The formation of towns – new perspectives on Scandinavian towns

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Abstract

Today, urbanity appears to be under re-construction. The urban landscape is rapidly changing in several ways, and new spatial practices are developed. This new perspective on urbanity affects our notion of 'the town'. Furthermore, our notions seem to oscillate between utopia and dystopia.

Despite our possibilities to contribute with an historical depth, archaeologists have seldom participated in the discussions of the towns of today – or of tomorrow. This is a rather odd condition considering that the vast majority of urban archaeological excavations are the result of – and hence a part of – contemporary political processes.

Possibly we have been too preoccupied with questions concerning dating, functions and typology. In order to participate in a wider, contemporary discussion, the challenge for urban archaeology in Scandinavia is to realise the potential of archaeology, i.e. to write 'a different story' than the ones found in the written record. In short, we need to reformulate some of the aims of urban archaeology in order to define how to reach them. This is not only a question of employing refined methods, producing high-resolution data, or to develop the explicit hierarchic order of interpretations. We need to challenge our own conceptual frameworks concerning time, space, and human agency, as well as our ways of presenting our results to a wider audience.

From an archaeological point of view urbanization may be summarized as a process creating urbanity and urbanism. The way people comprehended and organized the landscape changed during the Late Iron Age, which in turn created conditions for a landscape inherent with urbanity. Towns are often explained as a deliberate aim, or as the outcome of one-way power relationships. In my opinion, however, towns are the outcome of a much broader process, involving a wide range of agents with varying and changing objectives. This process may be studied using a landscape and long-term perspective in combination with detailed analyses of individual towns, and several such studies may be combined to highlight the complexity and diversity of urbanization. Our 'object of knowledge' is the changing social contents, relations and meanings of the urban landscape. Or put in another way: How was urbanism constituted in the Scandinavian context?

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Towns of all times are magnificent multi-vocal sources for a wide spectrum of questions concerning human conditions, politics, ideology, economy, technology, etc., the only limit being our own imagination.

Despite a decrease in the actual number of excavations performed, urban archaeology is vital. First and foremost, we can draw a lot on earlier work done. Though at times some older excavations might be questionable, and rather few of them being fully processed or published, things like the institutional lay out are mapped in most towns. This information can be used to either build on or to scrutinize. Critique and de-construction must be regarded as a creative way to challenge our established conceptual framework and lead us in other directions concerning, for instance, how social power relationships worked, when and what places became towns etc. Secondly, urban archaeology is accepted within most legal systems, and the need for rescue archaeology is not questioned the same way it was a few decades ago. Though this doesn't mean that we are all working under equal conditions, an international dialogue clearly helps strengthening our common cause and strives for adequate resources. Thirdly, we got 'new' technique available, which could be made interesting by employing a wider set of questions and theoretical approaches.

The last decade has seen an increasing discussion on the methods we employ in deep stratified sites. However, the discussion has dealt mainly on the task of transforming material remains into high-resolution data and questions of procedure. The theoretical side of things – how we can use these data and the need to challenge our conceptual frameworks – has been addressed in a more limited degree. Without such a discussion there is an inherent risk of the methods becoming the means to an end in themselves. In archaeology this risk primarily consists of mixing 'the past' with those material categories each method produces as data and knowledge.

High-resolution data does not in it self cover 'the past', they simply produces more, or other, categories of material culture. We still run the risk of producing a story about the ordering of those

aspects that we've been able to record. This will rather reflect the ordering logic within each method rather then actions in the past. If we don't change our questions, our theory, we'll end up basically telling the same old story (though hopefully in a more detailed and source critically valid way).

In order to avoid the fallacy of just repeating old statements, we have to analyse old 'truths' critically by asking new questions and finding new angles to urban archaeology (e.g. Christophersen 2000, Tagesson 2002, Andersson 2002b, Anund 2002, Anglert & Lindeblad 2004). Unsurprisingly, this has proved rather cumbersome. Changes in questions asked, not only often demands a change in methods, but as an extension, challenges our conceptual framework considering, for example, our understanding of stratigraphy, material culture, social agency and history. Some of these problems may be specific for the medieval towns of Scandinavia, but some might be of more general interest.

Every now and then urban archaeology is accused of being in lack of theory. I will not dwell into that discussion, but to some extent I agree. With the exception of employing heuristic, and somewhat instrumentalist, models for things like trade, exchange and production, we are not very theoretically minded, at least not compared with, let's say, Bronze Age archaeologists. This might be because we perceive Bronze Age society, as 'unknown' or 'alien', while defining medieval man as an acquaintance, or defining the 'unknown-ness' of medieval man simply as 'somebody else's problem'.

An archaeology that is not value-laden or unbiased cannot exist, but our conceptual framework can be more or less explicit depending on what discursive practice we are a part of. To some degree I think we have been deceived by the assumed 'obviousness' of what we excavate; a street is a street, a house is a house and a waste bin is a waste bin. Even our most difficult, or less well preserved, remains appear to be still more intelligible than most things dealt with by our pre-historic colleagues. This seems to have created a false, but comfortable, sense of security, expressed as a body of statements (procedures, topics, etc.) peculiar to urban archaeology.

By this I mean for example our tendency to discuss material culture, and the towns *per se*, more or less exclusively in functional terms, which they of course initially must be. There are of course a number of brilliant exceptions to this, but in general we still are less inclined to look at things like urban waste disposal or the ordering of space in such cosmological or symbolic terms as one can see in pre-historic archaeology. In these cases values and biases is expressed not so much in what is stated, but rather in what is *not* stated.

Instead of ending up describing the order of our self-produced data we asked ourselves the simple question of what history we want to tell. This is, in all its triviality, the ground for how we go about producing and, especially, interpreting our data. The question is, simplified, whether we want to study mankind (as such), the Middle Ages (as a historic period) or towns (as specific social phenomena). Different approaches inevitably produce different results.

As a first step to re-formulate our positions, a multi-disciplinary project was set up, founded by the National Board of Antiquities, '*Nya stadsarkeologiska horisonter'* (New Horizons in Urban Archaeology). In the first report approaches from human geography, history and ethnography as well as archaeology are presented (Larsson ed. 2006a). We hope to be able to publish some version for an international audience.

To sum up, our questions ought to be re-formulated from a 'how' to a 'why', in our case the subject being the creation of the, western, urban way of life, *urbanism* (c.f. Wirth 1938). Put in another way, we should not only write the story of the towns, but of the people living in them as well.

This is, of course, a self evident statement. Curiously enough, while 'urban studies' are a growing subject in, particular the 'new' universities, archaeology does not appear to have any tradition in associating to the subject of urban sociology. If we look carefully at the image of the medieval town we produced so far, it is an eerie place, more or less devoid of ordinary people. If we want to populate the towns, our task, as urban archaeologists, becomes to identify patterns of specific *social actions*, their *duration* and *changes*. Starting at the most basic or detailed level, we are re-constructing our dialectic understanding starting 'bottom - up' instead of 'top - down', looking at everyday practices as a basis for the understanding of changing social structure and human interaction, i.e. history.

Changes still have to be put into a wider context. The founding of towns and urbanisation has traditionally been connected to power or the exercise of power (Andersson 2002a). However, discussions on the nature of power have been rare within the field of urban archaeology. The means and nature of royal or ecclesiastical lordship have not been problematized, but rather, to a certain degree, taken for granted, thus creating a rather linear and 'uncomplicated' narrative, a sort of success story.

A variety of this is our somewhat simplified – and linear – understanding, and presentation of the relationship between the early towns and 'state formation'. This has obscured the role of other agents in the process of urbanisation as well as 'failed attempts' and other types of places. Taking this into

consideration we can get a glimpse of co-operative and counteracting strategies in the production of space, involving a higher number of active subjects.

2

A town is a system of distinct limitations and controlled perimeters. This inserts power and discipline in the production and disposition of space. Space is produced through changes in social practices. Reorganisation can be understood as a change in power, or dominion, over space, and thus as the visible expression of shifts in the networks constituting the power relationship of a specific social structure. Such changes does not necessarily need to be understood as imposed from 'above', or as a result of 'force' – as to some extent was the case in older archaeology – but as the combined outcome of changed practices at different social levels. Limiting oneself to describing its effects only makes 'power' a mysterious substance. Understanding power as relationship, in a Foucauldian way, covers inability as well as resistance. 'In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon action' (Foucault 2002:340). This makes it necessary to discuss and archeologically identify all inhabitants, including those close to the bottom, as social agents. A power relationship can only be articulated, and studied, on the basis of two elements that are indispensable: that 'the other' (over whom power is exercised) is recognised and maintained as a (analytical) subject who acts within a whole field of responses and reactions (Foucault 2002:340).

If our analyses do not go beyond identifying 'the presence of power' we'll just reproduce the hierarchic structures the élites of past times wanted to present. In the worst of cases we can, with lack of reflexivity, critical thought and lack of theoretical insights, end up actually reproducing and legitimising present ideological structures.

Socio-spatial changes obviously take place in different scales, paces and in varying intervals. As archaeologists we not only need to be able to analytically 'handle' these different levels, paces and scales of social action, but turn them into a possibility, a unique contribution from urban archaeology to the study of mankind. In order to achieve this, we need to explicitly employ *and* develop social theory and theories on human action and, not least, interconnect them with our production of data. The point is that these theories are not instantly applicable on our material. We need to confront them with what *we* got (or rather, have created), adjust them and re-analyse.

One conclusion that can be drawn from social theory is that changes at different social levels and scales clearly have different meaning, but are potentially of *equal importance* for the understanding of the social networks of a past society. For instance, handling of waste can be said to form a very basic social institution, in Anthony Giddens sense (Giddens 1984).

The different spatial scales in reorganisation can be analysed as different levels of social agency, the actions of urban, historically constituted subjects, spanning from the individual family to the society as a whole. Reorganisation at a detailed level, contexts or context groups can be analysed as household practice – i.e. 'the history of events'. Changes in larger units, blocks, parishes or whatever units within a town we can argue for, can be analysed as a change in *conjuncture*, involving larger groups of agents. Structural changes are the cause and effects in larger proportions of the town and involve the whole community as agent. Further more, this to some extent could follow the explicit hierarchic order of analysis and interpretation employed in single context recording methods, (e.g. Steane 1993, Saunders 2000) thus relating method to explicit theory.

I'd like to shortly outline a few attempts on such a line of discussion, though admittedly incomplete, undertaken in relation to excavations in some towns in the province of Scania in the southernmost of present day Sweden. (Until 1658/1679 the province was a part of the kingdom of Denmark.)

3

As in all regions, the conditions for urbanization in Scandinavia has been particular, resulting in rather few and small towns. The population was – and still is – relatively sparse and areas capable of producing an agrarian surplus were few. Even today, only Copenhagen and Stockholm have a population exceeding one million. The main wave of urbanization of the 13th century has nothing corresponding to it until the very late 19th century. The history of urbanization in Scandinavia is far from linear.

Although some localities founded in the late 10th century later developed into towns, it is questionable if the intentions were to found 'towns' as such. More likely they formed part of a new – and spatial – strategy for power and domination. By 're-constructing' the landscape, thus ascribing it with new meaning and values (see e.g. Dodgshon 1987), a new lordship and a new discourse was laid out straight into the physical reality of everyday life (Anglert et al. 2006).

Gitte Hansen have in a useful way employed the term 'investments' in order to summarise and clarify agency and the interplay between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' in the production of urban space (Hansen 2006).

The cases of the Scanian towns of Lund, Trelleborg and Malmö, founded in different historical contexts shows both differences and similarities in agency.

Lund was founded as a new 'locality' in the late 10th century, most likely as a part of a new strategy for domination. The place was adjacent to the older central place of Uppåkra, and held the possibility to 'block' communication and thus ascribe new meaning into the landscape. As pointed out by Sten Tesch (2000) for the case of Sigtuna (in Sweden) the place was more of an occasional gathering point for nobility, residing elsewhere. The placed was probably 'manned' by serfs. The initial spatial organisation was, the then, customary, described by Anders Andrén (1989) as 'congested countryside'. Accessibility was achieved without any street plan. The latter emerged as a spatial principle as the population grew, more buildings were erected and the originally large plots were divided into smaller units. By the late 11th century buildings were orientated in relation to streets, and accessible via them only (Magnusson Staaf et al. 1995).

A profound change in everyday practice, at the household level, obviously took place within the time span of one or two generations. From a form of a relocated agrarian 'way of life', social practice became more 'urban', changing both the physical and the mental landscape. The interesting thing is that these changing practices was reciprocal between different levels, or groups, of agents, and could be described as investments 'bottom-up'.

This does not, however, imply any lack of interest from the side of nobility. On the contrary, in the winter 1103/4 Lund became the see for the archbishops. The churched launched a massive 'investment' producing a very regulated space: the cathedral, the archbishop's palace, a number of churches, the introduction of masonry buildings, paving and a earthen town wall stems from the early 12th century. Lund was transformed into an ideological statement, with references to ecclesiastical centres on the continent. The resulting channelling of movement and sightlines imposed the organic and hierarchic feudal and Christian ideology, underlining the role of the church as the primary 'producer of truth'.

The 13th century saw the foundation of a number of 'merchant towns'. Due to the similarities in their rationale – channelling trade and skimming the surplus via taxation – differences between them have been somewhat obscured and mainly formulated in quantitative terms. However, a comparison between the contemporary towns of Trelleborg and Malmö appear to reveal differences in agency.

Trelleborg was founded and built more or less 'in one go', with street plan and plots laid out and buildings erected at once. Though the legal initiative clearly was an 'investment' from above, a large degree of consensus appears to have been at hand. This was clearly the burgher's town. This reveals itself through the remains of building practices. Obviously attention was paid, at least, to create the image of a town, i.e. putting up elaborated half timbered facades, facing paved streets. This space differed in all ways from that of the villages, but also, at least to some degree, from the ecclesiastical town of Lund. In Trelleborg it was the market square and the town hall that were given the most prominent location, not the church. What we see is the rising burghers' aspiration on a defined place in the medieval social order. The 'investments' in the production of space in Trelleborg can be summed up as going 'bottom-up'.

In contrast to the *gemeinschaft* of Trelleborg, the town of Malmö seems to present a different history. The differences are probably due to the fact that Trelleborg was founded on 'neutral,' i.e. unused land. That was not the case in Malmö. The sand bank was already in use in relation to (commercial) fishing. The founding of a town was thus a royal demand on an already existing space, laden with meaning. Consequently it had to be 're-charged', and not without some degree of resistance. The gradual congestion reminds of the situation in Lund 200 years before, rather then of the contemporary Trelleborg. This has been suggested to be an expression of a lower degree of integration among the inhabitants (Mårald 2006). However, this soon changed, and from the mid 14th century with an almost explosive expansion, turning Malmö into the commercial centre of Denmark.

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In the more 'conventional' narratives of early towns the foundation are presented as the act of a, more or less, single agent: the king or noble man. No one –not even a king– can decide, or order people to change their everyday practice. There need to be an element of consent or co-operation. The towns were successful because they worked at the 'lowest' analytical level, the field of everyday practice, that of the household. This, I think, illustrates the need to take all groups in consideration. We need to identify a broader range of subjects, agents and practices in order to see patterns of domination and explain power relationships as action upon action. In all its mundane simplicity this archaeology

hopefully gives us an opening for a somewhat different discussion on the towns and thus 'the creation of the urban way of life'.

In order to widen our understanding of urbanization alternative perspectives are of vital importance. In some cases we need to broaden our concepts, in other we just need to see things 'the other way'. Possibilities we would like to stress are:

A long chronological perspective (taking foothold long before the foundation of the particular town)

A non-linear and dis-continous development

A broad concept of agency

Understanding power as relationships (inability, submission, resistance)

A wider 'landscape perspective'

Acknowledging that all forms of urbanity have its own specific character, and so stressing differences.

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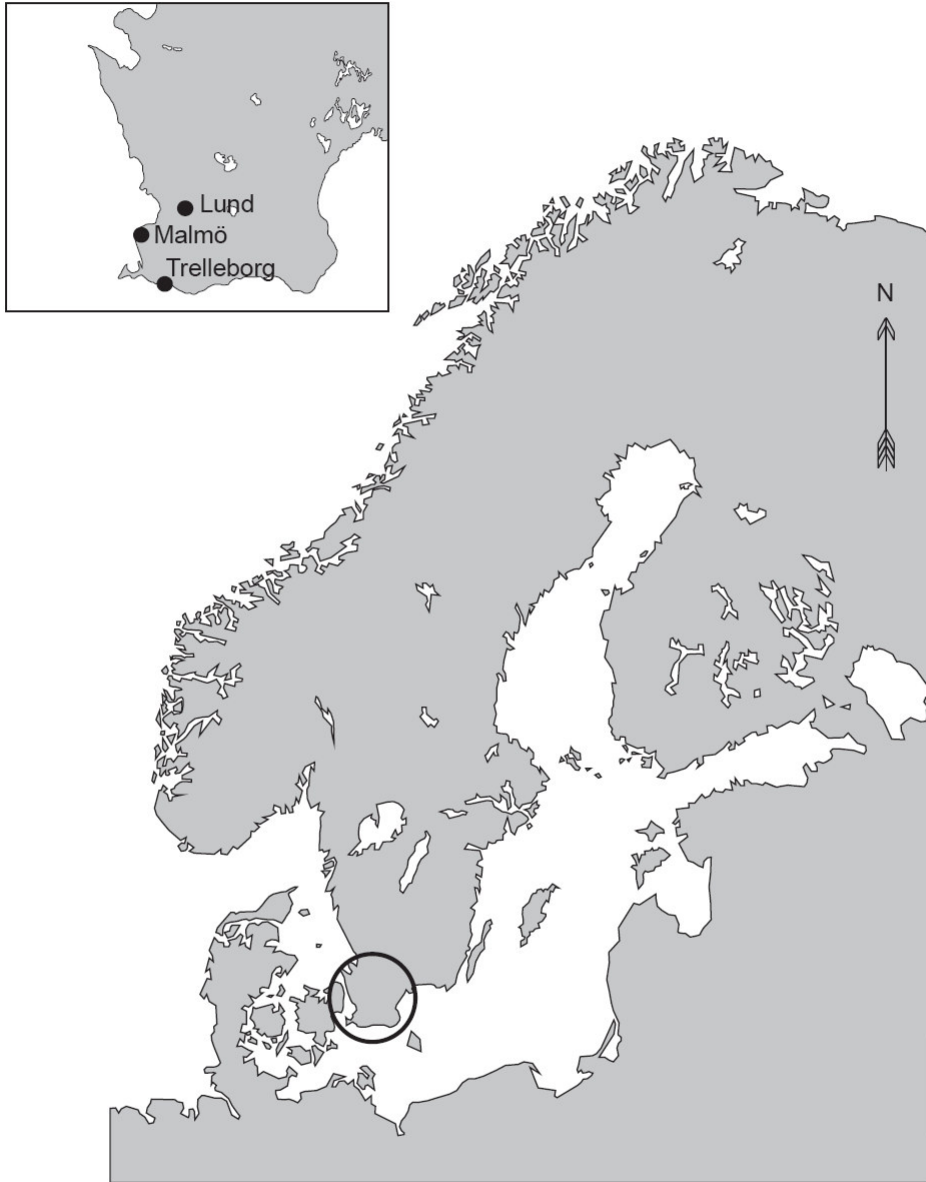Wirth, L. 1938. Urbanism as a Way of Life, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (jul. 1938), pp. 1–24.

Figure 1