



Eskil Arentoft. *De Spedalskes Hospital. Udgravning af Sankt Jørgensgården i Odense.* Odense: Odense University Press, 1999. 230 S

Reviewed by Linda Rasmussen

Published on H-Skand (January, 2000)

Eskil Arentoft, *De spedalskes hospital. Udgravning af Sankt Jorgensgrden i Odense*, Odense University Press 1999. Odense City Museums and the author is to be congratulated on this publication, which is a thorough examination of the excavations of the leper hospital in Odense and its medieval context. The main text is in Danish but with summaries and illustration texts translated into English. The book is divided into three parts. The first part includes an introduction to the excavation and its background and a detailed discussion of the archaeological results regarding the extent of the leper hospital, the church, the church-yard and other buildings.

The excavation revealed a small brick church with a romanesque ground plan which was erected around 1270-80 in a square area enclosed by a ditch. It was also possible to establish a rough chronology of the area. Initially the entire extent of the cemetery was used, right out to the boundary ditch. But the ditch was soon filled in, and buildings were erected on top of it. These quickly spread out beyond the outermost zones of the cemetery. Most of the North side of the cemetery was built on - and further North of these buildings signs of a courtyard appeared. Perhaps as part of the economic basis of the hospital, workshops were established for casting bronze (smaller items) and forging iron - this took place soon after the hospital was built, and the workshops were in operation at least for most of the 14th century.

The buildings found have been half-timbered structures, with clay floors. In some cases they were fairly flimsy, almost shed-like. In course of the medieval period, the church was enlarged by the addition of a tower and a vestry.

Two wells seem to have supplied the hospital with water during most of its existence; first a stone well, later a wooden well. The hospital was ravaged by fire two or three times in the early 14th century, when the workshops area, at any rate, burned down. Another fire about the time the hospital was dissolved, or shortly thereafter, destroyed the housing along Skt. Jorgens Gade. The second part is a catalogue of practically all the finds made during the excavation, excluding the bone material and more modern items (post-medieval).

The third part deals firstly with leprosy from a medical perspective and secondly a more general discussion of leper hospitals in Denmark with some references to European material. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that it was discovered that leprosy is caused by bacteria. It attacks nerve tissue, but has a low optimum temperature, which is why nerve paths in the coolest part of the body are primarily affected, i.e. hands, feet and face. Its reproduction time is long, which means that the period of incubation is also long. In addition, the individual's immune system reacts differently: some people are completely immune - this applies to the vast majority - and they

never discover that they have been exposed to infection. Major advances in the medical understanding of the disease have taken place in this century, particularly in regard to a cure with the discovery of antibiotics. However, there are still a lot of questions connected with this disease related primarily to its complete disappearance in certain parts of Europe in the later Middle Ages, whereas pockets of the disease continued until this century in both Norway and Iceland.

In the final chapter the author tries to place some of the myths about lepers and their treatment by contemporary society in a more positive light. The typical location of leper hospitals outside of boroughs has been interpreted as a part of the isolation of these people in order to hinder the disease from spreading, but the author demonstrates that isolation certainly was not strict and that people with no signs of the illness are also known to have lived within the boundary of the institution. Even the lepers themselves were allowed outside the hospital precinct on certain specified occasions.

Another issue is whether people who entered a leper hospital were considered dead to the outside world. The author has found no evidence of funeral masses being held for inmates in the Danish material and so concludes that such ceremonies were not held here. However, as no material of this kind has survived it is difficult to say anything about this matter. The author seems to view the fact that special institutions were set up for people with this disease as a positive development because the patient was supported when he was so crippled by the disease that he was no longer able to carry out any normal type of work. Because other weak people in society did not have similar opportunities. I wonder if this is not taking too bleak a view of the availability of care in the Middle Ages -most people would probably be looked after in the home, or placed in other types of hospitals or even supported by a monastic institution.

The results from the excavation at Odense comply with the findings from other Danish leper hospitals in that they seem to date from the thirteenth century which resembles the pattern known from Germany whereas English and French hospitals seem to have been established slightly earlier - in the twelfth century. The hospitals that have been examined archaeologically also seem to be fairly uniform in design, insofar as they consisted of the same components: church, cemetery and residential area. One could also normally expect to find farm buildings. In Odense, a certain amount of craft activity was also found.

As far as their illness allowed them, the inmates were expected to take part in normal everyday chores. Apart from alms, Skt. Jorgensgrden hospitals also had a certain amount of income from landed property donated to them. This is an area which, unfortunately, is not explored in this book, though some material for such research does exist.

The book is clearly expected to reach a wider audience than medievalists judging from the attempts to explain more technical terms and the many illustrations, however it is a question if the book does not to some degree fail to accommodate the interested lay audience. The organisation of the material is somewhat puzzling from this perspective, as it would seem that the publication would have benefited from a re-organisation of the chapters, bringing -after the introduction and establishment of a leper hospital in Odense - the chapters dealing with leprosy and leprosy hospitals in Denmark before the long (though necessary) scientific discussions of the various items and their interpretations. It is certainly difficult to justify the placing of the long catalogue of finds somewhere in the middle of the book, instead of at the very end. The organisation of the publication is the more the pity as the general discussion of leper hospitals in Denmark actually brings a much needed overview of this type of institution

and the discussion is a solid basis for further research into this topic.

The publication, unfortunately, suffers from quite a few spelling and printing mistakes, and the illustrations of the leper church at Svendborg in figures 27 and 37 show different stages of development making the comparisons between this church and the one at Odense somewhat confusing. However, the author is to be commended for publishing the whole scientific discussion of such a large-scale archaeological excavation - such publications are few and far between for the amount of money and time which goes into this kind of work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-skand>

Citation: Linda Rasmussen. Review of Arentoft, Eskil. *De Spedalskes Hospital. Udgravning af Sankt Jørgensgård i Odense*. H-Skand, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3776>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.