Legendary Churches – Can They Be Found?

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Abstract

During the last two decades a number of Nordic researchers have taken an interest in and published works on potential sources of unknown medieval churches. It has been claimed that by drawing on local traditions, legends and place-name material it might be possible to obtain a far better picture of the population of churches as opposed to only using the traditional written and archaeological sources.

This article critically reviews the use of the legends and name material as sources about unknown medieval churches. A place name for a church or chapel is no guarantee that a church ever existed in the suggested location, considering that place names will often refer to a geographical relationship to a known church site. Bearing in mind that there are hundreds of virtually identical legends relating to building churches and to migratory churches, the author finds that the credibility of such legends is minimal when it comes to tracing unknown medieval churches. Traditions and legends often serve as explanations for real cultural traces. There are very few examples of legendary churches that have been confirmed as genuine churches through archaeological excavations. A geo-radar study of a legendary church at Naust in Rissa in Trøndelag county did not change this conclusion.

Keywords: legends, churches, Middle Ages, place names, archaeology, study of folklore, source criticism

Legends about Churches and Legendary Churches

In 2003, the archaeologists Jan Brendalsmo and Frans-Arne Stylegar published an article entitled "Om kirkesagn og ødekirker" [On church legends and deserted churches] (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003). Their aim was to determine whether legends and place names can function as sources on their own premises when it comes to finding an older population of churches. The study focuses on some legendary churches that have been upgraded to "deserted churches", while four case studies aim to show the consistency of the folk tradition. The authors also analyse legends about migratory churches, pointing out that place names may function as tracing tools for finding churches.

Two of the legendary churches mentioned, Åknes in Åseral and Sånum just west of Mandal, have been examined using archaeological methods.

Strong legend traditions are connected with Åknes; one variant was written down by Jens Kraft as early as the 1830s (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003: 72ff). He wrote that it was still possible to see traces of the churchyard and that the church had fallen into disuse two hundred years earlier. The church building served as the barn on the farm. An excavation at Kyrkjevodden in 2000 uncovered six massive holes for pillars which have been part of a seven-metre long and four-metre wide building, which based on C14 dating was constructed around 1250. The building is interpreted as a church, even if it is highly unusual that a church building would have been constructed using pillars in the High Middle Ages. Stave churches had long been on the rise. Three Christian graves were also found at this location and they probably predated the pillar church.

There is a rich and imaginative tradition that there once was a church in the location called Kirkeågeren [the church field] (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003:74ff). The church was alleged to have been built of stone but its walls were shattered by the cannons of enemy ships. The stones were later used for buildings on the farm. In 2001, shafts were dug in Sånum. Around 20 Christian graves were uncovered along with the remnants of two buildings. A skull that was found was radiologically dated to AD 1440–1640. Based on the archaeological findings, there can be no doubt that there was a church in Sånum in the medieval period. However, this church cannot be characterised as undocumented as the parish of Sånum is mentioned in a document from 1409 (Figure 1).

Brendalsmo and Stylegar then move on to explain legend traditions about vanished churches and burial sites in Vest-Agder County (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003:76ff). Dedicated work here has collected comprehensive material of this type about specific traditions relating to church buildings that have disappeared, legends of migratory churches (see below about this type), and about names where the first name element indicates church or chapel (Kirke or Kapell). Special interest is found in such names as Kirkevollen [Church pasture] or Kirkeåkeren [Church field].

The two archaeologists consider the legend material as three different events: “the cultural historian's event, the narrative event and the concrete event” (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003:82). The first refers to whether or not one is willing to accept a legend as a source. The narrative event may for example be the story of a migratory church. The authors also point out that legends must have a function in the community if it is to be passed on, whether this is to entertain, explain or construct local identity. The moral element is also strong where there was a religious or political reason for why the church migrated from one location to another.

Brendalsmo and Stylegar find that there are concrete events behind the narrative event. Their conclusion is that the legends “must be perceived as a concrete and place-related source about churches that have no other evi-

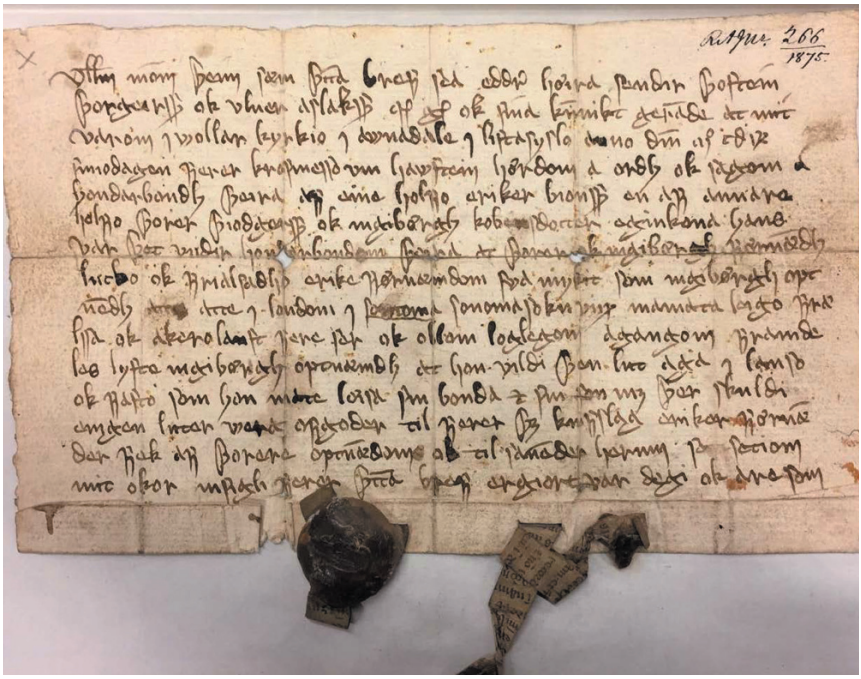

Figure 1. This diploma in the National Archives of Norway (Riksarkivet, Oslo) is dated 8 September 1409. Its contents refer to a married couple who paid a land property to a man for injuries caused by a knife. This was referring to Lande in Sånum parish. The diploma is printed in DN X no. 108. Here there has probably been an erroneous identification. See also RN IX no. 526.

dence in sources, which is the churches at the farms or the location A, and which in virtually all the cases are named. … There would appear, in brief, to be a close link between legends about churches and 'legendary churches' on the one hand, and deserted churches on the other hand" (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003:85).

Brendalsmo continues in this vein in an article from 2007, where he writes that Norwegian folklorists in a two-century perspective have been unable to convince other researchers in the field of history that oral tradition is a source similar to written sources and archaeological findings (Brendalsmo 2007:91). He also assigns greater importance to church legends than place names when it comes to locating closed down churches, as the church legends indicate a named farm (Brendalsmo 2007:80).

Similar ideas have also been forwarded by Dag Bertelsen in articles from 2002–2004 (Bertelsen 2002, 2003, 2004). He concluded that "renowned experts" in general consider the network of churches to be fixed (Bertelsen 2004:36). Legends, traditions and place names are not found to be interesting in this context. In his opinion there are a large number of indications of

churches that may help to fill in the gaps in the church network which must have existed in the Middle Ages. He also points out that a concentrated effort would have to be made by researchers in several fields if anything were to be gained from these questions (Bertelsen 2003:58).

This invitation was not accepted by Norwegian researchers, but in 2010 the Swedish historian Olof Holm wrote an article on the value of sources for "church location legends for the study of deserted medieval churches". The empirical basis is generally taken from Jämtland County in Sweden. He finds that church locations dealt with in legends in general are what in Jämtland are designated as ödesbölen (Swedish for deserted farms). He finds it improbable that church buildings could have been erected in these marginal settlements, concluding that church location legends in Jämtland often are fictitious and with no basis in reality (Holm 2010:29). The legends have come into being as explanatory legends of cultural remnants in deserted locations. These may be physical tracks in the terrain, but also names of places that are interpreted as indicating a church. Place names may have inherently been the root of church legends, thus church legends have no independent value as sources (Holm 2010:32). But Holm makes an exception for place names starting with Kyrk or Kapell (church or chapel) which have been alive in the local language up to the present. After a thorough review of Scandinavian archaeological literature, he has not found a single instance of legend material locating a deserted medieval church without the place name starting with "Kyrk- (o.d.) or Kapell" being connected to the location (Holm 2010:33). Holm warns, however, against assuming that names starting with Kyrk (church) indicate in all cases that there has been a church in that location. He concludes his article thus:

> For research on churches deserted during the medieval or reformation period, church legends can be disregarded. On the other hand, place names of the type mentioned above may in certain cases be the point of departure for endeavouring to find and prove by archaeological methods currently unknown church locations.

One of the last researchers in Norway to have written about church legends and their value as sources to uncover otherwise unknown medieval churches is the above-mentioned Dag Bertelsen. In 2016 he published his book *Kirker i glemselens slør* [Churches in the veil of oblivion]. This book is in many ways a continuation of the articles he wrote at the start of the new century.

Bertelsen comments on Holm's article in his book, but does not find his argumentation convincing, as he does not address the importance of iron extraction in these areas prior to the Black Plague. His judgment of Holm's article thus is as follows: "His argumentation does not appear convincing and the conclusions cannot at all be generalised to apply to other areas than Jämtland" (Bertelsen 2016:317).

As in his earlier works, Bertelsen argues that there must have been a far higher number of churches in the Middle Ages than those with traces manifested in written sources. After a total review of various types of sources indicating churches, Bertelsen estimates that in the High Middle Ages there may been another two thousand or so parish churches in Norway in addition to those that have been documented (Bertelsen 2016:405).

In several places in his book Bertelsen refers to "renowned experts" who reject various forms of sources indicating churches (Bertelsen 2016:269, 280, 411). In Chapters 20–25 Bertelsen addresses what he finds to be the most interesting indications of undocumented sources. These are:

1. Pure traditions or narratives about disappeared churches
2. Legend-like narratives which may contain information about disappeared churches
3. Place names which may have been created in reference to a church now forgotten
4. Old burial sites, assembly places, property ownership, maps and preserved objects which may indicate forgotten church locations

Below we will examine in more detail the power and reliability of these source categories.

Historical Traditions Relating to Monasteries, Convents and Churches

A historical tradition in this case means an oral tradition saying that once there was a church or monastery/convent in a location. Knowledge about the existence of this building has then been passed on from one generation to the next until the narrative has been put into writing. The oldest accounts were in many cases made by topographers in the eighteenth century. Gerhard Schøning for example writes that he has been told that in "the olden days" there were churches in Elnes in Verdal and Naustan in Børsa (Schøning 1979:74, 241).

Bertelsen presents a number of historical traditions about monasteries/convents and churches alleged to have existed without this having been embedded in written sources (Bertelsen 2016:283ff). This refers to 16 monasteries at documented medieval churches, and a similar number with no such connections. The number in itself indicates that these "monasteries" have no base in reality. Some references may probably be connected to properties with some sort of grange or granary function for a monastery, such as Opedal for Lyse monastery and Viggja for Holm's monastery (Munkholmen) in Trøndelag (Langgåt 2009:66ff; Dybdahl 1989:228).

Nor is there a lack of traditions about medieval churches in more or less credible locations around Norway. One interesting group comprises

churches and chapels in the fishing villages along the coast from Nordmøre to Finnmark. These could to some extent appear and disappear with the success or failure of the fisheries.

Many historians have expressed scepticism to the numerous church traditions. Jørn Sandnes points out that the church enjoyed a special position in the public imagination (Sandnes 1965:283ff). He maintains that "in almost each local district there is a legend about an old church, alleged to have stood on that or the other farm … For the folklore student they are interesting, but the historian must be careful with using them as sources" (Sandnes 1965:295).

Torbjørn Låg in *Agders historie* [The History of Agder] writes the following about churches in the mountain areas: "Neither kings, clergy nor church parishes belong in Setesdalsheiene [the Setesdal uplands]. Written sources from the late Middle Ages provide such a good overview of the church parishes that existed prior to 1350 that it is hardly credible that parishes have existed which have not been known and absolutely not in such numbers held by tradition" (Låg 1999:267f).

Church Legends

In the 1950s Reidar Th. Christiansen prepared a systematic overview of Norwegian travelling legends (Christiansen 1958). As a sub-category of "Local Legends of Places, Events and Persons", we find as no. 7060 "Disputed Site for a Church". The prototype of such a legend is described as follows (Christiansen 1958:201f):

> In a parish the congregation had decided to build a new church (A1), but two dissenting factions could not agree as to where it was to be built (A2). Finally, however, the building was under way (B1), at least the materials had been brought together (B2), or some mark – a wooden cross, stone, etc. – had been left in the chosen place (B3). One morning, however, whatever had been built was torn down (C1); the materials – implements, cross – had been removed (C2) by an unknown person (C3). New preparations were made (C4), and other signs occurred (C5). In the end the parishioners (D1) decided upon another site (D2) where the materials, etc. were found (D3), or following other indications (D4), the building was not hindered (D5), and other signs as well showed that they had chosen right (D6).

In some versions of this type of legend it is said that the timber for the church was tipped into a river, and the church was built where the timber came ashore. In others, the story is that a horse pulling a load of timber was released from his reins, and that the church was built where it stopped.

Christiansen here reproduces a brief version of a total of 158 such migratory legends. The majority of the legends locate the venue where the new church was built, while just over a half name the place where the church was originally intended to be built (Bertelsen 2016:309). By searching local history literature, Bertelsen has found more than 350 leg-

ends where the planned building site is not the same as a documented church site.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the site where the church was built according to the legend is a documented church site. If this is not the case, Bertelsen believes that this is a clear piece of circumstantial evidence that a church once stood there. Bertelsen offers some examples of different constellations when it comes to final building site and planned building site (Bertelsen 2016:310ff).

1. Both the planned and the final building site correspond to documented church sites
2. A planned building site where there is also a concrete tradition about a church
3. A planned building site with a place name indicating a church
4. Several planned building sites for one and the same final building site

For examples under category 1, six of ten examples are from the Trøndelag area. For Frøya, several legends are connected to migrating the church building from Sula to Sletta on the main island. One variant says that the church was moved in its entirety in one night by gnomes and goblins (Foss 1980:67). The first vicar on Frøya, Randers, entered in the church book for Frøya in 1883 that it had originally been the idea that the church was to be built in Kvalværet: "When it was being moved, however, some logs had come adrift and their course ended at Sletten (Sletta) – which was considered as a sign from on high, and it was decided to build it there" (Foss 1980:67).

When it comes to the realities of this relocation of the church, the written sources have clear language. In the sixteenth century Sula and Titran had approximately 70 per cent of the number of inhabitants on Frøya, in 1760 barely 14 per cent (Foss 1980:69). In the account of his visit in 1739, Bishop Hagerup writes that the vicar wished to move the chapel on Sula to Sletta, which would be a more favourable location for the majority of the population and a better burial site. After some discussion the new church at Sletta was consecrated in 1755, built with new material (Foss 1980:68 and 71). The church site in Ulvan parish on the island of Hitra had been moved to Fillan as early as 1686. There are also several legend traditions about where the church at Fillan had originally been intended to be built (Foss 1980:54, 68; Bertelsen 2016:310).

The migratory church legends are fairly loose on the concept of time. When such legends could arise virtually at any time, there is good reason to question their reliability and veracity when it comes to the medieval period. Some of these legends appear to have some logic in that the planned building site had a more peripheral location than the final site. We know that there was a medieval church at Megard in Snåsa in a marginal settlement

area (Sandnes 1956:122ff). According to the legend, the planned church was moved to Vinje, a stone church that has always been the main church in Snåsa (Sandnes 1956:119ff). We have a similar legend in Hegra about the churches in Skjølstad and Hegra (see below).

It may surprise many to find that migratory church legends have arisen so close to our contemporary time. An interesting case is the establishment of the Viken chapel in Frostviken in the 1790s (Holm 2010:30f). The sources show that this location was chosen according to rational points of view. A safe haven for boats was needed, space for the building was needed and the soil needed to accommodate deep graves. More than 90 years later, local people claimed that construction of the church had started at Kyrkbollandet, but the gnomes and goblins had pulled down in the night what the people had built in the day. The fourteen farmers who participated in the construction work then hewed their axes so they stuck in a log and allowed it to float away. Where the log came to shore is where they built the chapel.

Category number 2 implies both a migratory church legend and a tradition about a church linked to a location. This means that a church building was planned or started in one location, but was finally finished in another. There is, moreover, a local tradition which maintains that there was a church in the location where the church was initially planned to be erected. There must then be reason to ask whether legend and tradition are independent phenomena in such a context.

Tradition and legends of this type are connected, for example, to two locations in Lånke in Stjørdalen. Here, according to tradition, there was a church at Dyva, which was later moved to Lånke (see below). One may wonder at how and why such church legends have arisen. One important factor is undoubtedly word-of-mouth communication from one village to the next. There is no reason to believe that such similar legends could have arisen independently in hundreds of local communities. Other important ingredients appear to be skeleton remains uncovered by ploughing, building remnants, terrain shapes or names suggesting church names.

The Name Material

As mentioned above, several researchers have considered the name material as a source of otherwise unknown medieval churches. Many names of the type *Kirkerud*, *Kirkeåkeren* or *Kirkehaugen* [all names preceded by the noun *kirke*, meaning church] are found close to known church sites. Such names are also found in places where no documented church exists. Bertelsen also mentions names with prefixes such as *Prest*, *Kors*, *Kapell*, *Kloster*, *Støpul* and *Lik* [priest/vicar, cross, chapel, monastery/convent, bell tower, corpse] as interesting in the endeavour to reveal medieval churches. He even produces a table of such names with percentage rates indicating the prob-

ability of the name indicating a disappeared church which has not been documented through written sources or archaeology (Bertelsen 2016:324).

All things considered, it is problematic to use the name material for this purpose, as estimates show 15 000 names of locations in Norway which include either *kirke* or *prest* [church or vicar] (Haslum 2002:107). Furthermore, these name elements have been productive throughout a millennium up to the present time. It also appears that there are certain geographical differences, as these types of place names occur far more frequently in western Norway than in central Norway (Haslum 2002:107ff).

Vidar Haslum uses five semantic categories for names including *kirke* or *prest* [church or vicar]. In the overview below I have included some of the examples of names he mentions explicitly (Haslum 2002:111ff).

Name semantic categories	*Examples with Kirke/ Kjerke Distribution by percentages groups 1–5*	*Examples with Prest Distribution by percentages groups 1–5*
1 Owner/user function	**3%** Kjerkesletta, Kyrkjejordi, Kyrkjestykket, Kyrkjestølen	**50%** Prestbekken, Prestberget, Prestneset, Prestholmen
2 Geographical relationship	**61%** Kjerkesletta, Kjerkåsen, Kyrkejekleiva, Kyrkjeåkeren	**5%** Prestmyrane, Prestetuftene, Prest-eekra
3 Singular event	**8%** Kjerkjhøa, Kyrkjefloten, Kyrkjeøyna, Kyrkjeberget	**25%** Prestesteinen, Prestholmen, Presteneset, Presttjønn
4 Repeated action	**22%** Kirkesundet, Kjerkeholmen, Kjerkevika, Kyrkjeleitet	**20%** Presteberget, Presteklova, Prestvoren, Prestskjæret
5 Comparative function	**6%** Kyrkjebakken, Kyrkjebusta, Kyrkjesteinen, Kyrkjeåsen	

When it comes to the first category, the name implies that a church or clergyman has owned or used a natural resource. If no factual knowledge about such a user or ownership relationship is known, it would be very problematic to use this as evidence of an otherwise unknown church. Such resources may often lie far from church institutions, and it would be correspondingly problematic to determine which owner or user is being referred to. Approximately half of all names with *Prest* as an element belong in this category, while only three per cent have the *Kirke* element (Haslum 2002:111f and 116). This may not be that strange, as it must be assumed that a vicar has had a more active role in an owner/user function than a church (even if it had

a church warden). Good examples of names in this category are the deserted farm Kirkaunet in Orkdal which was owned by Orkdal Church, and Prestenget in Stjørdal which was under Stjørdal *prestebord* [vicarage] (*Skattematrikkelen* [the tax register] *1647 XIV*: 81; Dybdahl 1976:17). It is highly improbable that churches have been on these properties, rather, ownership is expressed in the names.

A geographical relationship may manifest itself in several ways (Haslum 2002:112f). In by far most cases this would concern a location close to a church or vicarage. This may be designated as a co-location, which applies to approximately 80 per cent of the type of geographical relationship relating to names starting with *Kirke*. Some of these locations are also connected to a legend about a church standing there.

Co-location with the vicar's residence has not been very productive in terms of name formation (Haslum 2002:116f), the material only has a few examples of this (around five per cent of the group).

A somewhat more pronounced directional relationship is found when the place name designates a location on the way to the goal, in this case a church (Haslum 2002:112f). Examples of such names are *Kyrkjeledet*, *Kyrkjebrauta*, *Kjerkesundet* og *Kjørkeskardet* [-track, -road, -sound, -pass]. Here it is necessary to bear in mind that these locations may have been situated far from the church building itself.

A clear directional relationship exists when the church could be seen from some point (Haslum 2002:113). Typical names of this type are *Kjerkhaugen* and *Kyrkjeberget* [church hill]. This is a group of names which will not be particularly useful when trying to locate a church which has not been documented.

Singular events that have given a name where *Kirke* in some form is part of the name will in most cases refer to the construction of churches (Haslum 2002:113f). Stone was taken from *Kjerkhøja* [-hill] for the restoration of the church. Haslum refers to a number of migratory church legends which come under this category. An example is *Kyrkebakken* [church hill] at Hodnekvam. According to the legend, the Myking church was to be built here, but one night the material was moved to where the church now stands. There is reason to ask whether the legend has named the location in such cases, or whether the legend is based on an already existing name.

Names including *Prest* [vicar/priest] in this category will often be connected to dramatic incidents (Haslum 2002:117), perhaps a story of a vicar who drowned at sea (*Presteneset* - headland) or a lake (*Presttjønna* -tarn). The background for the name may also have been of a more trivial nature. *Presttjørna* was allegedly given its name when Dean Eiknes set out fish in the tarn (Haslum 2002:117).

The most common background for repeated action is travelling on the way to church (Haslum 2002:114f). This may refer to the transition from water to land (*Kjerkneset*, *Kjerkehola* or *Kyrkjeberget* [-headland, -cave,

-hill]). Other typical names in this group designate places where it would have been natural to rest horses or let them drink water on the way to church. Names including *Prest-* in this category are also in most cases related to travelling to church (Haslum 2002:117f). *Prestberget* [-hill] or *Presteklova* [-gap] were roads it would be claimed the vicar had used to ride on, and he would have been put ashore and collected from *Prestskjæret* [-reef].

We obtain a comparative function when the place name designates a location which resembles a church (Haslum 2002:115f). In this group we find names such as *Kyrkjebakken*, *Kyrkjebusta*, *Kyrkjeåsen*, *Kyrkjehaugan*. This group is of no interest in our context.

I have chosen to follow Haslum's article about names, including *Kirke* and *Prest*, because he bases his research on a long list of scientific works from across Norway (Haslum 2002:120f).

In Denmark, almost half of 286 known deserted churches have names including "kapell" and/or "kirke" (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:218). Moreover, Jakob Kieffer-Olsen lists 73 place names with "*kapel*" [chapel] and something similar, which with only a few exceptions have not been located near known deserted chapels or parish churches (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:222f). When it comes to names with "*kirke"* [church], there are more than 150 such names with no ties to any known church just south of the Kongeåen [the King's river] (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:234). But there are said to be alternative explanations for a number of the names.

For Denmark, Kieffer-Olsen sees a large potential in using legends and local traditions as circumstantial evidence of unknown deserted churches (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:249). He has tested this in a detailed study of Børglum *stift* (diocese), where he has found that 41 unknown deserted churches are featured in legends (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:250ff). Of these, 24 are named in migratory church legends, while for 16 locations tradition is connected to a church or monastery/convent that once was there, or that there was a parish there. Place names with church or chapel are connected to ten of these locations. Kieffer-Olsen's conclusion is that based on Olof Holm's critical attitude to legends not being supported by adequate name material, there will be at least ten potential unknown deserted churches in Børglum diocese, "but if the legends should be assigned value also without known place names with 'church' and 'chapel', they might indicate at least 41" (Kieffer- Olsen 2018:253f).

Without an in-depth and elaborate analysis of the source material, such postulations have limited value. In Denmark as well, the background for place names of churches and chapels is in many cases based on other actualities than that there once was a church there. As pointed out by Nils Engberg, (Engberg 2018:21) field names such as *Kirkeager* [church field] in most cases refer to the fact that a church or chapel once owned this land. There are, therefore, also the same methodological problems connected to using Danish travelling legends as there are for the Norwegian ones.

Other Material Indicating a Church

Bertelsen lists a number of factors indicating a church which he believes may contribute to revealing unknown medieval churches (Bertelsen 2016: 345ff). This refers to burial sites, stone crosses, memorial stones with Christian content, holy wells, monastery gardens, building remnants, church fixtures and furniture, old maps and property ownership.

The most concrete source group is here undoubtedly the proven Christian burial sites. There may have been some burial sites on the coast without nearby churches, but with hardly no exceptions, the dead in the Christian period must have been buried in consecrated ground next to a church. Some such burial sites have also been discovered without finding any written information confirming that there also was a church there. In the Trøndelag region, some such burial sites have been found. On the Hernes farm in Frosta, which is mentioned in the sagas, remnants of coffins and skeletons have been found from seven Christian burials (Brendalsmo 2001:382f). The burial site appears to have been used for a relatively brief period of time in the eleventh century. But no church has been found here. A Christian burial site with seven graves has also been found at Hårberg in Ørland (Brendalsmo 2001:291f). This burial site was used in the early Christian period, but like the one at Hernes, it was only used for a short period of time. No trace of a church building has been found here either. Bertelsen also mentions such findings from other regions in Norway, but the number is quite low (Bertelsen 2016:347f). In practice this source group will not contribute to increasing the number of medieval churches appreciably.

It is also conceivable that burial sites were established at an early stage without any connection to a church. Later a church has then been built in another location. Examples of such burial sites exist in Sweden, Denmark and England (Engberg 2018:61f).

When it comes to the other categories mentioned above, they probably have little to contribute to locating otherwise unknown medieval churches. Stone crosses and memorial stones may have been erected without any connection to a church; across Norway there are holy wells in dozens of places where it is hard to imagine that there has been a church there. Monastery gardens can in practice be disregarded, as there is every reason to claim that there has scarcely been a monastery in Norway with no written documentation of it. Building remnants may be a difficult matter to decide upon, as in many cases it will be difficult to distinguish between a church and a secular building. Another source group is church fixtures and furniture, a category that is difficult to use. Bjugn Church in Fosen, which was built in the 1630s, has had a medieval triptych there for a very long time (Brendalsmo 2001:277). It must have been in another church earlier, but it is impossible to ascertain which. Sletta church in Frøya, built in the eighteenth century, had several sculptures of saints, but we do not know with certainty which churches they came from (Foss 1980:31ff).

If a church owns land, this would be a clear indication that it also existed in the Middle Ages. After the Reformation, the practice of donating land to church institutions came more or less to an end. Tracing unknown medieval churches through the material from the seventeenth century is virtually impossible, as landed property belonging to discontinued churches would be transferred to existing churches or the vicarage (Dybdahl 1989:158ff). Nor would maps be able to contribute very much. They do not go back to the Middle Ages, and the oldest maps have usually been made for military purposes. Another matter is that redistribution maps from the nineteenth century with detailed descriptions of parcels of land may reveal interesting place names.

Assessing the totality of these source groups, the conclusion must be that in only an extremely few cases can they make a probable suggestion of the existence of an otherwise unknown medieval church.

Sources and Methods in Practice – Stjørdal

In *Kirker i glemselens slør* [Churches in the veil of oblivion] Bertelsen has a chapter on "Kirkelandskapet i Stjørdalen" [The church landscape in Stjørdal] (Bertelsen 2016:373ff), a topic he has dealt with in several articles. In many ways Stjørdalen may be a good point of departure for a study of churches and parishes in Norway. Settlements in the High Middle Ages ranged from good agricultural areas along the sea to barren and marginal areas in the valleys and mountains. The calculated frequency of deserted named farms in the late medieval age was approximately the same in Stjørdal (57.8 per cent) as for the country as a whole (approximately 56 per cent) (Sandnes & Salvesen 1978:64, 72).

When it comes to churches and parishes, the material from the Middle Ages is thin, but using the census register of tithes, information about "Cathedraticum i Stiørndall" [tax paid to the archbishopric from local churches in Stjørdal] and Reformatsen 1589 [a commission report about the church economy in Trondheim diocese], we can form a good impression of the situation towards the end of the Catholic period (Dybdahl 2005:71, 165–169; *OE*: 52; *Reformatsen 1589*:53). In 1520 there were eight parishes, Fløan, Auran, Skatval, Værnes, Voll, Hegra, Skjølstad and Lånke. At that time settlement ended at Kil, but the list of the churches in Stjørdal that had to pay the "cathedraticum" shows that during the Middle Ages there was also a church at Ådal in Forbygda. In Reformatsen 1589, the churches at Voll and Ådal are not mentioned; it was now decided that the churches at Auran, Fløan and Skjølstad were to be closed down, and the congregations transferred to the Skatval and Hegra parishes. Thus Værnes was left as the main church with its annexes Skatval, Lånke and Hegra.

There is much material to suggest that a generation after Reformatsen

1589, a church was built at Kirkeby in Meråker. The Kirkeby farm is mentioned initially in written sources in 1590 (Dybdahl 2001:69), it was in all probability cleared again during the second half of the sixteenth century. The church in Meråker is mentioned by the vicar in his answer to the question from Titus Bülche about the census in the 1660s (Titus Bülche 1664–66:103f). It says there that under Hegra annex there is "Mærager Kirke" [Meråker church], four dangerous and "evil Norwegian miles thence". Divine services were only held there a few times each year held for the elderly who were unable to make their way to Hegra. Gerhard Schøning also refers to the Kirkeby church in his travel description from 1774, assuming that it was built 150 years earlier (Schøning 1979:18, 22). Schøning writes that it was said that when this church was built, "in the soil were found a great deal of human bones and remnants of rotted coffins". At the start of the seventeenth century the Kirkeby farm was owned by Stjørdal vicarage. When also considering the long distance to the nearest church, there is reason to assume that there was a church at Kirkeby, which in the late middle ages was deserted, as was the case with all the inhabitants in the district (cf. map in Dybdahl 1979:94f).

In addition to the above-mentioned churches, in his book Bertelsen suggests the following church indications in Stjørdal (Bertelsen 2016:387):

Skipreide [administrative unit]	*Church location*	*Type indication*	*Probability of church presence*
Aglo	Hegge	Tradition and legend	Probable
	Forbord	Tradition	Probable
	Blanka	Tradition, legend, place name	Fully possible
Værnes	Moksnes	Place name	Uncertain
	Presteng	Place name	Fully possible
	Ner-Holan	Legend	Fully possible
	Kalddal	Tradition and place name	Fully possible
Leksdal	Dyva	Tradition and legend	Probable
	Kirkhaug	Place name	Uncertain
	Elvran	Old map	Fully possible
	Kirkskogbekken	Place name	Fully possible
Hegra	Trøyte	Church fixtures and furniture	Highly uncertain
	Kristlok	Possible vicarage	Highly uncertain
	Stokkvollen	Possible burial site	Highly uncertain
	Bruåsen	Tradition	Fully possible
	Bjørgen	Tradition	Fully possible
Øyar	Hembre	Tradition	Fully possible
	Kil	Old map	Uncertain
	Meådal	Old map	Uncertain
	Klokkhaug	Legend	Fully possible
	Meråker	Old map and name	Uncertain
	Kjørkbykjølen	Place name	Highly uncertain
	Kirkegardsfjellet	Place name	Highly uncertain

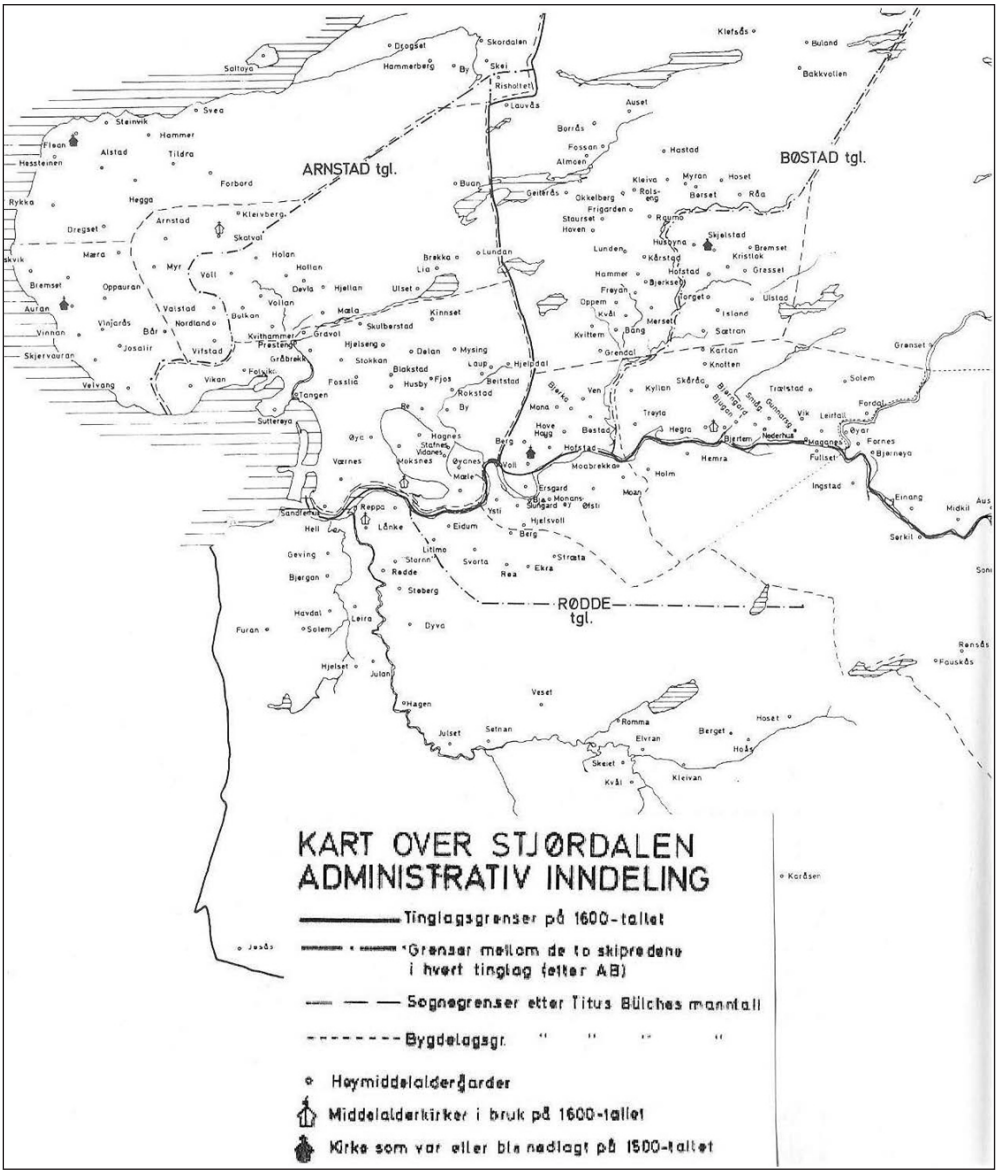

Figure 2. Churches and parishes in Stjørdal in the late medieval period and the early modern period. After Dybdahl 1979: 16 f. Both Voll and Hegra parishes included farms on both sides of the Stjørdal river. The churches at Ådal and Kirkeby are not shown in this map.

Tradition or church legends form the source base for ten of the potential medieval churches in the locations mentioned above. These are Heggja, Forbord, Blanka, Ner-Holan, Kaldal, Dyva, Bruåsen, Bjørgan, Hemra and Klokkhaug. In a map of churches evidenced by legend and tradition in Stjørdal, Jan Brendalsmo has marked the following 12 locations in the

valley: Heggja, Forbord, Ner-Holan, Kalldalen, Dyva, Setnan, Hemra, Leirfall, Rønsåsen, Bruåsen, Klokkhaugen, Kjørkbykjølen (Brendalsmo 2016: 102).

In terms of legend material, it is natural to start with Ivar Nilssen Værnesbranden's publications. According to tradition, the first church in Lånke parish was built at Dyva, where a field was called "Kirkeakeren" [the church field] (Værnesbranden 1905:9f). In a later text *Værnesbranden* calls the field "kristenåkeren" [the Christian field] (Værnesbranden 1928:114). Here, allegedly, digging found remnants of human bones and coffins. When the old church was to be rebuilt, according to the legend there was a discussion about whether to build it at Dyva or Lånke. Building started at Dyva, but what they built in the daytime was torn down in the night and brought to Lånke. This is also where the church was finally built.

According to legend about Kaldalskirken [the Kalddal church], an old man from Langstein had encountered a "huldrebrudefølge" [fairy wedding procession] on its way to "Kaldalskirken" for a marriage (Værnesbranden 1905:29f). When he looked back, he fell off his horse, and his leg never healed.

There are also migratory legends about Ner-Holan and Skatval (Værnesbranden 1905:60f). Here too there was discussion about where to build the church. One story has it that a log was put on a sleigh and a young horse was sent off pulling this. When the horse halted at Kirke-Skatval, the church was built there. Another story claims that what was built by day at Ner-Holan was moved to Skatval by night. This was assumed to be "divine judgment" and the church was built in Skatval.

There was also a legend about a church by Hemra – north of Reina (Værnesbranden 1933:66). This legend was not supported by place names. Here in "later times" a burial chamber was found that might explain the legend. But Værnesbranden did not find the legend improbable, as there were no documented churches in Øyjar *skipreide* [administrative unit responsible for furnishing a ship and crew for military service], and it was at times difficult to cross the river.

Værnesbranden also refers to a legend he had heard from Einar Hermstad, who said that there had been a landslide by Leirfall which had swept away Bjørgan Church (Værnesbranden 1933:76).

At Skatval there was a legend asserting that the first church stood at Heggja (Værnesbranden 1933:71f). During heathen times there had been a sacrificial grove or place of worship there. This *hov*, or place of sacrifice, was torn down and remade into a church in connection with a visit from Saint Olav. At North Heggja we find the name Kirkeåkeren [the church field] referring to a location approximately 100 metres north-northeast of the yard. Tradition has it that there had been a churchyard there, but no skeletons or any others remains have been found to confirm this (Brendalsmo 2016:103).

The church at Heggja was replaced by three smaller churches at Auran, Fløan and Forbord. Værnesbranden writes about the latter that "nothing more is known about the church at Forbord. It is impossible to ascertain where it stood. It has probably been placed in a 'lofty place', preferably up in the Forbordsliene [hills], where there was and still is a good view" (Værnesbranden 1933:72). But Leirfall writes that elderly people up to the present have pointed out the site of the church as being by "Rau-grinna" [the red gate] (Leirfall 1970:280). He states that some large stones have been lying there which may have served as the foundation wall. Ivar Forbord has stated that his father has told him, based on the collection of stones by Raugrinda, that he believed the church was probably here, and he had called this location "Kjerkbakkan" [the church hills] (Brendalsmo 2016:103).

Leirfall also refers to a legend that there was once a church at Bruåsen in Bruås common land (Leirfall 1970:280f). There had been settlements in these areas during the Middle Ages. Leirfall also mentions a legend about a church at Alstad, now in the municipality of Levanger (Leirfall 1970:281). It was alleged to have sunk in a marsh, Kjerkmyra [the church marsh]. In the middle of the marsh lies Blanka Lake. Here the church bells could be heard if a stone was thrown in the water.

Einar Hermstad believed that there had been a medieval church in Meråker, writing the following: "Not far from the current location of the church is the farm Klokkhaug. Legend has it that the first time a church was to be built, they had the usual conflict about where to place it, and the proposed locations were Klokkhaug and Kirkeby, and they started to build it at Klokkhaug, but it ended being built at Kirkeby" (Leirfall 1970:287). Here we thus have another migratory church legend.

Thus there are migratory church legends (Dyva, Ner-Holan, Klokkhaug) connected to three of the ten locations where tradition or legends are the source. A large number of such legends exist, and there is little to suggest that there are real events behind the legends. Very vague traditions are connected to four locations supposedly having a church once upon a time, i.e. Forbord, Bjørgan (Leirfall), Hemra and Bruåsen. With three documented churches in Skatval it is not very probable that there also was a church at Forbord. Bjørgan Church had disappeared in a landslide, and Leirfall writes that the church was located at Leirfall. We cannot put much hope in having this tradition confirmed. By Hemra farm, it is said that there was a field there that was left unploughed long after the Reformation (Bertelsen 2016:379). This is not an uncommon statement in connection with so-called church indications.

Bertelsen does not offer any other information about the Bruåsen location than that there is a tradition that there was a church there (Bertelsen 2016: 387). Close by lies Stokkvollen. For many years up to the present people would say that they were going to "cut the grass on the graves" when they

were going there (Bertelsen 2016:385). It is believable that this could refer just as much to animal pitfalls as Christian graves.

With respect to the names of places in Stjørdal, there are some names where the first element is *Kirke* and *Prest* [church and priest/vicar]. Presteng is undoubtedly a deserted farm which was run as a sub-farm for the vicar of Værnes church.

Some names with *Kirke* are connected to definite medieval churches. A holding at Voll is called Kirke-Voll ("Af K*ir*kiu Welle") in Aslak Bolt's cadastre from 1432/33 (*AB*: 58). Kirkeby in Meråker has already been dealt with. These are thus names of locations where there most probably were churches. Bertelsen writes that a location called Kirkemo at Moksnes is mentioned in old documents, but neither the location nor the background for this are known. This might refer to a "neighbouring name" as Moksnes and Værnes (with the county church in Stjørdal) are neighbouring farms.

Bertelsen also includes some names with *Kirke*, i.e. Kirkhaug, Kirkskogbekken, Kjørkbykjølen and Kirkegardsfjellet. The former has been referred to as "uncertain", the others "highly uncertain" (Bertelsen 2016:387). The map shows that Kirkhaug lies almost 400 metres above sea level. The background for the name may have been that there was a view of one or more churches. Kirkskogbekken most probably is connected to ownership. Kjørkbykjølen is situated remotely up against the Swedish border. Even if there was some activity in these outlying regions, it is very improbable that there was a church there.

Kirkegardsfjellet is alleged to be entered on a map from the seventeenth century, next to the national border at Storlien, but Bertelsen offers no reference to this entry (Bertelsen 2016:383). Another map that has caught Bertelsen's interest is a military map from the second half of the seventeenth century with markings for several churches in Stjørdal (Norge no. 14 in Kartverket [Norwegian Mapping Authority]). In the table above, four church indications are connected to the so-called "Norges-kart no. 14". This map regrettably has no legend to explain symbols, but there are stylized symbols for churches at Værnes and the four churches designated as annexes: Skatval, Lånke, Hegra and Meråker. Bertelsen has noted that there are similar symbols at Elvran, Kil and Meådal (Bertelsen 2016:384). He asks whether the cartographer might have used an older original. A medieval church at Elvran would fit well with a tradition that Sondalen in the old days belonged with Leksdalen. What Bertelsen finds most interesting is the marking of churches in Meråker. First here is marked "Meerager annex", which must be the church at Kirkeby. A little further south there is a similar symbol by the Meråker farm, which the cartographer consequently must have considered to be the location of the main church in this district.

Figure 3. This map, Norge [Norway] 14, is assumed to be from around 1690. We here see a number of symbols indicating churches. See more about this in the text below.

A closer study of this map shows that there is a church symbol by Kirkeby and the words "Meerager annex". By Meråker there is a similar symbol and the words "Leensmans Meerager". As mentioned above, the church in Meråker was an annex under Hegra around the middle of the seventeenth century, as there was no vicar or priest permanently residing in Meråker. The church-like symbol at Meråker thus does not refer to a church, but rather indicates that this was an important location for some reason, in this case the residence of the "lensmann" (bailiff). Similar considerations must be the basis for the other "church symbols" by Elvran, Meådal, Kil and Fornes (the symbols by Kil and Fornes are very similar). Here there may also be reason to note that the word "Trenche" is closer to the "church symbol" than the name "Kyl". "Trenche" here probably means "entrenchment". Such facilities naturally would need a "symbol of importance" on a map drawn for military purposes by a foreign mapmaker. The church-like symbols on this map therefore have no value as sources of otherwise unknown medieval churches. Nor does the map give an indication of any of the known medieval churches that were not being used at the middle of the seventeenth century.

In his table of churches and church indications in Stjørdal, Bertelsen enters 34 locations, adding that the list can in no way be considered complete, as it must be assumed that many indications have been lost. As mentioned above, there have been nine documented church locations in the valley, including Kirkeby in Meråker, which, however, has not been evidenced in sources before the seventeenth century. There may also have been a chapel at Steinvikholmen. The idea of the church landscape has not been significantly changed by the material Bertelsen and others have presented. There may have been *høgendeskirker* [private chapels] at virtually all large farms in Stjørdal, but as long as there is no concrete evidence there is little point in speculating about this. It is of course interesting to document old legends and attempt to arrive at some idea about why they have come about. However, I believe that only in exceptional cases could these put us on the track of genuine medieval churches, which I will return to.

A Traditional Church at Naust in Rissa – Examined with Geo-radar

An old tradition in Rissa says that the oldest church building in the district stood on the farm called Naust, a neighbouring property of the old chieftain farm called Rein (Dybdahl 1990:82). In late Middle Ages and early modern period there was a stave church at Rein, which was replaced by a notched log church in 1649 (Dybdahl 1990:174ff). The oral tradition about the church at Naust can at any rate be traced back to the 1930s where it is mentioned in a text about Rein (Bjørgan 1932:4). It is claimed that findings had

been made which allegedly came from an old churchyard. On the opposite side of Lake Botnen there was an old tradition that there had been a church at Naustbrettingen.

Supporting the widely held idea, it has been claimed that there is a special section of a field at Naust, called *Gammelkjerkåkeren* [the Old church field], which stands out from the surrounding area (Stamnes & Dybdahl 2018:9). The soil where the church is supposed to have been located is blacker than the areas abutting this field. This contrast is highly visible from the opposite bank of Lake Botnen when the soil has been ploughed and harrowed. Another piece of circumstantial evidence of the former presence of a church at Naust can be that according to Aslak Bolt's cadastre from 1432/33, the archbishopric owned a part of the farm (*AB*: 104). If the church was discontinued, the archbishop may have claimed the church property.

It has been claimed that bone remnants have been found in this location, but apparently this material has not been preserved as the bones were taken to be animal remains. In the catalogue section of his doctoral dissertation Brendalsmo writes (Brendalsmo 2001:300):

> Around 40 metres away from Lake Botnen there is a place called *Gammelkjerkgården* [the Old church field]. Here, probably at the end of the previous century, large numbers of human bones were found on several occasions after ploughing. In recent years the plough in the same area has hit something that might be a foundation wall. During the ploughing, fishing net sinkers and soapstone have also been found. The finders believed these could be gravestones.

Of objects submitted to the NTNU Science Museum we can mention a bolt lock and several pierced soapstones, interpreted to be fishing sinkers or loom weights (Stamnes & Dybdahl 2018:9). The alleged site and the surrounding field have been searched with a metal detector. The findings in general appear to be from the Middle Ages and more recent times. Among the objects found are a fitting for the end of a strap, several pieces of pottery from the medieval period, pot feet of metal or pottery and a fishing sinker (Stamnes & Dybdahl 2018:10). Some slag, melted copper and bronze tin, have also been found, which may indicate that metal work has taken place there. Large amounts of stones burned brittle testify to early settlement.

In his doctoral dissertation, Brendalsmo has not dealt with the legendary churches in Stjørdal. But he has included Naust, which has been designated as a medieval burial site and a possible church site (Brendalsmo 2001:300f). Brendalsmo envisions that the burial site may have been part of the farmyard or have been covered by cultural layers after the church went out of use. He suggests parallels with burial sites at Uthaug and Hårberg in Ørland and Hernes in Frosta. As no church is mentioned in written sources, he assumes that it must have been discontinued before 1350.

As it would be of great historical and methodological interest to have insight into whether the oldest church in Rissa was erected at Naust, an ini-

tiative was made to have the area examined with geo-radar. This survey was performed in the autumn of 2017, and the findings were published the subsequent year (Stamnes & Dybdahl 2018).

An area of approximately 6250 square metres was examined, which included the area with black soil. The examination was performed using a 3D GPR. This equipment has produced profiles for each 7.5 cm with high resolution in the entire examined area. A number of anomalies were found. Fifteen pits with stones are probably cooking pits. A possible house ruin was also found, as was a large area of deviating response, which in scope is coincidental with the layer of black soil. If the archaeological material found is included, there is much to suggest that there were once buildings in the area with black soil where people lived who for some period of time were engaged in metalwork. No postholes or graves were found. The black soil layer clearly indicates that this is a farm pit – a cultural layer consisting of waste and remnants of burned and rotten buildings which has been accumulating over centuries – rather than an early Christian church with a burial site.

Conclusion

In *Kirker i glemselens slør* Bertelsen provides a table which shows the distribution of church indications by county in the form of church traditions, church legends, place names and other indications (Bertelsen 2016:365). All in all he ends with 2636 church indications against 1162 documented churches for all of Norway. This material is now available on the website https://lokalhistoriewiki.no/wiki/Indikasjoner_på_udokumenterte_kirker, which is managed by the Norwegian Institute of Local History.

The problem with this database is that it only names the location and gives a brief rationale for entries such as "Forbord in Stjørdal: Church reported by Raugrinda under the ski hill at Forbord". Including a possible chapel at Steinvikholmen, this website has 22 locations entered for Stjørdal with indications of there once being an undocumented church there. In general the most comprehensive group for the Trøndelag region is the place name indications. Here it appears that a number of names with *Kirke* (with dialect variations) and *Prest* have been included with no reflections on the background of these names.

The danger with a website like this, which is moreover managed by the Norwegian Institute of Local History, is that many will believe that the locations entered here have been real church sites. Warnings should be given in the introduction to the material of such unintended "side effects". It is clear that some churches have existed which we today have no knowledge about, but in the quest to find medieval churches we must not forget basic critical use of historical sources and methodology.

When there is every reason to approach traditions, church legends and place names with a pinch of salt, this can be given a rationale based on a number of factors:

1. The large majority of real churches not known from written or archaeological sources must have been closed down in the early Middle Ages. The chance that recollection of the church has been lost is therefore strong.
2. Even if strict requirements were hardly posed for the education of the clergy during the process of converting Norway to Christianity, there is reason to believe that there was a shortage of priests in the medieval period.
3. The majority of the unknown churches must have been local chapels, built by the well-to-do on their farms. Many of the legendary churches are located in outlying fields, far from large farms.
4. Many legends are "migratory legends", a template type of legend genre that is well known in many countries.
5. Many legends feature fairy-tale elements, such as supernatural beings, which do not add any credibility to the legends.
6. Place names with *Kirke*, *Prest* and similar elements without any connections to a documented church will only in exceptional cases refer to a disappeared church. The place name will in most cases indicate a road to a church, proximity to a church, ownership or circumstances of use, a view to a church or a landscape formation similar to a church.
7. Archaeological finds must be assessed closely by experts. For most people it will be difficult to distinguish between secular and church buildings and between skeletons from heathen and Christian times.
8. In some extremely rare cases, archaeological studies have confirmed that previously undocumented legendary churches have actually existed.
9. It is difficult to know where medieval church fixtures and furniture originally belonged.

One may then ask how and why legends about churches have come about. An important reason relating to legends of migratory churches is, as mentioned above, the infectious nature of other similar stories. When people hear such legends from other districts, it is obviously easy to construe one's own legends on a local basis. Indeed, one could simply replace the names. In other cases, these may be "explanatory legends", where, for example a coffin in a grave from heathen times or a collection of rocks as found at Hemra and Forbord in Stjørdal have raised associations to an ancient church. Similar to what is the case in Jämtland, many legends have arisen due to cultural traces in the terrain which have been interpreted as remnants of a church building.

When it comes to Naust in Rissa, it may be believed that people have wondered about the area with black soil, where even bone remnants have come to the surface after ploughing. Within sight was the church at Rein; it may then have been reasonable to assume that an older church with "the old churchyard" had existed at Naust. As mentioned in the introduction, two legendary churches in Agder have been confirmed as genuine by archaeological excavations. But the church at Sånum is connected to a written source, as Sånum parish is confirmed in the Middle Ages. In Jämtland, some locations with church legends have been the subject of archaeological studies. It has turned out that in many cases there have been "misinterpretations of a house ruin, a clearance cairn with an uncommon shape or something else" (Holm 2010:29).

Olof Holm concludes that the legends of churches "to a very high degree are fictitious". In some cases such legends may still be connected to locations with *Kyrk* or *Kapell* , where there actually has been a church which later has disappeared. In such cases the legend in itself has no evidentiary force, as the legend may simply be an explanation of the name of the place.

As mentioned above, a name with *Kirke* may not actually refer to an old church. Jørn Sandnes expresses his scepticism to the many names of this type in Namdal thus: "They may for example be partly linked to how there once was an old road passing by the church, partly that a church owned land there, partly also the idea of a churchyard based on findings and bone remnants from heathen graves" (Sandnes 1965:291).

In my opinion there is reason to suggest that some researchers in recent years have had exaggerated notions about the number of undocumented churches that have been closed down in the Middle Ages. Bertelsen has also found that the number of documented churches is less than half of the number of undocumented churches with circumstantial evidence of medieval status. An indication of the number of churches in Norway which were discontinued in the late Middle Ages is given by a study conducted by Mona Beate Buckholm of *Firdafylket*, *Sygnafylket* and *Hordafylket* [historic counties in western Norway] based on the land register *Bergens Kalvskinn* [register book in Bergen made from calf leather] from the middle of the fourteenth century. Of 171 churches and chapels in the country in these counties, 34 were closed in the late Middle Ages or the early modern period. If we deduct 11 which are known to have been discontinued after the Reformation, 23 churches and chapels (13 per cent) remain which were discontinued in the period between the *Bergens Kalvskinn* book from around 1360 and a cadastre from 1585 (Buckholm 1998:7, 59f). These are numbers for which there is every reason to take note of.

After a thorough review of written and archaeological sources relating to the occurrence of deserted churches in Denmark, Nils Engberg arrived at 456 "definitely deserted churches" (Engberg 2018:9). Engberg has also at-

tempted to determine when these churches and chapels were discontinued, i.e. when they ceased to function as places of worship. He found seven churches discontinued before 1100, 15 in the period from 1100 to 1300 and 64 rural parish churches discontinued between 1300 and 1525. The great restructuring of churches in Denmark occurred, however, in the reformation century up to 1600, when as many as 284 church buildings became "deserted churches" (Engberg 2018:61ff).

Several Danish researchers have attempted to determine the number of churches and parishes in Denmark. Axel E. Christensen found that in the thirteenth century there were 1817 parishes in what is now Denmark (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:86). Kieffer-Olsen finds that the Danish sources relating to church affairs in the Middle Ages are so flawed that nothing at all can be stated about the number of medieval churches that have been discontinued if they are not mentioned in written sources or manifest themselves as archaeological remnants. Based on studies by Jes Wienberg and Nils Engberg, Kieffer-Olsen finds that the number of known churches in the Middle Ages in Denmark can hardly reach more than approximately 3100 (Kieffer-Olsen 2018:151). Kieffer-Olsen then draws comparisons with three areas where written sources from the Middle Ages give a more or less complete picture of contemporary churches. These areas are Iceland, the Orkneys, Shetland and the shire of Devon in England. If Wienberg's number for parish churches in Denmark (2692) is applied, the proportional relationship between parish churches and all churches is 1.2. If similar proportions from the mentioned areas to Denmark are transferred, it would be found that the number of medieval churches in Denmark was not 3100, but rather somewhere between 11 000 and 17 000. Such comparisons in my opinion have very little value because the dissimilarities between Denmark and the regions in the west are far too great in many respects.

Collecting legends and traditional material is valuable cultural history work. For the folklorist there are many issues to address. For the historian, the very number of more or less similar narratives becomes a factor that erodes the credibility of a legend claiming there was once an undocumented medieval church in a specified location. The chances that there really has been a church there almost one thousand years ago are in my opinion minimal.

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