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Thirteen Essays on Medieval Artefacts



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Tools of Trade

Spatial Interpretations of Trade Activities in Early Medieval Sigtuna

By MATS ROSLUND

Abstract

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The spatial distribution of artefacts, whether individual objects, categorized finds, or mass material, does not reflect unconsciously enacted behaviour. This article argues instead that an artefact pattern should be seen as created by active individuals in a defined cultural and temporal context. The example chosen for study is traces of trade in the form of weights and coins and the view of private and public space in houses and townyards in early medieval Sigtuna. In the period c. 980–1250 people chose to carry out most of the transactions involving the weighing of silver in the private part of the townyard. Although special craft booths were established in the period, the scene of the silver-based exchange was not moved to them; other towns, however, show a concentration of late medieval finds here. The picture suggests that craft products were disposed of through exchange, while more costly bulk transactions required weighing silver in a socially more controlled setting.

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When confronted with the complexity of the medieval town, one is struck by the obstacles to our perception of the milieu that result from the fragmentation of research. The presentation of research findings is often geared to specific activities such as trade, craft, boat-building, or house construction, or confined to artefact studies divided up according to the material – iron, wood, copper alloys. This makes it difficult to obtain a total picture of medieval life. Townspeople in the Middle Ages butchered pigs, cut combs, cooked food in the home to the accompaniment of shouting and clattering. They discharged their bodily functions between the houses or in pits, pigs were driven in for the evening, strangers in odd clothes walked past, leaving in their trail a flow of incomprehensible words. It may be too difficult a task to combine the archaeological source material into such a lively synthesis. In fortunate cases we can at least find remains of the physical cacophony when we excavate the sites where a particular activity was carried on.

If we want to get at medieval noise, we must abandon the perspective of the king's gerfalcon hovering over the town and looking down at a grid of streets, plots, and quarters. If we want to grasp what everyday life was like, we must come down to the level of the people and interpret what went on in public and private space.

This article seeks to add to our picture of the Middle Ages by looking at the exchange of goods in early medieval settings in Sigtuna between c. 980 and 1250. The questions asked are whether the location of weights and coins can be used when interpreting where exchange was carried on in the town, and whether these conclusions can be used to understand early medieval trade at a general level. By a dichotomy of the townyard into private and public in both social and spatial senses, we can understand what place the actors deliberately chose when a deal was to be settled. The actual meeting-place is not objectively chosen, but is guided by the cultural norms internalized by the individual.

What I am looking for is the action itself at the micro-level, where the place is important for our discussion.

Before we can obtain answers to these two questions, however, we must undergo some hardships. As in medieval allegories, the way is not straight. We must pass through the Forest of Methodology, avoid the Pitfalls of Trade and the Mist of Self-Perception, before we reach the too large Lake of Probability, a poor modern-day substitute for the Fountain of Truth.

Things and Space

The link between people's actions and physical objects is not unambiguous. In archaeological terms it lies in the relation between layers, structures, and artefacts. None of these sources is uninfluenced by conscious contemporary actions or the disturbances of later times. Like the formation of layers, the distribution patterns for artefacts are reshaped in several stages. If we are to trust that the finds we study have been found in their contemporary context, whether this applies to mass material in the form of craft waste or individual objects such as grave finds, the assessment of the information value of the source material and its relation to time and space is an important instrument for interpretation.

The pattern of distribution of find categories is a chorological method that is generally used in archaeology (Hodder & Orton 1976). The yardstick can be the whole world or a limited area within a house. The questions can concern the emergence of technical innovations or the function of the house and where activities were carried on at the habitation site.

The methods for interpreting activities at a site on the basis of the local distribution pattern of artefacts and waste products (intra-site spatial analysis) has been developed by archaeologists studying Palaeolithic and Mesolithic culture groups (Olausson 1986;

Blankholm 1991). With the aid of advanced statistics and studies of distribution in numerical and graphical form, the idea is to discern distinctive features providing information about the behaviour of the groups. The aim is to arrive at general rules for the internal arrangement of several habitation sites in the same culture group, which can be difficult in view of the countless factors that may have influenced the way the source material came into being, not least the local cultural customs which may have guided the selection more than general norms for behaviour. There is a risk that, despite stringent source criticism, and despite the insight that the spatial position is significant, one views the find context as behaviour. This entails a depersonification of the action which is instead reduced to reflexes created by the environment and the group norms. To emphasize a different basic outlook which leaves room for dynamics, one can see "spatial structure ... not merely as an arena in which social life unfolds, but rather as a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced" (Gregory & Urry 1985, p. 3).

For medieval archaeological investigations, what is interesting is to combine statistical methods for analysing distribution with a view of the disposition of space as culturally rather than functionally determined. The pattern we study is then regarded not as unchanging behaviour but as bound to time and place and hence varying. Nothing of this kind has been presented for the Swedish Middle Ages. On the other hand, interesting results have been obtained using recent material from Dalarna (Welinder 1992). The sources that are used vary greatly, comprising a spectrum from masses of waste to categorized find groups to individual objects. The analysis of the spatial spread of mass material such as craft waste and household refuse such as bone and broken pottery can tell us about the view of clean and dirty and can be of direct assistance in the study of the process by which occupation layers grow. There have also been attempts to interpret differences in the dis-

tribution of waste as evidence of changes in the pattern of production for comb-makers in the Early and High Middle Ages (Christophersen 1980).

Artefacts which can be divided into categories on the basis of function, such as craft-indicating finds and trade-indicating finds, offer – despite their scarcity – a possibility of studying patterns of activity in particular times and settings (Nordeide 1990). The problem of functional analogy is that there is a risk that the internal meaning of the artefacts may have changed during the Middle Ages and that the categorization forces them into groups that are too coarse. We must bear in mind that artefacts are a materialized idea, with differing meanings and qualities in different temporal and spatial contexts. This makes it difficult to accept solutions which presuppose that the same form always has the same content.

Even a single object is meaningful in a spatial context. Several objects of the same type reinforce the credibility but do not change what the object says about the social action that is suggested by its position. Changes in the position of artefacts in space are not chance. Instead, the creation of spatial connections is “a human product: it always involves a transformation of space inseparable from a transformation of society” (Gregory & Urry 1985, p. 7). If a change in the selection of a place for an activity is reflected in the picture of distribution, this can also mean that a change has occurred at a more general level than merely in the area that has been archaeologically investigated.

Whether we study the distribution of mass material, categorized material, or individual objects at a site, the link to the settlement is of the utmost importance for conjuring up a picture of medieval modes of action. If the houses themselves are silent, then the objects can say something about the function of the buildings. At the Viking Age fortress of Fyrkat the similar form and placing of the houses and the division into quadrants was a problem to archaeologists seeking to understand

the function. The minimal spatial variation and the architectural monotony of the buildings meant that the artefacts were the only evidence for the way the houses were used. By marking, say, where fragmented crucibles were found, it was possible to localize areas where metalwork was carried on (Roesdahl 1977, p. 181). If we already know the function of buildings or other structures, we can use the artefacts for a more profound interpretation: the performance of the activities in a socially defined space.

Fragments of exchange in an early medieval town

Sigtuna, a town on the northern shore of Lake Mälaren, shows in its early medieval trading and cultural contacts that it had strong interests in Slavonic and Baltic areas to the east (Roslund 1990, 1992a, 1992b) (Fig. 1). Earlier research has depicted Sigtuna as a successor to Birka when the silting up of navigable channels made it difficult to reach Björkö at the end of the tenth century. The exchange of goods is seen as constant and static, while the need for places to conduct this exchange is invoked as the main reason for the foundation of the town.

Because the early archaeological material from Sigtuna has not been systematically processed and interpreted, it has not been possible to stake out a clear boundary between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries. Consequently, it has not been possible to verify or reject hypotheses about the foundation of the town. Finds have been dated to “the Sigtuna era”, a period covering two hundred years of human activity. From the 1980s onwards, we have reports from excavations which give a clearer picture of settlement history. There are now findings to show that settlement was well organized in oblong plots with their ends along the main street, Stora Gatan (Svensson 1987, p. 226; Tesch 1992, p. 193). The organizational level of the plot structure, the dendrochronological dating of

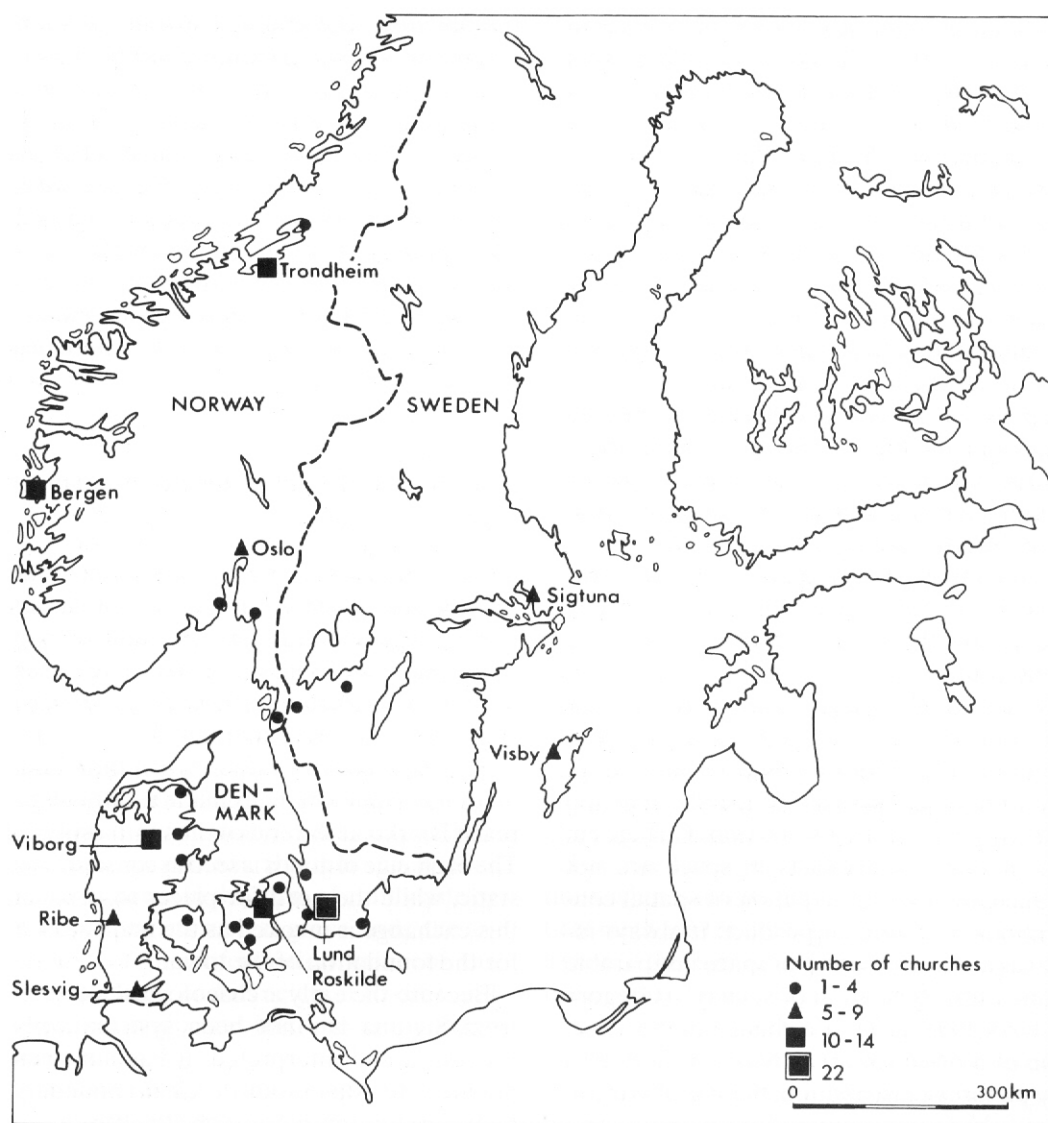


Fig. 1. Early medieval towns in Scandinavia 1000–1150. After Andrén 1989.

this, and the geographical location of the only early medieval town in central Sweden have been put forward as evidence that Sigtuna was founded as an administrative centre on royal initiative at the end of the tenth century. It has not been able to confirm that trade was the incentive for the foundation of the town, since the first thirty years of the town's life from about 980 show no traces of any extensive commercial activity. Instead, weights,

scales, and coins appear only just after the year 1000, in a second phase of settlement on the site, increasing then until 1250, when the occupation layers cease (Roslund 1992b, p. 149). The control of exchange can instead be seen as one of several means of constituting power, which did not begin to take effect until after a certain time.

Most information on conditions in Sigtuna in the Early Middle Ages comes from the rich

source material produced by the 1988–90 excavations in the centrally located quarter called Trädgårdsmästaren. Layers, structures, and artefacts from 1500 cubic metres of remains were then excavated. The remains represent 250 years of settlement in the town, divided into ten settlement phases from c. 980 until 1250. We obtain a picture of a regulated system with plots in which the townyard area was filled with rows of houses.

Remarkably, no wells, latrines, or waste pits were dug through the layers in this part of the town during the Middle Ages. The water supply was catered for in a different way. This fact strengthens the credibility of the results of artefact studies. It is exceptional that older finds are found redeposited in younger layers. The medieval attitude to the handling of waste must nevertheless be included in the interpretation.

Within the plots, the strongest growth in occupation layers is concentrated in the parts facing the main street and the front part of the zone where the dwelling houses are located. The very thickness of the accumulated layers, 2.5 metres at the street end and just less than a metre in the back yard, shows the difference in the intensity of deposition within the plot. Waste was not buried in pits or amassed to any extent at the back of the plot, away from the buildings. Large quantities of waste after fires and the rearrangements of individual plots could have been dumped in Lake Mälaren, either direct from the shore in the warm seasons of the year, or piled on the ice in the spring when the lake was frozen. Most of the waste was evidently left in its original position, as is suggested by the thick layers mingled with waste horn and soot which lay in or beside the craft booths along the main street. The consequence is that the artefacts used in the interpretations represent a residue of activity, both within the plot and within the built zones in the plots. This stratigraphically well defined material makes it possible to ask questions about weights and coins as tools of trade.

*

Scales and weights were important tools in medieval economies based on different types of media. In early medieval Scandinavia they were used for valuing silver in the form of fragmented and intact ornaments and whole and divided coins. The use of these valuation tools suggests a type of economic exchange preceding the general use of coins in everyday transactions.

From the end of the ninth century there is an increase in the use of weights and scales in the countries around the North Sea and the Baltic (Steuer 1987, p. 512). In Germany the increased use of locally minted coins with a nominal value guaranteed by the minter made the use of these tools of trade unnecessary in the tenth and eleventh centuries. German hoard finds include coins with a limited geographical distribution and similar weight. For transactions in Scandinavia and countries further to the east, the more archaic valuation methods continued to be used (Hatz 1974, p. 121) (Fig. 2).

The location of Sigtuna in terms of geography and power means that the regional exchange of goods must have been influenced by the intra-Baltic weight-based economy. The need to weigh silver in the town is evident from the picture painted by coin finds in the Trädgårdsmästaren quarter. Of the identifiable Viking Age coins, 14 are from different places in Germany, two are English, one Scandinavian, five of unknown origin, and one Arabic. The latter is fitted with an eye to allow it to be used as an ornament, and probably never circulated in Sigtuna (Svensson 1990, p. 69). The temporal distribution is just as disparate as the geographical. Thirteen of the 23 coins are dated. All those with a known minting date were made before 1073 but were deposited throughout the period 980–1250. With such a large geographical and temporal spread in the circulating coins, weight was the essential yardstick for valuation.

The areas in Scandinavia which were closer to countries like England and Germany, where coins were minted from an early date,



Fig. 2. The craftsman Riquinus with his scales. Bronze door from c. 1152–1154. Originally produced for the cathedral in Plock, Poland, the door has been in the western doorway of the Cathedral of St Sophia in Novgorod, Russia, since the Middle Ages. After Świechowski 1982.

underwent a quicker change from an economy based on weighing to one based on the use of coins. The monetization of urban and rural medieval Sweden was not complete until around 1300 (Klackenberg 1992, p. 512). It was only then that nominally valued coins began to be used as part of the peasant economy.

Categorizing weights and coins as tools of trade may mean a restriction in the areas of use of the objects in the Middle Ages. Other social transactions besides trade in which silver needed to be weighed were, for example, the division of plunder, the payment of companions, and the payment of fines (Grierson 1959). I nevertheless assume here that the main use of these artefacts was for weighing silver in trade.

Public and private in mind and space

The organization of space and actions within it are conditioned by the prevailing views within a population group and are learned from childhood onwards through cultural internalization. This is particularly clear when two different culture groups succeed each other in the same place. In the medieval town of Qsar es-Seghir on the north coast of Morocco, the Muslim population was succeeded by Portuguese who lived within the same city walls from 1458 (Redman 1986). The arrangement of settlement and the interior of the houses differed significantly between the inhabitants of the two periods.

When approaching a home in the Muslim town, the visitor encountered a connected house with few openings and sparsely decorated outer walls. A long corridor or L-shaped entrance hall separated the home from the street. The scene was completely different inside the yard. In the private family sphere there was a small, open cobbled yard with a well in the centre or in a room beside it, surrounded on three sides by two “living rooms”, the kitchen and a room with

a latrine. The sanctity of private life was further reinforced by the fact that the women stayed in one of the rooms while the guest, if he was a stranger, was entertained in a different part of the house. The extremely closed impression of the exterior with its spare aesthetic had its antithesis in the richly decorated interior of the court. In the open court one walked on coloured floor tiles in green, black, and turquoise shades laid in symmetrical patterns. If one had come this far one was a guest in the house and could expect the attention due in such a situation (Redman 1986, pp. 76 ff.)

In the Portuguese period all this was reversed. From the public sphere one passed through a wide door surrounded by rich decorative elements to enter the big room that was used collectively by the whole family. From this shared space one could enter other rooms, such as the kitchen and small bedrooms. Sometimes there was a second entrance from the street directly into the kitchen section. The architecture generally consisted of a linear arrangement of rooms with no corridor, so that virtually all rooms had to be passed through to get to other rooms. Activities in the home were more mixed, with trade and production integrated with other functions of living (Redman 1986, pp. 180 ff.).

The difference between these cultures is most clearly expressed in Redman's own words: "For the Muslim, public and private are not on a continuum, but are distinct situations" (Redman 1986, p. 245). The sliding scale from public to private applied by the Portuguese was an unknown attitude for the former inhabitants of Qsar es-Seghir.

In the early medieval town in Scandinavia, there must have been a social division of space which in some way took account of public and private. As in other cultures, there was a need to draw boundaries, although the expression of the division could vary. Awareness of or the need for a more distinct marking of private life is something that has developed over a long period of history. The de-

velopment can be said to be part of a civilization process in which early societies did not mark the segregation of the individual from the group as clearly as later societies did. The categorization of the immediate environment into a general and a familiar sphere is connected with the desire to limit the flow of contacts with other people and to create a self-identity (Sanders 1990, p. 50).

The concepts of private and public also have different meanings for medieval man and for us. When we today associate "private" with the individual's rights *vis-à-vis* the public sphere, that is, the state, we are far from the medieval categorization. What was public and not owned by anyone mostly become the property of the king and was part of his personal royal rights (Duby 1988, pp. 5 ff.). This could apply to beaches where wrecked ships fell to the king, or to hunting rights in the forests outside the villages' spheres of interest. In this respect, the public is already private. The medieval Latin verb *publicare* actually meant to remove from private use, to confiscate. On the other hand we find the word *privatus*, which refers to the family sphere and even seclusion. For a monk, private life meant sharing the collective within the walls of the monastery, together with his new "family". For a young man in today's Sweden, compulsory military service is not seen as a private matter, which would have been the case in the Middle Ages. Entry into a temporary order of this kind would have required ceremonies in which adoption into the new family corrected a situation that was abnormal in medieval eyes, namely, being an individual outside the collective, lacking kin and long-tried ties of friendship. The vague remains of a military group identity that occur in our days may superficially have the same content. The difference is that we today can step into and out of more social roles than medieval people could. For these people the ideal was social stability in a God-given order where the individual was born into the circle that surrounded him for the rest of his life.

Normally private life meant the solidarity within the family which was held together by ties of kinship, and in which communal life was regulated by custom. In courtly, French words like *privé*, *privance*, *priveté* referred "to the people and things included within the family circle ..., to the domestic, to that over which the master of the house exercised his power" (Duby 1988, p. 6). The private found physical expression in the demarcated courtyard and the walls of the house.

These continental ideas about medieval private life perhaps do not agree well with Scandinavian rules for living together. Here in Scandinavia private stands for a community shared by a broad group of people. The people in a household probably consisted of more than just a nuclear family. The houses were occupied by relatives, slaves, lodgers, and tenants, who had in common the fact that they were known and placed in their given social roles. If an unknown person had entered from the street he would probably have been regarded with suspicious eyes until his identity and his business had been established. In the infrastructure of the medieval town there were common main streets, alleys, and areas for open social interaction. Here one could meet people who were not socially defined. The risk of encroachment on life in the townyard from the public street could be controlled with the aid of both physical and social barriers. By impeding direct entry by means of a gate, and by placing activities such as domestic crafts – which belonged to the border zone between the private and the public sphere – next to the street, while the people in the house enacted their private life further in, visible and invisible obstacles were erected in the way of the stranger. The booth, which gradually developed into a separate section within the plot, became semi-public in the High and Late Middle Ages, in the sense that it was let to craftsmen who did not necessarily have direct links with the "family" in the townyard.

In early medieval townyards people continued to develop the functional division of

houses which was already discernible in rural houses in the Viking Age. In the vicinity of Sigtuna there have been excavations of Viking Age and early medieval settlement at the sites of Sanda and Pollista. In Sanda there was a change by the start of the tenth century from multifunctional long-houses to courtyard farms consisting of a dwelling house and outbuildings built in groups round an open area (Åqvist & Flodin 1992, p. 327). The consequence of moving this court into a narrow oblong plot in a town was that the functional division was spatially accentuated and multiplied in each plot in the closely packed community. The courtyard became a narrow, closed, and private unit separated from the more public space of the street. Within the townyard there developed a culturally conditioned division of the buildings, organized in the contrast between the street and the back yard and in the functional division of the buildings. The placing of the buildings within the courtyard in the countryside does not leave as clear signals about what was private and what was public. There is now a possibility of rethinking the social organization of the rural farm using the insights derived from townyards.

The courtyard was divided into zones where the different functions of the household dominated more or less (Christophersen 1990, p. 113). Such a division can also be made in Sigtuna (Pettersson 1992). In a first zone along the street, for most of the eleventh century there were small buildings with remains of textile and metal crafts (Fig. 3). Specific craft buildings or booths begin to appear there from the second half of the eleventh century. The next zone has small buildings without hearths and with varying functions. Finds of loom weights suggest that they were used for the townyard's own work, as well as for storing tools and household material. The last zone, at the rear just before the actual back yard, has the dwelling houses, with corner hearths and furthest in central hearths.

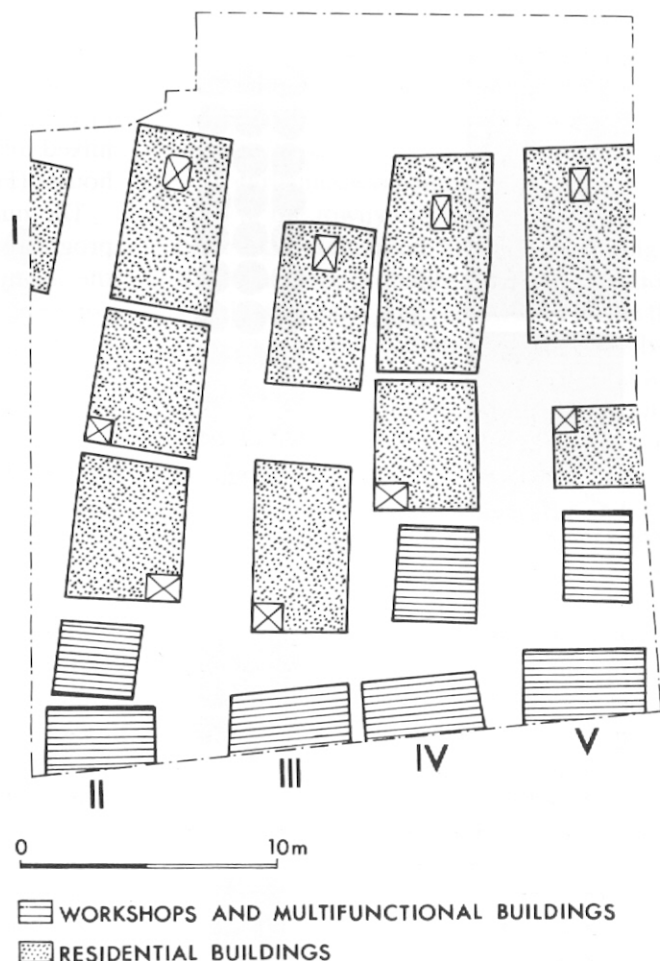


Fig. 3. Settlement in the Trädgårdsmästaren quarter, Sigtuna. The plots adjoin Stora Gatan at the bottom of the map. The phase "preliminarily dated to the second half of the eleventh century" was compiled by Björn Petterson and Mats Roslund. After Petterson 1992.

Coins and weights within the townyards of Sigtuna

Once the spatial situation is defined thus, it is possible to investigate where in the span between public and private the exchange of goods took place. People handling coins and weights occasionally dropped them on the dirty floors. Some of these remained in their original sites until they were found by archaeologists, whereas others were swept out through the door and thus ended up beside the building where the goods had changed hands. There was a total of 24 weights and 23 coins in the excavated area in the Trädgårdsmästaren quarter. Within the three settle-

ment zones, 6 coins and weights were found in the craft milieu, 9 were found among the houses with a mixed household function, and 32 among the dwelling houses. These figures are shown graphically as percentages (Fig. 4), which clarifies the picture of the dwelling zone as the major scene of exchange in the townyard.

The difference may appear to be due to the difference in the size of the area represented by the zones. The dwelling zone is the biggest and consequently can contain most objects. If we look at the volume, however, the front of the plot is seen as the part where the occupation layers grew most rapidly. If the difference in the distribution of coins and

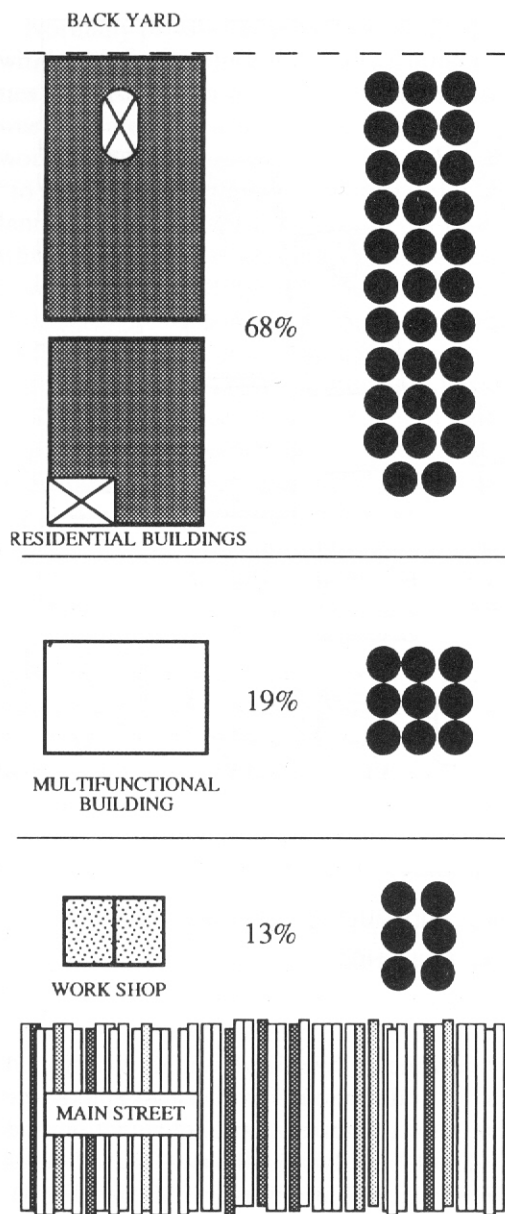


Fig. 4 Percentage of coins and weights in the settlement zones, Trädgårdsmästaren 9 and 10, Sigtuna.

weights is not due to culturally conditioned actions preserved in space, but instead represents a purely random distribution, then most objects should have been found there.

By using the finds that are linked to the interior of the house, we can sharpen the picture still more as regards source criticism.

This reinforces the links between artefacts, building, and action, as suggested by the zone division. Three coins and weights were found in the craft booths, four in buildings with mixed functions, and 17 in the dwelling houses (Fig. 5).

The number of objects increases as one progresses away from the street deeper into the townyard. This shows that the dwelling zone was preferred for transactions where it was necessary to weigh silver. Nevertheless, neither the multifunctional zone nor the craft zone are devoid of weights and coins. The reason for this is the time aspect that is concealed in the very long period covered by the excavation, some 250 years. There will be reason to return to this in future analyses.

The obvious difference between the number of weights and coins in the dwelling zone and the craft zone by the street shows a dichotomy between production and sale. This either means that all buying and exchange took place in the private setting in the townyard or that it was just the major silver-based transactions that required the sanctity of the home. In the booths people did not use silver as a medium for trade; either the goods of lesser value that were produced there were exchanged for other goods, or else these places were wholly reserved for manufacture. Furs in bundles, slaves, and everyday goods in bulk quantities changed owners in a different setting from combs, simple brooches and ornaments, beads and single whetstones.

The laws of the High Middle Ages show the tension between the king's or the town's need to control and tax trade in the towns and the merchants' or townspeople's need to decide for themselves where to engage in trade. Street trading was the ideal, with buyer and seller meeting in open booths allowing easy surveillance (KLN 1981, s.v. Strætiskaup). Trade inside the townyards was more difficult to control. The Town Law of King Magnus Eriksson declares that "Salt and other heavy goods imported by guests shall be brought up from the ships to open street

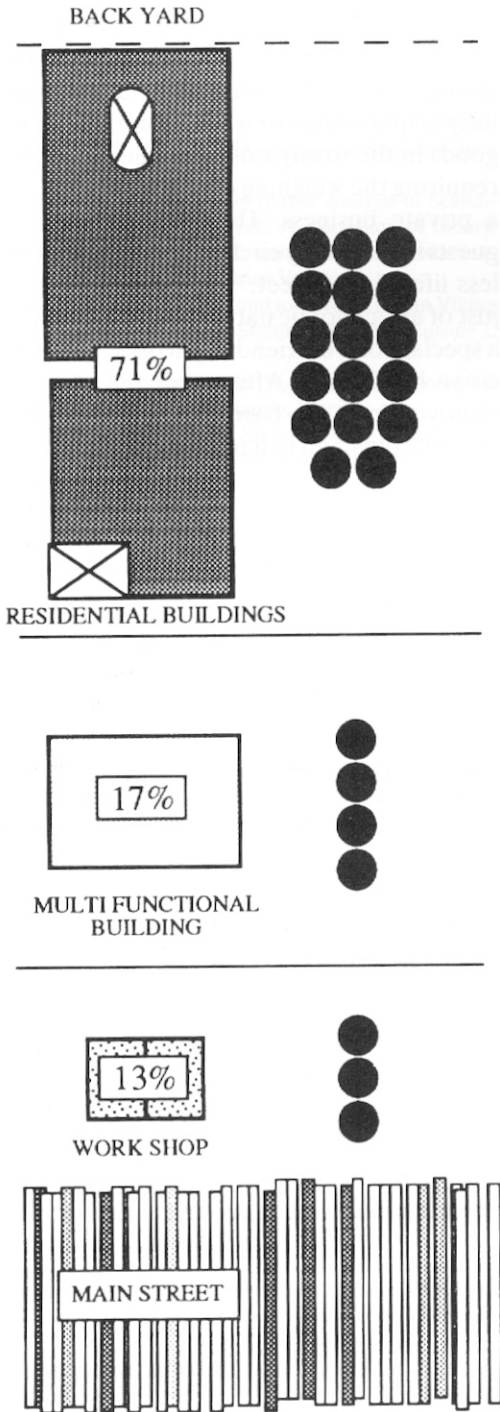


Fig. 5. Percentage of coins and weights found in the houses in the settlement zones, Trädgårdsmästaren 9 and 10, Sigtuna

booths and sold there, but not in any cellars or back booths" (Holmbäck & Wessén 1966, Kmb XXXIII, 2). The Old Swedish word *bakbodh* refers to small buildings located inside the yard.

In early medieval Sigtuna the trading contacts of the townyards do not yet appear to be so highly regulated. Merchants arriving in the town were probably subject to taxation, which at an early stage could have taken the form of personal gifts and payments in silver to the lord who protected the town. That was the end of the control. Before the booths proper were established along the main street, we find remains of exchange among the dwelling houses. It is possible that this custom, which was maintained by the family, the private sphere, was gradually moved towards the street for various reasons. The rulers' increasing control of the circulation of goods may have compelled this. In addition, changed social patterns developed in the High Middle Ages which made trade and craft work into freer pursuits. This gave room for individual contacts with an increasingly large market. The surface of contact was concentrated in the market, which in the case of Sigtuna was the main street.

Unfortunately, our sources fall silent around 1250. The reduced intensity in the deposition of occupation layers in the townyards of the Trädgårdsmästaren quarter make it difficult to follow the later choices of places for trading. We thus lack the ideal picture in the later layers of the sites chosen for transactions. Perhaps the citizens were not so obedient. Laws are often a sign that rulers consider it necessary to legislate against a common but objectionable practice. The unruly townspeople practised civil disobedience by continuing the private custom of trading in the townyard in defiance of the public control.

Not everything can have taken place in booths along the street or at markets in the High and Late Middle Ages. Major transactions appear to have been conducted in the private sphere. The custom of shaking hands

in the presence of witnesses or drinking beer or wine together after concluding a deal came from Germany around 1200 (KLN 1981, s.v. Handarband, Lidkøb). It is highly likely that there were already such symbolic actions in Scandinavia. In a society without writing like that of the Middle Ages, gestures and witnessed concrete actions were just as binding as signed documents. An expression of this was that personal relations between actors were maintained by sharing food and drink with friends. The guilds that had already arisen in Scandinavia functioned in a similar way. A sphere was created that was close to the family, the group that shared a meal around the hearth.

Fragments of these customs survived for a long time in pre-industrial society and could be observed before housing and work were segregated in urban settings. Holger Arbman (1942, p. 13) has painted a picture of trade in Sigtuna on the basis of purely "ethnoarchaeological" observations from his childhood, which was not so far removed from the High Middle Ages.

"It should not be imagined, of course, that trade in Sigtuna in the Early Middle Ages was of the same character as modern shop trade in our times. The booth played a subordinate role, it could even be confined to a hole in the wall, the merchants were probably more to be regarded as wholesalers of a kind. Anyone who has spent many years of childhood living above a grocery shop in a provincial town for many years, observing the yard which the farmers made for when they came to town, where there were stables for their horses, and a place where they could buy or exchange horses, will have a strong impression of what the yard in such a quarter means. Even in our day it is a highly important factor in the economic life of a small town. We can surely envisage that in medieval Sigtuna it was in the enclosed townyards, not in the modest street booths, that the most important business was conducted."

The child's perception of what was normal in horse-trading obviously remained with him throughout his life. Medieval children similarly acquired the view that the exchange of goods in the townyards of medieval Sigtuna requiring the weighing of precious metal was a private business. They were among the guests in the family circle, away from the restless life of the street. The meeting was not just of an economic nature, but also required a special bond of friendship to lead to the decisive handshake. Afterwards the plug was removed from the barrel and the cups were passed from hand to hand, around the steaming pots.

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