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EDITORIALS

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Bergen, Centennial City



Bergen, as the home of Hansen and Danielssen (Boeck lived in Oslo), is well known in the abstract to members of the International Leprosy Association. It is most fitting that the ILA in congress assembled, London, 1968, determined to hold its

1973 congress in Bergen¹ as a centennial celebration of the epoch-making determi-

¹ Two recent pertinent articles are: Linchan, E. J. Norway Land of the Generous Sea. National Geographic Magazine. **140** (July 1971) 1-43. La Fay, Howard. The Vikings. National Geographic Magazine. **137** (April 1970) 492-540.

nation by Hansen that *Mycobacterium leprae* is the causative pathogen of leprosy.

Largely forgotten is the fact that this will be the second time an international leprosy congress is held in Bergen. The "Second International Conference on Leprosy" met in Bergen, August 16-19, 1909 with Dr. G. Armauer Hansen as its president. The languages of the conference were English, French and German, and official delegates were in attendance from: Argentina, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Cuba, Denmark, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the United States of America.

Bergen, now the main shipping center and second largest city of Norway, was founded as Bjorgvin in about 1070 A.D. by King Olaf Kyrre. Before that it was a major raiding base for the Vikings. It prospered as an export center (chiefly codfish). In the Middle Ages, when the city was the largest in the country and a main residence of the kings, it fell prey to the Hanseatic League which by about 1350 made this city one of its four great foreign establishments. This association was a mercantile league of medieval German towns formed, in part, in defense against pirates, against regulations detrimental to foreign merchants and against excessive customs. Nevertheless, Bergen was sacked by pirates in 1395. The German merchants of the league ousted the Bergensers from the quay area and set up a trade colony by means of which they monopolized the city's commerce, chiefly in cod, furs, metals and woods for export to other Hanseatic cities. This unpopular rule lasted till 1560 when competition broke the monopoly. In 1702 a fire near the Bergen waterfront largely destroyed the warehouses of the Hanseatic League. They were, however, rebuilt along their original lines and at the present, housing small shops, they remain an architectural treasure of the country.

Lying on the Bergenfjord, the city has its back against mountains, on the uppermost heights of which snow may be found even in summer. A funicular railway carries one to the summit of 1,000 foot Mt. Floien and

a cable car ascends the 2,000 foot Mt. Ulriken. Either summit presents a spectacular view of the city, fjord and mountains.

Part of the old quarter of Bergen has been restored and is called "Gamle" (old) Bergen. The oldest part lies north of the shore from the fishmarket and has in it the Bergenshus which is a medieval castle, once a royal palace and chief citadel.

Edvard Grieg's home lies on the fringe of the city, backed by forest. Named "Trolldaugen" (Hill of the Trolls) this was the setting where the famous composer found inspiration for works such as his *Peer Gynt Suite*. His composition *Autumn* was played by the Bergen Theater Orchestra at Hansen's funeral. Not far from this museum, there still stands in the woods, the Fantoft Stavekirke (stave-church), dating from the 12th century. It is one of the approximately two dozen stave churches remaining of an estimated 900 that were built during the Middle Ages. These, and related, old Norse churches are very interesting and there are a number within striking distance of Bergen for those who are curious. The stave church has been thought by some, because of its essential shape, to have been inspired by the shape of the pine tree, of which wood it is chiefly built. The original ones were tall but were cramped in floor space and the congregation apparently stood during the service. Later churches were enlarged, some being built of wood and the cathedrals of brick or stone. Their ceilings and walls were often painted with Norse "Rosemaling" and the ceilings had angels with trumpets floating in the sky or a representation of the eye of God keeping surveillance on the congregation. When the Reformation came, there was a revolt against images and painted representations, and many of the church walls and ceilings were overpainted, often with a dull grayish blue. In recent years many churches have had these overcoats removed and the underlying artwork is now uncovered and on display. In the central to southern part of Norway there are several such churches:

Stavanger Cathedral—has a massive, ornate pulpit and canopy, seemingly so heavy that it required a figure of Samson as a base to hold it up.

King Olav Church, near Haugesund—on the outside there is a long needle-like slab of stone which is called the "Virgin Mary's needle." This leans toward, but does not touch the church wall. Tradition states that on the day that the needle touches the wall, on that day the world will come to an end. Blessedly, no one apparently is keeping any record of its progress and making the naturally expected calculations.

Röldal Stave Church—Located in a beautiful valley, largely cut off from the world by the snow of winter, this church is interesting for its design and its wall painting. Its crucifix at one time was reputed to have healing power and brought wealth to the parish.

Bykle Church, Bykle—This old church has been covered with board sidings to preserve it, but its interior has fabulous wall paintings.

Bjelland Church—Also a white frame church with an interior retaining much of the sombre sternness of the Reformation. Outside there is a large slab of stone set on end into the earth. At about shoulder height there is a hole drilled through the stone through which a rope was passed and thus sinning parishioners could be tied to the stone and held there on display as punishment. It is related that fellow parishioners could even spit on them to show their disapproval of sin, such as that of cursing.

Oddernes Church, Kristansand S.—This must be one of the most elaborately decorated churches in the country; the style baroque. Its ceiling has a huge eye painted on it—guaranteed to remind any child that God watches his fidgeting. In the adjacent cemetery there is an old stone with runic inscriptions still discernible and even photographable. It tells how the church was built in honor of the fact that King Olaf the Holy attended the baptism of the son of the man who built the church.

Some may wonder what this has to do with leprosy and one must answer, "Noth-

ing, directly." However, the earliest of these churches were built near the time when the law was passed in Norway recognizing infection with leprosy as adequate grounds for invalidating marriage betrothal. Also, the church was intimately associated with the problem of leprosy, as witness the fact that the first two figures for leprosy resulted from the work of the priests.²

1836–659 cases (census by clergy)

1845–1,123 cases (census by clergy)

1852–1,782 cases (census by physicians)

1865–2,850 cases (census by physicians)

The first asylum is recorded as having been built at Nidaros in 1170. By 1300 there were several such institutions, among them St. Jörgens Hospital in Bergen, which still stands. The original buildings burned, as did several subsequent structures and the presently remaining set of buildings date from 1703. They contain a small laboratory in which Hansen worked.

The Bergen Museum was also intimately associated with the life of Hansen. His father-in-law, Danielssen was a strong personality who left a deep imprint on many of the activities of Bergen in his time. In 1852 he became one of the directors of the museum and in 1864 its president, a position he held till his death in 1894. He had a greater influence than any other on its development. Part of his drive lay in interesting young men in the museum and its zoologic studies. Thus, it was not surprising that in 1872 he was influential in having his young colleague, Hansen, elected to the directorship. For many years Hansen maintained a study at the museum where he engaged in wide-ranging zoologic studies largely involving studies of mollusks. He described several new species. Hansen succeeded Danielssen as president of the museum and was the director of the natural history division. His funeral ceremonies took place at the museum where his remains lay in state in its main vestibule with its head under the bust of Danielssen. Hansen's ashes remain in the museum, held

² Melsom, Reider. "Spedalskhetens eldre historie." Ciba-Tidsskriftet, November 1952.

in a bronze urn created by goldsmith Thorvald Olsen.

Bergen also has a Maritime Museum of great interest to visitors for it depicts the 2000 year long maritime saga of Norway by its collection of full-sized boats, models, pictures, maps and ancient navigational instruments and ship-building tools.

Apart from the approach by air, the chief approaches are by train and ship from the seas through the fjord, a spectacular trip of about two hours, winding its way through a maze of islands and inlets. The other, equally scenic approach is overland from Oslo by the Bergensbahn, a journey of about nine hours by modern, efficient electric trains which travel over glaciers and skirt multiple beautifully clear and scenic lakes as well as mountains. Land approach by automobile is, of course, practical from many directions.

The rail line connects in Oslo with trains to and from Europe and Great Britain. Accordingly, it is likely that many congress participants will visit also this capital with its many historical sights including the Viking Ship Hall where 9th century Viking ships are on view, a nearby housing also of the Kon-tiki, and another well-known stave church, the Gol Stavekirke on Bygdö. Unique also to this city is the Vigeland Sculpture Park at Frognerpark.³ This consists of a varied but coherent outdoor arrangement of more than 120 groups of park statues and 60 bas reliefs, all created by a single artist, Gustav Vigeland. The unifying force is the life philosophy expressed by the whole complex. Again, the question, "What has this to do with leprosy?" Again the answer, "Nothing, directly." But we have recently experienced great stimulus in comparing the sculptural philosophy of this massive work with the only other comparable complex we know of—Angkor Wat. The comparison has told us much about the variant development of culture at the two opposite ends of the earth. Angkor Wat, of course, does have its leprosy relationship

³ Two beautifully illustrated works discussing this sculptural park have recently been published: Hale, N. C. and Finn, D. *Embrace of Life, the Sculpture of Gustav Vigeland*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
Stang, Ragna. *Gustav Vigeland, 1869-1969*. Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag, 1969.

directly in the legend and statue of the "Leprous King."⁴

Stavekirke, Vigeland Park, scenic views, towering mountains, snow-fed crystal-clear lakes, raging North Seas storms and mountain torrents, Viking ships, Torget Fish Market, fjords, rosemaling, stabbur,—any direct relationship to leprosy? Perhaps not. And yet:

1. Can one be insensible to that which plays a large formative role in one's colleagues and still expect to retain sensitivity to one's patients, often of a different cultural background than our own.
2. This was the milieu of Hansen, Danielssen, Boeck and many other workers and this was the milieu that gave their total life and work a far greater breadth and impact than most of us have appreciated.
3. This is the milieu of perhaps the best documented leprosy epidemic in history.
4. The philosophy of leprosy control by segregation found in this epidemic a model that persisted till after the time when those specific therapeutic results became available which suggest that chemical isolation may be as effective as physical segregation.
5. An intolerant climate would not permit a man to live as a beggar in the street, the deep-running faith of the stave kirke would not tolerate neglect of the suffering but made of each man a neighbor; the stern Viking spirit that faced with necessity could carry through and maintain a long policy of segregation—perhaps these were, after all, related to leprosy.
6. Perhaps it was Viking curiosity and a tradition of facing the unknown that, in league with factors noted above, cause a young man with a simple microscope, scissors, scalpel and teasing needles to persist in painstakingly searching leprosy tissue for something—he knew not what—for which there was only tenuous precedent.

⁴ Skinsnes, O. K. and Skinsnes, F. M. What Happened to the King? *Internat. J. Leprosy* **38** (1970) 435-438.

Finally, the language—than which in our experience there is none better for the telling of tall tales; they sound so grand. However, the twinkle in the Norwegian eye of my favorite uncle assures me that he knows the tale is tall but also that it is based on some truth.

The many who attend the Centennial Congress in this Centennial City will experience a milieu that will subtly change them and they will return to their homes with many tall tales—tall tales of a Century of Advance in Leprosy Understanding, all based on fact.—Olaf K. Skinsnes