https://doi.org/10.12685/qxmqqh47

Limits in Town Charters – Small Urban Centres in Sweden How Small Could a Medieval Town Be?

Annika Nordström

Strängnäs, Köping, Hedemora (Sweden); Charters/town rights; small towns; secular housing; workshop areas

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to compare to what extent a town's formal status corresponded with its physical appearance at a given point in time. The study is based on three medieval Swedish towns: Strängnäs, Köping and Hedemora. The reason behind this choice is that Hedemora's charter dated 1459 states that the town *'shall have and use half-town rights, which our trading towns Strängnäs and Köping already have and use'* (Folin 1979, 8, and references). The term 'half-town rights' denotes a restriction in usual town privileges, although what this meant in practice is largely unknown. As far as I am aware, this seldom-used term has never been analysed historically. Another important point of departure is that the three towns differ greatly from one another: Strängnäs is an episcopal see, Köping an early market centre, and Hedemora a metal trading town.

What was a Medieval Town?

In general, the term 'town rights' goes together with the documents by which certain places were granted special municipal status. One characteristic that differentiated a late medieval town from its surrounding countryside was the juridical and administrative apparatus that went with its charter, and which defined the urban laws and regulations. There are, of course, many ways to define a town. Medieval towns could vary greatly in terms of size and function, from small market centres with fewer than 1000 inhabitants, to very large towns such as Paris and London. The population of a typical medieval Swedish town rarely exceeded 300–500 inhabitants; only Visby (*c.* 6000 inhabitants) and Stockholm (*c.* 10,000) can be seen as large towns in European terms. In addition, Hilton (1995) states that a town must possess permanent market consent – not just a weekly right as was the case with many medieval Swedish towns. The lords of many 13th-century English and French villages had the right to hold a weekly market without their settlements being regarded as towns. The paramount criteria, according to Hilton, is that town inhabitants were not self sufficient in terms of agrarian products. In order to obtain these they would need to exchange or sell other goods. Urban social class differences, on the other hand, need not to have been so great as has previously been assumed. This is true both for smaller towns in England and France (Hilton 1995) and Sweden (Anund 1998). Hans Andersson cites three important sets of criteria that define a town: functional, topographic (in its hinterland relationship), and legal/administrative (evidenced by a town seal, charter, town council etc.). This final category also includes internal structural relationships (Andersson 1990, 27).

Köping

Köping is located to the north of Lake Mälaren. Its surrounding arable landscape includes extensive late Iron Age remains, including one great mound, suggesting an obvious prehistoric

Fig. 1: Köping 1704. J. V D. Aveelen.

antecedent to the town. The earliest documented reference to Köping dates from 1257, where it is termed a Laghlysakypung (this may denote a trading centre without town rights [Folin 1979, 8]). A reference to a town seal in 1349 provides the earliest evidence of civic status. It is uncertain whether medieval Köping, once it had been granted a charter, acquired its own church. The early 14th-century church within the area of the town today is a rural parish church that was never removed from its original jurisdiction. The earliest known charter dates from 1474, which allowed a market to be held every Thursday (Folin 1979; Andersson 1990). Köping's urban development from the mid-14th century onwards has traditionally been linked with the early medieval mining boom. However, Köping's relationship to its hinterland farms may have been of greater importance for its emergence and later development, given the town's location on the periphery of the mining regions, and its central location in the agrarian landscape (Folin 1979, 8; 23).

Strängnäs

Strängnäs was one of central Sweden's earliest episcopal sees, and scholars usually link the town's medieval development to its relationship with the Church and the bishop. The location of the town, both in terms of its communications and its situation in a hinterland already densely populated as early as the Iron Age, provided favourable conditions for the

Fig. 2: Strängnäs 1670–1674. A. Perelle.

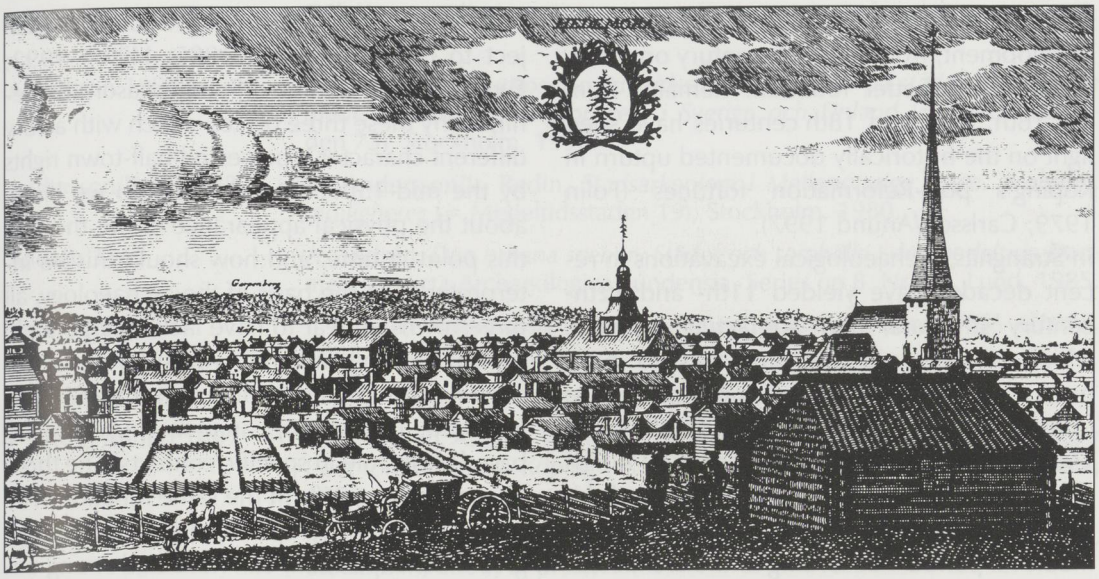

Fig. 3: Hedemora 1696. E. Reitz sc.

initial development of this central place. The first reference to Strängnäs as an episcopal see is in a register of cathedral cities dating from the 1120s, and the bishopric is clearly documented from 1179 onwards. A Dominican monastery was founded in 1268; a surviving seal is first referred to in 1315. Strängnäs' annual winter fair was probably already of some antiquity when first mentioned in the regional laws of 1327. However, the fair is unlikely to be of prehistoric origin, as its annual date was set according to the Church calendar (Andersson 1990; Järpe 1979; Sjösvärd 1987). Strängnäs developed during the later medieval period almost exclusively as an ecclesiastical centre and seat of learning of national political importance (Jägerstad 1959; Sjösvärd 1987, 254).

Hedemora

The third town, Hedemora, has a somewhat different origin to the other two. The earliest substantial settlement in the mining regions, Hedemora is first mentioned as a 'trading town' (here an uncertain term) in a letter dating from 1414. In 1446 it acquired the right to hold a market every Saturday. Only in 1459, as stated above, did Hedemora acquire half-town rights. The earliest reference to the parish of Hedemora, however, dates from the mid-14th century (Folin 1978, 24). The history of the town is obviously connected with the mining industry and its development, and its charter was probably granted in order to ensure the supply of necessities that the miners were unable to provide for themselves. In addition, Hedemora most likely fulfilled a local communicative role, as a nodal point in southerly traffic to the Stockholm region (Andersson 1990, 53).

Why are high- and late-medieval remains in small towns so elusive?

In general, high- and late-medieval remains in small towns such as these are rarely encountered. This is not so strange in the case of Hedemora, given its late foundation as a trading town. But why the dearth of medieval building remains in a typical and (according to other criteria) well-established trading town such as Köping? And, moreover, in an episcopal see such as Strängnäs?

Archaeological excavations in Köping have yielded relatively little information relating to the earliest history of the town, although admittedly most excavation has taken place outside the area likely to contain the earliest structures. Urbanisation probably took place during the 14th century (Folin 1979), although there are indications of earlier activity. Schück (1926) considered that Köping probably began life as a trading centre. Even if such historical interpretation, based largely on place-name evidence, can be criticised, later excavation has found evidence for a large, probably Christian, burial ground, seemingly unrelated to the known churches, suggesting the presence of a Viking Age or early medieval central place (cf. Björnänger 1989, 25; Folin 1979, 18 ff.; 2). In

contrast, our knowledge of the town's later development, from the 16th century onwards, is somewhat better founded. Remains from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries have shed light on the historically documented upturn in Köping's post-Reformation fortunes (Folin 1979; Carlsson/Anund 1997).

In Strängnäs, archaeological excavations in recent decades have yielded 11th- and 12th-century structural and artefactual remains, which strongly suggests Strängnäs to have been a Viking Age/early medieval central place (Andersson 1990, 50; Carlsson 2000; Sjösvärd 1987). Certain 13th- and 14th-century building remains have been unearthed around the central square (Sjösvärd 1987). During the late medieval period – according to the archaeology – the fortunes of the secular urban environment declined in relation to those of the 'cathedral town'. One can see, in a way, the foundation of the monastery in the 1260s as representing some form of urban environment (Andersson/Redin 1980, 43), the question is: exactly what form did it take?

Turning to Hedemora, the church and certain cellars comprise the only unequivocal archaeological evidence for medieval buildings of any kind (Folin 1978). Other structural finds date primarily from the 17th and 18th centuries, and are clustered around the square at the then centre of town (Nordin 2000, 38 f.).

Interpretation

As stated above, there is no single definition of a medieval town. Since urbanised society continued to evolve during the medieval period itself, numerous breaks in continuity occurred and the defining factors themselves were subject to change (Andrén 1985; Hilton 1992; Ewan 1990). Do three different reasons lie behind why these three places – each with a very different character – possessed half-town rights by the mid-15th century? What do we know about the physical appearance of the three at this point in time, and how should this be interpreted? On the basis of the archaeology, all three towns appear to have lacked large-scale secular housing and craft-workshop areas. But a town must also be studied in terms of its origin; and, importantly, analysis must also be based on its role in specific contexts. The three towns did not perform the same function. The establishment of an episcopal see, and the degree of its expansion, can have had strong underlying political reasons. A well-established trading centre could well have lost much of its status and power by changes in the patterns of communication, altered trade restrictions, or by competition from neighbouring centres. A place requiring some kind of formal status, but lacking any form of urban environment can readily have been granted a charter. The above hypotheses are voiced with the respective development of Strängnäs, Köping and Hedemora in mind.

Technically equivalent towns probably varied greatly in their appearance. Even episcopal sees can have possessed civic status without displaying any great signs of bustling town life. Only archaeology seems able to shed light on the townscape and living environment in the smaller medieval Swedish towns.

Translated by Aidan Allen

Bibliography

Andersson 1990 — H. Andersson, *Sjuttiosex medeltidsstäder- aspekter på stadsarkeologi och medeltida urbaniseringsprocess i Sverige och Finland* (= Medeltidsstaden 73), Stockholm, 1990.

Andersson/Redin 1980 — H. Andersson/L. Redin, *Stadsarkeologi i Mellansverige. Läge, problem, möjligheter* (= Medeltidsstaden 19), Stockholm, 1980.

Andrén 1985 — A. Andrén, *Den urbana scenen. Städer och samhälle i det medeltida Danmark* (= Acta Archaeologica Lundensia. Series no 8. Nr 13), Lund, 1985.

Anund 1998 — J. Anund, "Mångsysslare, småstäder och klassresor", in: *META 4/1998*, 1998.

Björnänger 1989 — O. Björnänger, *Köping – från forntid till nutid*, Köping, 1989.

Carlsson/Anund 1997 — R. Carlsson/J. Anund, *Vågtorget, en arkeologisk undersökning av lämningar i det förindustriella Köping* (= UV Uppsala, Rapport 1997:51), Uppsala, 1997.

Carlsson 2000 — M. Carlsson, *Vikingatida fynd i centrala Strängnäs* (= UV Mitt, Rapport), Stockholm, 2000, in press.

Ewan 1990 — E. Ewan, *Townlife in Fourteenth-century Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1990.

Folin 1979 — C. Folin, *Köping* (= Medeltidsstaden 11), Stockholm, 1979.

Folin 1978 — C. Folin, *Hedemora* (= Medeltidsstaden 8), Stockholm, 1978.

Hilton 1992 — R. H. Hilton, *English and French towns in feudal society. A comparative study*, Cambridge, 1992.

Jägerstad 1959 — H. Jägerstad (ed.), *Strängnäs stads historia*, Lund, 1959.

Järpe 1979 — A. Järpe, *Strängnäs* (= Medeltidsstaden 10), Stockholm, 1979.

Nordin 2000 — J. Nordin, "Att skapa platser och få makt. Om maktens rumsliga ambitioner i Dalarna på 1300- och 1400-talen", in: *META* 1/2000, 2000.

Schück 1926 — A. Schück, *Studier rörande det svenska stadsväsendets uppkomst och äldsta utveckling*, Uppsala, 1926.

Address

Annika Nordström
National Heritage Board
Box 1406, S–701 14 Örebro
annika.nordström@raa.se