

The cultivated town – another perspective on urban life

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Swedish archaeologists have mainly studied urban space with focus on the built-up areas. The town dwellers' way of life and economic base, like crafts and trade, have been viewed as a contrast to the surrounding countryside. Very little research has been devoted to the town dwellers' cultivations, despite the fact that farming on lands surrounding the built-up town, was of great importance to the inhabitants far into the 19th century. Almost every Swedish town held extensive lands with arable fields, pastures, meadows and forests (Björklund 2003). However, it was not only the surrounding arable fields that were cultivated by the town dwellers. Within and nearby the built-up town area there were orchards and kitchen gardens. Also in this field of study archaeological research has been very modest (Lindeblad 2006, Tollin 2005).

The medieval towns of Sweden were all situated in the southern parts of the country. The oldest ones were founded in the late 900s and the youngest in the 16th century. Almost all the towns held large land areas surrounding the built up town with fields, meadows and woods. There are a few exceptions; some of the larger towns like Stockholm did not hold land areas like this. These parts of the urban space were well integrated with the built up areas, for example they were under the town laws.

In recent years the common perception of the town dwellers as dependent on products from the surrounding countryside and villages has been questioned within Scandinavian research. Recent research considers the town dwellers to have been self-sufficient to a much

greater extent than earlier assumed (Björklund 2003, Öye 1998). We will try to shed light on these topics with examples from two medieval towns in the eastern part of central Sweden, Skänninge and Vadstena.

The two towns that we are going to discuss are placed roughly 15 kilometers apart in an intensely cultivated landscape near one of Sweden's largest lakes, Vättern. Extensive excavations have been carried out in Skänninge in recent years and in the 1990s Vadstena was object of a large excavation. In Skänninge the agricultural development in the outskirts of the town can be followed from probably late 12th century into modern days. From Vadstena there are examples showing cultivation in the town yards.

We are currently working on this study and the results will be published next year by the Swedish National Heritage Board (Lindeblad & Wennström in prep). This is a couple of the main questions we are studying:

- Where and when were the fields and different gardens established in the towns? Where they a part of the urban space already from the beginning when the town was founded? How did these parts of the towns change over time?
- How where the fields and gardens arranged with for example boundaries and fences? Which crops and plants were cultivated in the towns? And with what kinds of tools? Who owned the cultivated areas of the towns and who cultivated them?

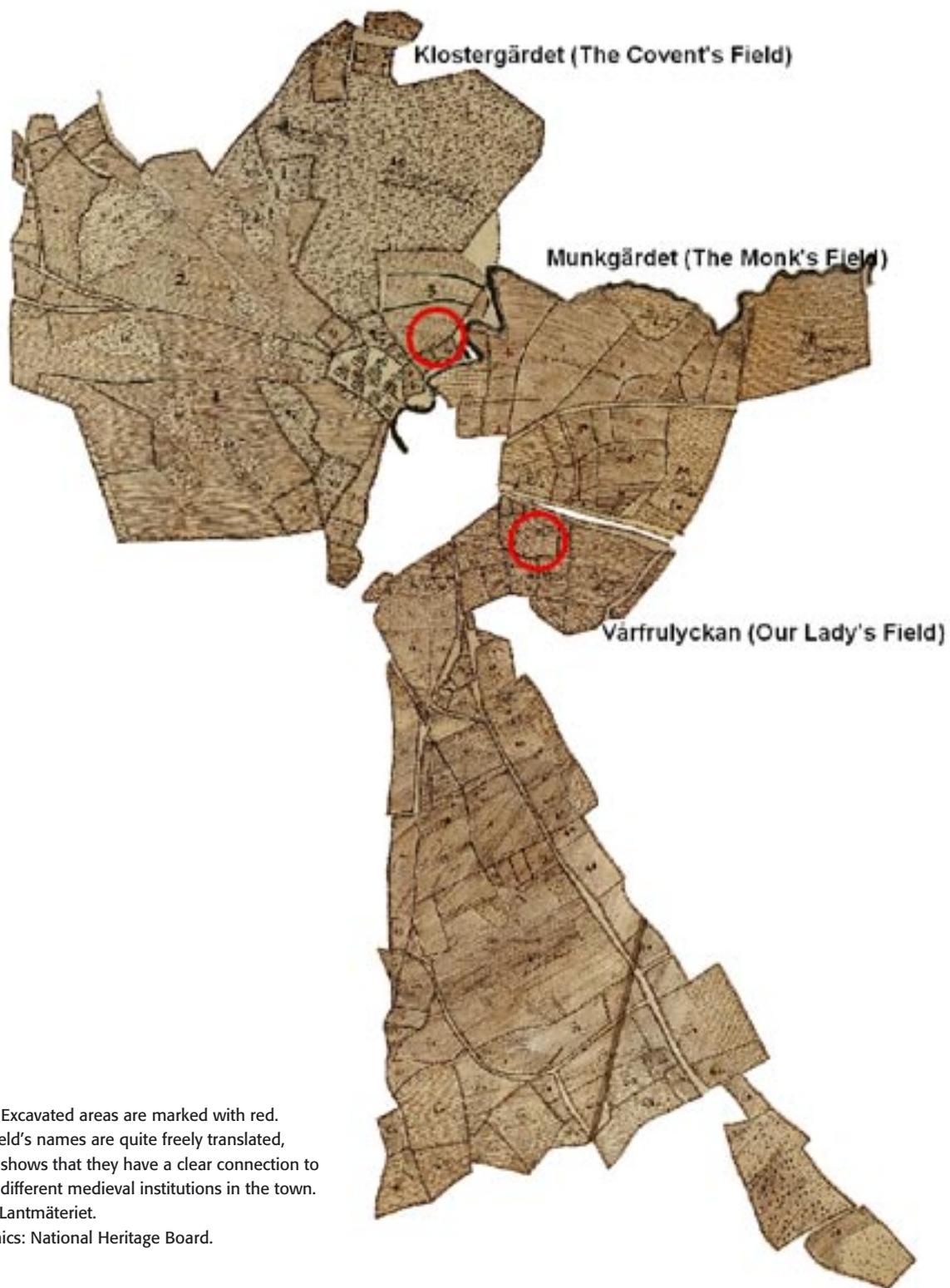


Fig 1. Excavated areas are marked with red.
The field's names are quite freely translated,
but it shows that they have a clear connection to
three different medieval institutions in the town.
Map: Lantmäteriet.
Graphics: National Heritage Board.

Skänninge and its surrounding fields

The town of Skänninge is still a very small town and the center corresponds with the medieval town. The built up area of the town makes up a very small part when you look at the total area belonging to the town, including arable fields and different resource areas, like pastures and forests. Skänninge's lands were medium-sized by comparison with other towns in Sweden.

In Skänninge there were two early medieval churches. In the 13th century two Dominican convents were founded and about 1300 the only medieval building still standing, Vårfrukyrkan (The church of Our Lady), was constructed.

The archeological excavations, that will be discussed here, were carried out in 2002-2006. The railroad is to be broadened, which gave us a quite narrow stretch of about 1 km to study.

The two areas where we have found agricultural remains are situated just outside the medieval town and most towns have long ago incorporated this land. But in Skänninge the land has not been exploited until today.

Maps

The oldest map depicting Skänninge is dated 1638. It is separated in three parts of which we also have records in written sources a hundred years earlier.

Available maps all indicate different origins of the northern and southern parts of the lands belonging to the town. The northern part has several similarities to a common village in its structure, while this is not the case with the southern part. The northern fields are large and clearly separated in two parts, indicating two year crop rotation. The southern fields are smaller and more spread out, perhaps indicating that the land has been bought and sold several times.

The lands belonging to the towns were not only used for agriculture. On the map from 1638 we can for example see the town's gallows and brick manufacturing. We know that in Skänninge the land was also used as a market place. In concentrated places we have found objects indicating trade, including coins and lead seals. In fact Skänninge still holds one of the largest annual markets in Sweden.

On the border - methods

It was not obvious to us which archaeological methods to use in excavating these types of remains. The town's lands are in many senses on the border between urban and rural - also archaeologically. The remains are more rural than urban in character but the connection to urban life is obvious.

For example it is of great importance to uncover large areas, which makes it possible to identify different phases and discover whether or not they have different ranges. This is also important to discover possible older remains that can affect dating of the agricultural remains.

Historical maps are an important part of the study, both on a smaller and larger scale. By tracing lingering structures and comparing them with the archaeological material, results from the excavations can produce a picture that is valid for a much larger area.

We work with a long perspective in time – from early middle ages to early modern or modern times. Often, when it comes to agricultural remains you have to deal with structures that last through many generations.

One methodical problem is absolute dating, since completely closed contexts are rare and objects, because of cultivation, move both up and down in stratigraphy. Therefore, you have to work with the larger tendencies.

Excavations of the cultivated areas

The remains of the Dominican sisters convent, S:ta Ingrid, founded in late 13th century is situated very close to one of the excavated areas. It was probably preceded by a manor with a private church that was part of the founding donation to the convent.

Here agricultural remains, dated back to the 12th century, were excavated. A house and bronze casting pit from the 11th - 12th centuries were also found. Ever since the latter were abandoned the area has been used for cultivation.

Close by the early medieval house there was a small kitchen garden. The area was at least six meters wide and ten meters long. Within this area there were traces



Fig 2. This picture shows the results of the excavation in the northern parts of Skänninge. The map in the background was made in the late 1700s for one of the great land reforms. The yellow structure on the map shows plots from the 11th or 12th century, possibly for craftsmen connected to the manor. Map: Lantmäteriet. Graphics: National Heritage Board.

of that spades had been used for cultivation. The boundaries of the kitchen garden were a short ditch, the building itself and a stone paving. Unfortunately no closed layers were found so it is not possible to say exactly what was cultivated in this particular area.

The earliest evidence of more extensive cultivation was a small field situated close by the early medieval house. Underneath the layer there were traces of the use of ard. Ceramic finds indicate that the field was cultivated some time during the same period that the building stood.

Latest in the early 13th century the area was totally reorganized. The whole area was structured with ditches, straight through the older field and plots. This is the red structure on the map (fig 2). The ditches were laid out more or less right-angled relative to the building. They didn't cross these structures and it is evident that they were in use during the same period. The field was almost 4000 m² and divided into a minimum of two smaller fields. This should indicate that there was more than one user. Along the ditches were traces of the use of ard. The initiative to this reorganization probably came from the manor, which must have been landowner in this period.

Structuring and planning the landscape with different ditches and other boundaries seems to start in Sweden in early medieval times. In eastern middle Sweden, where Skänninge is located, laws from the 13th century regulate the digging of the ditches (Myrdal 1999).

The oldest ditches in Skänninge have not had draining as main function. They don't follow original topography and the variance in the bottom level was very small. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that they were dug primarily for marking borders.

In the late 13th century the house was abandoned and the whole area was converted into arable fields. This can be linked to the establishment of the convent nearby and it is very possible that not only the church but also a great deal of land was part of the donation.

Several of these ditches, with origin in the 13th century, were actually used into the 18th century, i.e. over a period of 500 years. One of them was still in use when this map was drawn in 1776.

In this region ard was used perhaps as late as the 18th century. But we do know that the plough was used in neighboring Vadstena already in the 15th century. Possibly the light sand soils surrounding Skänninge was a factor in keeping the old ard in favor of the plough.

It is difficult to say who cultivated the land during the middle ages. But it is very likely that the landowner was the Dominican convent. One possibility is that it was leased to town dwellers, another that the convent had its own leasers. By the mid 16th century the land was confiscated

by the crown. It is noticeable that this change did not leave any archaeological traces.

The next major change didn't take place until the late 1700s, this change is visible both in maps and archaeologically, and came about as a result of one of the big agricultural reforms. It's the light blue structure on the map (fig 2). The fields were divided into smaller fields, with a direction that differed from the earlier. By comparing the map with the archaeological results we can conclude that the field has been divided into more parts than was actually planned according to the map.

We can conclude that this large field has been cultivated for at least 800 years. During this long period a number of changes took place, both in how it was cultivated, size and layout of the fields and owners. The land belonged to the town but was in the early map from 1638 owned by the crown and cultivated by Skänninge's inhabitants. It has its origin in a manor from early medieval times, when it most likely was used by leasers or slaves. It was later donated to the Dominican convent. We can't be sure that this land was considered town land during the middle ages, we can't tell for sure about this until the 16th century. The most obvious changes in the archaeological material are from the 13th and 18th century when two completely different systems of ditches, dividing the field were laid out.

The southern parts of Skänninge show a completely different structure when it comes to ownership. In the 1600s there is land owned by the crown, as well as privately owned land and land possessed by the aristocracy. In written sources from the 1400s we read that a field here is sold, which indicate that it was privately owned already in the middle ages. A thought is that the parts of Our Lady's field that after the reformation are owned by the crown, earlier belonged to the church itself.

In this part of the town archaeological results suggest that the land wasn't cultivated until the 13th or 14th century and an idea is that it somehow was connected to the founding of the town. If this is the case it is a major difference compared to the origin of the northern town lands. The structures here doesn't appear to be as static

as in the northern part – perhaps this is also a result of that the land was privately owned – pieces or entire fields were bought, sold and inherited.

Vadstena and cultivations in the built up town

Vadstena is a late medieval town and has not grown very much since the middle ages. The town was founded in the year 1400 around the convent of Saint Birgitta. The convent was one of Sweden's main cultural institutions in the late middle ages. It held very large gardens with orchards and kitchen gardens. Next to the church there was a garden used for the sisters' contemplation. In this garden white lilies were grown, a symbol of the virgin Mary. The convent garden still remains, with the medieval brick wall which enclosed the garden preserved.

Today there are a lot of cultivated areas in the town. If we compare this situation with the oldest map of the town from the year 1705 we can see that there were even more cultivated areas in the town then (Lindeblad 2006). The surveyor Johannes Eekbom made a very detailed description of the different plots in the town and at this time one third of the built up area of the town were plots used for orchards, kitchen gardens and other cultivation, for example hops. These gardens were mainly situated in the outskirts of the town. There were also orchards on the town yards where the town dwellers had their houses. The largest gardens were owned by the more prominent inhabitants, like the major and the parish priest. It was probably a way of showing your status to have a large orchard. Some of these gardens are still visible in the layout of the town today, for example the parish priest's garden, which was about 4000 m².

It is hard to tell if the map also shows medieval situation even though we know that some of the gardens, like the convent gardens, still have their medieval layout.

The excavations

In Vadstena very extensive excavations of several town yards have been carried out, and a couple of the town yards where excavated in there full extent. This gave us

an opportunity to study the layouts of the late medieval plots, with buildings, yards and streets but also the cultivated areas (Hedvall 2002).

Fig. 3 shows a reconstruction of three late medieval town yards in Vadstena. As you can see the plots are situated in between two streets close to the lake. Each plot was about ten meters wide and 60 meters deep. The dwelling house was in the middle of the plot and the workshops and booths were placed closer to the main streets. Behind the dwelling house was the kitchen garden with a smaller shed placed by the backstreet. About one third, or more, of the plot was used for cultivation.

In the kitchen gardens we excavated traces from spade blades which formed rectangular shapes in the yellow sand. This shows that the plants have been cultivated in rectangular beds, placed in symmetrical rows (fig 4). The kitchen gardens were enclosed with a wooden fence. At this excavation the conditions for macrofossil analysis

were poor. There were only preserved seeds from two different species; parsnip and flax.

Plants and seeds

From Skänninge the analysis of macrofossils shows a great variety in the plant material (Heimdahl in print). Seeds from different fruits and berries were found, and also herbs used for both cooking and medicine. The seeds are not found in gardens but in the kitchen of a convent and in a town yard, so the seeds must not show what has been cultivated in the town even though it's very likely. The results from the analysis are not equivalent to any other town or village in the region. It is possible that this indicates that Skänninge has been a center of horticulture in the area.

It is hard to tell where in the town these plants have been cultivated and how the different plants have been used. We can tell from the medieval written sources that the herbs were used for different purposes, in cooking

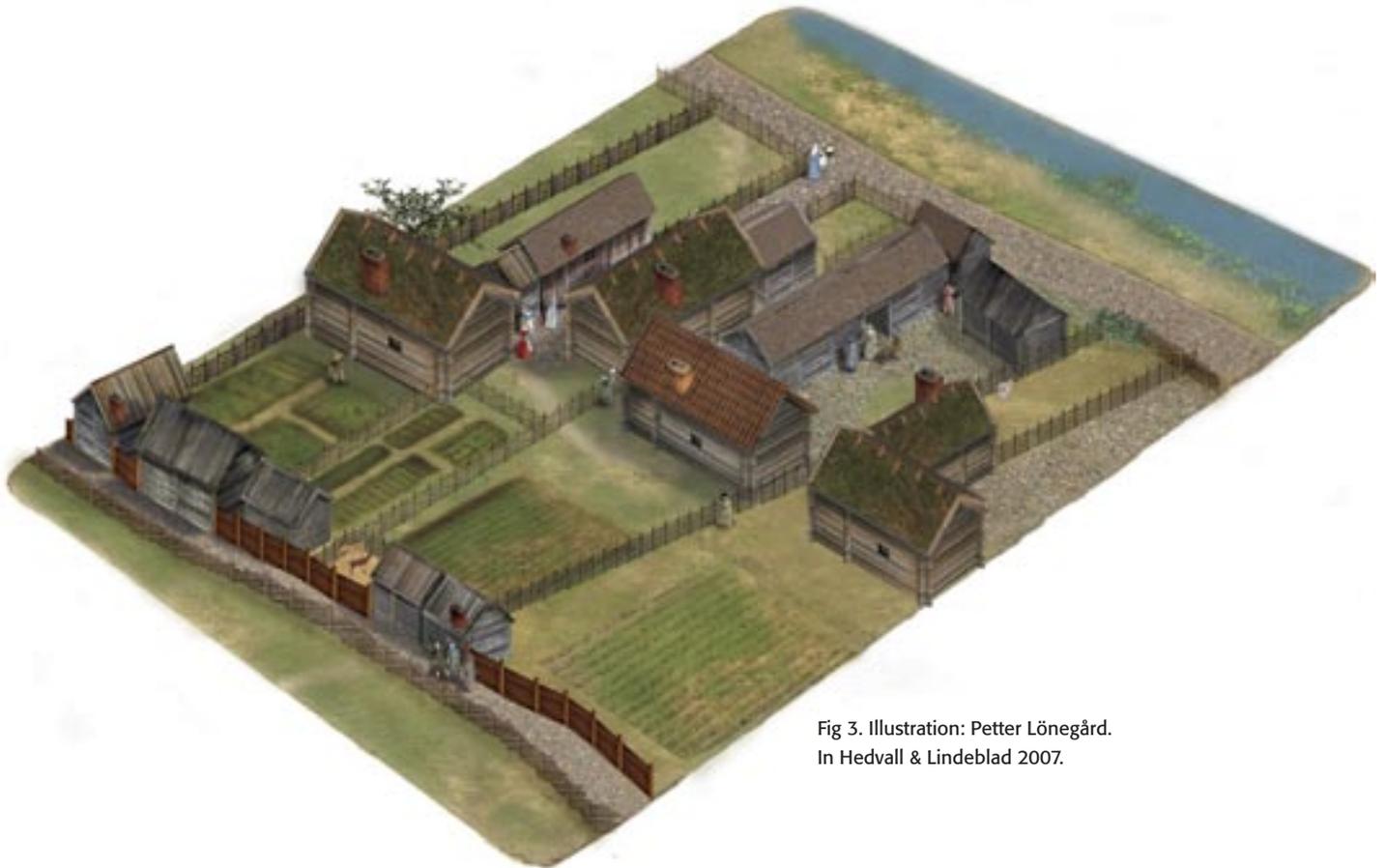


Fig 3. Illustration: Petter Lönegård.
In Hedvall & Lindeblad 2007.



Fig 4. Photo: National Heritage Board. Picture: After Hyams 1971.

***A selection of the plant seeds
found in Skänninge;***

| | | |
|----------|--------------|-----------------|
| oregano | lettuce | cherries |
| lavender | camomill | wild strawberry |
| parsley | marjoram | blackberry |
| onion | butterbur | pear |
| wormwood | cat-mint | apple |
| chicory | fennel | hops |
| borage | marsh-mallow | |
| henbane | blackcurrant | |

and to cure different illnesses. A lot of plants also had symbolic and religious meanings. One thing is certain – the different plants brought beauty and pleasure to the town dwellers by their colour, taste and scent.

Another perspective

Finally we would like to say that we think that this way of studying urban space has given us new perspectives on the medieval towns. It gives a possibility to study urban life in another way - between the practical and pleasurable, between economy and cultural symbolism.

We think that studies like these can give new and different perspectives on the town dwellers everyday life.



Fig 5. This is a picture from the beginning of the 16th century of a small British town. It gives a good impression of what the towns that we h

Plots for cultivation were an important and extensive part of the urban space. Picture: After Landsberg 1997.

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