

Egil Lindhart Bauer

# Self-expression through Eponymous Tenement Plots in Medieval Oslo

**Abstract:** While archaeological material rarely reveals tenants of medieval towns, contemporary documents mention eponymous tenement plots, allowing us to approach individual selves. To evaluate whether tenement plot names represented self-expression or practical markers in the townscape, I juxtapose names occurring in documents mentioning four town fires, dating to the period between the thirteenth and sixteenth century, as well as the Black Death. Furthermore, I compare this to changing plot structure at two excavated sites. My investigation suggests that eponymous tenement plots could represent the person who built on a plot, provided it contained no significant buildings which would prevent new names from being conventionalized due to practical reasons of orientation. On the other hand, changing ownership would probably require a new name of a tenement plot if it lay close to significant landmarks.

**Keywords:** archaeology, diplomas, town yard, blockhouse, property, ownership, name, farm, self-assertion, stone building, boundary, medieval towns

Norwegian documents from the period 1050–1590 mention approximately 70 named tenement plots (*bygårder*, see clarification of terminology below) from medieval Oslo. Roughly half of these were eponymous, reflecting individuals and, presumably, their connection to the tenement plots. While scholars have attempted to identify the individuals behind tenement plot names, particularly in Oslo and Bergen (Bull 1922; Espeland 1929; Brattgard 1944), little attention has been given to *why* many medieval tenement plots were eponymous or whether these names changed – and the reason for such changes.

The total number of tenement plots and their location within Oslo is unknown, but all were situated within a town which covered approximately 27 hectares on a headland in the Bjørvika inlet in the inner Oslofjord. At its height in the fourteenth century, the town had 2,700–3,300 inhabitants, according to estimations by Nedkvitne and Norseng (2000, 179). Archaeological excavations and radiocarbon dating have shown that the urban settlement was established in the first half of the eleventh century (Schia 1987b, 164–5). The high medieval town encompassed

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the king's and the bishop's palaces, five churches, three monasteries, and a hospital. Like other Norwegian medieval towns, Oslo was limited in geographical scope, with a relatively small number of buildings, meaning that the plot names would have been sufficient to navigate by (Helle 1982, 227). After a town-wide fire in 1624, Oslo was abandoned, and the new town of Christiania was established by royal command on the other side of Bjørvika. Grasslands replaced most of the town, and the tenement plot names were forgotten. In contrast, Bergen's medieval town plan has survived until today, with several of the tenement plot names on Bryggen (the dock) still being in use (Brattegard 1944, 283–4).

My aim with this article is to consider whether eponymous tenement plots in medieval Oslo were used as a method of self-expression, i.e., that the tenement plots were named to accentuate oneself in the urban topography. This possibility is evaluated against the practical function of a name as a marker in the town. After a clarification of terminology and delimitation of the material, with considerations of source criticism, I will examine change and development in tenement plots in the archaeological material from two selected sites and compare this with the occurrence of tenement plot names in the diploma material. Moreover, I will look at changes or continuation in the excavated tenement plots, as well as disappearing or reoccurring names in the diplomas, before and after significant town fires between the thirteenth and sixteenth century – and the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century.

My hypothesis is that an eponymous tenement plot could represent two different situations: 1) that the person who built on a plot – regardless of when this occurred in the plot's history – gave his/her name to the tenement plot, whether this was decided by the person him-/herself or others in the community, or 2) that the tenement plot got a new name when this was required in the urban topography – for instance, after the tenement plot was divided into different properties. In either case, an eponymous tenement plot signifies a person's property. In a society with fewer possibilities for lasting self-expression than today,<sup>1</sup> I propose that naming a tenement plot after oneself or a family member could be a way to leave a mark in the urban topography – to say: “This is mine / ours.” Thus, rather than dealing with the inner self, I focus on the public sense of individual property.

In this regard, social memory is essential to consider. This is an active and ongoing process, with people remembering or forgetting the past according to the needs of the present (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003, 3). While eponymous tenement plots clearly represented a person, we need to ask who decided what a tenement

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, through personal freedom to publish texts and images in a range of forums, including numerous social media.

plot would be named, and what constituted a change important enough for a tenement plot to be renamed? Moreover, what made a name remain in the social memory? Many tenement plot names were kept for several generations, even centuries (more on this below). Thus, the names possibly went through a gradual, chronological development from appellatives to proper names, i.e., a process of propriation. The question is whether the association with a name changed, as time went by, specifically reducing the association with the person behind the eponym after the person's death and the name's integration in the townscape.

While several scholars have done extensive work on the subjects of tenement plots, plots of land, and property in different medieval towns (for instance, Lorentzen 1952; Schia 1987b, 1987c; Wienberg 1992; Ermland 1994, 2011), no scholars have previously attempted a similar interdisciplinary analysis of eponymous tenement plots from Norway's urban Middle Ages. In general, places names have rarely been used as a source in archaeological research (Dalberg and Sørensen 1979, 23). By juxtaposing archaeological material and names in written sources, my goal is to contribute to our understanding of how citizens' names were connected to tenement plots and property in medieval Oslo.

## Clarifications of Terminology

The Norwegian term *bygård* literally means “town farm,” and Schia (1987a, 16) defines it as a collection of buildings with different functions, including a courtyard, on a relatively densely settled plot of land demarcated by boundaries. Compared to agrarian farms, the *bygård* covered a small area. The terminology is inconsistent in English translations: Schia and Molaug use the term “townyard” (Schia 1992; Molaug 2004). However, *bygård* is translated to English in different ways, for instance as “house-block” (Brattegard 1944) or “town plot” (Hansen 2015). I prefer the term “tenement plot,” as it comprises two elements: both the dwelling, often with more than one family, and the area of land. The plot was usually divided by boundaries, visible in the archaeological material, such as fences or drainage ditches. A tenement plot could comprise more than one property, and could be divided between several people, families, or households, for instance, in halves or quarters. Some buildings or rooms could even be of joint use. Some dwellers owned their tenement plot, while others rented (DN IV, 965; Schia 1987d, 222–3; 1987b, 192; 1987a, 16, 20; Wienberg 1992, 97–8; Helle et al. 2006, 104).

Property boundaries within tenement plots are not readily visible in the archaeological material. Several scholars have discussed ownership and right of use in medieval towns, especially Bergen (Lorentzen 1952; Ermland 1994, 2011), but also Tønsberg (Wienberg 1992). It is characteristic of northern European medieval

towns, including Oslo, that the user of a tenement plot, usually corresponding with the owner of the buildings, was not the same as the owner of the plot of land. Right of use, the *dominium utile*, was rented from the plot owner (Erslund 2011, 16). In Oslo, as in several medieval towns, the plot owner was likely the king, who divided and distributed the plots (Nedkvitne and Norseng 2000, 44). However, the tenant commonly had sovereignty over the plot. The rent furthermore regulated the tenant's legal status in the town (Erslund 2011, 94–5).

## Delimitation of the Material

Eponymous tenement plots make up approximately half of the tenement plot names occurring in the diplomas dealing with Oslo. This is similar to the ratio in the material from medieval Tønsberg (Wienberg 1992, 57–60), but a greater ratio compared to Bergen (Lorentzen 1952, 263–5). As many as 80% of the eponymous tenement plots consist of a person's name and the ending *-gård*, and I will return to a possible reason for this when discussing self-expression versus practical function of eponymous tenement plots. Some tenement plots are referred to by their owner's name, for instance, Hr. Pål's gård ("Sir Pål's tenement plot") (DN V, 147, 168) and Hr. Gyrd's gård ("Sir Gyrd's tenement plot") (DN V, 588, 603). Although such terms entail property, these are not necessarily the tenement plots' proper names (Bull 1922, 185).<sup>2</sup> Hence, such tenement plots should not be considered as eponymous, and consequently I have excluded them from the material.

The source for the tenement plot names is the documents, called diplomas, collected in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (DN). The diplomas mentioning the tenement plots date primarily from the late-thirteenth to the early sixteenth century, which consequently delimits my discussion to the same period. Bull's (1922, 171–185) account of the occurrences of tenement plot names in the diploma material is relied upon. He presents 69 tenement plots in alphabetical order, with information about when the names are mentioned, along with information about possible owners. For some tenement plots, he includes information from the diplomas about use, buildings on the plot, property transfers, and in some cases, vague location within the town, for instance, by parish affiliation. The names are not identifiable in the archaeological material, making it impossible to place the named tenement plots in the urban topography.

Few diplomas are preserved from the early thirteenth century or earlier. However, the number increases in the late-thirteenth century and especially in

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<sup>2</sup> See Lorentzen (1952, 64–65) for more on different name types, albeit for medieval Bergen.

the fourteenth, when it became customary not only for the king, but also for regular people, to formalize property transactions (Bagge 1998, 157). Tenement plot names would have been necessary in legal matters, to precisely identify houses and areas (Brattegard 1944, 258). However, the type and amount of information about the different tenement plots in the diplomas varies. There is, for instance, information about tenement plots being rented out (DN V, 909), divided (DN V, 900), or sold, sometimes including value (DN II, 220; III, 131). Size of the plot can be accounted for (DN V, 909), or agreement about division of property within the tenement plot, even of parts of the same building (DN IV, 283). Other diplomas recount people staying at the tenement plot, for instance, during illness (DN III, 146), or special functions of the tenement plot, such as Bjarnegård, which was used for council meetings (DN III, 165).<sup>3</sup>

## Source-Critical Issues

Having accounted for the type of information provided by the diplomas, I now turn to some source-critical issues. The diplomas' representativeness is limited both by which documents that happen to be preserved and whether a tenement plot was mentioned at all. Since it is known that some changed names (DN V, 900), a tenement plot mentioned by one name in one diploma could, in theory, be mentioned by another name in a later diploma. And, conversely, we cannot know for certain that all reoccurring names represent the same tenement plots. Hypothetically, new tenement plots could be established with the same name as an earlier tenement plot but named after another individual.

Personal names do have a chronology, but this chronology is too coarse to be of use for evaluating whether tenement plot names can be older than their first occurrence in the diplomas. Old, Nordic (Germanic) names were almost exclusive until the eleventh century. Christian names were used from the eleventh century, with saints' names from the earliest period and biblical names gaining popularity primarily after the Reformation. German names occur frequently from the fourteenth century onwards (Schmidt 2002, 89–90).

Moreover, Rygh (1898, 38–40) points out that we might not fully understand the meaning behind all names, especially considering the modification of meaning emerging from name compositions. This is relevant for names that include comparisons, for instance, with tools, weapons, an item of clothing, or a body part – or from praising or disparaging names. Such names can lead to

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3 “radæsmannæ hussæt j Bierna gardde j Oslo.”

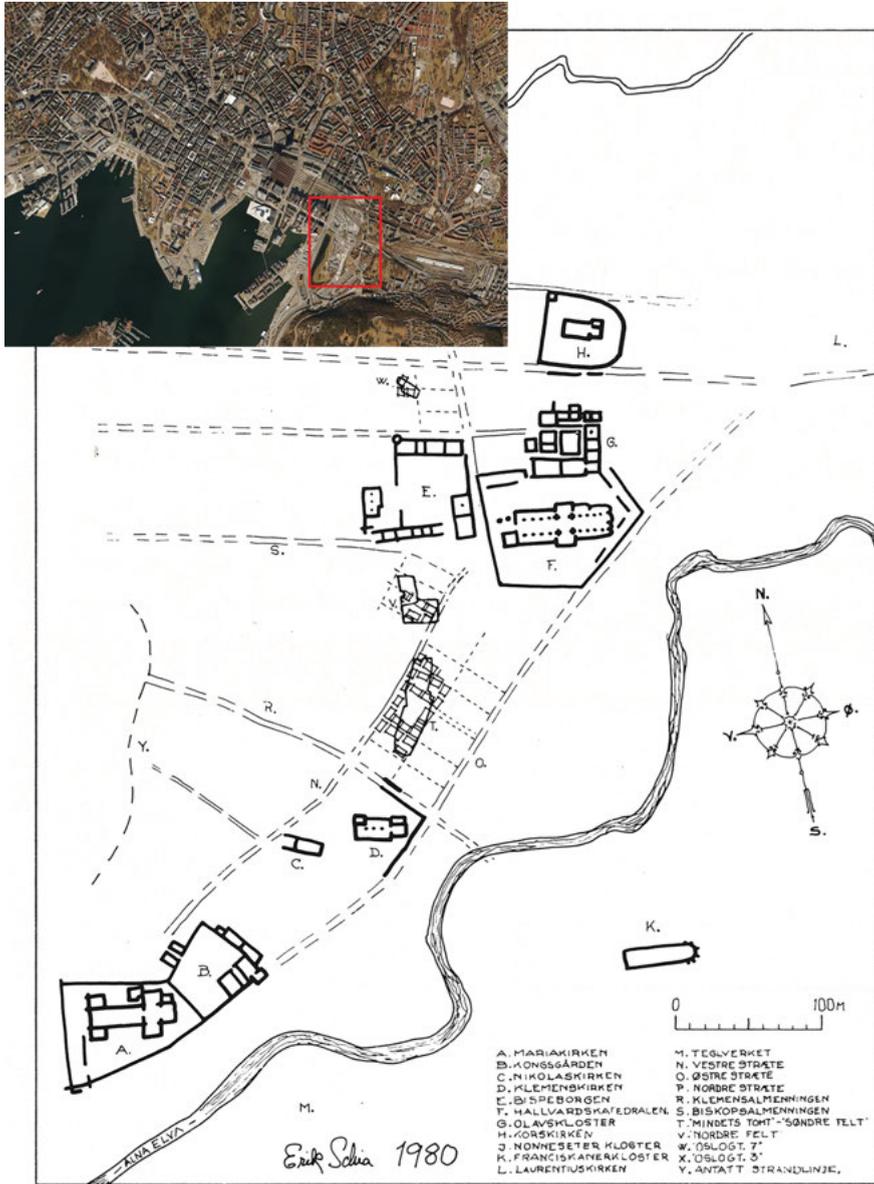
scholars disagreeing over the meaning (Brattegård 1944; cf. Espeland 1929). Few eponymous tenement plots are liable to be misunderstood, however, although there are examples, such as Einarsgård in Bergen, which German traders took to mean unicorn (Brattegård 1944, 270–1).

The archaeological material used is from the Søndre felt and Mindets tomt excavation sites from the mid-1970s. These have been selected for two reasons: 1) together, these sites make up a continuous area of approximately 1000 m<sup>2</sup>, with a high number of excavated buildings in a central part of medieval Oslo (Fig. 1), and 2) the material from the sites has been extensively investigated and analyzed (particularly by Schia 1987e), facilitating its use in the discussion. Forthcoming results from the recent excavations related to the Follo Line Project 2013–18 will undoubtedly allow for expansion of the study, but as the most relevant projects are still in their post-excavation phase, with analyses not yet completed, they have been omitted from the discussion here.

Representativity still presents a source-critical problem in that the two archaeological sites that I focus on only cover a relatively small part of medieval Oslo (Schia 1987a, 9). Furthermore, the development of the plot structure at Søndre felt and Mindets tomt is different from recently excavated sites in Oslo, with these recent sites having significantly fewer site periods and comparatively few traces of town fires (Nordlie, Haavik, and Hegdal 2020; Edman, Hegdal, and Haavik [forthcoming]). The topography was important for how the settlement developed (Nedkvitne and Norseng 2000, 44); the tenement plots excavated in the two sites dealt with lay on the flat top of a northeast–southwest-running ridge (see Fig. 1), while the recent sites from the Follo Line Project lay in a gradual slope towards the docks in the west. Despite the caveat of limited representability, the thorough analyses done on the material from Søndre felt and Mindets tomt arguably justifies their use in my discussion.

## Approach to the Material

There is no direct correlation between excavated tenement plots and the names known from the diplomas. While in Bergen several names are retained until the present day (Helle 1982, 227), only one such example exists in Oslo: Saxegården (Bull 1922, 180), and this tenement plot is in the southern part of town. The location of a few tenement plots is indicated in the diplomas, for instance, Olbjørnsgård (DN V, 853), which lay west of St. Mary Church (A. in Fig. 1), in the southern part of the town. Others are indicated by a relative location, for instance, Brandsgård and Vidarsgård, which lay next to one another (DN II, 25) somewhere in the parish of



**Fig. 1:** Map showing the location of Søndre felt and Mindets tomt (T.) in the central part of medieval Oslo (Schia 1987b, fig. 15). The location of medieval Oslo within modern-day Oslo is shown in the aerial photograph in the top left corner. The tenement plot boundaries outside Søndre felt and Mindets tomt are indicated, although this relies on speculation. Note that the western boundary of the tenement plots is limited by a street (N. Vestre stræte), while the eastern

the Church of the Holy Cross (DN V, 648; H. in Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> In comparison, the tenement plots at Bryggen in Bergen are mentioned in the diplomas frequently enough to allow them to be placed in a relatively certain internal order (Helle 1982, 227). A similar exercise for medieval Oslo's topography is not possible (Sæther 1987, 24), although attempts have been made (Fig. 2).

Since the precise location of the tenement plots mentioned in the diplomas is unknown, the comparison here of the excavated tenement plots at Søndre felt and Mindets tomt with eponymous tenement plots in the diplomas is done on an abstract level. Still, by correlating changes visible in the archaeological material with the time of appearance or disappearance of names in the diplomas, it is possible to test my hypothesis regarding reasons for naming and re-naming a tenement plot.

Specifically, the years when names appear and disappear will be correlated with four well-documented town fires, in 1223, 1352, 1453/56, and 1523. From 1137 to 1624, the written sources account for 13 fires in Oslo (Sæther 1987, 23). I have selected the four specific town fires for three reasons: 1) all four fires are visible in the archaeological material from Søndre felt and Mindets tomt (Sæther 1987, 37), making Schia's (1987c; 1987d) analyses of tenement plot structure and development relevant when discussing changes after town fires; 2) the fires correspond with the time span that the diploma material covers; and 3) the fires caused significant destruction, increasing the likelihood that the fires' effects are indirectly visible in the diplomas by the appearance or disappearance of tenement plot names.

The other nine fires<sup>5</sup> are excluded since their extent is uncertain, meaning that they cannot be assumed to have had significant impact on the urban topography. Some of them cannot be identified in the archaeological material from Søndre felt and Mindets tomt (Sæther 1987, 37). Furthermore, the two earliest and

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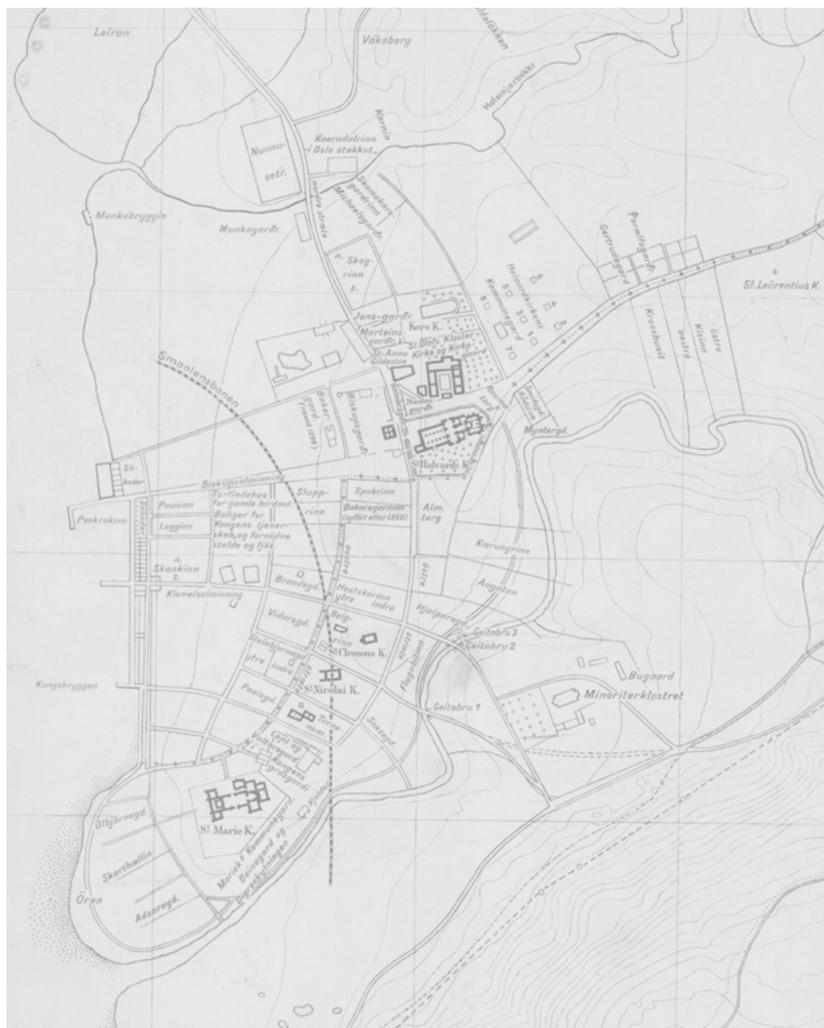
**Fig. 1** (continued)

boundary is marked halfway to another street (O. Østre strete). Whether some of the tenement plot extended all the way to Østre strete cannot be established without further excavation in the area. The two excavation sites together covered approximately 1000 m<sup>2</sup> (Schia 1987b, 9, fig. 15). Nordre felt (V.) was excavated in the 1980s but the results are still unpublished. Aerial photograph: norgebilder.no (Kartverket, NIBIO, and Statens vegvesen). Norge i bilder, Oslo kommune 2019, owner Oslo municipality (Oslo kommune). Map by Erik Schia. Reproduced with the permission of The Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren).

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this should indicate a location in the northern half of the town (cf. Fig. 2), as the Church of the Holy Cross lay north of the cathedral and of St. Olaf's monastery.

<sup>5</sup> In the years 1137, 1159, 1254, 1287, 1379, 1515, 1567, 1611, and 1624.



**Fig. 2:** Cropped version of Colonel N. M. Widerberg’s map called “Kristiania amt nr. 93” in “Katalog over Norges Geografiske Opmålings Norske Landkartsamling.” The map supposedly shows Oslo with surroundings in the Middle Ages c. 1300–1500: “Oslo med nærmeste omgivelser i middelalderen fra ca. 1300–1500. Utarbeidet efter ældre karter og skriftlige optegnelser av oberst N. M. Widerberg 1923.” Widerberg has used information from diplomas for placing names in different parts of the medieval town plan. Although some locations may be correct, archaeological excavations cannot confirm the information. Also note that Brandsgård and Vidarsgård, which Widerberg has placed in the middle of town, probably lay in the northern part of town, due to their connection to the parish of the Church of the Holy Cross (DN V, 648). Reproduced with the permission of Kartverket (Norges Geografiske Opmåling): 93–1, ob. N. M. Widerberg, 1923; license CC BY 4.0.

the three latest fires fall outside of the period when the eponymous tenement plots are mentioned in the diplomas, making comparison impossible.

The Black Death ravaged Oslo in the mid-fourteenth century. Due to the relative closeness of the time of the plague and the town-wide fire in 1352, it is challenging to distinguish between changes following one or the other of these two significant events. Still, I will return to the Black Death towards the end of my discussion.

## Self-expression Versus Practical Function of Eponymous Tenement Plots

Before proceeding with a discussion about self-expression, an obvious question regarding the tenement plot names must be addressed: Were they not simply practical markers in the urban topography? Place names enable us to orient in the landscape. Without them, trying to describe even a simple trip would be laborious (Strid 1993, 11).

To be useful as markers in the urban topography, tenement plot names needed to be well known, and this would require that they lasted for some time. Some of Oslo's tenement plot names were indeed durable; 26 of them are mentioned in diplomas more than a century apart, and 4 of them more than two centuries apart. Furthermore, it is highly likely that many tenement plots are older than their earliest occurrence in the preserved diplomas. For Bergen, several plot names can be traced back further than the time of the diplomas when they are first mentioned, either by being mentioned in older sagas or by references in the diplomas to events that happened earlier than the date of the diplomas in question.

Tenement plot names can be traced back at least to the second half of the twelfth century (Lorentzen 1952, 64–5). The extensive period in which some names occur in the diplomas eliminates the possibility that all tenement plots were named after each current owner, as this would limit the time a name occurred to a human life span. Thus, it is meaningful to see the act of naming a tenement plot as separate from the continual use of the name. It is possible that the name meant something different to town-dwellers contemporary to the person the tenement plot was named after than to later generations.

Names can occur in different ways, either spontaneously or as a longer process (Strid 1993, 26). Most agrarian farm names are results of a lexicalization process based on a description of the object being named (Helleland 2002, 49). The prototypic Nordic place name is a propriarized terrain appellative, sometimes

combined with a modifier or clarification (Helleland 2002, 49). Agrarian farm names are dealt with much more extensively than names in medieval towns (Rygh 1897; Olsen 1967, 1971; Schmidt 2000). Relatively few new agrarian farm names appeared in the period from the mid-fourteenth century to the end of the fifteenth century (Schmidt 2003, 72). During the same period, however, many new tenement plot names appeared in Oslo. This is natural, for two reasons: firstly, due to expansion and densification of the town, and secondly, due to a continuous need for marking identity and property in a developing town.

Based on my own review of tenement plot names in the diploma material, I noticed a pronounced overweight of *-gård* names in medieval Oslo, compared to agrarian farms with names ending, for example, in *-heim* or *-stad* or other suffixes. In Oslo, there are no known *-stad* names, and only one ending in *-heim*: Skinheimen. The chronology of name suffixes is relevant here, as most *-gård/gard* names, both urban and rural, date to the medieval period, likely due to the settlement expansion from the Viking Age to the middle of the fourteenth century (NSL 1997).

Still, I propose that the need to define and demarcate tenement plots in an urban context could be the reason for the prevalence of *-gård* names in Oslo. The eponymous tenement plots primarily end with *-gård*, in the meaning of *bygård* (see definition above). While *gård* translates to farm, it originally meant “fence” or “fenced area” (NSL 1997). A *gård* was an individual landed property or an economic unit, with the latter meaning explaining why it was used for urban tenement plots (Hovda 1960, 191–2). Still, the original meaning should be stressed; in densely populated areas, like a medieval town, the physical boundary between private and public space was more important than in rural areas. Plot boundaries are commonly found in archaeological excavations, often as fences or drainage ditches. The latter not only functioned as drainage, but also to define the plot (Wienberg 1992, 98–9). The consistent use of the ending *-gård* could thus demonstrate the need to demarcate property of urban tenement plots.

Having discussed the importance of demarcating the boundary of tenement plots, I can return to the question of self-expression. Giving urban tenement plots characteristic names was a practice which originated in twelfth-century Germany, when citizens gradually gained wealth and power (Brattegard 1944, 257). Reasonably, the tradition spread to other towns and countries, and the earliest known named tenement plots from Norway are from the second half of the twelfth century (Lorentzen 1952, 64–5). How the tenement plots were identified in the earliest phase of the Norwegian towns is unknown, but considering the commercial revolution in the high medieval period, which included the

citizens (Helle et al. 2006, 80–6), it is likely that their increased wealth and power allowed them to name tenement plots in Norway, as in Germany.

Essential when discussing self-expression is whether a person named the tenement plot him- or herself. However, if it was implied that a tenement plot would be named after any person who built there, self-expression was just as much in the act of building, as the given name would be the same, regardless. Any disparaging or mocking names were likely not given by the person him- or herself, though I have found no such names among the eponymous tenement plots in Oslo.

Presumably, having a tenement plot named after oneself would entail a certain element of status. Status can be connected to the size of the plots or the types of buildings on it. For instance, we could expect stone buildings as part of the eponymous tenement plots if demonstration of status was a motive, as these buildings required large amounts of resources. Recent excavation results (for instance, Edman, Hegdal, and Haavik [forthcoming]; Berge and Ødeby et al. [forthcoming]) suggest that several of the stone buildings mentioned in the diplomas were built in the late-thirteenth or early fourteenth century. The diplomas explicitly account for one or more stone buildings or cellars in twelve tenement plots.<sup>6</sup> Because only half of these tenement plots are eponymous, it suggests there is no correspondence between the stone buildings and the eponymous tenement plots. Perhaps wealthy town-dwellers had less need for self-expression through the tenement plot name as they might have alternative ways of asserting themselves, compared to less wealthy town-dwellers. A name such as Hjalparegård (DN II, 495), named after “the savior,” Jesus Christ, even suggests a motive of piety, in contradiction to self-assertion. While the type of name could conceivably follow from a tenement plot’s function, I have not found a convincing pattern supporting this.

We cannot know how the tenement plot names were perceived by other town dwellers. The names, even after a short period of familiarization after they were given or changed, might primarily have been an aid for navigating the urban topography. Still, they were likely also perceived as marking private property, especially when combined with physical boundaries such as fences.

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<sup>6</sup> Stige and Bauer 2018, 6, 79. Brandsgård (DN III, 134), Bjarnegård (DN I, 216; III, 138), Olbjørnsgård (DN IX, 128), Belgen (DN IV, 352), which includes two cellars (DN II, 481; VI, 306), Skogen (DN IV, 355), Kjærungen (DN II, 322), Agaten (DN III, 435), Hjalparegård (DN II, 495), Smidsgård (DN IV, 557), Skarthælen (DN IV, 759), Ossursgård (DN V, 678), and Blesusgård (DN V, 900). In addition, there was likely a stone building in the tenement plot called Turnen, as this means “the tower” (DN III, 87; Ekroll 1990, 8).

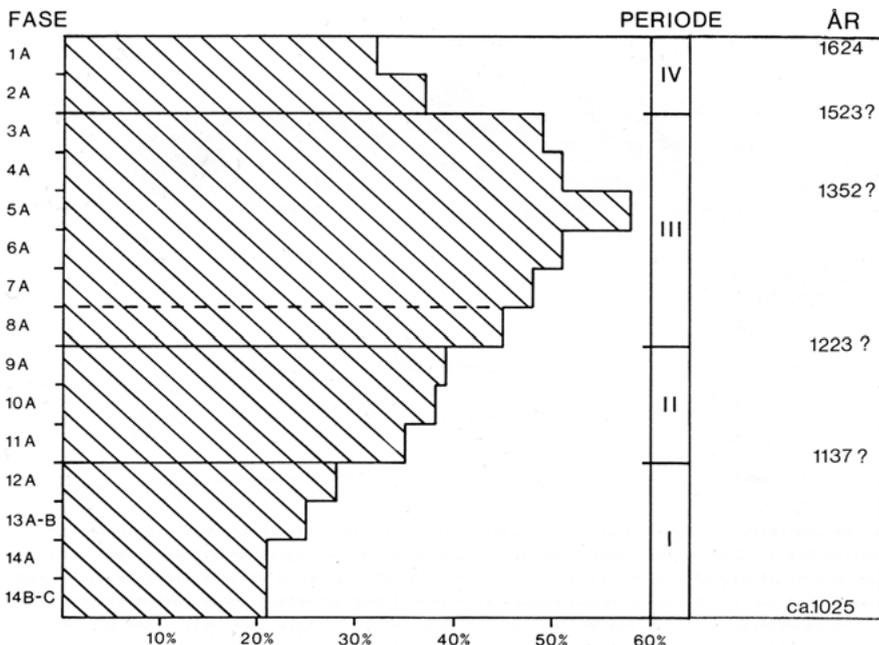
## Change and Development of Tenement Plots and Their Names

A premise for this discussion is that certain changes in the tenement plots were significant enough to warrant a new name. Changes in tenement plots are confirmed both by archaeology (Schia 1987c) and the diplomas (for example, DN II, 25; IV, 601; V, 1021; Nedkvitne and Norseng 2000). Still, of the two source types, archaeological material is the most applicable for identifying change and development of tenement plots.

With the use of archaeological material from Mindets tomt and Søndre felt, Schia (1987c, 180, fig. 188) presents the building density in the different site phases (Fig. 3). Based on changes in density, he divides the excavation sites into four main periods. There is a convincing correlation between changes in density and three of the four town fires that are examined in the next section. This entails that significant changes occurred after a fire, presumably connected with restructuring of buildings within the tenement plots – perhaps even changes in different properties. Presumably, town fires were good occasions to make more space for people in a growing town. Still, a change in building density alone does not necessarily entail a change in the tenement plots or their names. Increasing density could simply mean that a tenement plot developed, with few or small buildings being replaced by more or larger buildings. It is, however, possible that the changes in building density occurred when a new owner took over and established or developed a new tenement plot. This is especially likely if the takeover happened after a fire had destroyed most of the buildings.

In the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century, in parallel with the densification of old plots, Oslo was expanded northwards, past the bishop's palace, and south and east, past the Alna river (Nedkvitne and Norseng 2000, 95–6), towards the ridge called Ekeberg / Eikaberg. New tenement plot names might be connected to new plots and building activities in these areas. From the way it is mentioned, Ossursgård, for instance, may have lain close to the Alna river, probably on the opposite side of the town proper, as a diploma states that Ossur Jonsson received a plot close to Eikaberg – “upp med Æika bærk” (DN I, 92) – southeast of town. However, no archaeological investigations have located tenement plots on the southern side of the river (DN V, 678; Nedkvitne and Norseng 2000, 95).

Compared to building density, changes in boundaries between tenement plots might be a stronger indicator for the naming of new tenement plots. From the two sites, there are archaeological traces of such changes (Schia 1987b, Fig. 8). The changes were more pronounced in the early history of the area, especially up to



**Fig. 3:** Histogram of building density in 14 different phases in Mindets tomt and Søndre felt. These 14 phases (left column, marked “FASE”) are what Schia (1987c, 180) calls a-phases, which represent the situation distinguishable after the whole area was destroyed by fire. Consequently, these phases present a complete image of the tenement plots in the area. Based on the building density, the 14 phases are placed in four main site periods (I–IV, thin column marked “PERIODE”). To the right in the histogram are the years (“ÅR”) of some of the fires known from written sources. These correspond to significant changes in the building density which justifies the division of the sites into periods. Figure by Erik Schia. Reproduced with the permission of The Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren).

and including phase 8 (see Fig. 4), i.e., in a period from when we scarcely have any diplomas preserved. Phase 8 may represent changes following the 1223 fire (see below). However, in the early thirteenth century, one of the tenement plots seems to disappear. This corresponds to a process of gradual increase of tenement plot width throughout the four main site periods (Schia 1992, 152).

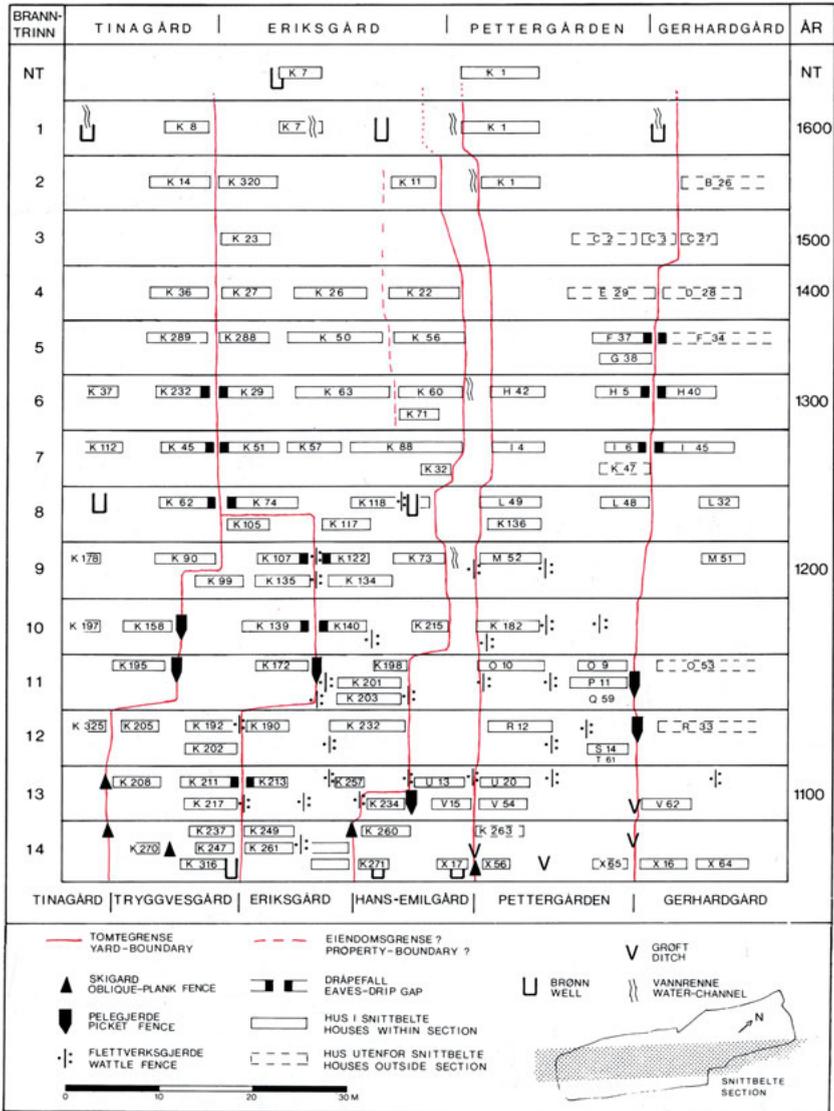
Still, stability in boundaries between tenement plots in the thirteenth to sixteenth century should not be considered as hard evidence for name continuation, as it is only natural that plot boundaries were important to uphold considering the right of use – the *dominium utile* – of the tenement plots. It is very unlikely that transfer of the right of use from one person to another would entail infringement on neighboring tenement plots. It is more reasonable to imagine plots changing,

albeit to small extents, after fires which obliterated buildings and boundary markers. Such small changes are visible in Fig. 4, either by water-channels or fluctuating boundaries between buildings on either plot. As I will argue in the coming paragraphs, even changes which did not leave physical marks in the urban topography could require new names for tenement plots.

While the physical plot boundaries are often visible in the archaeological material, property boundaries might not be. Tenement plots could be sub-divided into smaller properties, but we do not know if such sub-division would leave physical traces (Schia 1992, 151, 153). Furthermore, we cannot know whether sub-division of the tenement plots, which started in the late-eleventh century (Schia 1992, 154), entailed renaming, or whether a tenement plot's name was more firmly connected to the physical plot of land, regardless of how many properties it contained. The significant relationship between property and tenement plots is shown in the town law of Magnus the Lawmender (Magnús *lagabætir*) from 1276, which says that those who owned or rented a whole, a half, or a quarter of a tenement plot could attend the town meeting (Robberstad and Taranger 1923, 48). It seems unreasonable that there would be a separate name for each of the properties in a sub-divided tenement plot, especially if the boundaries between the properties were not visible.

Turning to accounts of changing tenement plots in the diplomas, one example is Skadden (albeit not eponymous), which was divided along the tenement plot's long axis in a southern and northern part (DN V, 1021). Furthermore, when half of Blesusgård changed hands, this part was thereafter called *søndre* (southern) Lassegård (DN V, 900). Tenement plots divided in this way were possibly *dobbeltgårder* ("double tenement plots"), consisting of two rows of buildings, one on each side of a narrow passage (Helle 1982, 222). Regardless of the original layout of the tenement plots, they could be divided on different axes. This could lead to names like northern or southern, as mentioned above, or *øvre* and *nedre*, meaning "upper" and "lower," which also occur in the diplomas (DN II, 495; Schia 1987b, 197, 199). While significant for the tenants, such modifiers are rarely visible archaeologically.

What these kinds of modifiers say about self-expression is not clear. However, I propose that certain forms of division would *require* renaming of tenement plots, either with a new proper name or with a modifier, like those mentioned above. The boundaries of a plot could be defined by different elements, for instance, streets, docks, cemeteries, ditches, or fences (Schia 1987b, 201; 1992, 152). If a tenement plot occupied the entire area between two streets, or between boundaries like the docks or cemeteries, the tenement plot would have had a façade towards an important landmark. In such cases, it is reasonable to imagine the tenement plot as a marker in the urban topography, with a specified location, for instance, "south of the bishop's dock" or "on the corner of Western Street and St.



**Fig. 4:** Schematic section through the excavation sites Mindets tomt and Søndre felt, with fire sequences in the left-hand column (marked “BRANNTRINN”) and calendar years in the right-hand column (marked “ÅR”; “NT” entails recent times). Buildings, wells, drainage ditches, and fences are projected to a vertical plan. Interpreted tenement plot boundaries are demarcated by red lines (Schia 1987c, fig. 8). Note that the tenement plot names in this figure are fictitious; they are the names of archaeologists and are thus not mentioned in any diploma. Figure by Erik Schia. Reproduced with the permission of The Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Riksantikvaren).

Clement's Street." If a tenement plot in such a location was divided, especially if it was divided across its long axis, the façade towards the boundary on either side would subsequently belong to a tenement plot with a new extent. This would reasonably require renaming of one or both tenement plots to maintain efficient navigation in the town. Presumably, a new name could also be required if the tenement plot was divided *along* its long axis, as this would entail two narrow façades next to one another, belonging to two different tenement plots, where there previously had been a single broad tenement plot façade. In such cases, the need for orienting would eventually make the town dwellers forget the name of old tenement plots (cf. Van Dyke and Alcock 2003, 3).

Name-giving and creation of physical boundaries are two different methods of claiming space and communicating it to the rest of the population. While the latter is important for the right of use, the former would contain an additional element of allowing accentuation of oneself in the urban topography. For effective navigation in an increasingly densely settled town, one would be required to know that specific tenement plots lie in specific areas. At first, the name would probably be associated with the person who named it. Gradually, however, the names were likely used in the language of the town-dwellers as a place name with purely a practical, topographical significance. Thus, it seems that relatively brief episodes of self-expression cast long chronological shadows on the urban landscape. Still, another type of self-expression might be relevant when considering the long life of certain tenement plots, namely, that of descendants associating themselves with the relative that the plot was named after – be that a parent or a more distant relative.

## The Town Fires' Effect on the Tenement Plots and Their Names

Town fires certainly affected the urban topography and the town-dwellers. The four town fires in 1223, 1352, 1453/56, and 1523 were all significant and likely caused massive changes to the townscape. Disappearing or reoccurring names can of course be attributed to random survival of documents. Still, a high number of disappearances likely signifies large changes in the town (Sæther 1987, 29). The 1352 fire is supposed to have devastated the whole town except the buildings on the docks (NGL IV, 489). Bull (1922, 257) suggests that this fire rearranged the urban topography completely. Changes from such large fires are visible in the archaeological material from Mindets tomt and Søndre felt, where the changes especially from phase 6a to 4a (see Fig. 3) are significant (Schia 1987c, figs. 14–16).

Several tenement plots are only mentioned before or after the 1352 fire, and the same applies to the 1453/56 fire a century later (Bull 1922, 171). On the other hand, a significant number of tenement plot names show continuity through both these fires. Sæther (1987, 29) argues that disappearing names do not necessarily mean that the tenement plots disappeared completely, but rather that a new tenant named it. Such a change in tradition indicates a break of some kind, for instance, that a new person occupied and rebuilt a plot after a fire. Sæther furthermore argues that we should expect a waiting period after a tenement plot was built or obtained a new name before it appears in the written sources. I disagree with this premise; if a new name was given, it would have been necessary to refer to it, especially in legal matters, regardless of when these occurred.

Bull (1922, 171) focuses on changes before or after the 1352 and 1453/56 fires, but looking at the occurrence of eponymous tenement plot names in the diplomas, it seems that the 1523 fire is the most prominent, as eleven eponymous tenement plot names disappeared within a period of approximately 50 years before this fire (Bjarnegård, Mikkelsgård, Halvardsgård, Gjertrudsgård, Lassegård, Pausen, Smidsgård, Thorelvagård, Tomasgård, Toragård, and Vidarsgård). The buildings in phase 3a at Mindets tomt / Søndre felt were probably destroyed in this fire (Schia 1987b, 70–2).

According to written sources (NGL IV, 489; DN IV, 601), the 1352 fire was one of the most destructive in the town's medieval history. Still, only three eponymous tenement plots (Beinegård, Gullinn, and Miksgård) disappear from the sources a short time prior to the fire. Four names (Gjertrudsgård, Haraldsgård, Ossurgård, and Pålsgård) appear during a period of approximately 50 years after this fire. The buildings in phase 5a at Mindets tomt / Søndre felt were probably destroyed in the 1352 fire (Schia 1987b, 79–83).

Kyrningen is mentioned from 1310 to January 6, 1453 (DN II, 798), and despite that the date of the 1453/56 fire is unknown, it is reasonable to assume that Kyrningen disappeared with this fire, as the tenement plot is mentioned so early in 1453 (the diplomas is dated January 6th), and not later. Ossurgård also disappeared prior to this fire, 15–18 years before. The building remains in Phase 4a at Mindets tomt / Søndre felt were possibly destroyed in this fire. However, the archaeological remains provide an incomplete image of the settlement structure in this phase (Schia 1987b, 73–9).

No diplomas mentioning Oslo's tenement plots, eponymous or otherwise, predate the 1223 fire, and only one appears shortly thereafter: Håkongsgård in 1226. This says less about the consequences of the fire and more about the scarce diploma material in the early thirteenth century. The buildings in phase 9a at Mindets tomt / Søndre felt were probably destroyed in this fire (Schia 1987b, 104–11).

Considering that so many eponymous tenement plots show continuity through one or more fires, I propose that if a tenement plot was traceable after a fire, either by still-standing buildings or by physical connection to boundaries like streets, the names would generally be kept. Due to the many fires in Oslo, along with inexorable degradation of timber, the buildings standing on the plots cannot have survived for as long as some of the tenement plot names occur, which in some cases were for more than two centuries. If buildings were replaced one by one, the tenement plot was probably perceived as the same unit.

Moreover, there might have been buildings of such significance that the tenement plot name remained, even if the rest of the buildings were destroyed by fire or gradually replaced. Stone buildings might have held such significance. Indeed, most of the tenement plots with stone buildings are mentioned both prior to and after the 1352 fire. The average time span of occurrences of tenement plots which contained one or more stone buildings is 136 years. Of the eponymous tenement plots with stone buildings, the average time span is similar: 140 years. Dating of excavated stone buildings show that these constructions had an even longer period of use – around 200 years or more (Edman, Hegdal, and Haavik [forthcoming]). These lasting buildings thus dictated the development, or rather lack thereof, of the tenement plot – probably even nearby infrastructure – for centuries.

Consequently, most plots with stone buildings must have survived the original builder, and this suggests that if a known landmark, in this case a tenement plot with a stone building, still stood, names could be kept.

## Change after the Black Death?

The Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century was a disastrous event, where at least half of Oslo's population died (Nedkvitne and Norseng 2000, 338). At first glance, one would expect this to leave a clear mark both in the archaeology and in the tenement plot names.

Archaeological traces of the Black Death in Oslo are hard to identify, although an area of deserted buildings lying south of where Bishop's Street met the docks might indicate an aftermath of the epidemic (Nordlie, Haavik, and Hegdal 2020).

When it comes to tenement plot names, three (Gullin, Miksgård, and Beinegård) disappear 5–22 years prior to the plague, and three (Ossursgård, Haraldsgård, and Gjertrudsgård) appear 7–21 years after the main period of the plague's ravages. Still, 19 out of the 38 eponymous tenement plots are mentioned in the diplomas both prior to and after the plague. This demonstrates that there was no clear correlation between the plague and new tenement plot

names. This supports the idea that tenement plot names were less connected to the current dweller, and more to the physical buildings.

The closeness in time between the 1352 fire and the Black Death entails that the same 19 tenement plots that were mentioned prior to and after the plague also were mentioned prior to and after the 1352 fire. Thus, it is difficult to ascribe changes to one or the other of these events. However, the marked reduction in building density at Søndre felt and Mindets tomt at this time (Fig. 3) suggests that even though the fire caused a rearrangement of the tenement plot structure in the area, the population reduction removed the need for additional settlement densification in the succeeding centuries.

## **Summary and Conclusions: To Rename or Not to Rename – Self-expression or Practical Function?**

Both archaeological material and diplomas demonstrate changes in the urban topography. Source-critical aspects make my conclusions uncertain, but as additional sites are added from the large-scale excavations from the Follo Line Project, the same methodology can be applied to this material. This will create an increasingly fine-meshed image of tenement plot development in different parts of medieval Oslo.

The duration of several names in the diplomas illustrates that they were used long after the person who originally built on the property had died. On the other hand, after large-scale fires, when presumably whole tenement plots burned to the ground, with boundaries obliterated, some would be renamed after a new person built there. This process could entail an adjusted plot boundary, although in the period focused on – the thirteenth to the sixteenth century – archaeological material from Mindets tomt and Søndre felt shows that such adjustments were relatively small, even though the composition of buildings and their density changed significantly. Still, based on the continuity of several names after significant fires in medieval Oslo, it cannot be argued that tenement plots were simply given new names if they burned. Naturally, we cannot know whether buildings survived a specific fire, but if the owners survived and rebuilt the plot, there is no reason to expect a name change – especially not to another eponym.

Initially, I presented a hypothesis regarding eponymous tenement plots. My consideration of the archaeological and written material leads me to the following conclusions: eponymous tenement plots could represent the person who built on a plot, provided there were no significant landmarks on the plot which would make renaming impractical and thus preventing new names from being

accepted and conventionalized in the population. The high number of new occurrences of eponymous tenement plots in the late-thirteenth to early fourteenth century could at first glance be interpreted as representing increased town-dweller status and autonomy – with accompanying opportunities for self-expression. Status increase is especially relevant when considering the growth of stone buildings in Oslo at that time. However, considering Oslo's geographical expansion during the same period, the new names could simply be a consequence of new tenement plots being establishing in newly allotted areas, for instance, north of the bishop's palace or on the opposite side of the Alna river. Such expansion would require new tenement plot names to efficiently navigate the new neighborhoods. Still, tenement plots in established parts of town might also be given new names if property changes caused new tenants to occupy tenement plots facing important thoroughfares like communal streets or docks.

A degree of self-expression is clearly related to naming. But what does this say about the individuals and the urban population as a whole? While we cannot know how having a tenement plot named after oneself felt for the medieval tenant, we can presume a degree of pride. Still, this kind of self-expression was more relevant for the public perception than the tenant's inner self. The population undoubtedly needed tenement plot names and physical structures to mark their property and recognize others. This was essential both for navigating the townscape and for legal matters. As Van Dyke and Alcock (2003, 3) argue, the needs of the present cause people to remember or forget. Thus, it is reasonable that names were kept if they were still useful and if continuity was desired. If new ownership needed to be claimed and communicated to the rest of the urban population, either for personal or practical reasons, presumably a new name was given. As argued here, the type of buildings on the tenement plots and their physical relation to other landmarks could possibly limit potential renaming. Such limitation probably became stronger after a name's conventionalization and its gradual transition from association with the person behind the eponym to a place name with a mainly practical, topographical significance.

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