



Women's oldest Profession? Evidence from twelfth Century Bergen, Norway

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I am going to present a micro level study; A close up on activities at town plots in Bergen in twelfth century western Norway providing substance to our insight in the everyday life of ordinary people – the first generations of townspeople in this newly established town. The background for the present paper is a comprehensive study of the emergence of Bergen as a town (Hansen 2005). Interesting patterns in the distribution of artefacts showed up, and a puzzling one was the pattern formed by sausage pins, ordinary cooking tools and debris from workshops occupied by travelling artisans.

Bergen is located on the south west coast of Norway (Figure 1). During the Middle Ages Bergen appeared as the most important town in Norway. From the end of the thirteenth century it was known as the country's largest trade centre and from the end of the twelfth century it was the ecclesiastic centre of western Norway. The story of the beginning of Bergen as a town is a somewhat untraditional one. The town was founded by a king probably about 1020/30. The archaeological sources show that plots were laid out and that some of these plots were taken into use after the foundation. In the next generations to come further royal investments were made in the town project; more areas were regulated and included in the townscape, streets were laid out and institutions such as churches and monasteries were founded. On the town plots where the ordinary townspeople were supposed to live development was, however, slow and activities sparse for the first 80 – 100 years after the initial foundation (Hansen 2005).

Archaeological, environmental and a sparse written material provide sources to the first years of Bergen's history as a town. I have analysed patterns in the distribution of artefacts and structures from 46 sites dating to between c 800 and c 1170. The sources were analysed within 5 chronological horizons. Horizon 1 (c. 9800 – 1020/30) was studied as a back curtain for the emergence of the town. From horizon 2 (1020/30 – c. 1070) and on the material was analysed with the town plot as the lowest analytic unit (for a full account of the methodological approach see Hansen 2005, 42-50). For the oldest "urban horizons" (horizons 2 and 3) the sources are scarce, reflecting not only that activity was low, but also a methodologically unsatisfying source situation as goes the context for artefacts. In horizon 4 (1100 – 1120's) activities were picking up and from a methodological point of view the source situation is better. Still one cannot perform quantitative analyses across the plots and make conclusions based on the lack of certain groups of finds on the single plots, which is what I am going to do in the present study. Thus my focus here is going to be on the period covered by my horizon 5 that is the period between the 1120's and c 1170.

The artefact assemblage assigned to horizon 5 comprised 9100 finds from 24 plots/analytic units, most of the plots were only partially excavated, but the contexts were largely well dated. Data from horizon 5 is valid for trustworthy conclusions as goes activities in the town area seen as a whole. When going down on a plot level, however there are still methodological problems, and it is only on four plots (plot 6/C, 6/D, 6/E and 6/G) that I find that the representativity of the material is strong enough for a quantitative approach where the lack of finds may be given culture historical explanations as opposed to predominantly methodological ones (Figure 2).

Sausage pins are common in medieval Scandinavian contexts. The pins are characterised as 6 – 27 cm long wooden sticks with a diameter of 0,5 – 0,7 cm, one end is pointed whereas the other may be cut or broken straight off (Figure 3). From ethnological studies it is known that pins, with the same characteristics as the archaeological artefacts, were used up into modern days when making sausages. The pins were used when closing the sausage casings. The sausage was then hung up, dried, smoked or otherwise prepared for consume. In historical times sausage pins were often reused (Weber 1990, 76 ff).

There are three steps from the production of a sausage to consummation. Having butchered and dressed the animal, meat and guts are chopped and filled into the sausage casing. The sausage is dried or smoked for storage. This is the first step. On the next step the sausage is stored, and as a third step it served and eaten. It is most likely that the sausage pin was taken out of the sausage before it was served, in this way the sausage pin could be reused in the household where it was made. I have as a premise for the analysis that sausage pins in an archaeological context signifies the place of production or storage, not the place of consume.

In Bergen the sausage pin is a very common artefact, in the material assigned to horizon 5 as many as 730 objects were classified as sausage pins, this comprises 8,02 % of the total number of artefacts assigned to this horizon. The sausage pin is not very advanced in its form and a large part of the pins we are talking about here were classified in the childhood of medieval archaeology, it is thus possible that some may have been classified wrongfully. I have not been able to verify the classification of all the pins, as they were not all accessible in the museum storerooms, however, since we are dealing with such a large number of objects it is likely that the true number of sausage pins is still very high.

As already mentioned there is an interesting pattern in the distribution of sausage pins versus other groups of finds. The distribution of tools for ordinary or basic cooking, that is steatite vessels and baking slaps, showed that food was prepared on 17 of the 24 investigated plots/analytic units in horizon 5. This was not so surprising, because everybody must eat. The distribution of sausage pins however showed that sausages were not made or stored everywhere (Figure 4). This may imply that sausage making, in some respects, was a specialised activity. The question is then if there are special finds patterns attached to the plots where sausage pins were few in numbers or not found?

Many ambulating artisans, such as shoemakers, comb makers and some types of smiths visited Bergen for shorter periods during horizon 5. This is shown through the distribution of waste and blanks on the town plots (Hansen 2005, 203 f). On several of the plots, where relatively few or no sausage pins were found, artisans had probably rented a temporary workshop. During horizon 5 this is the case on plot 6/G, 8/A, 8/B, 26/A, 30/B and 30/E. (There was also a lack of sausage pins on plot 27/C, but some pins were found between this plot and the neighbouring plot 26-27/B and it cannot be determined which plot the pins stem from). If "everybody" ate sausages, and this is yet a premise in my study, the general pattern in the material implies that ambulating artisans did not themselves make sausages, but instead had to buy their "hotdogs". This thought is not so unreasonable in itself, considering the comprehensive tasks involved in sausage making. From this it follows logically that some townspeople must have made sausages for sale.

As you may recall there are problems of representativity in the material from this early part of Bergen's history. I find that one can only perform a meaningful quantitative analysis of the material across four of the plots in horizon 5, these are plot 6/C, 6/D, 6/E and 6/G. As seen in the diagram in Figure 4 a quantitative analysis of data from these plots, however, supports the pattern of ambulating artisans on plots with few or no sausage pins: On plot 6/G, where artisans of different kinds had had a stay, sausage pins only made up 0,55 % of the total number of finds, as opposed to the average 8,2 %. This suggests that sausage making was not a common activity on plot 6/G. Thus if everybody ate sausages a quantitative analysis of data supports that some visitors of the town bought their sausages, and that some townspeople made sausages for sale and thus were professional sausage makers.

Who were the professional sausage makers in early Bergen? Women were traditionally the ones to cook and refine foodstuffs in the early medieval Scandinavia. Grinding by hand mill and milk processing are examples of refinement of raw materials or food processing that were always associated with women in written and iconographic sources in the early middle ages (KLN 1956-78, IX 565 ff; Schmidt Sabo 2005, 161 ff). Sausage making is not known from contemporary written or iconographic evidence so we cannot connect the activity directly to genus through such sources. Olaus Magnus (1490-1557) tells about foreign sausage makers (OM 1976, part 13), but he does not tell us whether the sausage makers are men or women, anyhow since Olaus relates to a period some 300-400 years after the period under study, I will not give his account weight here. In written sources describing episodes as far back as in the thirteenth century we learn that men could work as cooks, but in these sources the male cooks are always associated with monasteries or households within the highest social levels of society (KLN 1956-78, VIII 622). In the few contemporary sources where men are otherwise associated with cooking their activities are in connection with simple or ordinary cooking, and usually the man is on a journey while cooking (see for instance Gísladóttir 1985, 46 ff). I find it most relevant to see sausage making as a food processing activity bound to a permanently located household, and sausage making is thus likely to have been an activity traditionally related to women in the early middle ages.

While women could perform traditional male tasks without the fear of losing social recognition, men could not carry out female tasks without the risk of losing male prestige (Schmidt Sabo 2005, 174). Thus, if we assume that refinement of food was traditionally a female task, it is highly likely that the sausage makers of twelfth century Bergen were women. As a counterargument one could hold that the town as such was an arena where traditional limits for male and female tasks could be challenged and even trespassed (see for instance Øye 2005, 58). Thus men may after all have made the sausages that left all the pins in Bergen. A possible scenario is also that men that had no social prestige to lose, for instance men that were not free, could have made the sausages. On the other hand the division of work between different social groups was deeply rooted in the fundamental structures of the agrarian society (Schmidt Sabo 2005, 174) – and the first generations of townspeople

must basically have come from the agrarian surroundings; they surely brought along their traditions and values when coming to town. Radical changes in the traditional division of work were not likely to be carried through over night. This speaks in favour of women as professional sausage makers in early Bergen.

We have two written sources that mention women as professionals in Bergen before 1170. In the Orkneyinga saga we learn that when Ragnvald Kale visited Bergen between 1115 and 1120, he drank and slept in Unn's tenement (Orkn 1913-16; Holtsmark 1970, 92-94; Helle 1982, 114), which from the description, must have functioned as an inn. Unn is a woman's name, and Unn was apparently the mistress of the inn (Steen 1929, 350 f). The Heimskringla saga relates that when king Sigurd Munn (Sigurth Haraldsson) was killed in 1155, he was also in a tenement drinking. Sigrid Sæta was the mistress here (Hkr 1911, 591; Holtsmark and Seip 1975, 679), and her tenement apparently functioned as an inn (Steen 1929, 350). These saga passages were recorded for the first time some 70-100 years later than the events described and may thus theoretically describe Bergen at a later state. With a basis in the archaeological record I, however, find it reasonable to assume that inns must have been a reality in Bergen at least as early as the 1120s. Because if we accept that various ambulating artisans visited the town by the middle of the twelfth century, it is likely that these visitors, and probably also other visitors, such as tradesmen in still increasing numbers (Hansen 2005, 205 ff), could not depend merely on the traditional hospitality of the townspeople (cf. KLN 1956-78, V 701 ff). Visitors of the town would need food, drink and accommodation. It is thus likely that inns like those visited by Kale and Sigurd Munn were a reality in the period covered by my horizon 5 (1120's – c. 1170).

With the sagas as a back curtain it is reasonable to think that women such as Unn and Sigrid – maybe as part of their inn-keeping business also made sausages for sale. So with the point of outset in patterns in the archaeological material and with written sources as a back curtain, the contours emerge of new service related urban professions, where female innkeepers and sausage makers may well have been central actors. Innkeeping and indeed also sausage making may have been women's oldest profession.

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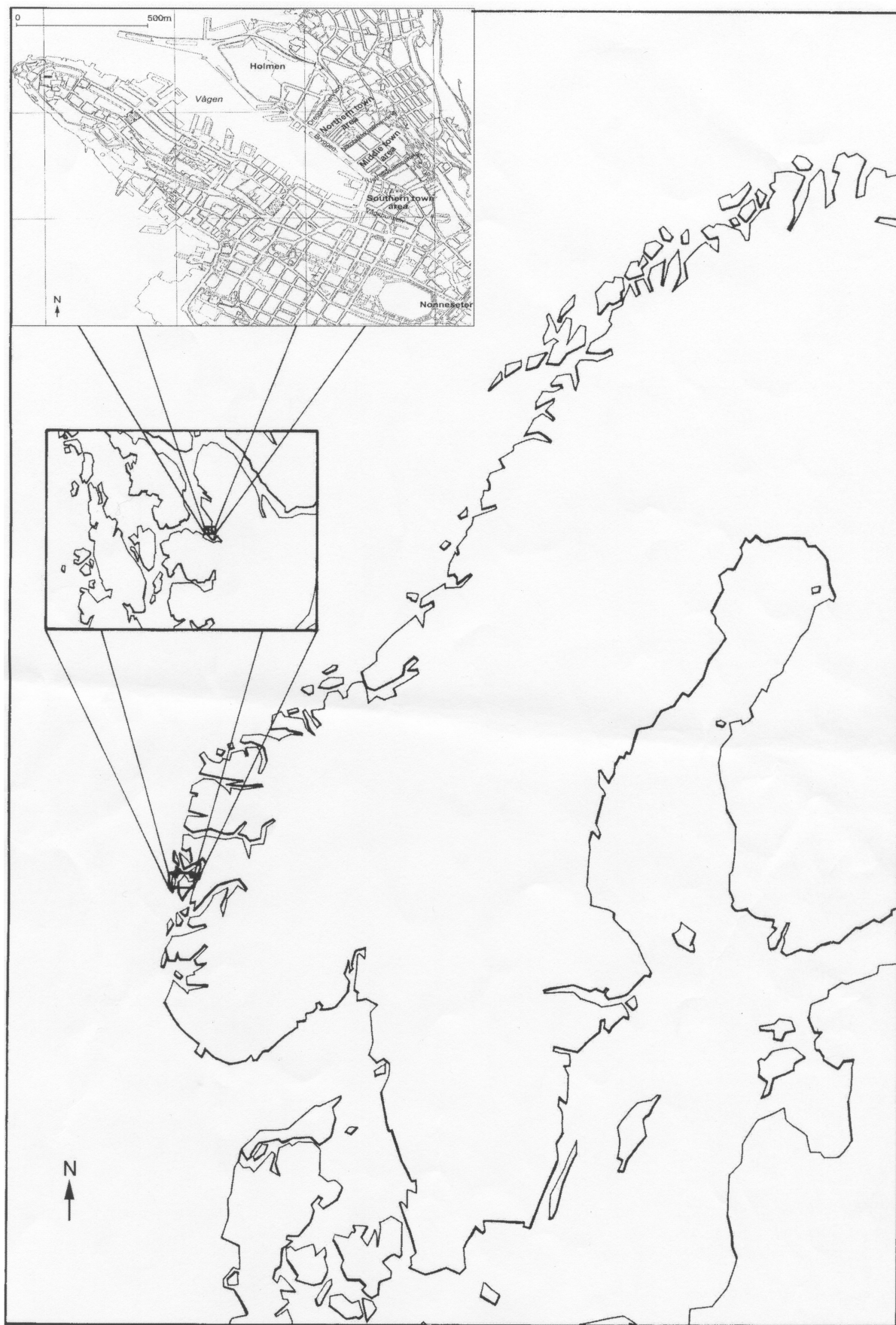


Figure 1.
Bergen on the west coast of Norway

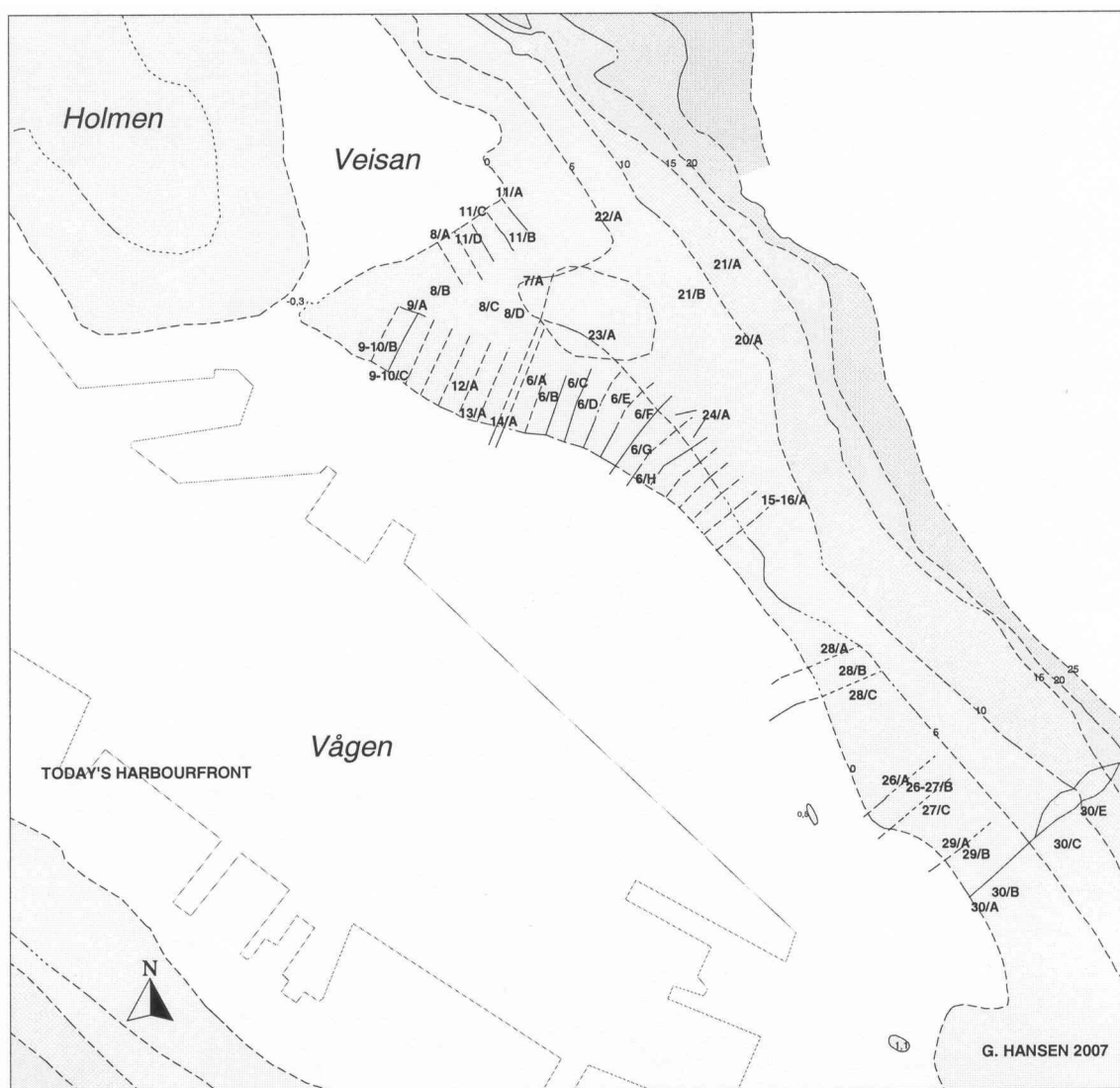


Figure 2.
Plots and analytic units in the northern and middle town areas of Bergen. Plots/units with a number have been partially investigated archaeologically.



Figure 3.
Sausage pins

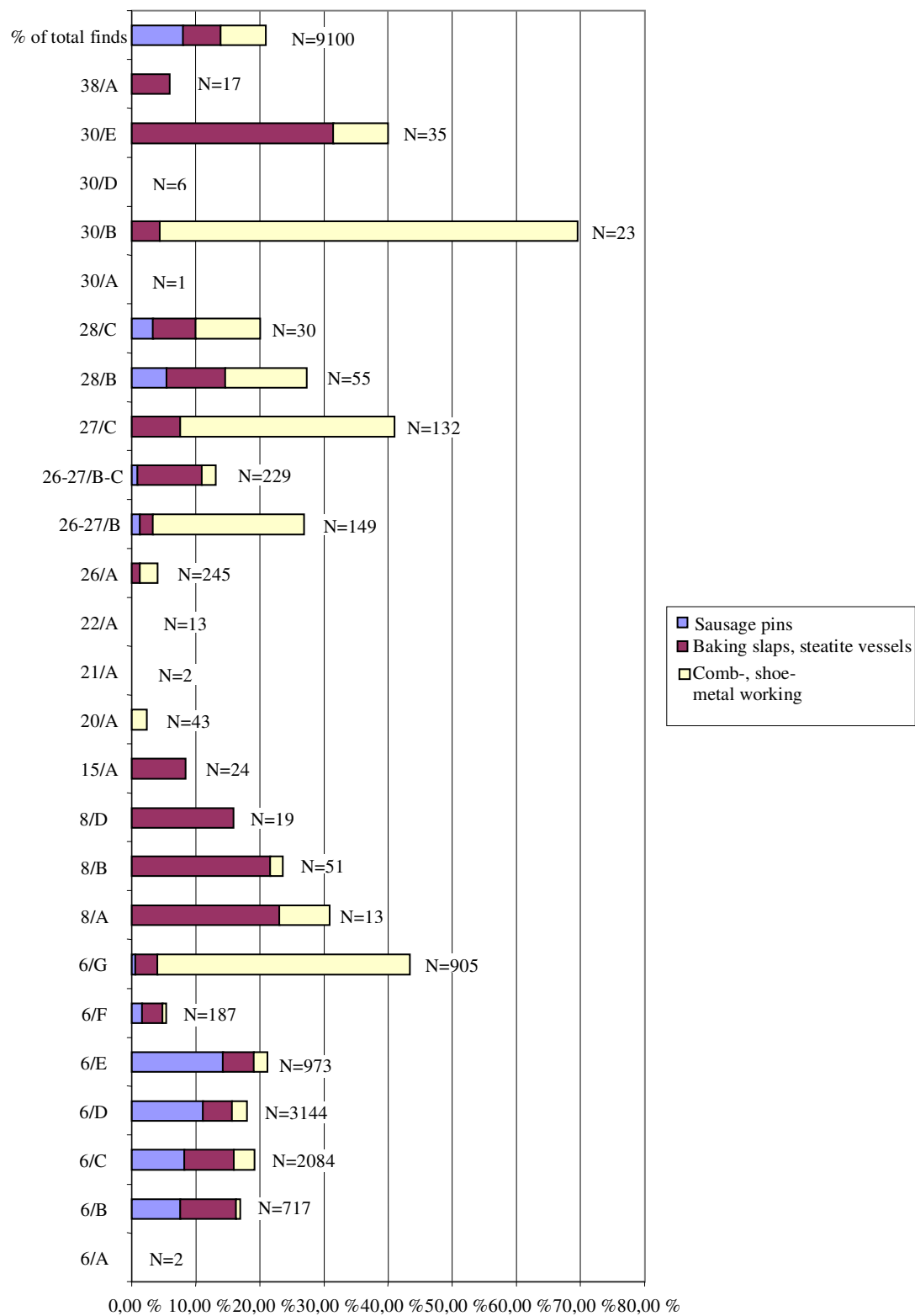


Figure 4.
Horizon 5 (1120's – c 1170). Sausage pins, basic cooking tools and production waste from ambulating comb makers, shoe makers and metal workers: as a % of the total number of finds from artefact yielding plots/units