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MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN TOWNS IN SWEDEN IN A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

LARS ERSGÅRD

The problem

Most of the early modern towns in Sweden have their origin in the Middle Ages. However, the towns of the Middle Ages and the towns of the Early Modern times have often been treated as two separate phenomena in Swedish urban-archaeological research. The medieval urbanization being characterized by great regional variations, the urban landscape of the Early Modern period often has been looked upon as a more uniform structure.

How shall we understand the early modern towns in the light of the medieval urbanization? Is it just a matter of discontinuity or had the medieval urban structure any impact on the development of the early modern towns? In the present paper I will discuss this problem and my empirical point of departure is a case study of East Sweden and West Sweden in a comparative long-term perspective.

Urbanization in the Nordic countries 1000-1700 – a general overview

A brief comparison between the medieval and the early modern period concerning the founding of towns shows great differences. Most of the towns existing in the period 1000-1700 AD were founded in the Middle Ages (1000-1550). The majority of them were located in Denmark but very few in Norway and Finland. In medieval Sweden the towns were founded mainly in the southern part of the country. In Early Modern Sweden (1550-1750) on the contrary a lot of the new towns were founded in areas where urbanization was absent in the Middle Ages (Andrén 1989).

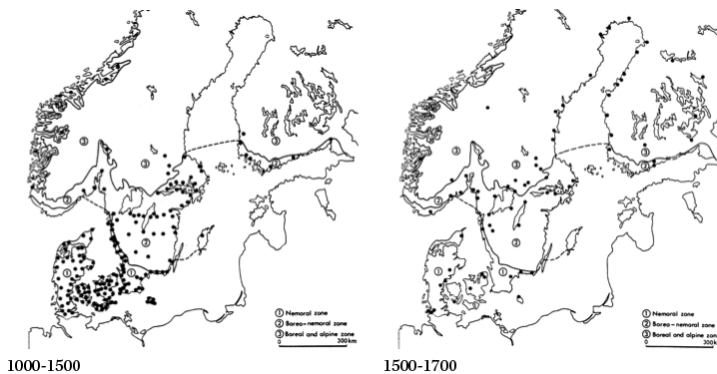


Figure 1: Urbanization in Scandinavia during Middle Ages (1000-1500) and Early Modern times (1500-1700). (after Andrén 1989)

Medieval urbanization

In general Early Medieval urbanization (1000-1150) in Scandinavia is characterized by relatively few towns, of which a major part were located in Denmark. In Sweden

the western part stands out during this period with three towns while in the east there is only one town - *Sigtuna* at the Lake Mälaren.

This pattern changed radically at the end of the 12th century. A phase of extensive urbanization begins at that time and lasts until the beginning of the 14th century. This change is a part of a major, pervasive transformation, namely the transition from an older kin based society to a medieval society of feudal character where a royal kingship was established in the 13th century, supported by a landowning elite, and the exercise of power was gradually institutionalized.

The new towns functioned primarily as centers for the distribution of an agrarian surplus, controlled by the elite. Denmark was still the dominant urban zone with a great number of towns all over the country. In Sweden different urban regions began to emerge in the 13th century. From a minor dominance for the western part of Sweden in the early Middle Ages there is shift of emphasis towards east about 1250. The Mälär valley appears as a dynamic urban region with several major towns around the Lake Mälaren characterized by urban institutions like friaries (Lindkvist 2010: 27). *Stockholm* became the dominant town in this region at the end of the 13th century.

Some of the Mälär towns had a special importance as distribution centers for the iron from the mining districts north of the Lake Mälaren (Andersson 2010: 99ff). The mining activities began to expand about 1200, much thanks to the new blast furnace technique by which the volumes of iron could be increased.

In the west the new towns founded during the mentioned period were rather small and most of them of little economic importance. A special characteristic of

some of the medieval towns in the west was an unstable urban structure. Some towns changed their location during the Middle Ages, especially in the province of Halland. The town *Varberg* at the west coast had four different locations before the urban structure was stabilized in the 17th century (Andersson 1984: 14).

During the late Middle Ages (1350-1520) some new towns were founded in Sweden but most of them were small and of little economic importance (Broberg 1992). The period as a whole was characterized by a profound crisis in the medieval society initiated by three severe outbreaks of the bubonic plague in the middle of the 14th century which may have diminished the population in the Nordic countries as much as 50 %. Probably the founding of towns in the late Middle Ages can be looked upon as an effort from the royal kingship and the elite to strengthen the control of a decreasing agrarian surplus. Some of the new towns were places with central functions of a much earlier origin such as marketplaces or pilgrimage centers which gained formal urban status not until the late Middle Ages.

In general the late medieval towns didn't change the overall urban picture from the early Middle Ages. One of the most important towns from the late medieval period was *Vadstena* at the lake Vättern in the province of Östergötland, which got its town charters in the year 1400. This town became an important cultural and religious center thanks to the cult which emerged around the shrine of Saint Bridget and attracted thousands of pilgrims every year (Lindgren-Hertz 1992).

Early Modern urbanization

The urbanization of early modern times in Sweden takes place in quite another historical context than the medieval urbanization. The urban expansion, above all in the 16th and 17th centuries, came about in close connection with the emergence of the Swedish absolutist state whose bureaucratic efficiency had few counterparts in Early Modern Europe (Maarbjerg 2004). The central power now had the tools to control people and resources in a more efficient way than during the Middle Ages. A hierarchical urban system was established with the so called *stapelstäder*, that is towns with rights to trade with foreign countries, and *uppstäder*, which were towns only allowed to trade with the inland areas (Lilja 2002).

The Early Modern urbanization was manifested in more than one way. As mentioned above one important characteristic of this urbanization was the founding of towns in quite new areas such as the northern parts of Sweden and Finland and around the Lake *Vänern*. A lot of these towns were located along the coasts of the Gulf of Bothnia.

Also in the south several new towns were founded but here the overall pattern from the Middle Ages was the same. Some important new towns in the south were *Karlskrona*, founded as a naval base in the archipelago of Blekinge in the later part of the 17th century, *Kristianstad* in the northeast of Skåne and *Gothenburg* on the west coast.

Beside the founding of new towns the urban expansion of the Early Modern period also meant a radical transformation of the urban topography in many of the older towns founded in the Middle Ages. According to new principles for urban planning, inspired by antique ideals, a right angle system was applied in block division and street

network, strongly contrasting with the often very irregular medieval town plans (Andrén 1998).

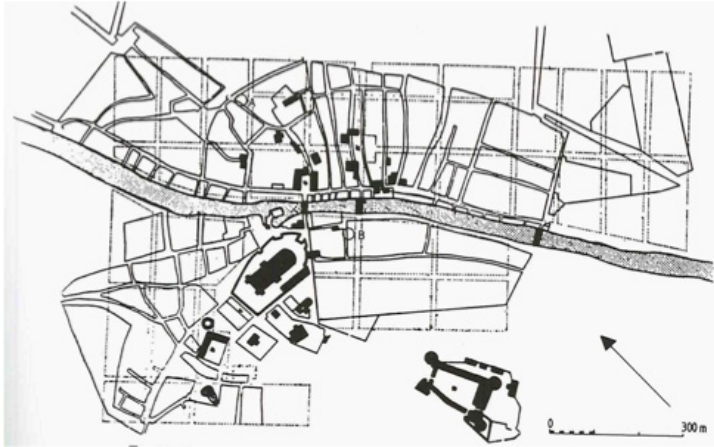


Figure 2: Map of Uppsala from the 1640s showing the medieval town plan (black lines) and the early modern plan (dashed lines).

The town plan of 17th century *Uppsala* stands out as a good example of the topographical change. In this town a right angle street network replaces the irregular medieval system in the middle of the century (Redin 1976; Andrén 1998). However, inside the new blocks the medieval system is still present in property boundaries up to the 20th century, probably reflecting a resistance against the large-scale changes of 17th century. Something similar can be observed in the important mining site of *Falun* in the middle of Sweden where some of the new city blocks stayed unsettled long after the formal urbanization in 1641, probably reflecting a resistance of the miners to accept a new identity as burghers in the new town (Andersson & Holmström 1990).

In some cases the early modern transformation of the towns meant a removal of the urban area in whole. One famous example is the town of *Kalmar* in the southeast part of Sweden. Here the townspeople had to leave their residences in the old town in the 1640s and resettle on the nearby island of *Kvarnholmen* where a town of a new, early modern design had been mapped out (Cf. Tagessons article in this book).

In some places the civil town was combined with the military fortification, for example *Gothenburg*, *Kalmar* and *Karlskrona*. Here a technically advanced system, according to Dutch models, with walls, moats, bastions and ravelins surrounded the urban settlement (Ahlberg 2005).

The case study – Early Modern urban development in the west and the east of Sweden

West Sweden

Here the concept ‘West Sweden’ includes the provinces of Bohuslän, Västergötland, Halland and Värmland. As mentioned above the urban structure was weak in this part of Sweden during the Middle Ages and in certain areas even instable. In the early modern period the state authority managed to stabilize the urban structure in the west, that is the towns did not change location any more. However, most of the towns still remained small with little economic importance but for a close hinterland. The great exception from this pattern was *Gothenburg* that became a trading port of major international importance (see below).

The towns in the west functioned primarily as fiscal and administrative strongholds for the central power and as small centers for local trade. Many of the small towns had

a significant agrarian character and differed not so much from an ordinary village in the surrounding countryside. A good example of this was the town of *Bogesund* (Cf. Roséns article in this book).

Obviously the towns in the west were of minor importance for a surrounding hinterland. Outside the towns in the west an alternative commercial structure was developed in the 16th century. Peasant merchants at several places along the west coast carried out a long distance trade to different European countries (Sandklef 1973). Usual export cargos were timber and lime. The first written evidences of this peasant trade occur in the 16th century but probably these mercantile activities go back to the late Middle Ages. Even peddlery was a frequent activity in certain parts of the countryside in the west, particularly in the province of Västergötland where different sorts of fabrics were common, highly demanded commodities.

Gothenburg

Gothenburg was founded in 1621 and became the big town in the west. The underlying strategy of the Swedish government was to create a seaport in the western part of the country that could function as an important link between Swedish trade and a global market (Andersson et al. 1986: 37ff; Bramstång red. 2006: 7ff). The Swedish trade policy included a close collaboration with the Netherlands who had become the leading trade nation in Europe and had established a worldwide mercantile network in the beginning of the 17th century.

From the beginning *Gothenburg* was designed as a modern baroque town in accordance with Dutch ideals.

The new settlement was built in a right-angle street system and the layout also included strong fortifications with walls, bastions and channels (Bramstång red. 2006: 14ff). For the extensive building works engineers and town planners from the Netherlands were engaged.

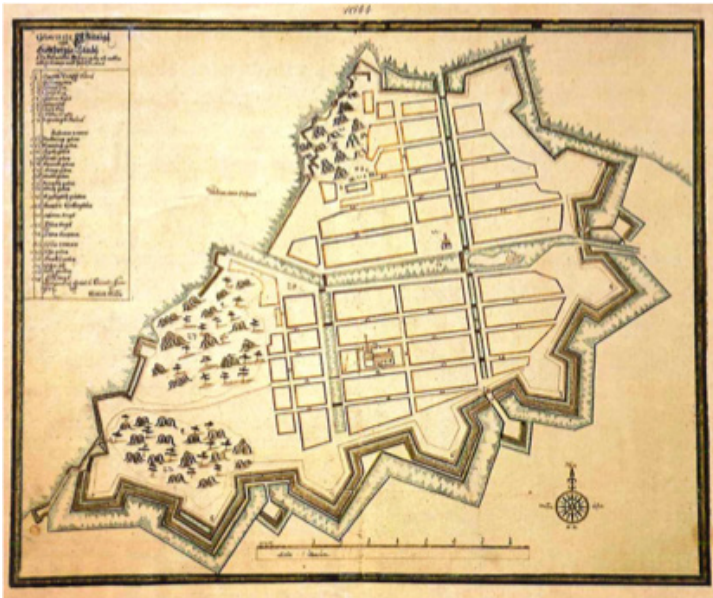


Figure 3: Town map of Gothenburg in 1644.

17th century *Gothenburg* was an internationally oriented seaport with a lot of foreign people living in the town (Bramstång red. 2006: 12f). The biggest group beside the Swedish population was the Dutchmen but there was also a presence of Germans and Englishmen. Many of the foreign people were merchants and artisans, favored by the Swedish government through benefits and privileges.

Gothenburg was in the 17th century a center for distribution of Swedish iron and timber to an international market. The 18th century saw the establishment of several manufactories, for example for processing of tobacco and refining of sugar (Andersson et al. 1986: 52f). In the same century the town became a center for a very profitable trade with East Asia, especially China. The founding of the *Swedish East India Company* in 1731 marks the start of this activity that lasted up to the beginning of the 19th century. However, a very little amount, 6-7 %, of the precious goods from East Asia trade, such as tea, porcelain, spices and silk fabric, were consumed in Sweden, the rest being redistributed on an European market (Nilsson Schönborg 2001: 24ff).

Through its size, character and international mercantile network *Gothenburg* differed a lot from the other towns in the west. In many ways the town was a closed area to a surrounding countryside and the interaction between town and the nearby hinterland was rather weak (Cf. Winberg 2000: 210f) Instead the primary hinterland of *Gothenburg* in the early modern era was an international, mercantile arena.

East Sweden

The east of Sweden as an urban region here includes the provinces of Uppland, Västmanland, Sörmland, Östergötland and the eastern part of Småland. As mentioned above this region formed the urban main point of the country since the middle of the 13th century and in the Early modern period this position was further strengthened and developed.

Many of the most important Swedish towns were located in the eastern part of the country during early modern times, of which *Stockholm*, *Norrköping* and *Kalmar* deserves to be mentioned in particular. *Stockholm* got its position as capital strengthened during the 16th and 17th centuries in connection with the rise of the nation state. *Norrköping* became a dynamic industrial center at the east coast of Östergötland and got its first upswing in the 17th century when industries like arms factories, paper mills and shipyards were established. *Kalmar*, the old medieval stronghold and trade center at the important waterway of Kalmar Strait, was transformed into a new shape in the 17th century through the removal of the town and the building of the new fortifications.

Most of the towns of the Mälars valley, of which Stockholm was the biggest, had cultural traditions from the High Middle Ages. In the Early Modern period they still formed an effective and lasting urban network of crucial importance for the Swedish state. Those towns had a dynamic interaction with a rich hinterland, above all the iron mining districts in the north, the so called "*Bergslagerna*".

The mining activities had begun already in the high Middle Ages with the introduction of the blast furnace technique. The oldest datings of such furnaces originate from the end of the 12th century. In the late Middle Ages the processing of iron production became more effective, among other things through the collocation of the blast furnaces and the hammer mills (Magnusson 2010: 114ff). Besides the iron mining districts mines there was a big copper mine at *Falun* in the province of Dalarna and a silver mine at *Sala* in the province of Västmanland, both of utmost economic importance for the Swedish state in the

early modern period. The activities in the mining districts reached a peak in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Furthermore a new social organization around the mining activities was established in the late Middle Ages with the emergence of the peasant miners (Pettersson Jensen 2012: 213ff). Those were peasant freeholders, who carried on with iron production beside the agricultural activities, and became a mighty social group in the late Middle Ages. They were living in villages where the single village formed a collective enterprise with an iron foundry in the center surrounded by the farms of the peasant miners.

In some of the mining districts a settlement of a “town-like” character had emerged in the Middle ages. Those places had some special privileges, giving them a central status in the landscape, for instance the right to have a weekly street market (Andersson 2010: 66). However they were no towns in a formal way. The continental “*mining towns*” (bergstädte) had no counterparts in Sweden during the Middle Ages, the mining activities being firmly established in the agrarian society through the presence of the peasant miners.

In the Early modern times some of the mining places became of a special economic interest of the Swedish Central power, among them the copper mine at *Falun* and the silver mine at *Sala* (Andersson & Holmström 1990; Bergold & Öhnegård 1987). Sometimes in the 17th century the capacity of the former was so great that it could cover most of the needs for copper in Europe. This development was an incentive for the Swedish government to transform the old mining sites to modern towns.

Sala and *Falun* became towns in a formal way in the first half of the 17th century - *Sala* in 1624, *Falun* in 1641.

The town map of *Falun* in 1628 presents the first attempt to regulate the settlement at the place, showing a right angle street network. However, the building of the new town was a lengthy process, being completed not until in the end of the 17th century.

Other mining places that got formal town status in the 17th century were *Filipstad* in the province of Värmland and *Lindesberg* and *Nora* in the province of Västmanland (Ahlberg 2005).

Cultural development from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period – the archaeological experience

On the basis of the above made overview of the urban development from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period some general conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, in the Early modern period the central power became more successful in stabilizing the urban structure and in maintaining administrative and economic control of the urban functions.

Secondly, the regional variations still remained, the urban development in the West differing a lot from the one in the East. These lasting regional variations give some ground for the question if these were not only of a purely economic but also of a cultural nature. Did there exist several urban cultures in Sweden during the early modern times?

Starting from our case study we might discern on the one side an eastbound pattern characterized by bigger towns and a manifest urban structure, visible in the settlement and the fortifications. A cultural borderline against a surrounding countryside is apparent.

On the other side we might see a westbound pattern characterized by mostly smaller towns, a semi-agrarian urban structure and a lack of manifest traits in the settlement. Here a clear cultural borderline between town and countryside is lacking.

Is it possible to further deepen or nuance such a twofold picture of early modern urbanization in Sweden? What can archaeology contribute to such a discussion? Are there any clues in the material culture of the towns?

An archaeological picture

So far, Swedish urban archaeology has not focused much on regional cultural variations in Early modern times. Comparative studies have been rare. An idea of only one urban culture valid for all regional contexts has often been implicit in the discussions. However there are reasons for a reconsideration of such an idea.

Consumption patterns and disposal of waste have been two common topics in an archaeological discussion on urban culture in early modern Sweden. Concerning the former the discussion has often focused on the consumption of ceramics. However the overall picture of the distribution of ceramics in the towns looks rather uniform. The same categories are present everywhere, above all the red earthenware. No single town or group of towns stands out in this respect. Instead, it seems to have been a significant difference between town and countryside concerning the consumption of this type of ceramics, however a cultural difference being clearly discernable not until in the middle of the 18th century (Rosén 2004: 252ff).

The imported pottery of a more exclusive character from continental Europe, shows no limited distribution to certain towns. Such pottery has been found also in agrarian contexts, for example in a non-urban area like the northern part of the province of Bohuslän (Rosén 2009).

Concerning the consumption of food an analysis of macrofossils from a latrine in the 17th century town of Jönköping has revealed a food culture probably restricted to a certain social and cultural context. Finds of figs, lemon, almond, watermelon, oysters and clams, rare foodstuffs in a Swedish, early modern context, indicate the presence of an immigrant from continental Europe bringing with him the food culture of his homeland (Heimdahl & Vestbö Franzén 2009: 31f). These finds probably reflect an ethnic diversity during an early phase of some of the early modern towns where a lot of the inhabitants were immigrated merchants or artisans.

Regarding the disposal of waste a new construction for taking care of the garbage in the town settlement occurs in the 17th century. While most of the garbage was removed from the town plots in the late Middle Ages, special waste pits were built on the plots in the 17th and 18th centuries. Usually, they had a square shape, in some cases being timber framed with vertical or horizontal planks (Andersson et al. 1986: 85). (Fig.4) Such pits are often placed in the backyard but a location in front of the dwelling house may also occur. Sometimes they contain a selected archeological material like animal bones or ceramics (Tagesson 2003: 41). Waste pits of this type have so far been found in some of the bigger coastal towns in the east, *Kalmar*, *Norrköping* and *Nyköping*, but also in *Gothenburg* and *Halmstad* on the west coast and in *Karlstad* at the northern coast of the Lake *Vänern* (Tagesson & Nordström 2012: 111ff; Tagesson 2003:

42f; Andersson et al. 1990; Andersson et al. 1986: 85, 110f; Rosén 2004: 240f, fig. 139; Karlsson & Knabe 2006: 30). In other towns they seem to be absent.

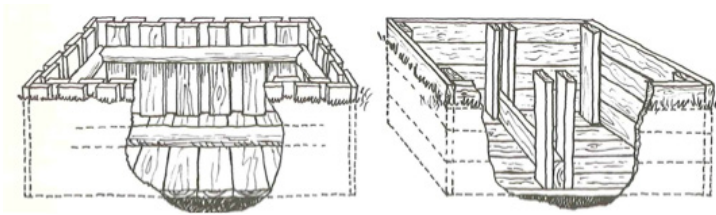


Figure 4: Schematic construction of a timber framed waste pit from Gothenburg. (after Andersson, Jönsson Kihlberg & Broo 1986)

Different explanations for this type of construction have been presented. Göran Tagesson has meant that the pits should be seen in connection with a common individualization of the urban life in the 17th and 18th centuries (Tagesson 2003: 42f). The living in the towns became individualized and so was the waste disposal an individual matter. In Tagessons explanation the pits reflect a mental change, a new need for orderliness in the town plots.

I myself have argued for a social function of the pits taking a point of departure in the facts that they sometimes have a manifest location in the town plot and that the waste in them often has a clear selected character. So the pits could have signaled a certain social message to the environment, demonstrating a sort of *conspicuous consumption* of the wealthy town dweller through the waste (Ersgård 2003: 21).

The problem concerning the function of the waste pits has not got any final solution so far. Another crucial

question remains to answer, that is whether they can be associated to a certain cultural context because of their irregular distribution among the 17th and 18th century towns. Obvious is that the waste pits occur in the bigger seaports in the east, towns linked to an international trading network. However they are present also in some coastal towns in the west like *Gothenburg* and *Halmstad*. Here they seem to belong mostly to the 18th century. In eastern towns like *Norrköping* and *Kalmar* they are frequent already in the 17th century.

A possible interpretation of the waste pits in a wider cultural context could be as follows: they are material expressions of an individualized urban culture, reflecting a cultural behavior of the town burgher and his need to display a new social identity. Considering the chronological variations of the pits, such a culture at first developed in the major seaports of eastern Sweden. Apparently the same cultural behavior can be seen in some of the coastal towns in the west but with a temporal delay. The general impact of such a behavior in the western towns seems to happen not until in the 18th century.

This interpretation of the waste pits is very hypothetical and should first of all be considered as a starting point for further discussions. There are still some fundamental problems to be solved. The observed chronological and regional variations concerning the distributions of the pits must so far be regarded as tendencies. Further comparative analyses are needed before we can use these constructions as a general cultural marker.

However, at the moment we can discern a distribution pattern of the pits where the opposites east-west and coast-inland are evident. The occurrence in the 17th century had its initial impact in the coastal towns of the east while the

real breakthrough in some towns of the west didn't seem to appear until the 18th century. Obviously the pits primarily were a coastal phenomenon. The absence of waste pits in inland towns, both in the east and in the west, during the 17th and 18th centuries are apparent. For example, in the important town of Jönköping at the southernmost tip of the Lake Vättern, where large areas of early modern town settlement have been excavated, the lack of waste pits is significant (cf. Nordman & Pettersson 2009: 113f).

Some final conclusions

The above presented, brief overview of pre-modern, urban development in Sweden has shown the necessity of a long-term cultural perspective for the understanding of all aspects of Early Modern urbanization. Major changes of the urban landscape took place during the early modern period but at the same time long-lasting urban structures survived the transition from Middle Ages to Early Modern times.

A critical breakpoint in the urban development formed the middle of 13th century. At that time the regions started to move in different cultural directions. A dynamic phase of urbanization began in the East but the western parts of Sweden chose another way. Apparently the towns in the west meant less to the surrounding countryside than in the east where a close interaction between town and hinterland was an essential element of a successful urban development. Probably the single farmstead in the west was of primary importance as a social unit more than the urban commune (Winberg 2000: 113).

Through the grand project of the late 16th and 17th centuries the Swedish state brought about an enduring stability of the urban structure. Yet the regional differences remained. The historian Christer Winberg has pointed out the fact that such differences, even in more recent times, tended to strengthen in spite of better communications and an increased political and administrative centralization (Winberg 2000: 120). Maybe we can discern the start of such a development in the 16th century when a long-distance trade outside the control of the towns was established by peasants in the west.

So it is possible to characterize the urban structure of the west in the following way. There were towns in this region but they existed mainly as small fiscal and administrative strongholds of little economic importance. These insignificant urban centers were surrounded by a countryside that actually could handle important urban functions like trade independently of the existing towns. In this respect the west of Sweden in many ways had much in common with Norway in early modern times with its “undergrowth” of small urban or semi-urban places beside the towns (cf. Eliassen 2009).

According to the above discussed distribution of the waste pits the majority of the towns in the west never developed a pronounced urban lifestyle during early modern times but maintained a semi-agrarian character. The exception was Gothenburg whose connection with a global network gave this town an international urban character. However, Gothenburg was thereby much of an enclosed solitaire in the western parts of Sweden.

In the east the situation was different. The countryside surrounding the towns was to a greater extent integrated in an urban economy thus contributing to a dynamic

expansion of the towns. Unlike the urban localities in the west several of the eastern coastal towns developed a manifest, urban culture in the 17th century.

In conclusion, the western experience bestows the early modern urbanization in Sweden a peculiar complexity. To understand this complexity and its origin we must go further back in time, at least to the early Middle Ages – maybe even further. In that way we might look upon this “western urban alternative” as an example of a “*longue durée*” from the Early Middle Ages up to Early Modern times, typical for great parts of western Sweden – and maybe even Norway?

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