

In December 2010, Aarhus University organized an international and interdisciplinary conference on changing forms of living in Europe, primarily between 800 – 1600 AD. The conference forms the basis of a fascinating book.

From different perspectives the researcher papers demonstrate the need for comparative and cross-national research. The papers show the enormous diversity of techniques and ideas used to construct houses in medieval times.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part on “Exploring domestic and social space” the authors provide a meta-perspective on the anthropological approaches behind medieval houses. These questions are intensified by papers investigating the appearance and refurbishing of Austrian tower houses. Comparisons are made to Swiss castles and Swedish countryside dwellings.

In the second part, “Regions and regionality”, the common architectural heritage between upper-class and lower-class dwellings is dealt with. The Danish-German border is the place to focus on regional differences in constructing houses. Furthermore the appearance of turf houses in Jutland is considered in the light of changing environmental conditions. The common construction rules of Greenland and Iceland are traced back to a joint topos of regionality.

In the final section on “Houses, Homes and social strategies”, case studies deal with the living conditions in southern Scandinavia, Iceland and Norway. For instance, the ideal of hospitality is linked with the form of doorways in the Viking-Age longhouse. The way houses shed light is used to define a concept of cultural living conditions. Medieval English peasant houses are checked in the light of contemporary texts on household and husbandry. Smoke houses are investigated in order to find some elements of ritual practice in the household. It could also be shown that heating systems from the circum-Alpine zone have influenced the construction of dwellings in southern Scandinavia in the 16th century. New aspects include the view on Italian houses in the 5th to the 16th century and Dutch townhouses between 700 – 1300 AD.

All these different papers are fascinating to read. The book is highly valuable and important.

The authors join one common result, which is true: “The study of buildings, houses and homes is a fundamental research field in archeology, but it is an area of research shared by many other disciplines, including anthropologists and sociologists” (p. 10). Especially those articles are fascinating which check the position of doorways, the placement of fixtures and the position of portable artefacts and decoration in medieval homes. The book here discovers new areas of knowledge as these papers even combine literature, sociology and archeology. They help to make contemporary texts like the Icelandic sagas more understandable (as for example in my favourite text in the book, written by Teva Vidal on Grettis saga).

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