byloven for example describes the route of the nightwatchmen who met outside St Hallvard's Church and walked in pairs down Bispeallmenningen, Vestre strete and Østre strete, meeting at St Mary's Church (Bl. VI 3). The vague descriptions presented in the Håkon Håkonssons saga describes Vestre strete as a direct route connecting the king's manor with St Hallvard's Church (*Håkon Håkonssons saga*, chs. 230–235). This theory was readily accepted by earlier scholars and was strengthened further by Johan Meyer's discovery of a short section of stone road found close to the king's manor in 1892 (Fig. 1). The road ran in a north-easterly direction parallel to the western façade of the king's manor, before splitting close to its western corner and continuing eastwards towards the Alna River. The other section, assumed to be Vestre strete, continued in a north-easterly direction and was flanked by a series of stone buildings along its route.

### A new archaeological approach: Fischer's map

In 1922 Gerhard Fischer took up the challenge of creating a map of the medieval town based upon the knowledge available to him at the time. This map contained all the archaeological discoveries in the town up to that point, together with an interpretation of these remains (Fig. 2). It represents the first comprehensive attempt at reconstructing the medieval town of Oslo, and includes a basic street plan showing Bispeallmenningen, Østre strete, Clemensallmenningen and Vestre strete together with the possible locations of the town market and main bridge (Geitebru).

<sup>1</sup> Magnus Lagabøtes Bylov of 1276 (VI 4) regulated the width of all common roads and streets to a width of 8 alen, c. 4.40 meters wide. There are two different types of alen the long alen (47,4 cm) and the short alen (55,33 cm). Recent excavations of Bispeallmenningen indicate that the long alen was preferred in Oslo (Berge, Ødeby & Holmen (in prep.)).

<sup>2</sup> *Sverre's saga* mentions 'Langstrete' [the Long Street] (Ch.135). This has been interpreted as an early reference to Vestre strete and accepted by many (Schia 1991: 35). There is however nothing that links it directly to Vestre strete.



*Figure 1. A cobble road which Meyer interpreted as a section of Vestre strete (foreground), excavated by Meyer in 1892. Another section of the street turns in an easterly direction following the northern façade of the king's manor towards Saxegården, an eighteenth-century building built on a medieval stone cellar can be seen top right. Photographer: Johan Meyer 1892 (The archive of the Directorate of Cultural Heritage – Riksantikvaren).*

Fischer was the first to link Meyer's stone street and associated stone buildings with Vestre strete. He also quickly realised that a large rectangular stone cellar, uncovered by Peter Andreas Blix (1879) belonged with this row of buildings (Fig. 2, marked '2'). The inclusion of Belgen, extended the street further towards the north. The remaining 170-meter northern stretch, however, was less well defined and its placement was largely influenced by the saga passages which promoted a direct route to St Hallvard's Church. In order to complete the route, Fischer incorporated a cobblestone surface uncovered by Blix in 1879 into his plan which he claimed was the continuation of

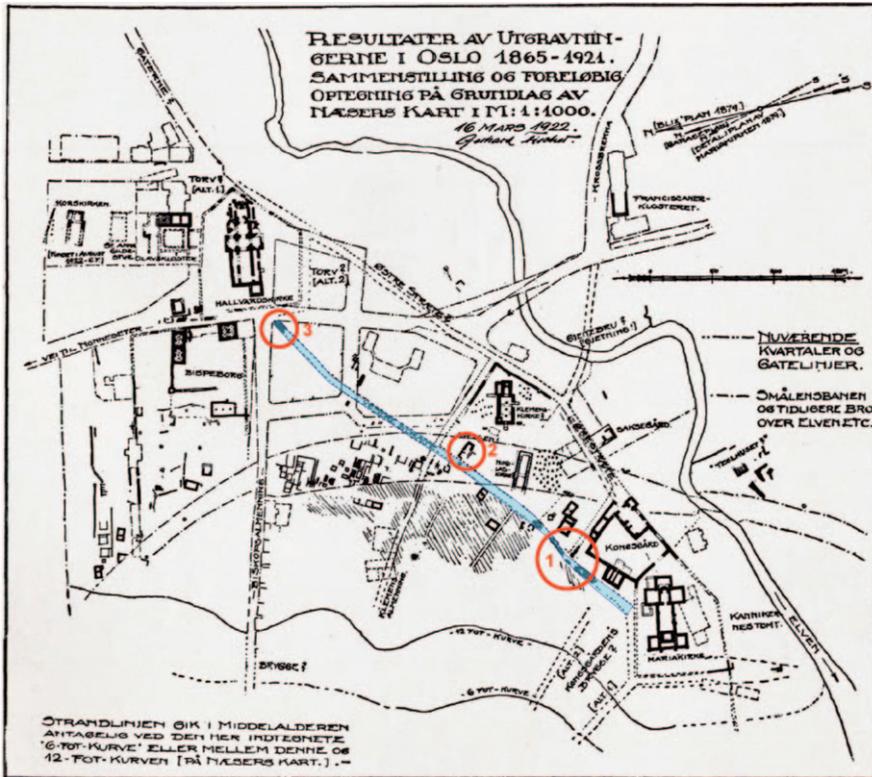
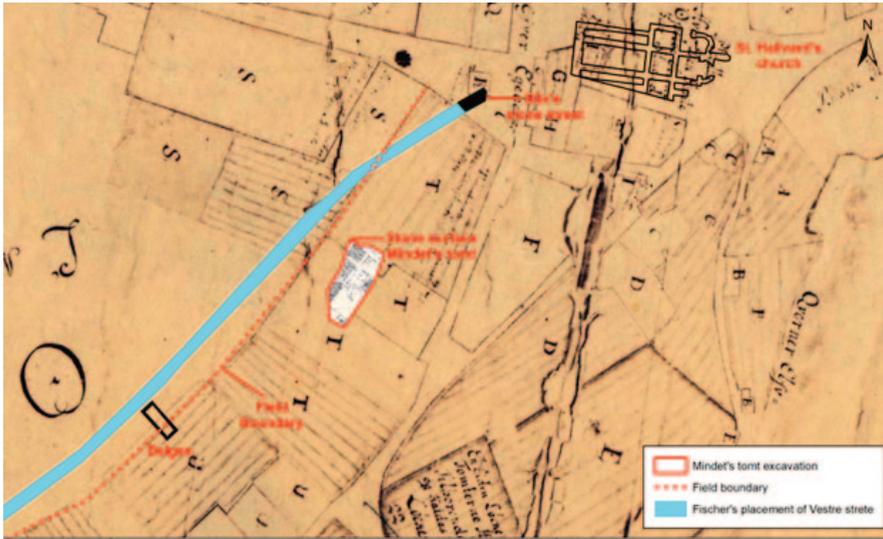


Figure 2. Fischer's plan of the medieval town shows his suggestion for the location of Vestre strete (blue) which stretched from the king's manor (Kongsgården) to St Hallvard's Church. The map also shows the archaeological evidence used to place the street: Meyer's stone street (1), the stone cellar of Belgen (2) and a stone surface uncovered by Blix close to St Hallvard's Church (3). The disputed northern section lies between Belgen and St Hallvard's Church. Map: Fischer 1950.

Vestre strete (Fig. 2, marked '3'). This resulted in a street which stretched from the entrance of the king's manor in the south, to St Hallvard's Church in the north. This route lay unchallenged until the 1970's and 80's when largescale excavations south of the bishop's manor, provided archaeologists with the first chance to test Fischer's theory (Bogen et al. 1990; Høeg et al. 1977; Molaug et al. unpublished; Schia 1987).

### Time moves on and so does Vestre strete: Lidén and Schia

Hans Emil Lidén was the first to refute Fischer's route (Høeg et al. 1977: 67). He suggested instead that the northern half of Vestre strete lay further to the east, following the line of a field boundary shown on a map of the old town from 1700 and later 1742 (Fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he claimed that a stone surface, which lay at the very edge of his excavation area at Mindets tomt, could represent a later phase of Vestre strete (Høeg et al. 1977: 71, note 9).



*Figure 3. A map of Oslo's old town from 1742 shows a long field boundary (dashed line) stretching from NE to SW. Lidén suggested that this boundary reflected the original route of Vestre strete, which would have run along the western edge of his excavation area at Mindet's tomt (red polygon). The route of Fischer's Vestre strete is represented by a blue stripe. Annotations: Michael Derrick, NIKU.*

<sup>3</sup> Kristiania amt nr 13: Situations Cart ofver Opsloe Ladegaard og der tilliggende Morsing Løck. Both these maps show the state of the town after the fire of 1624. The majority of the original buildings have gone, including all the churches. Recent excavations have shown that some of the field boundaries shown on this map correspond to actual medieval boundaries. It is therefore entirely feasible that the boundaries on these maps could relate to older roads, streets, and passages (Berge et al. in prep.).

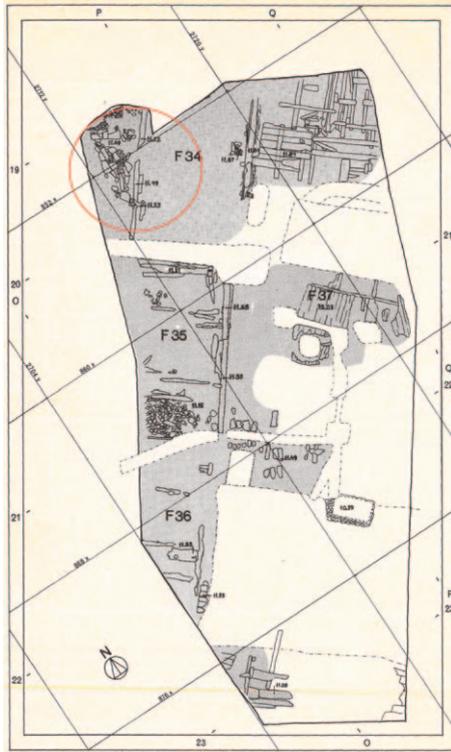


Figure 4. The stone surface lying immediately west of a wooden building (F34) lay in the north-western corner of Mindets tomte excavation area and was interpreted by Lidén as a good candidate for a late phase of Vestre strete (Høeg et al. 1977: 26.).

The small fragment of stone surface (Fig. 4), which was contextually dated to the 1300's, was preceded by several wooden phases suggesting continuity. However, the surface lay on the very edge of the excavation area, making it very difficult to interpret and connect definitively to a street. In addition, the field boundary shown on the eighteenth-century maps, lay 10 metres further to the west of these archaeological remains, weakening Lidén's claim that the boundary reflected the route of the street.

During the 1970's and 80's further excavations took place at Nordre and Søndre felt. Mindets tomte was extended southward into Søndre felt revealing several phases of settlement activity dating to between 1100 and 1600 (Fig. 5). This activity comprised several small urban farm plots (*bygårder*), containing wooden dwelling and farm buildings, which were separated by passages. Periodically, the settlement was destroyed by fire and new buildings were built within the plots over many genera-

tions. In this way the street plan between the plots evolved, expanded, and became established.

It was the excavations at Nordre felt however, that were responsible for changing the path of Vestre strete (Molaug et al. unpublished). These excavations uncovered a series of medieval building plots in the area where Fischer had suggested Vestre strete should lie (Fig. 5). This proved definitively that Fischer's placement was wrong and that the street must lie elsewhere. After much deliberation, Schia suggested that the northern half of Vestre strete must lie further to the east in an area between two building plots unearthed during the excavation of Mindets tomt and Nordre felt (Fig. 5).

This solution was convenient as only did it give meaning to the space between the newly excavated building plots, but it also preserved the direction of Vestre strete towards its traditional endpoint of St Hallvard's Church. The new placement fitted very neatly with both Lidén and Schia's excavation results and provided a good solu-

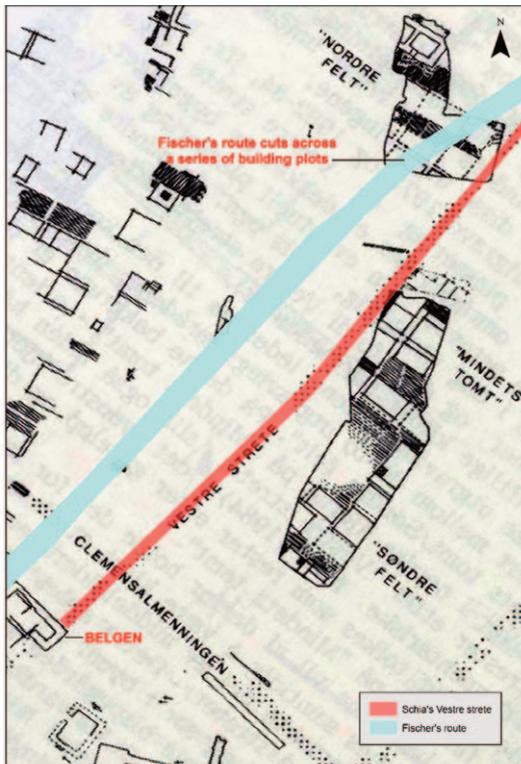


Figure 5. Fischer's Vestre strete (blue) cutting across a series of building plots in Nordre felt. To the east of this lies Schia and Lidén's new route which conveniently slots in between building plots discovered in Nordre felt and Mindets tomt. Underlying map: Molaug et al. unpublished. Annotations: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

tion at the time. However, a closer look at the archaeological evidence used to support this theory suggests that this placement was built on shaky ground.

### Lidén and Schia's Vestre strete deconstructed

The archaeological evidence used to place Lidén and Schia's Vestre strete is found in five separate excavation areas (A, C, D, E, and F) shown in Fig. 6. A series of timber surfaces and possible building remains found in Trench B in 2016 was later used to support this theory (Furan & Birkelund 2016). Schia suggested that the archaeological remains found in areas A, C, D, E and F, when joined together, formed the northern end of Vestre strete. It is therefore important to test the strengths and weaknesses of this evidence, in order to assess the validity of his route.

### Excavations south of the bishop's manor

The archaeological evidence from Mindets tomt and Nordre felt provided the foundation for Schia's repositioning of Vestre strete. As mentioned earlier, the route makes sense, as it fits neatly between two opposing building plots. However, closer inspection of the evidence used to support the theory reveals some weaknesses in the material and interpretation.

The strongest evidence for the existence of a street along Schia's route was uncovered at the north end of Mindets tomt where remains of building plots faced westwards onto an area of planking (Fig. 7, A). In 2016, a trench was opened immediately adjacent to these remains revealing possible evidence for buildings on the opposite side of the 'street' (Fig. 7 (B) and Fig. 8).<sup>4</sup> When taken at face value, both pieces of evidence do appear to indicate the existence of a passage or open area (*gårdsplass*) between building plots. This evidence, however, does not prove definitively that the planking represents a street, let alone Vestre strete. For the remains to be part of a street, there must be further archaeological evidence which shows that the street continues in a north and south direction.

Schia attempted to show that the street continued further northwards by using evidence from the excavations at Nordre felt.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this evidence was very fragmentary, and his interpretation at that time was heavily based on speculation.

<sup>4</sup> The excavation area was very cramped, measuring 1.80 m x 2.40 m, making interpretation difficult. The building remains comprised several posts and a possible sill-beam. There was however nothing definitive to say that they were part of a building. More excavation in this area could perhaps resolve this issue.

<sup>5</sup> Nordre felt was excavated in three sections, in 1972, 1976–77 and 1982–83. None of the excavation results were published but a draft of from the first excavation period exists. This makes interpretation even more difficult in this area.

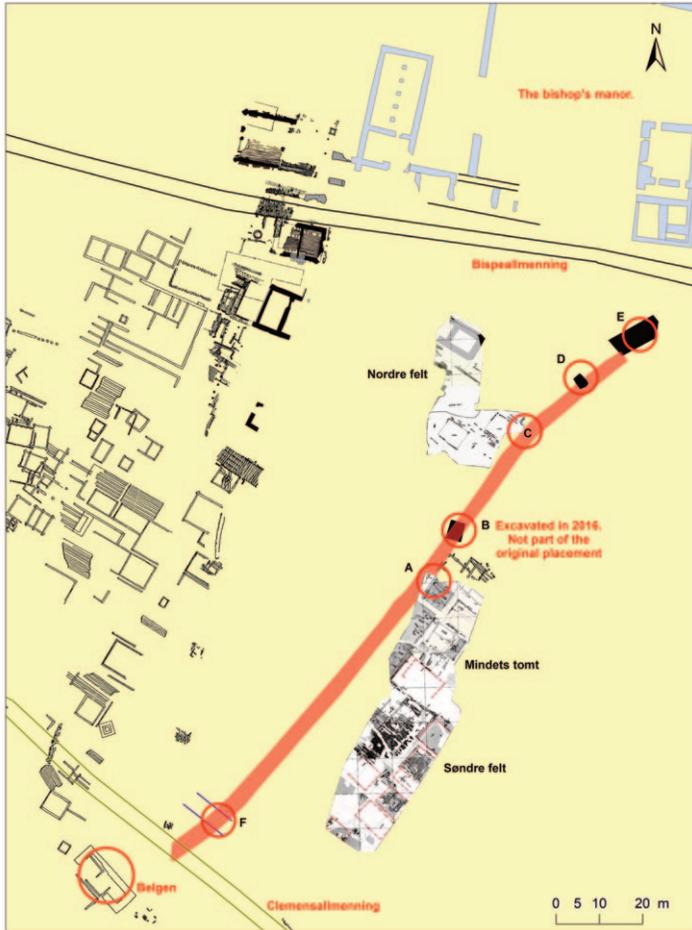


Figure 6. The location of the six excavation areas used to support Schia's theory for the placement of Vestre strete's northern extent. The archaeological evidence for the presence of Vestre strete lies on the periphery of the larger excavation areas of Mindets tomt (A) and Nordre felt (C) and in small trenches B, D, E and F. The stone cellar known as Belgen (circled) lay in the path of Schia's suggested route for Vestre strete. Map: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

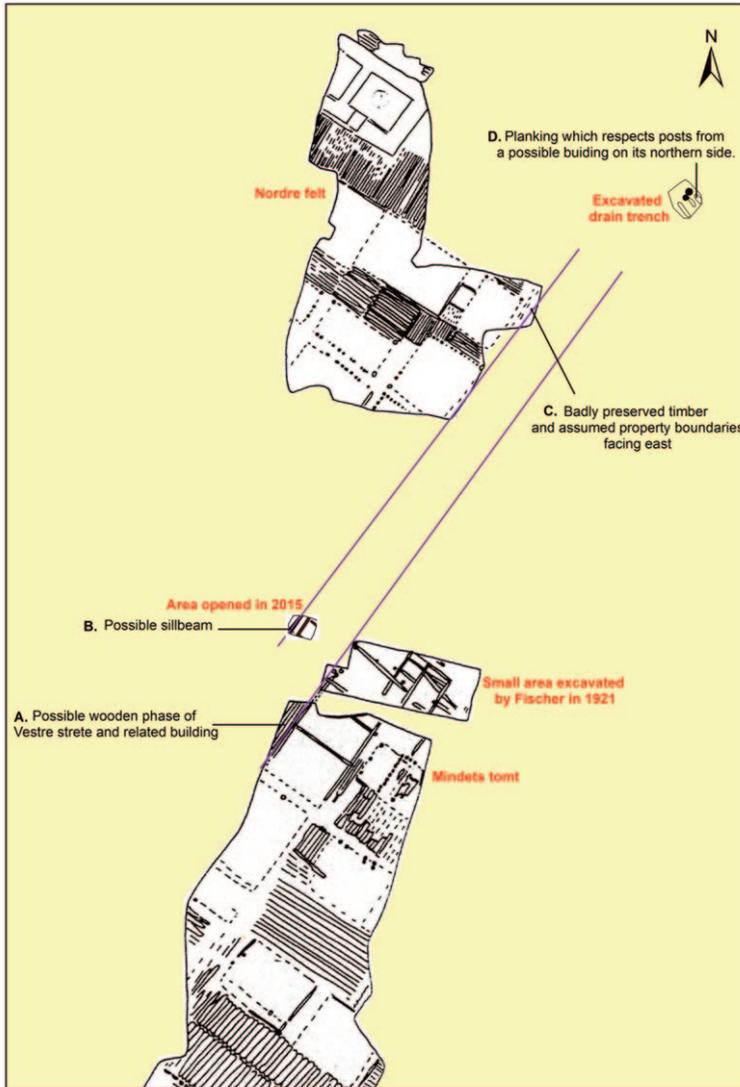
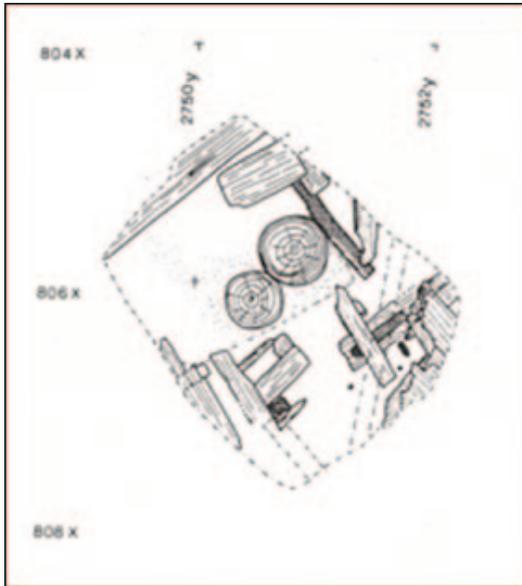


Figure 7. Detailed drawing showing Areas A, B, C and D and Schia's suggestion for the placement of Vestre strete between the two areas. Drawing: Molaug (unpublished) with annotations by Michael Derrick, NIKU.



Figure 8. Left: A plank surface dating to the thirteenth century, found in a small trench. Right: wooden supports for the same surface together with a plank (far right) which was interpreted as a burnt sill-beam. There is nothing in the description that differentiates this sill-beam timber from the other planks. The interpretation seems to be driven by an assumption that Vestre strete should have continued in this area (pers comm. Nora Fronth Furan, NIKU). Photos taken facing SW by Kristina V. Birkelund, NIKU.



*Figure 9. A possible plank surface and building remains, found in 1973 during drainage work. (Molaug, unpublished). The alignment of the planks suggests that Schia's Vestre strete would have turned sharply towards the north-east.*

Molaug, for example, mentions that the timber found in the area where Vestre strete was assumed to have lain was so badly preserved that it was impossible to identify it as a street (Molaug unpublished manuscript: Ch. C, lines 18–20).

The main reason for placing the street in the area between Mindets tomt and Nordre felt appears to be based upon the arrangement of the building plots in the area. The buildings found at Mindets tomt were built with their long sides facing onto what was assumed to be the street. The buildings in Nordre felt were less well preserved and therefore harder to discern but these were also interpreted as having their long side following a street. Unfortunately, the lack of excavation immediately to the east of Nordre felt meant that there was no way to prove if there was an opposing row of buildings in this area. It appears that Schia's reason for placing Vestre strete in this area was the assumption that the section found in Mindets tomt must have continued in this direction, between plot boundaries, on its way towards St Halvard's Church.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A series of unpublished hand drawn plans, not included in the unpublished volume Bind 4, have recently come to light. These show the remains of earlier field boundaries and what appears to be a possible planked street, boundary ditches and fences immediately south of the badly preserved remains. Molaug says this shows that there was indeed a route between two property boundaries possibly relating to a street, dating to 1000–1100. This passage likely

In order to support this theory Molaug points to evidence from a small trench directly north-east of Nordre felt where the posts from a house foundation and plank-ing were found (Fig. 7 (D) and Fig. 9).<sup>7</sup> While it is possible these remains could represent the continuation of a street and an associated building; it is also equally feasible that this area is part of a planked courtyard. Nonetheless, these remains were important in Schia's interpretation, as they turned the street towards the endpoint of St Hallvard's Church and particularly towards a stone surface found by Blix in 1879, which was also included in his placement (Fig. 6).

### **Blix's stone 'street' and the marketplace theory**

Perhaps the most influential piece of evidence relating to Vestre strete's northern extent was Blix's discovery of a stone surface found close to St Hallvard's Church in 1878. The surface became an important cornerstone in the reconstruction of Vestre strete and was used by Fischer and eventually by Schia to prove that there was evidence for a street continuing towards the church. The 'street' was described as 4-5 feet (1.20–1.50 meters) wide, comprising flat angular stones which lay on a 30 cm thick layer of smaller stones and mortar (Blix, 1879: 50). The most obvious problem with this description is that the surface Blix describes is too narrow to be a street, particularly when we compare it with the stone street unearthed by Meyer close to the king's manor which was almost 5 meters wide.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, archaeological excavation (Derrick in prep.) revealed that the surface found by Blix was more likely to relate to a period of post-medieval regeneration connected to the development of a stone-paved open area, possibly a marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps telling that Schia (1987: 173) originally omitted Blix' surface from an earlier interpretation of Vestre strete, perhaps indicating that he too doubted its sig-nificance. It relates to an earlier phase of the town's development prior to the establishment of Vestre Strete, Bispeallmenningen and Bispegården (pers. comm. Petter Molaug).

<sup>7</sup> Molaug mentions that archaeologists were not present for most of the digging, which was carried out by machine. This is likely to have affected the interpretation of the remains.

<sup>8</sup> Fischer (1921: 148) questioned whether this was a typological error and suggested that it referred to feet. He points to Blix's map which shows a much broader area of stone. It is impos-sible to know however, whether this is simply a schematic drawing or a real representation of the surface.

<sup>9</sup> Excavations for a new tram line took place in an area known as Oslo torg, an open area at the junction of Bispeallmenningen and Nordre strete where the town's medieval marketplace is believed to have existed. This revealed traces of two phases of cobbling which appear to have covered the whole marketplace area. Both phases of cobbling were dated to the late 1500's (Derrick in prep.). The surface found by Blix is believed to part of the earliest phase of cob-bling, which suggests that Blix's surface must be of a similar date.

nificance. The surface, does however, reappear in Schia's later reconstruction of the street which he suggested could have terminated at the town's marketplace.<sup>10</sup>

Connecting the stone surface to a medieval marketplace is an interesting idea. A market lying at the end of Vestre strete provides a reason for the street's existence - as one of the town's main trade routes. This in turn legitimises Schia's route. Evidence for a marketplace in this area however is flimsy. It is based on evidence from a map of the town dating to 1700 which shows a funnel-shaped ending to Bispeallmenningen (Fig. 10). Schia suggested that this open area could be the location of the town's marketplace during the medieval period. The idea was quickly adopted, giving credence to his Vestre strete route.

Recent archaeological excavation (Derrick et al. in prep.) has however, cast doubt on the existence of a medieval marketplace in this area. In 2020, a two-phase stone building dating to the fourteenth century was uncovered in the middle of the funnel-

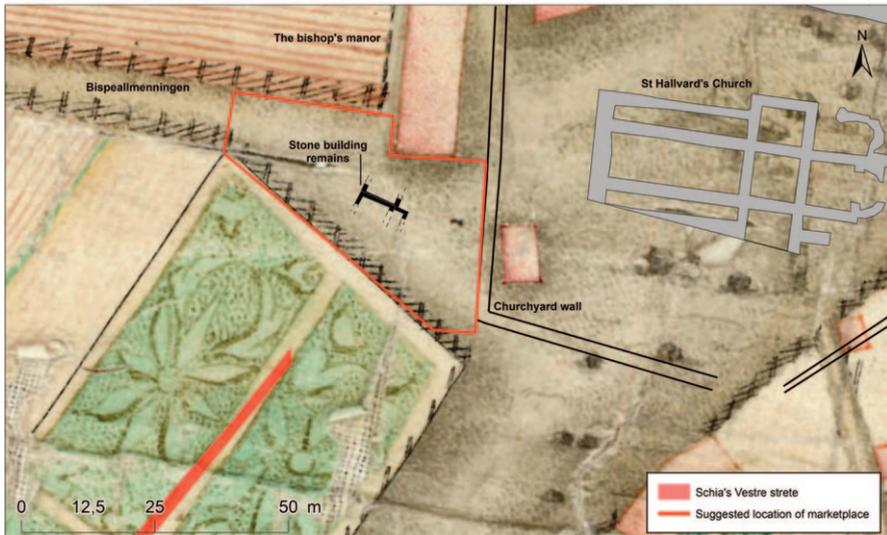


Figure 10. The presence of a stone building in an area previously thought to be a good candidate for the location of Oslo's medieval marketplace suggests that the town's marketplace must have lain elsewhere. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU. Background map: *Carte von Agershuus und der Stadt Christiania (øst)*, from 1700 (*Statens kartverk*).

<sup>10</sup> Schia 1991: 35. Debate over the location of the town's marketplace(s) begun when Fischer suggested two locations immediately south and east of St Hallvard Cathedral.



*Figure 11. The southern room of the stone building occupying the area previously thought to be Oslo marketplace. The building has been truncated by modern activity on all sides which makes it appear much smaller than it originally was. Facing NE. Photo: Regin Meyer, NIKU.*

shaped area, suggesting that there was no open space where a market could take place (Fig. 11). Take away the possibility of a market in this area and Schia's street simply takes you to the crossroads where the bishop has his church. The absence of a marketplace in this area therefore could weaken Schia's interpretation.

### **The missing link?**

The final piece of supporting evidence for the continuation of Vestre strete in a southerly direction was a small section of planking discovered close to St Clement's Church. This is a vital piece of evidence which is used to join the northern end of Schia's Vestre strete with the established southern section (Fig. 12).

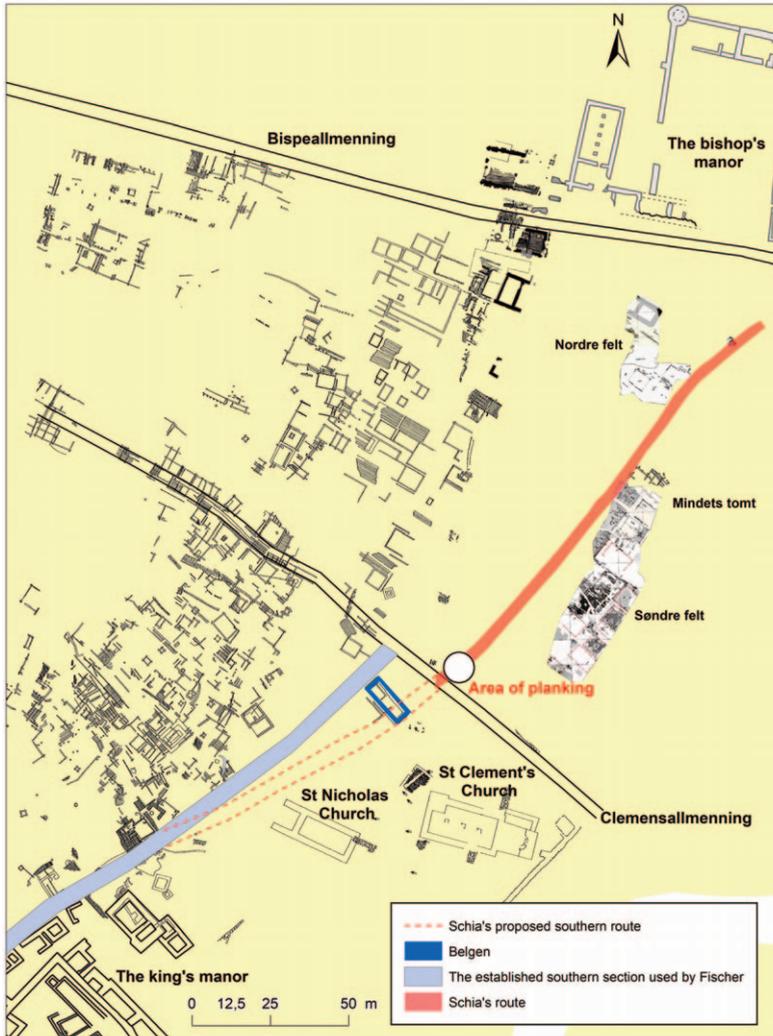


Figure 12. The location of a planked area (white circle) which Wihl and Karlberg suggested was part of Vestre strete. This section of planking lies 75 meters from the remains found at Mindets tomt towards the north and places Vestre strete in direct conflict with the medieval stone cellar of Belgen. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

The interpretation of these planks seems to have been greatly influenced by the possible find of Vestre strete at Mindets tomte and Nordre felt. Wihl and Karlberg (1991: 141) initially describe the planks as belonging to a possible street or open area but quickly become convinced that they are in fact connected to the fragments of Vestre strete, which were found at Mindets tomte and Nordre felt. This rapid re-interpretation, which occurs in the space of just two paragraphs, fails to consider the 75-meter distance between the two areas of planking which makes it difficult to meaningfully join up the areas.

A re-examination of the documentation also brings into doubt Wihl and Karlberg's interpretation. The drawings show a small area of planking which crosses a 1-meter-wide trench (Fig. 13). The direction of these planks is unclear, and it is not definite

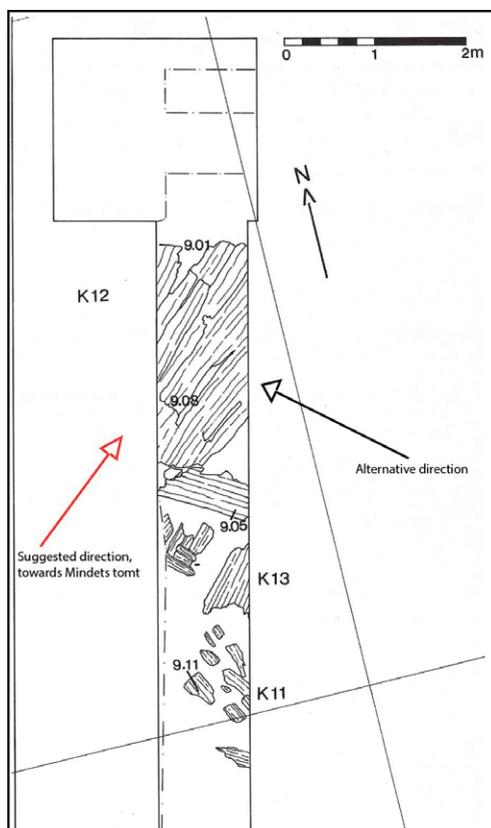


Figure 13. An area of planking found in the trench close to St Clement's Church. These planks were interpreted as being part of a street running NE-SW, but the planks most likely represent a street running in the opposite direction towards the NW. Drawing: (Wihl and Karlberg, p.123, fig.8). Annotated by Michael Derrick, NIKU.

that they run in a north-easterly direction towards Mindets tomt. In fact, archaeological remains from the town's main thoroughfares suggests that the planks are more likely to run perpendicular to the route suggested by Schia.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Schia tentatively agreed that these fragmented remains could be part of the same street found at Mindets tomt (Schia 1991: 35).

### **The Belgen problem**

The biggest problem with placing Vestre strete in this area, however, is that it puts it on a collision course with the stone cellar of Belgen, first mentioned in the written sources in 1322.<sup>12</sup> In order to connect the northern and southern sections, the street would have to either turn towards the east, cutting through the graveyard of St Clement's Church or sharply towards the west. Since written sources mention Vestre strete as existing in the mid-thirteenth century, we must assume that it pre-dates the stone cellar of Belgen. This means that Belgen is more likely to have been constructed alongside the already existing street, making Schia's route untenable.

To overcome this problem, Schia suggested that Belgen could in fact have been built later than Vestre strete and that it could post-date the medieval period, thus removing the problem altogether.<sup>13</sup> This solution, however, seems too convenient, and it is obvious that it was created with the intention of finally joining together the northern and southern sections of Vestre strete. In addition, there is no building which has been discovered which could offer an alternative placement for Belgen and very few places where this building is likely to be unearthed.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> There have been many streets, passages and allmenninger uncovered in Oslo's medieval town. Some of these are constructed using planks which are laid lengthwise, following the direction of the street. However, most of the main thoroughfares (Bispeallmenningen, Clemensallmenningen and Nordre strete) comprise planks or posts which lie perpendicular to the direction of the street, which could be the case with the planks in this trench.

<sup>12</sup> The stone building of Belgen is first mentioned in 1322 when it is sold together with amongst other things a 'street' and allmenningen (common street) (DN III 131). This could suggest that it was located on the corner of Vestre strete and Clemensallmenningen. A later document locates Belgen to the west of St Clement's Church and north of St Nicholas' Church (DN II 481) which ties in well with the location of the stone building found by Blix and commonly recognised as Belgen.

<sup>13</sup> There have been instances in the medieval town where such activity has occurred. Excavations close to the Church of the Holy Cross (Korskirken) revealed a later post-medieval stone cellar lying over an earlier medieval path (Fischer 1931).

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 16 which describes Belgen's location, limiting its placement to a very specific area.

The removal of this southern part of the route together with Blix's northern section effectively cuts the head and tail off Schia's northern section of Vestre strete making it untenable. What we are left with is a route between two property boundaries in the north of the town, with no beginning or end, which cannot be linked directly to the remains of Vestre strete found by Meyer.

### **Evidence for a new placement**

When Erik Schia moved Fischer's Vestre strete eastwards, he was understandably influenced by the new archaeological evidence from Mindets tomt and Nordre felt, which created room for the street between two adjacent rows of building plots. However, another alternative could have been to move the street further west. Schia did not dismiss this option outright, however he didn't think it plausible, partly due to a lack of archaeological excavation in the area which could support this theory (Schia, 1987: 174). It is easy to see why Schia came to that conclusion. Fig. 14 shows Mindets tomt, Søndre felt and Nordre felt together with all the excavated areas known prior to the 1980's. It is apparent that Mindets tomt, Nordre felt and Søndre felt lay in an area which was almost entirely unexcavated at this time. Moving the street westwards, into an unexplored area of the town, was therefore not an option. Recent results from the Follo Line project, however, has provided this missing evidence which suggests that Vestre strete did indeed lie further westwards.

### **The stone buildings – a key to finding Vestre street**

The importance of Vestre strete as a main artery within the town is indisputable. The sagas describe it as both a processional route for a royal coronation and as the quickest route across town. It is, however, the archaeological remains found close to the king's manor, which reveal the street's importance. Here, the street is paved in stone and flanked by a series of high-status stone buildings.<sup>15</sup> These buildings would have belonged to the wealthy and powerful elite within the town and could have been used for dwelling and for storage of goods. Stone buildings were an important part of the medieval town's economy, protecting goods from fire, theft, and decay.

<sup>15</sup> The stone paved street is likely to represent the last phase of use. It is unclear when it was paved in stone, but the width of the street suggests a post-1276 date in accordance with Magnus Lagabøte's regulations. Recent archaeological evidence has given rise to the theory that the southern end of Vestre strete was constructed over an earlier moat. This possible moat appears to have fallen into disrepair and was backfilled around 1300 which means the stone laid phase of Vestre strete is likely to post-date that period (Derrick 2021).



Figure 14. This map illustrates the problem Schia had when trying to place Vestre strete. The excavations at Mindets tomt, Søndre felt and Nordre felt lay on their own, in an area which was largely unexcavated. This made it difficult to justify placing it elsewhere and confined Schia's placement to within his excavation areas. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

Storage buildings require easy access to the town's main trading routes which is why they were built alongside or close to the paths of the town's main thoroughfares. This is illustrated in Fig. 15 (next page) which shows the distribution of the excavated stone buildings throughout the medieval town.<sup>16</sup> Most of the buildings lie along or close to the main routes of Clemensallmenningen, Bispeallmenningen, Nordre strete, Østre strete, and of course the southern end of Vestre strete. Those buildings which lie in apparently isolated areas are likely to have lain close to other main arteries which have not yet been discovered. It may therefore be possible to discern the original route of Vestre Strete by examining the distribution of the stone buildings previously unearthed within the medieval town. The challenge, however, is to find which of these buildings relate to Vestre strete.

In order to identify these buildings, we must focus our attention on what we already know about the street. We know for example that the southern section was located around a power centre, namely the king's manor. It is not unreasonable to suggest therefore that the northern end of Vestre strete will resemble the southern plan, and that the endpoint is likely to be the bishop's manor. It is therefore important to examine areas in the northern part of the town, for clusters of stone buildings, close to the bishop's manor which could indicate the presence of a street.

### **Stone buildings around the bishop's manor**

One such cluster of buildings was recently uncovered on the southern side of Bispeallmenningen opposite the enclosure wall which surrounded the bishop's manor (Fig. 15).<sup>17</sup> The buildings date to the beginning of the fourteenth century, coinciding with a period of redevelopment spearheaded by King Håkon V (Schia 1987: 27). They represent some of the largest secular stone buildings uncovered in the town and it is evident that they have been constructed by people of wealth and power (Figs. 16 and 17). The close proximity of these buildings to the bishop's manor could suggest that they have strong connection to the bishop.

<sup>16</sup> Prior to the Follo line excavations, it was assumed that most of the stone buildings found in the town were erected after the reformation due to there being a surplus of stone from abandoned religious establishments. This, however, appears not to be the case. Most of the stone buildings unearthed during the Follo Line project for example, have been dated to the medieval period.

<sup>17</sup> Two of the buildings were in fact partially discovered by Cato Enger during excavations in 1954. The true extent of the buildings, however, were only realised when the remaining foundations were discovered during the Follo Line project.

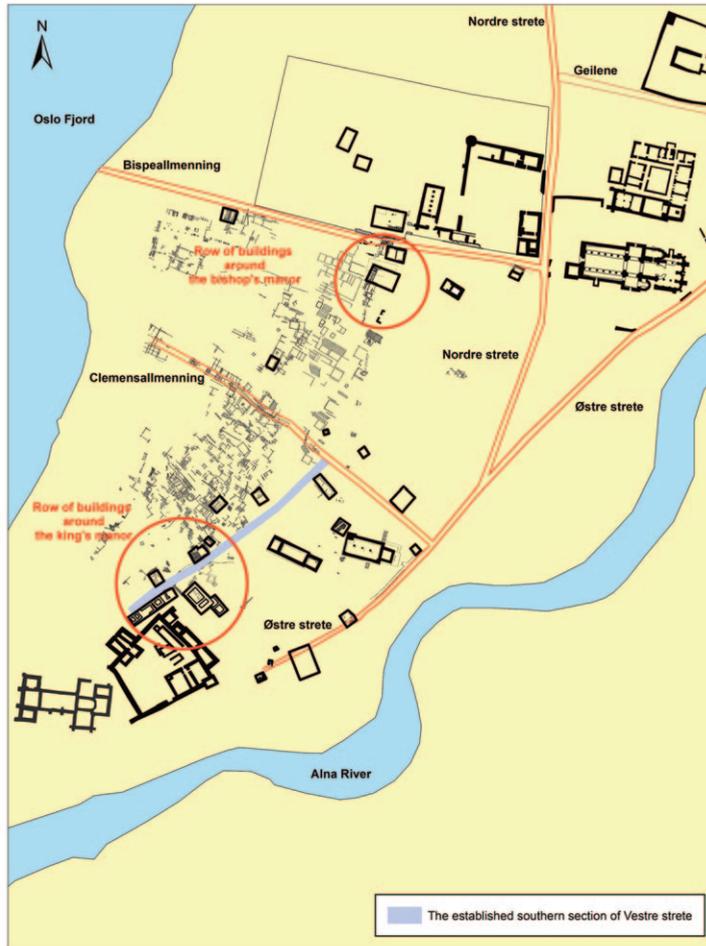


Figure 15. The black rectangles represent the town's stone buildings which are concentrated around the main streets. The concentration of stone buildings close to the King's manor is focused on the southern end of Vestre strete. There is also a cluster of buildings further north, close to the bishop's manor, which are distributed in a line from south to north. Many of the town's stone buildings are undated and some are likely to relate to the post-reformation period, however, excavation has shown that a large number of them are medieval in date. Drawing: Mick Derrick, NIKU.



*Figure 16 (top). The remains of a two-room stone building complete with a planked floor (Building A in figure 18). The building lay along the south side of Bispeallmenningen, directly across from the bishop's manor. Facing north. Photo: Aksel Haavik, NIKU.*

*Figure 17 (bottom). The walls of a large stone building excavated during the Follo line project (marked B on Figure 18). The remains are part of a much larger 3-room building, which was previously unearthed by Cato Enger in 1954. Facing south. Photo: Gorm Seljeseth,*

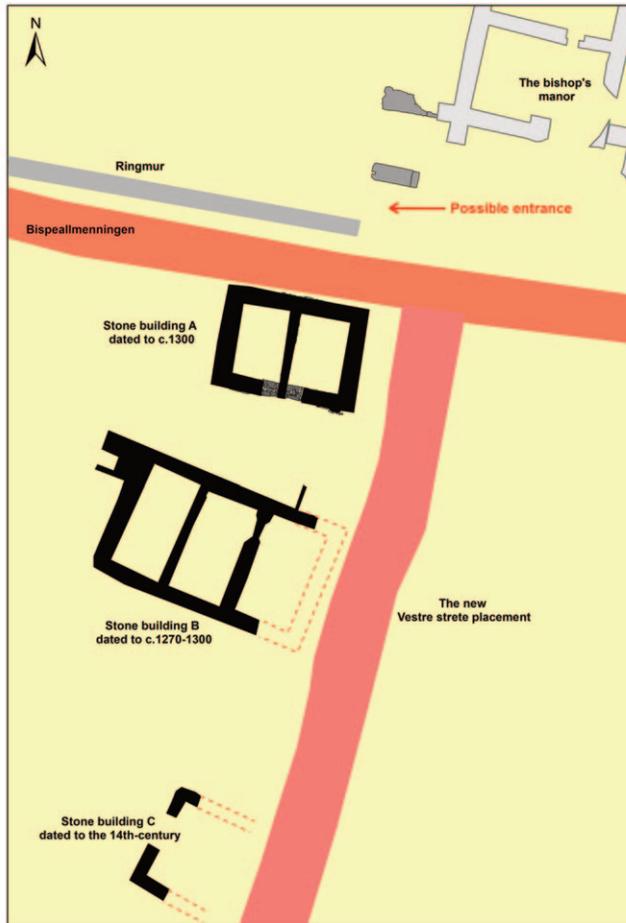


Figure 18. A row of buildings which lies immediately outside the wall which enclosed the Bishop's Manor. Building A and B were partially unearthed by Cato Enger in 1954 and most recently during excavations carried out at the Follo Line project. Building C was also unearthed during the Follo Line project. Buildings A and B are likely to date to the early fourteenth century while building C is more difficult date precisely but likely dates to the fourteenth century. The enclosure wall stops abruptly close to an opposing wall which lies a few meters further north. This has been interpreted as an entrance to the bishop's manor. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

As mentioned earlier, the stone buildings within the medieval town were built alongside or close to the town's main streets. It is therefore highly likely that these high-status buildings were also connected to one of the town's main arteries. The plan of the buildings appears to confirm this. They lie in a row, aligned north / south suggesting that they follow a thoroughfare running in the same direction (Fig. 18). Evidence from earlier excavations and more recently from the Follo Line project have shown that there was no street on the west side of this row of buildings, suggesting that any street is likely to lie along the east side.

### **A connection is made**

While the row of buildings does seem to suggest the existence of a street in the area, there still remains the question of whether that street is Vestre strete. For it to be Vestre strete it must connect with the southern part of the street and, if the sagas are to be believed, have some connection with the bishop or at least have a viable end-point. It is not enough to say for example that the street lies close to the bishop's manor, as the same could be said for other streets or buildings.

The discovery of a possible side entrance to the bishop's manor, at the northern end of the row of stone-buildings in 2018, provided this possible connection (see Fig. 18). The entrance (Fig. 19) appears to have been incorporated into the enclosure wall which was built around the bishop's manor sometime during the fourteenth century.<sup>18</sup> However, the discovery of an earlier fence line which curved towards the entrance and was dated to the mid-thirteenth century, suggests that this area was already an established focal point prior to the construction of the enclosure wall.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The enclosure wall was built on top of hundreds of upright wooden posts which created a solid platform for the stonework. Radiocarbon dates from these piles were used to date the wall. Unfortunately, the dates spanned a long time period, and it was only possible to conclude that the wall was constructed sometime in the fourteenth century (Berge et al. in prep).

<sup>19</sup> Excavation under the stone buildings show that the area was a focal point for high status buildings already in the thirteenth century. Under building B (Fig. 18), lay an earlier wooden building built on a strong foundation of massive posts and dated to just after 1200. The building was 15 meters long and 9,5 meters wide. For comparison, the largest wooden building found in Norway in the medieval period was uncovered within the king's manor and measured 17 x 11 meters. An ordinary two rooms dwelling was less than a third of the size (Bauer & Engen in prep).

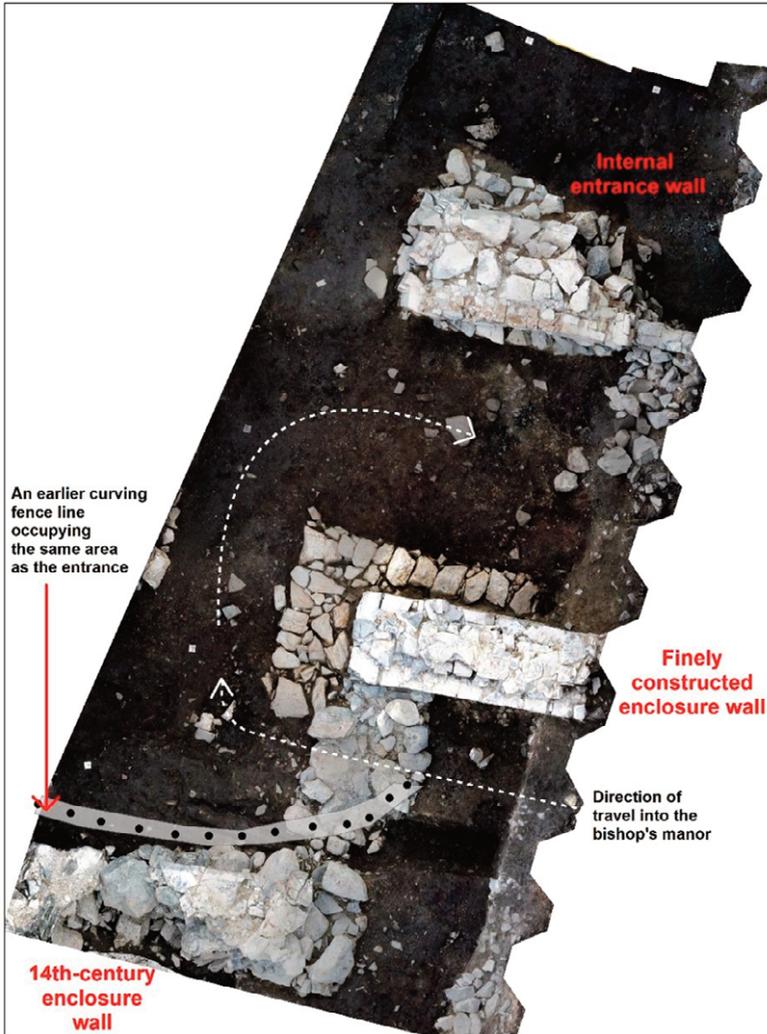


Figure 19. The fourteenth-century enclosure wall and the finely constructed wall form two sides of a possible entrance which would have taken you inside the enclosure wall. In order to enter the bishop's residence, you had to pass through an additional entrance between the northern wall and the finely constructed enclosure wall. Orthophoto: Jani Causevic, NIKU.



*Figure 20. Part of the possible entrance leading into the bishop's manor. The fine ashlar blocks built into the end of the wall hint at the very well-constructed entrance. Facing SE. Photo: Sara Langvik Berge, NIKU.*

The initial entrance leads to a grander portal inside the enclosure wall, which incorporates the finely built wall shown in Figs. 19 & 20 and an opposing internal entrance wall further to the north (Fig. 19). This entrance would have led into the bishop's southern wing and associated stone buildings. The walls which make up the entrance are different in character. The northern wall is partly built in bricks while fine wall is built in only stone. Both walls, however, are built on a similarly constructed stone platform, something which could support the idea that they are connected to each other.

As suggested earlier, the situation around the bishop and king's manors are very similar. A row of buildings led out from the entrance of both the manors. We know that Vestre strete was an important linking between these institutions. It is not unthinkable then, that the two rows of buildings reflect a route which led from one door to the other.

### The sagas and the town laws - a spanner in the works?

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries various authors have used the sagas as a way of interpreting the route of Vestre strete. There are problems around this, not only with the reliability of the saga writers but also around the vague descriptions of the street. In some saga passages the street is referred to as simply 'strete' or 'stræte' while in the *Sverre's saga* the name 'Langstrete' has been attributed to Vestre strete. It is only in *Håkon Håkonsson's saga* that the street is mentioned by name. This entry also gives a full description of the route of the street which places the start point at Kongsgården and the endpoint at St. Hallvards churchyard.<sup>20</sup> This description is quite vague, and the street is mentioned only in passing as a route to get from A to B. The saga passage which mentions Vestre strete in length concerns Duke Skule in 1240, fleeing up Vestre strete towards the churchyard of St Hallvard and the ensuing battle between his forces and those of King Håkon Håkonsson in 1240. The endpoint of Vestre strete in this passage appears to be St Hallvard's Churchyard. The important question, however, is how Håkon reached his destination? It is unlikely for example, that the sagas would have described the whole route verbatim. The most important point of the description would surely be the journey's endpoint. It could also be argued that when Duke Skule flees up Vestre strete to find sanctuary behind the walls of the churchyard, that it would be much safer to access the churchyard via the side entrance of the bishop's manor and over the bridge connecting St Hallvard's Church with the manor.<sup>21</sup>

Another tantalising possibility is that the saga descriptions are actually describing two different streets. If we look at the timeline of these entries, we see that Langstrete is mentioned in *Sverre's saga* in 1199. It is not until 1240 that Vestre strete is mentioned by name (*Håkon Håkonssons saga*, Ch. 230). However, the sentence preceding this, which describes Duke Skule's route mentions only *street*. Is it possible that Vestre strete and Langstrete / strete are two different entities? The newly proposed route for Vestre strete does leave room for another street in the town and Schia's old route could be the remnants of that street. Is it possible that the fragmented passage or street found in the 1970's and 80's is in fact Langstrete, a street which preceded the newer Vestre strete? (Fig. 21).

<sup>20</sup> I do not include the description from *Sverres saga* (Ch. 135) which mentions *Langstrete*, as Sverre's forces abort their journey before they reach the end of the street. *Håkon Håkonssons saga*, Chs. 230–235. Described as both *stratet* (the street) and later *Vestre stræte*.

<sup>21</sup> At this point the stone enclosure wall had not been built but it is possible that the remaining two walls formed the initial entrance. Only the northern wall was dated. The earliest phase of the wall was dated to 1220 while the latest phase is believed to have been constructed sometime between 1250 and 1260 (Berge et al. in prep.).



*Figure 21. Schia and Lidén's original Vestre strete placement could offer an alternative placement for Langstrete. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.*

### **Archaeological remains relating to the new possible route**

In order to place Vestre strete, I have chosen to base my theory on archaeological evidence which I believe can stand up to scrutiny. I have tried to avoid using evidence from small-scale excavations as the basis for this argument. I have, for example, ex-



*Figure 22: The remains of wooden planking possibly Vestre strete, together with house foundations on its eastern side. A stone building lay on the opposite (western) side of the possible street but is not visible in this picture. Facing SE. Photo: Mark Oldham NIKU.*

cluded two areas of wooden planking which could relate to Vestre strete due to the documentation being very poor (Lidén & Øgar 1961). There is, however, one area which came to light recently, which is difficult to ignore.

In 2020, the remains of a possible planked street (Fig. 22) were unearthed along the east side of stone building B (see Fig. 18). The foundations of a wooden building were found along the opposite side of the planking suggesting that there was indeed a thoroughfare between the buildings. (Figs. 22 and 24). The possible street and building dated to the middle of the 13th-century (Derrick et al. in prep.). The space between the two buildings measures 5,75 meters but could be less depending on how far the stone building continued eastwards, leaving ample room for a street the width of Vestre strete which should be approximately 3,75 meters according to the town laws of Magnus Lagabøte. This find alone is not definitive proof for the existence of Vestre strete, however it does support the other pieces of evidence which place the street in this area.

### **Vestre strete comes of age**

Fig. 23 shows the new proposed route of Vestre strete in relation to the stone buildings and the possible side entrance to the bishop's manor. The southern part of Vestre strete remains unchanged, however the street now passes on the western side of Belgen, avoiding conflict with the building. From here the street continues north/north-east until it encounters the stone buildings near the bishop's manor, completing the route from the king's manor to the bishop's manor, and mirroring the curve of Østre and Nordre street.

The area between Belgen and the buildings near the bishop's manor is almost completely unexcavated, explaining the lack of any associated stone buildings along the route of the street in this area. This lack of archaeological evidence makes it more difficult to accurately place Vestre strete. To overcome this problem, it was necessary to examine other clues for the street's existence in this area.

### **Building alignments**

Fig. 24 shows building remains uncovered during previous excavations on the east and west sides of the proposed route of Vestre strete. The buildings on the eastern side differ in alignment to those further to the west. The probable reason for this difference is that the buildings are aligning against two different features within the town. The buildings on the east side lie almost perpendicular to the new placement of Vestre strete which could suggest they radiate out from the street while the buildings on the west side approach the Vestre strete at a more oblique angle and could be oriented against a road or boundary lying further to the east.<sup>22</sup>

The alignment of the buildings towards on the west side of Vestre strete appear to be aligned against a different boundary. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this boundary could be Vestre strete. With this in mind, I have placed Vestre strete in an area where the eastern and western plots boundaries are likely to converge, thus continuing the street's route beyond Belgen.

<sup>22</sup> The effect a boundary can have on the orientation of features in the landscape was revealed during excavations close to St Nicholas Church in 2018 (Derrick 2018). A series of graves were unearthed close to the south side of the church which followed the church's NW-SE orientation. Further to the south, on the graveyard's southern extent the graves had shifted orientation until they lay almost N-S. The southern extent of the graveyard is assumed to have been bounded on its southern side by Østre strete which curved around Clemenskirkegården before continuing northwards. It is possible that the graves lying to the west were cut perpendicular to Østre strete.



Figure 23. The proposed route of Vestre strete (red). The southern section follows Fischer's route from the king's manor to Clemensallmenningen while the northern section heads towards the cluster of buildings outside the possible side entrance to the bishop's manor. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

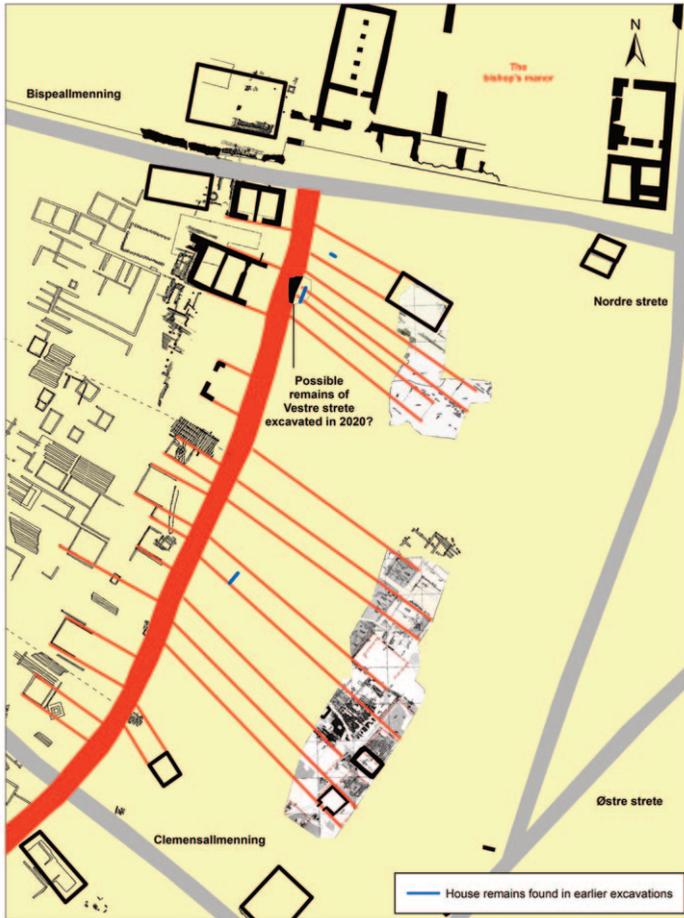
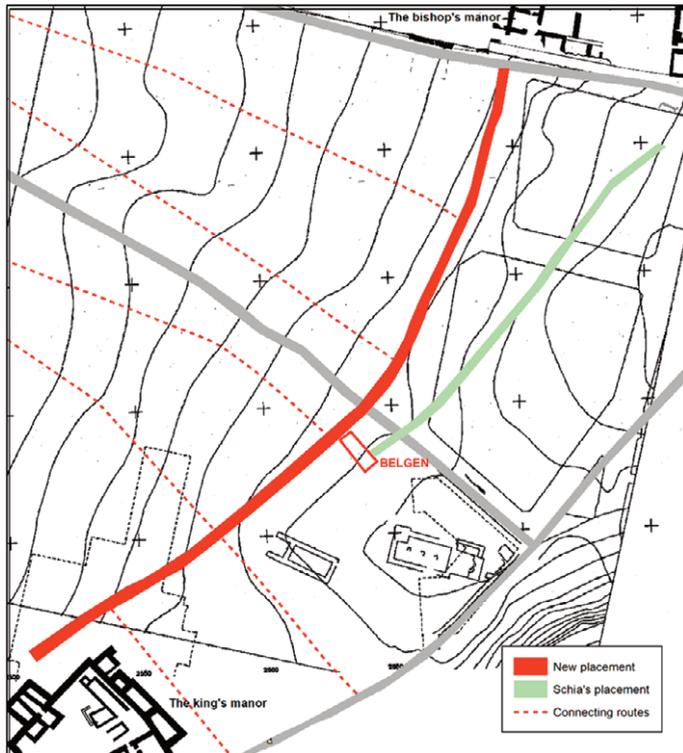


Figure 24. The buildings to the west of the new Vestre strete placement have a different alignment to those on its east side. This suggests that the buildings to the east and west are aligned against two different features in the landscape. I have suggested that the buildings on the west side are built perpendicular to the route of Vestre strete. The small blue lines represent building remains from a series of small-scale excavations west of Mindets tomt, Søndre felt and Nordre felt (Elliott 1991; Wiberg 1991) which confirm that the boundary alignments from the 1970's and 80's excavations continue westwards towards the area where I have placed Vestre strete. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

**Which Vestre strete works best?**

For Vestre strete to function it is vital that it takes the shortest and most gentle path possible. Fig. 25 shows the new Vestre strete route superimposed on a map of the medieval terrain.<sup>23</sup> The incline from King's manor is relatively gentle, rising gradually towards Belgen. From Belgen it continues a short distance before following a relatively flat ridge which continues all the way to the entrance of the bishop's manor.



*Figure 25. New versus old Vestre strete. The new placement lies between two contour lines providing a relatively gentle journey along a shallow ridge while the earlier suggested route is much steeper. The newer route is also served by a series of passages and allmenninger which meet it at almost right angles. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.*

<sup>23</sup> This terrain map has been reconstructed using heights from earlier archaeological excavations.

This gentle journey is in sharp contrast to Lidén and Schia's suggested path which would have been much steeper, cutting across the upward slope towards St Hallvard's Church.

The new route would have been an excellent street for the transport of goods, not too steep and relatively wide enough to allow the movement of horses, carts, and people. In addition, there are also a series of routes which cross Vestre strete allowing access from all parts of town (Fig. 25). The most important of these routes were Bispeallmenningen and Clemensallmenningen which were used to transport goods to and from the harbour. In addition, there are also several other passages which would have been equally important in connecting the town's main streets. These small passages, allmenninger, and streets formed a network which crossed the whole town, making access easy and ensuring the flow of goods and information throughout the town.

### **Trading places?**

The new route places Vestre strete at the centre of the town's commercial activity with all the town's main routes connecting along its path. It is not therefore impossible that the town's marketplace could also have lain nearby. Fig. 26 shows an area where I have suggested as good candidate for the placement of the marketplace. The area lies immediately outside the possible entrance to the bishop's manor at the junction of Bispeallmenningen and the suggested route of Vestre strete. This area would have been perfectly placed for the sale of goods arriving from within and outside the city.

Evidence for a marketplace in this area is purely speculative, however there are a few clues which may support the theory. The possible street found in 2020, occupied an area between two buildings which was 5.75 meters wide. This is slightly wider than the stone-laid part of Vestre strete found close to the King's manor which was 5 meters at its widest point. It is possible that the increased width could reflect a widening of the street towards the north perhaps in relation to an open area where a market was located? In 2018, the remains of a set of scales (Fig. 27) of a type commonly used in trade transactions was recovered from an area outside the possible entrance to the bishop's manor. A few meters to the south of this find, lay an area of mud which had been compacted over time. This layer contained a weight, gold thread, a bead, ceramics from England and the Low Countries and stoneware from Germany. It is tempting to suggest that the trampled deposit and associated finds could reflect the area's use as a marketplace.

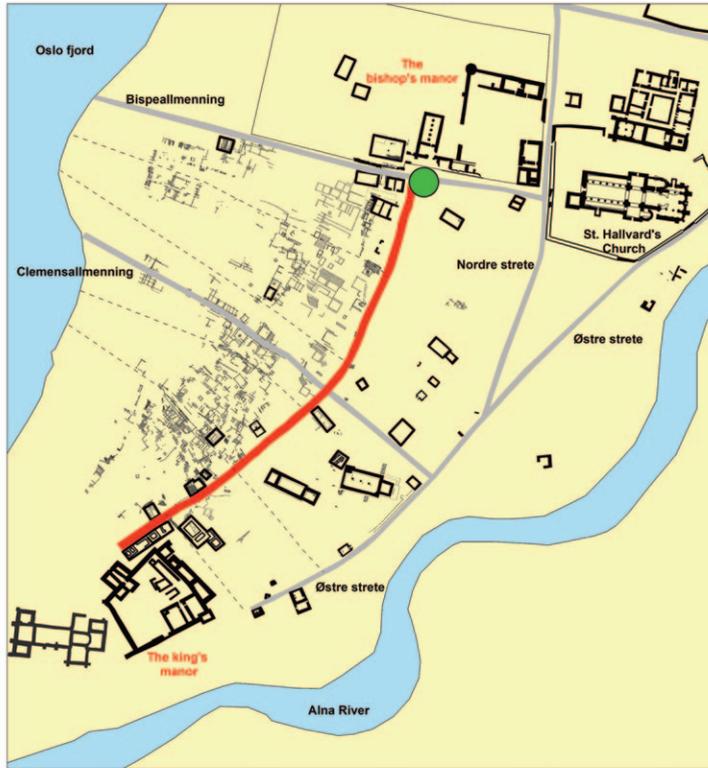


Figure 26. The green marker shows the suggested location of medieval Oslo's marketplace. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU.

### The death of Vestre strete

Excavations along Bispeallmenningen and Clemensallmenningen have shown that the main arteries of the medieval town began life as simple tracks before being decked in planking, widened, and later paved in stone. Vestre strete probably followed the same pattern. It is curious then that there are no traces of Vestre strete surviving in the landscape today. Bispeallmenningen, for example, has survived into the present day as Bispegata. Clemensallmenning's eastern stretch is today's Kanslergate, which follows the churchyard wall connected to St Clement's Church.

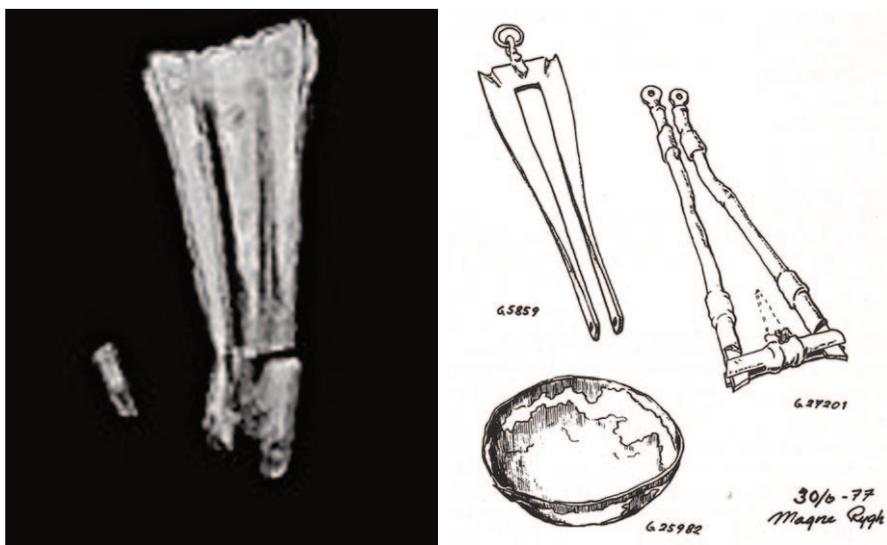


Figure 27. Left: X-ray of a metal object found outside the possible entrance to the Bishop's Manor in 2018 revealed a set of scales, similar to those found at Søndre felt (right). (Original drawing: Magne Rygh, see Færden et al. 1990: 237–238).

It is easy to blame the absence of Vestre strete on railway development which obliterated the area during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, maps which pre-date the arrival of the railway show Bispeallmenningen, part of Clemensallmenningen, and what we must assume are parts of Nordre strete<sup>24</sup> and Østre strete surviving in the landscape into the beginning of the 1700's – but no Vestre strete (Fig. 28).

So why did Vestre strete disappear while the other streets thrived? The most likely answer is that the institutions at either end of the street began to diminish in importance. It has been suggested that the royal manor which lay in the shadow of Akershus castle, became primarily a priest's residence before being demolished sometime in the first half of the sixteenth-century (Molaug 2012). After the Reformation, large parts of the Bishop's Manor were demolished, and the bishop moved his residence

<sup>24</sup> Traditionally Nordre strete has referred to the road leading out of the town in a northerly direction with a starting point at the top of Bispeallmenning. I have extended Nordre strete southwards and joined it to Østre strete forming a fork in the road. This is based on evidence from maps from the 1700's and will be discussed in a later article.

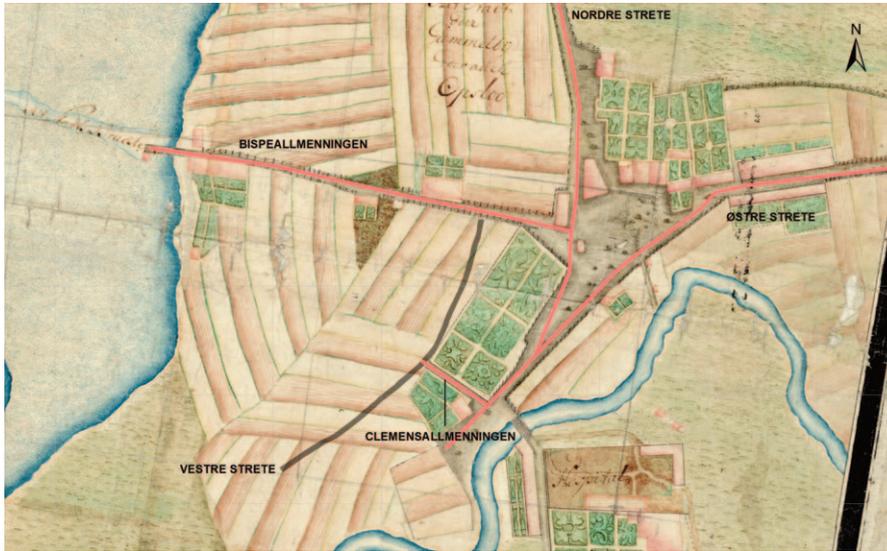


Figure 28. A map of the old town from 1700 showing that traces of almost all the main streets from the medieval town survive, with the exception of Vestre strete which has disappeared under agricultural land. Drawing: Michael Derrick, NIKU. Background map: *Carte von Agershuus und der Stadt Christiania (Øst)*, from 1700 (*Statens kartverk*).

further eastwards into buildings previously occupied by the dissolved Dominican order.

It is possible that the survival and partial survival of the other routes reflect a new focus away from these institutions, concentrated on the harbour and trade. These roads would have thrived and continued as important trading routes in and out of the town unimpeded by a connection to the bishop and king. Vestre strete on the other hand would have become a minor street connected to two dead institutions.

### Schia's route is reborn

The decline in importance of Vestre strete will have created a shift in focus within the town and, inevitably, new routes will have begun to spring up. Ironically, one of these routes seems to be the route proposed by Schia as a good candidate for Vestre

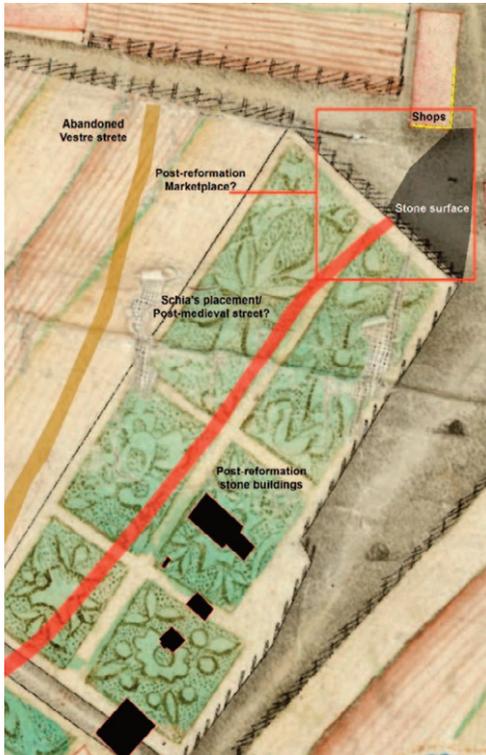


Figure 29. A series of stone buildings dating to after the reformation period which appear to follow the route of Schia's earlier suggested placement of Vestre strete. This coincides with the paving of the area at the top of Bispeallmenningen in stone and a series of shops being built into the wall of Ladegården. Could this be the location of Oslo's post-medieval marketplace? Drawing: Michael Derrick. Background map: *Carte von Agershuus und der Stadt Christiania (øst)*, from 1700 (Statens kartverk).

strete. Suddenly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a row of stone buildings was constructed between Østre strete and Schia's route (Fig. 29).<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned earlier, stone buildings were important for storage and trade, and they required a good network of streets leading to and from these buildings. That these buildings suddenly appear in this area suggests that the passage has become an important trade route through town.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the area in front of St Halvard's Church is paved in stone and there appears a new row of shops built into the

<sup>25</sup> Schia 1987. The area between the stone buildings is cobbled, suggesting a lot of traffic in the area.

<sup>26</sup> The northernmost building in Fig. 29 is a two-roomed building. Both rooms were constructed in the sixteenth century. The small eastern room was built first and the larger western room was built later extending the building further west towards Schia's route. This further strengthens the idea that the street and buildings were connected to each other.

wall of Ladegården (the successor of the Bishop's Manor) (Meyer & Hvinden-Haug in prep.). This activity could suggest that the area previously thought to have been a medieval marketplace was in fact a focus for post-medieval commerce.

### The Eulogy

The placement of Vestre strete could be seen as a trivial matter, however this is not the case. By moving it out of the back streets and putting it front and centre in the medieval town, we create a focal point around which the town radiates and evolves. It is perhaps not a surprise that Vestre strete is mentioned by name for the first time in 1240. This is a time of change. The town's two main institutions are improving their defences. The Bishop's Manor, Bispeborgen, is already built in stone and the King's Manor, Kongsgården, is slowly catching up. The town is getting a makeover, and this includes a new street – Vestre strete.

The dimensions of the stone paved street uncovered by Meyer suggest that remains post-dates Magnus Lagabøtes Bylov (town laws) of 1276. It is possible that the stone street was built as a response to the fire of 1287 recorded in the Icelandic *Lögmannna annals*. Prior to this Oslo appears to be a town predominately constructed in wood with only the high status religious and royal buildings built in stone. After the fire we see a change. Bispeallmenningen is reconstructed in accordance with the regulations in Magnus Lagabøtes Bylov (perhaps indicating a begrudging acceptance twenty years too late, that Magnus was right when it came to fire-protection and wide streets). The adoption of these regulations helped solidify the town plan and perhaps encouraged the building of more permanent structures in stone.

We see this in action as King Håkon V (1299–1319) embarks on a series of building projects which include the expansion of St Mary's Church, the construction of a Franciscan monastery and most importantly the construction of Akershus fortress (which may be seen by looking down Bispeallmenningen towards west), all driven by the production of bricks from his newly established brick kilns.

Perhaps Vestre strete was seen not only as an important route through town but also vital to how Håkon V wished his town to be viewed. The main street and accompanying stone buildings would have presented the town in a very modern light and impressed those who visited the town for the first time. The chronicles of the Swedish duke Eric testify to the town's opulence when Oslo is described in 1308 as 'very rich'. These first impressions are everything, and while the main functions of the street were communication and trade, we cannot overlook the fact that perhaps King Håkon V was showing off his new modern town which also included the newly expanded St Mary's Church and most importantly Akershus fortress.

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