



Maija Ojala, *Protection, Continuity and Gender: Craft Trade Culture in the Baltic Sea Region (14th-16th century)* (Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 1974), Tampere University Press: Tampere 2014. 340 pp.

The recent three decades have seen a revival in the study of guilds and guild-like organizations in medieval Europe. Particularly interesting is the renewed interest in guilds among researchers in the Nordic countries and around the Baltic Sea, resulting in several doctoral theses and anthologies from Swedish, Danish, German, Norwegian and Estonian historians that have given new insights and perspectives on the different functions of guilds and their place in rural as well as urban society in the medieval and early modern period. Important contributions here, among others, include the doctoral theses of the Swedish historian Dag Lindström (1991), the two Danish historians Grethe Jacobsen (1980) and Lars Bisgaard (2001), the German historian Christoph Anz (1998) and my own doctoral thesis from 2012. These are supplemented by two Danish anthologies on guilds in medieval Denmark from 2002 and on guilds and cultural transmission in Northern Europe from 2013, as well as several contributions from Anu Mänd.¹ The latest contribution to the research of guilds in the Nordic countries and the Baltic Sea Region is Maija Ojala's doctoral thesis from 2014.

¹ Grethe Jacobsen, *Guilds in Medieval Denmark: The social and economic of merchants and artisans*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan-Madison 1980; Dag Lindström, *Skrå, stad och stad: Stockholm, Malmö och Bergen ca. 1350-1622* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 163), Almqvist & Wiksell International: Uppsala 1991; Christoph Anz, *Gilden im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien* (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 139), Wandenhoock & Ruprecht: Göttingen 1998; Lars Bisgaard, *De glemte altre: Gildenes religiøse rolle i middelalderens Danmark*, Odense Universitetsforlag: Odense 2001; Lars Bisgaard and Leif Søndergaard (eds), *Gilder, lav og broderskaber i middelalderens Danmark*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag: Odense 2002; Håkon Haugland, *Fellesskap og brorskap: En komparativ undersøkelse av gildenes sosiale, religiøse og rettslige rolle i et utvalg nordiske byer fra midten av 1200-tallet til reformasjonen*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bergen 2012; Lars Bisgaard, Lars Boje Mortensen and Tom Petitt (eds), *Guilds, Towns and Cultural Transmission in the North, 1300-1500*, University Press of Southern Denmark: Odense 2013.

Ojala's thesis looks at craft trade culture in the Baltic Sea Region between 1350 and 1620. Craft trade culture was an integral and vital part of urban life in the period, and as Ojala argues, should be studied because it helps us understand late medieval and early modern urban life in general. Still, as Ojala points out, craft trade culture has not received as wide attention as it should in previous research, and here Ojala's thesis is a welcomed and important contribution. A common view held in previous research is that late medieval and early modern craft trade culture was a rigid system that hindered the development of markets and prevented the development of a dynamic and flexible economy. Ojala presents a hypothesis in opposition to this view, and proposes that craft trade culture was a flexible system that adapted to changing circumstances, left room for negotiations and different solutions, and strived for continuity.

The hypothesis is tested or approached from three perspectives. Firstly, Ojala examines the different kinds of organizations that existed in the late medieval and early modern towns. Secondly, she looks into the opportunities and rights of widows within the craft trade culture by examining craft guild statutes. Here, the craft trade culture is examined through the perspective of artisan widows, and how gender relationships were constructed and what role gender played in this culture. Thirdly, she examines craft trade culture in the German Hanseatic town of Lübeck more closely, by examining how the rights of artisan widows – as seen in preserved statutes – were applied in practice. Here, Ojala uses a different, narrative source material, namely 22 letters from Lübeck that somehow deal with artisan widows' rights.

Ojala's time frame is long. She studies craft trade culture and gender from 1350 to 1620. This is partly because she wants to break with the traditional separation between the medieval and early modern period, and study changes and continuity over a long time span, a perspective that she shares with other researchers that have studied guilds the last couple of decades, such as Dag Lindström and myself. But Ojala also wants to test a view held by many scholars in previous research on widows' rights in craft trades in the period, namely that the Reformation came to restrict the opportunities and rights of artisan widows within the craft trade.

Ojala's perspective is comparative. The thesis is a comparison between the craft guilds of four different towns that all are situated along the Baltic Sea: Lübeck, Riga, Stockholm and Tallinn. This is a necessity if one wishes to study the different functions of guilds in depth, given the widespread existence of guilds in the towns surrounding the Baltic Sea in the period. Ojala list several good reasons for choosing these four towns. First of all,

they were all commercial centres in different parts of the Baltic Sea Region, and by comparing them Ojala hopes to identify the characteristics of the craft trade culture in the region. Secondly, the four towns were all part of the trade network of the Hanseatic League. Lübeck, Tallin and Riga were formal members of the League, while Stockholm had a colony of Hanseatic merchants and had close economic and political connections to the Hanseatic towns. Thirdly, the four towns shared a similar social structure, which provides a good ground for comparison. Finally, it was important that similar source material had been preserved from the four towns from more or less the same period.

The main sources in Ojala's thesis are craft guild statutes, which exist in different numbers from the four towns. She has, however, excluded preserved statutes from the journeymen's guilds and the preserved craft guild statutes written in Latin, as well as preserved craft guild statutes that are undated. In Ojala's view, the statutes written in Latin represent an older layer of craft statutes in the Northern towns than the other statutes, while the journeymen's guilds form a category on their own, and that the bulk of preserved statutes from journeymen's guilds are dated later than 1620, and therefore are outside the scope of Ojala's thesis.

Nevertheless, these are not very good reasons for leaving these statutes out. The fact that the statutes written in Latin constitute an older stage or layer of craft guild statutes is exactly the reason why they should have been included. As Ojala stresses in her thesis that the craft guilds were not static organizations, but flexible and changing, this point could well have been illustrated by including the statutes written in Latin as well as the later ones written in Old Swedish and Middle Low German.

The thesis consists of six chapters. The first is an introduction to Ojala's field of study, the different research objectives, sources, methodology and earlier scholarship. In the second chapter Ojala turns to the vast diversity of urban associations in the late medieval and 1500s. Here, she discusses the differences and similarities between craft guilds, merchant guilds and religious or devotional organizations. She calls for a differentiation between crafts consisting of artisans belonging to a single craft, guilds (merchant guilds and guilds consisting of artisans from several different crafts, which Ojala calls composite guilds) and devotional organizations, a categorization Ojala calls the tripartite classification. Ojala's differentiation is based both on the members and different functions of the three categories. According to her, although they shared common features, the professional crafts were distinguished by their military function in the defence of the town, their subordination to the town council – Ojala argues

that craft statutes had to be sanctioned by the town council while guild statutes were not – and the way the craft statutes focuses on regulating the actual work of the artisans.

Chapter 3 is followed by three chapters concerning artisan widows and their roles in the craft guilds and the craft trade culture from the fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century. The third chapter looks into the roles and formal rights of widows in craft guild statutes from the four towns. Ojala finds that the statutes gave widows many opportunities to continue their trade when their husbands died. Most widespread was the one year rule, which meant that widows were allowed to continue their trade for a year after the husband had died, while the second most widely spread rule was that widows were allowed to continue without any restrictions. In the fourth chapter, Ojala looks into the transition period of household workshops, where the task of leading the workshop went from the widows to their sons, while the fifth chapter looks into the labour market and entrepreneurship in the craft trades of the four towns. The sixth chapter is the conclusion, where Ojala sums up her findings and places them in the wider context of gender and craft trade culture in the period.

Ojala's thesis contains many interesting findings. Most important is probably that she clearly shows that there was no decline in the artisan widows' rights after the Reformation. Instead there was a continuity of the rights and opportunities of artisan widows in the Baltic Sea region between 1350 and 1620. Thus, Ojala shows that the assumption made in previous research that the Reformation caused a decrease in the opportunities of women to work in the crafts must be rejected, at least for the period up to 1620. She also shows that the craft guilds themselves made no attempt to restrict the opportunities for artisan widows to pursue their trade. On the contrary, they strove to secure the continuity of production and to protect craft trade production. The craft guilds considered widows an integrated part of the craft trade culture and even considered them as independent masters of their craft alongside their male colleagues. Perhaps most surprising is Ojala's finding, based on the sources from Lübeck, that not only did widows continue to work as artisans in the year following their husbands' deaths, but many of them worked for years afterwards, one even for nineteen years after the death of her husband. Furthermore, the craft guilds did not form a rigid system that hindered the development of markets, they were flexible and able to adapt and change to changing circumstances.

However, a few objections must also be made regarding Ojala's thesis. Firstly, Ojala claims that her tripartite classification is a new way of categorizing between different kinds of urban associations. Yet, there little

new about her tripartite classification, perhaps except for that she places merchant guilds and composite artisan guilds in the same category.

In fact, for most of the last century, it was common both in the Scandinavian research on guilds and in the research on guilds in other Western European countries, to distinguish between different types or subcategories of guilds. One differentiation has been made between urban guilds and guilds in the medieval countryside (for example parish or village guilds). While the former type of guilds supposedly only consisted of parts of the town population, the guilds in the countryside were said to consist of the whole population of parishes or villages. A further differentiation has been made between different types of urban guilds, between occupational guilds and religious confraternities. The occupational guilds have been divided further into merchants' guilds and craft-guilds, which in Scandinavian research has been labelled *gilde* and *laug/skrå* respectively. The religious confraternities have been divided into the subcategories of clerical guilds, often called *kalent* in Scandinavian research, and religious confraternities for lay people. Over the last decades, this view has been challenged by scholars who have focused more on the points of similarity between different guilds in medieval society while admitting that medieval guilds were founded for and pursued a whole range of different objectives. They also point out that all such categorizations fall into the danger of creating divisions that were not there, and that they are slightly oversimplistic. As to membership, both Lars Bisgaard and myself have pointed out that a late medieval craft guild did not necessarily consist exclusively of artisans from the same craft, that clerical guilds had many lay people as members, and that merchant guilds could have members from other social and economic groups in the town as well as nobles and peasants from the countryside.²

Furthermore, Ojala states that only the crafts were subordinated to the town council (pp. 105-107). This is not entirely accurate. We also find examples from the Nordic towns of other guilds being subordinated to the town council. For instance, the guild statutes from the merchant guild in Odense were sanctioned by the town council in 1496. Implied in Ojala's claim is also that only the crafts were subordinated to a superior authority. This can also be criticized. Dag Lindström and myself have among others suggested that the late medieval and early modern town must be considered to consist of several, overlapping vertical structures of supremacy and

² Bisgaard 2001; Haugland 2012. See also Gerhard Kraack's study of late medieval guilds in Flensburg, *Das Gildewesen von der Stadt Flensburg* (Schriften der Gesellschaft für Flensburger Stadtgeschichte e. V. 19), Gesellschaft für Flensburger Stadtgeschichte: Kiel 1969.

subordination, and of horizontal structures. One such vertical structure was the one between the town council and the craft guilds, but also other authorities sanctioned guild statutes in the late medieval Nordic towns. As Ojala also points out, we find that craft guild statutes were also confirmed by royal authorities. Furthermore, the statutes of the Hanseatic merchant guilds were ratified by the local town councils and the statutes of several clerical guilds by bishops. In Bergen, we find a particularly complicated hierarchy of supremacy and subordination, where the German shoemakers' guild was subordinated to both the local Hanseatic merchant guild as well as the Norwegian king and his representatives. In Bergen, we also find evidence that the king attempted to subordinate not only the crafts, but all guilds in the town under his supremacy in 1293 or 1294, claiming that to sanction guild statutes was a right that belonged to him only. The right to sanction (all) guild statutes was later, in 1320, delegated to the royal representative in Bergen and the town council.³

My second objection concerns Ojala's claims that the religious functions of the craft guilds have been overrated in previous research (113). This is, in my opinion, a misreading of previous research. In Danish, Swedish and Norwegian research, there is a long tradition for focusing on the economic, craft trade and political functions of the craft guilds. On the other side, little or no attention have been paid to the religious functions of both craft guilds and merchant guilds as well as to the religious functions in late medieval guilds in general. Here, Anz and Bisgaard's doctoral theses from 1998 and 2001 marked a new direction in guild studies in the Nordic countries, which has increased the awareness of the religious roles of guilds in Nordic scholarship.

Ojala bases her claim of the overrated role of religion and devotion in craft guilds on the preserved craft guild statutes. However, to base such a conclusion solely on preserved statutes is problematic, a problem that Ojala does not discuss. Admittedly, when studying the preserved statutes, one gets the impression that religion played an insignificant or perhaps no role at all in the craft guilds. Many of the statutes mention only briefly religious matters such as chantries, religious processions, prayers, burials and saints, and some of the preserved statutes do not contain references to religious practices at all. This is probably due to the fact that most of them were official statutes sanctioned by town councils and royal representatives, and mostly concern the regulation of the craft within the town, matters that both the towns and the king were keen on regulating.

³ Haugland 2012, 266–92.

Again the merchant guild in Odense could serve as an example. The guild's statutes are preserved in three versions. While the two statutes sanctioned by the town council and King John (Hans) I of Denmark (r. in Norway 1483–1513) in 1496 concerned trade, the first version of the statutes, dated 1476 and not sanctioned by any superior authority, focuses on the social and religious functions of the guild.⁴ If we just had studied the officially sanctioned statutes of the guild, we would not have known much about the religious role of the guild. Thus, in order to study the religious functions of craft guilds, we must look at other kind of sources as well. For instance, Lars Bisgaard has shown that many craft guilds in the Danish medieval towns held chantries in town churches. Many of these chantries were not mentioned in the preserved official statutes from the craft guilds, but in the preserved post-Reformation lists of chantries from several Danish towns.⁵

Another example concerns the German shoemakers' guild in Bergen. There are no mentions of chantries or any religious functions in the guild's statutes from 1412, but two wills from Hanseatic merchants reveal that the guild had a chantry in the Franciscan convent church in Bergen.⁶ The example also shows the importance of keeping in mind that many guilds existed for many decades, even centuries, without revising their written statutes. Thus, by only using guild statutes as sources, the guilds might appear more static and less changing and adapting than they actually were, an argument Ojala often stresses elsewhere in her thesis.

A few minor points should be mentioned as well. Ojala does not introduce the historians she mentions in her thesis. For instance, the Swedish historian Dag Lindström is not introduced as being Swedish nor a historian, and the same goes for the Danish historian Lars Bisgaard. In my opinion this is unfortunate, particularly for the readers that are not familiar with the research on guilds in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, she refers to the German historian van Heusinger's definition of guilds (60), without mentioning that van Heusinger based her definition on the one made by another German, Otto Gerhard Oexle. It is also unfortunate that she on several occasions uses references to discussions later on in the thesis as arguments in her discussions.

To sum up, despite my comments, Ojala's thesis is an important and interesting contribution to the study of guilds and gender in Northern Europe in the late medieval and early modern period.

⁴ Haugland 2012, 314.

⁵ Bisgaard 2001, 149–202.

⁶ Haugland 2012, 25

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