

Centre – Periphery, World Systems, and Medieval Archaeology

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Introduction

In an essay entitled “The 5000-Year World System”, published for the first time in 1993, Andre Gunder Frank and Barr K. Gills note that “Most study of medieval history is also extremely Eurocentric” (Frank/Gills 1996). They say this in connection with an analysis of how a number of disciplines relate to studies of things outside Europe and particularly in relation to the view of the occurrence of world systems. They are referring to medieval history, if I understand them correctly, but the same can in my opinion be said about medieval archaeology. In most countries of Europe medieval archaeology is a national project with all that this involves. In our work we are far too tied to the material and the questions generated inside our own countries. The handbooks that appear are devoted to each country separately. (Some examples may be mentioned: Barry 1987; Clarke 1984; de Bouard 1975; Fehring 1987; Hinton 1990; Liebgott 1989). International conferences are an important forum in which to present accounts of national findings, but there is no interaction or integration. We talk about *our* towns, about *our* castles, and so on. We often fail to capitalise on the opportunities for crossing boundaries that we have at meetings like the present one.

In total, then, there are very few people working across boundaries, and even fewer who try to tackle the problems of medieval archaeology in a larger comparative perspective. I would say that this is a crucial matter for the development of medieval archaeology and also decisive for the way in which our knowledge can be integrated and made useful in interdisciplinary research. This has consequences particu-

larly for medieval archaeological research in itself. It means, among other things, that approaches to problems cannot be developed in the way they could have been developed if they had been given a broader base than just the national perspective. There are numerous themes and research tasks in which a broad perspective should have been relevant. One such topic, to which I shall return later, is urbanisation. We know very well that urbanisation is not just a national phenomenon but in large measure a process which in some sense is general and should of course be studied as such.

How we handle these problems is of course connected to our archaeological perspectives. An archaeologist works at several levels, at a very detailed level in the actual excavation situation but at other levels as well when the findings are to be interpreted and put in a broader context. I recently heard a historian cite another historian who had said that there are two kinds of historians: the one that can be compared to a truffle pig who roots directly in the soil, and the one who is more like a parachutist, seeing things from above and hence also with a wider view. The point for my friend the historian was of course that both kinds are needed, and ideally the truffle pig and the parachutist should be contained in one and the same person. In the best of all possible worlds this should also apply to archaeologists and medieval archaeologists.

To manage this, however, we need theoretical awareness and an open mind, and of course detailed knowledge as well. Both aspects are important. It may seem superfluous to stress this once again, but I think it is central to all our work. It is not always so easy to lift our

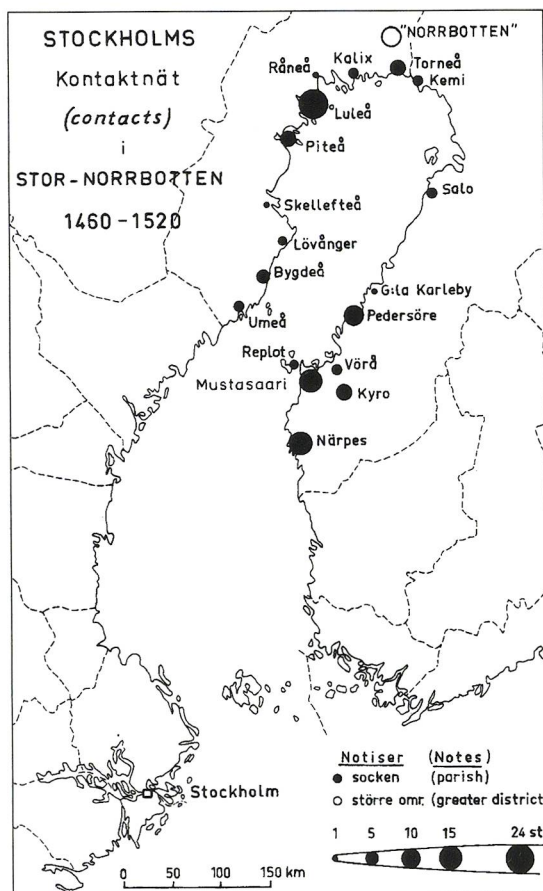


Fig. 1: Stockholm's contacts with Greater Norrbotten, 1460-1520 (after Friberg 1983, 50).

gaze above the edge of the trench. Sometimes we don't do it at all, sometimes we proceed very quickly from an observation in the trench to a grand historical interpretation, without really thinking about the implications. The solutions are far too simple and perhaps based too much on chance. A theoretical stance that is well thought out, without being rigid, can help us to keep the interpretation together at various levels, particularly when we are working with different types of source material. Perhaps a theme of the type centre – periphery, with its theoretical points of departure, can help us to formulate problems more sharply.

Centre – periphery

It may therefore be fruitful that "Medieval Europe" this time has focused on a main theme: *Centre – periphery – region*. This is a topic that invites us to cross boundaries; in fact, it often requires us to do so. Some might think that, after all the theoretical development we have had in the last few decades, the theme is out of date. Yet medieval archaeologists themselves have not taken up this discussion to any great

extent. I think this is a pity, but it is not too late. The topic is still relevant.

The discussion of the centre – periphery problem has been going on for a long time. How long depends on how broadly you interpret the problem. It was used back at the start of the twentieth century in a geopolitical discussion. In 1933 Walther Christaller published his book *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland*, which was to have an extremely profound influence on geographical research into cities and other central places (Christaller 1933). The non-central was thereby also defined indirectly. Today, however, we probably associate centre – periphery issues above all with the discussion of a world system or world systems that started with Immanuel Wallerstein's work *The Modern World System* in 1974.

In the Swedish national encyclopaedia the political scientist Magnus Jerneck defines *centre – periphery theories* as follows:

The conceptual pair occurs in several scientific traditions. It denotes opposite or contrasting phenomena. Centre – periphery refers to geographical as well as cultural and functional properties: physical distances, cultural and ethnic differences, distribution of responsibility and resources, the spread of power, differences in status, etc. As theoretical tools, the concepts are used in social research to characterise and analyse oppositions, relations of dominance, and development processes in political, economic, or social relations. The spatial meaning of the words can be used to conjure up images of distance and conflict between, e.g., territories, cities, population groups, organisations, or political systems. As instruments for the analysis of power and influence, centre – periphery theories have points of contact with concepts such as centralization – decentralization, balance – imbalance, justice – injustice, development – underdevelopment, and also integration – separation. Centre is most commonly associated with junctions or meeting places, where processes, lines, and structures converge or interact; periphery with areas removed from or governed by centres (Jerneck 1990)

We can see the problem on very different scales, from considering a central place with its hinterland, to thinking in terms of world systems. Medieval archaeologists can use centre – periphery thinking both to find starting points in a local discussion, and also to be able to put

this discussion in a much larger context. I presuppose, of course, that centre – periphery is a useful theoretical instrument to work with (which not everyone may agree with). If we think that the centre – periphery concepts are relevant and useful, we must specify the meaning we ascribe to them. What we must reasonably want to get at is contact networks, relations of strength, opportunities for influence, and the areas in which this applies. We will touch on areas such as politics, economy, and communications, as well as cultural aspects of these contacts.

We must, however, be very observant that there is always a problem when one discusses centre and periphery, namely, that the exchange of opinions can take on a powerful emotional charge. It is considered grander to live in the centre than on the periphery. This is really a classical conflict which is found in most countries, for instance between the capital and the provinces. Yet this must further

sharpen our analytical concepts since, as we shall see, there is hardly any unanimity about what is centre and what is periphery.

I shall show not only obvious examples but also, and in particular, some more complex situations which arise when we try to interpret contacts and relations of dependence in categories of centre – periphery.

Christaller's central place theory has already been mentioned. Cities and their areas of influence can surely also be described in centre – periphery models. Of course, the picture can be further complicated by the fact that there are different levels of centres, and hence the periphery or peripheries also become fluid.

In relation to Central and Northern Sweden, Stockholm acquired the role of a superior centre in economic terms, partly from the late thirteenth century onwards. All foreign trade had to pass through the town. The courses taken by the traffic and the contacts that Stockholm had with Central and Northern Sweden

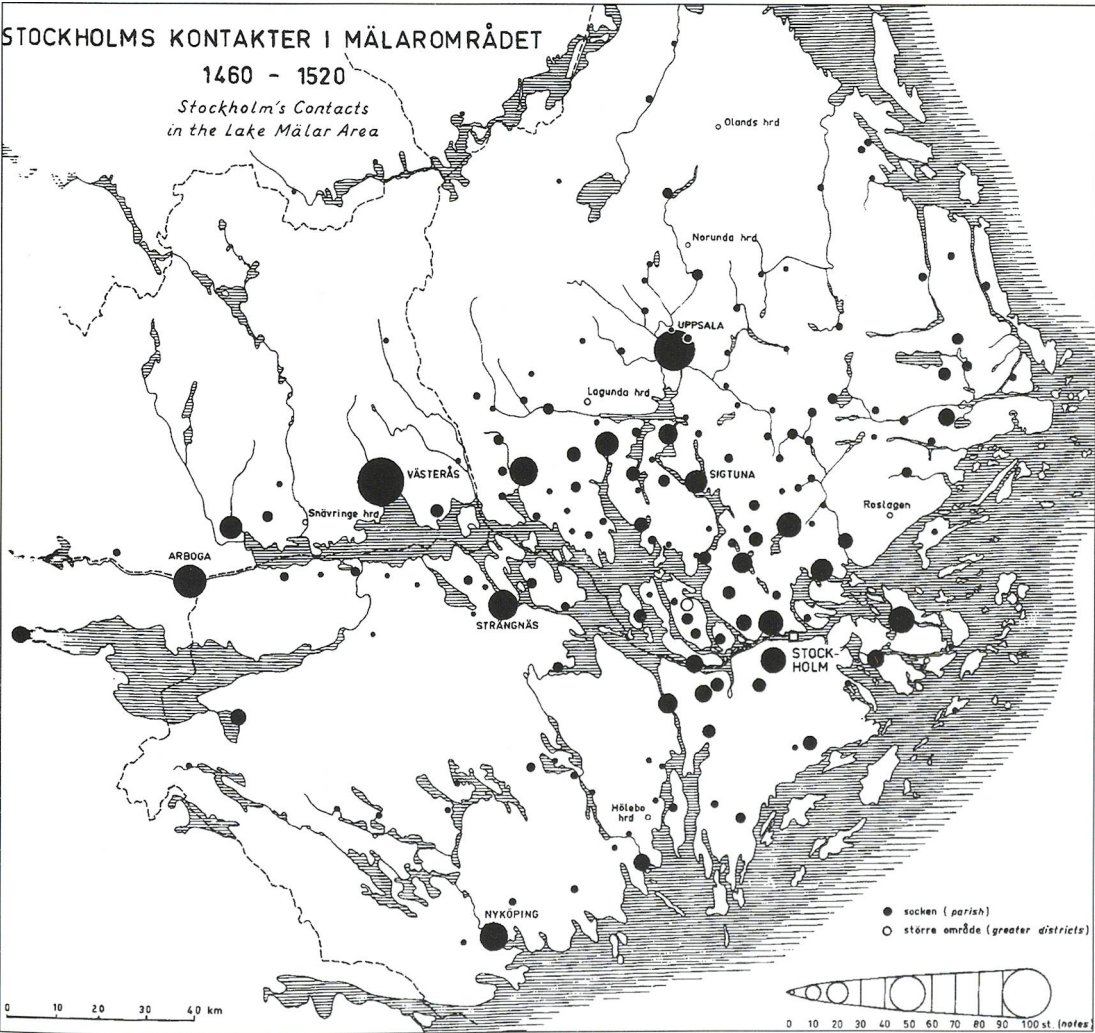


Fig. 2: Stockholm's field of contacts in the Mälaren area in the late Middle Ages, 1460–1520 (after Friberg 1983, 83).

(Norrbotten) in the late Middle Ages can be seen on some maps (fig. 1-2) (Friberg 1983, 50 and 83). In Central Sweden it was above all iron from the mining district of Bergslagen that was brought in via the smaller towns and the central places in the area around Lake Mälaren. The studies that have been carried out have shown the flow to Stockholm, but there has been very little study of the reverse: how the periphery was influenced by these contacts. Wallerström (1995) is one of the few who has considered these questions from the point of view of medieval archaeology.

person, for example, a king, or to groups of persons. Where they happen to be is the centre. Kings in Scandinavia did not really have a fixed geographical point to proceed from until late in the Middle Ages. Before that they were constantly travelling between a number of places in order to support themselves and their retinue, and of course to exercise power and control.

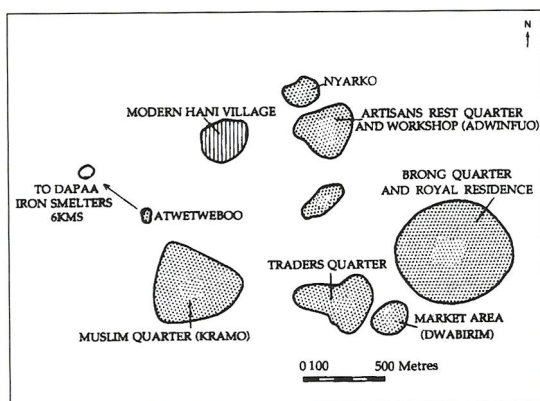
Or let us take a completely different example. In Ethiopia, a few centuries after the fall of Axum, from the Middle Ages and a long time to come the rulers led a semi-nomadic life in a constant sequence of camps. English scholars have called these "moving capitals" (Connah 1987, 83). Here we have to start with this mobile centre and hence a constantly changing geographical-political concept of centre.

There are also more cases where it can be dangerous to see the centre as a single geographical point. There is clear evidence today, not least through archaeological investigations, of a structure where instead of a *central place* we should talk of a *central area*. In an area of this kind different central functions are distributed in different places. We can trace such structures in several places in Sweden. One example is the Kalmar area on the Baltic Sea, or Bohuslän on the west coast. In Iceland this structure existed until modern times (Thorláksson 1977). There is a similar situation, for instance, in this example from Africa: Begho Town in Ghana (fig. 3) (Anquandah 1993, 648 ff., fig. 38.3). With this spread of central functions, where is the periphery? How should we define periphery? One should rather speak about interaction between different places on the same hierarchical level.

In Sweden, structures of this kind mainly belong to the Viking Age and early Middle Ages. Yet it is likely that some areas like these survive even after urbanisation has gained momentum.

Studies of northernmost Scandinavia show very elusive and perhaps even non-existent centre – periphery relations. Here it is a question of groups of people moving over large areas, mainly in an east – west and west – east direction. There is considerable contact between the groups, but it is difficult to say that there is any centre or centres for these people to fall back on. But when Novgorod, Norway, and Sweden began to take an interest in the possibility of collecting taxes, the area was gradually

Fig. 3: Begho town, AD 1000–1750 (after Anquandah 1993, 650).



What does a power centre mean in the form of a castle, which has to secure its provision by, for instance, collecting taxes? How does it affect its periphery? One study in which the problem is considered concerns the province of Hälsingland, where a castle of this kind is one such centre of gravity. The author's question is whether the castle in some way had an influence on life on the real periphery of the province, represented by the little village of Ängersjö. The question is important but not always easy to get at archaeologically, but serious attempts have been made in a recently published doctoral dissertation (Mogren 2000).

It may be the case that there are societies where we can find hardly any examples of a special centre, which means that there will be no periphery either. We should also be careful not to view centre – periphery as fixed geographical concepts. There is a dynamism over time that constantly shifts centre and periphery. Sometimes centre becomes periphery and vice versa. On one level an area can be a centre, but in relation to another level it is a periphery. Sometimes we have to see the centre – periphery concepts as being linked to one

incorporated into some form of larger political-economic centre – periphery situation. But the problem is which centre is relevant, since these countries competed for control of the area and managed to collect taxes, often in one and the same area. In a dissertation that appeared in 1995 it has been shown how one of the centres, the Swedish medieval crown, gradually succeeded in making itself a centre, thanks to a fairly deliberate policy, thus twisting the east – west contacts into a political and economic situation which instead emphasised north – south communication (Wallerström 1995).

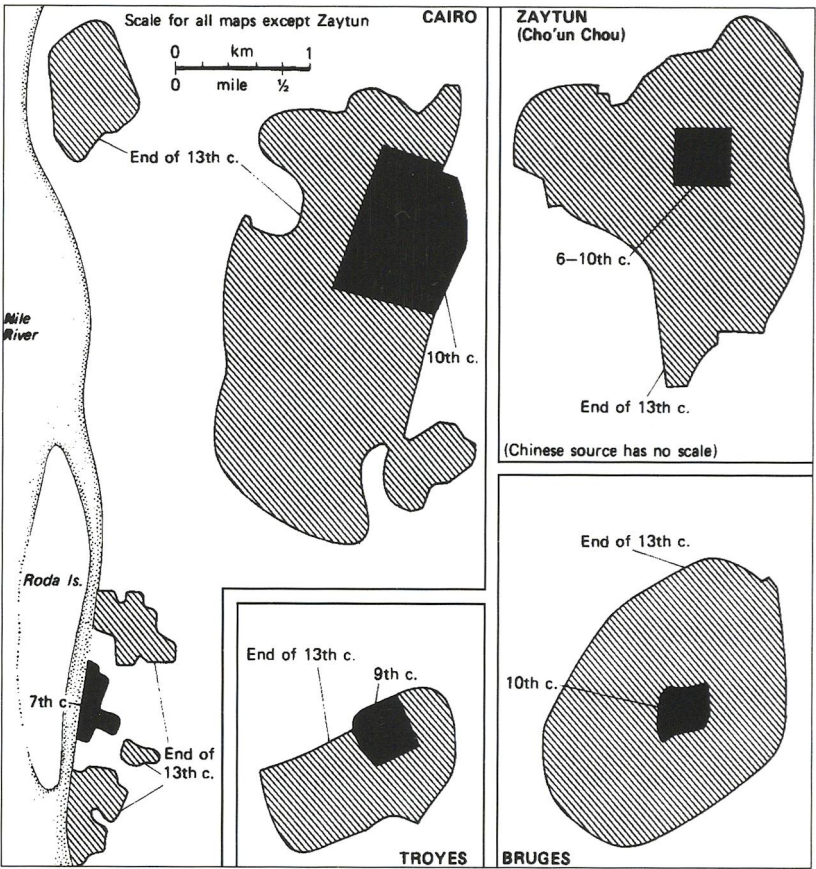
The same thing happened in Norway. Vågan in the Lofoten islands is a good example of this. From having been the endpoint in a transport system extending in an east – west direction during the early Middle Ages, it was incorporated in the High Middle Ages into a system governed from the centre of the kingdom to the south. The place remained a central place, but now as a collection point for cod which was then transported on to the most important economic central place on the coast, namely Bergen. This town was a central part of the Hanseatic system (Bertelsen/Urbanczyk 1988; Urbanczyk 1992).

World system(s)

All the examples hitherto have been regional or to some extent national. I have shown examples of the complications that can arise if we are not constantly observant of the fact that the concepts of centre and periphery must always be qualified. Let us now move on to a much broader geographical perspective.

I want to take up the much-discussed problem of the world system or world systems. What does this have to do with our work, some may be wondering. Let me return to my introduction. As medieval archaeologists we can also make contributions to a discussion about contacts, communications, and the relation between different centres in a broad perspective as well. This of course requires that we start following the discussion that has been going on for a long time and that we test the possibilities of medieval archaeology.

The modern discussion started in the 1960s, when it concerned the relationship between rich and poor countries. Immanuel Wallerstein



was obviously influenced by this when he formulated his world system model. Wallerstein claimed that a single world system was created in the seventeenth century, when a clear centre – periphery relationship prevailed. The centre, that is, Western Europe, acquired its raw materials on the periphery, that is, in Asia and Africa, processed them and extracted the added value of this processing. In Wallerstein's account this becomes a process with the regularity of a law. It was not until the seventeenth century, according to Wallerstein, that a situation like this became possible. The raw material areas ended up in a kind of colonial dependence. Wallerstein denied that such world systems could exist before this. The old empires did not have the organisation to enable them to collect raw materials from an economically dependent periphery, even if they could cover large areas with a number of centres of differing dignity (Wallerstein 1974). Wallerstein's thesis provoked a major discussion among archaeologists and ancient historians as well. For the latter the question was whether there might have been some form of world system even before the seventeenth century. Wallerstein reckoned with one world

Fig. 4: The growth of selected cities between the ninth/tenth and the end of the thirteenth century (after Abu-Lughod 1989, 357).

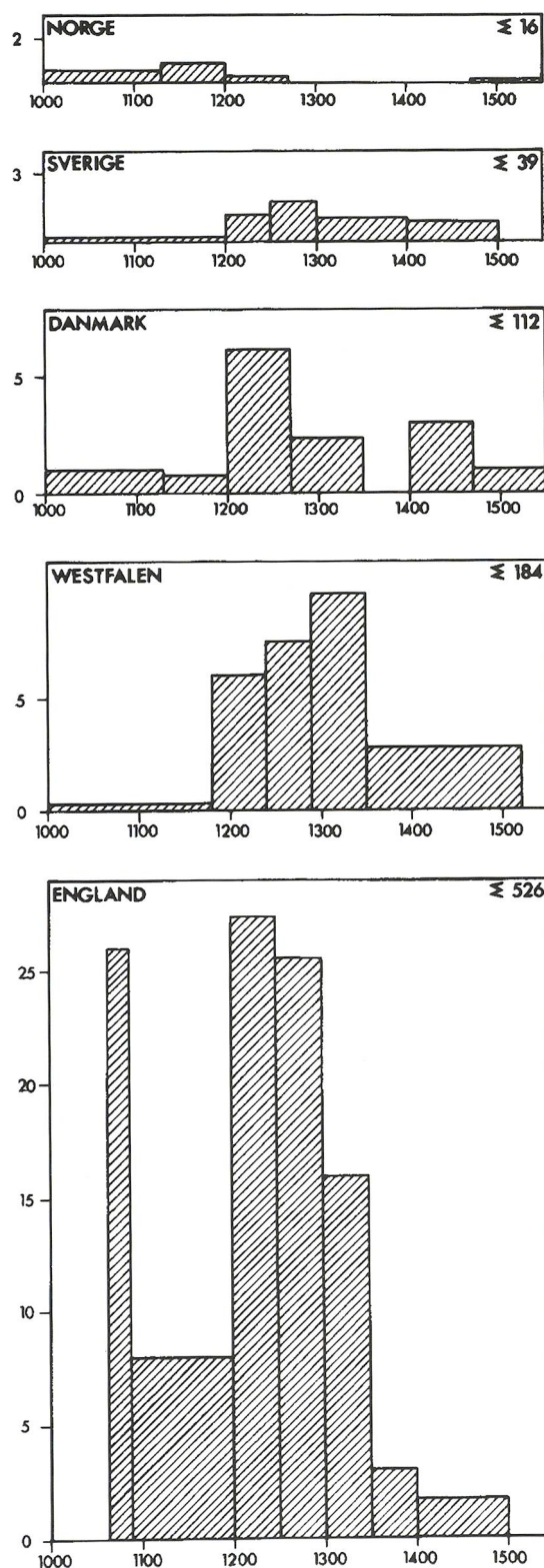


Fig. 5: The extent of medieval urbanisation in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Westphalia, and England (after Andrén 1985, 32).

system while many of his opponents spoke of several being able to exist simultaneously or chronologically following each other. On the subject of the Bronze Age we have a number of studies discussing world systems (Rowlands/Larsen/Kristiansen 1987).

When it comes to the possible existence of world systems in the Middle Ages, Janet L. Abu-Lughod's book *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* is of particular interest. She claims that there was a clear world system in the years 1250–1350, which comprised both Europe and Asia. The decline in contacts came with the Black Death. She demonstrates a mutual dependence and the existence of contacts, although the channels could vary. One precondition was that the Mongols in this period were mainly gathered in one unit. They controlled the most important routes and thus created the conditions whereby trade could be pursued over long distances. When this situation came to an end, however, these contacts did not totally cease; instead they became restricted and narrower. Some of the old contacts survived and served as a starting point when a new cycle of wider contacts got under way, as happened in the seventeenth century. She thus emphasises the dynamism that existed through time (Abu-Lughod 1989, 368 f.).

According to Abu-Lughod, the thirteenth-century world system was organised according to very different principles. I quote:

Rather than a single hegemon, there were a number of coexisting 'core' powers that, via both conflictual and cooperative relations, became increasingly integrated over the course of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century. Since the system was *not hierarchical*, in the sense that no single hegemon dictated the terms of production and trade to others, no geographical entity could be said to be located at *the center* (Abu-Lughod 1989, 364 f.).

A consequence of this reasoning is that (Western) Europe no longer had such strong dominance as in Wallerstein's picture. Instead the centre of gravity was shifted eastwards, or rather, from her perspective, there was a greater balance between east and west. Other scholars firmly place the centre of gravity in Asia, above all in the countries around the Indian Ocean, but also further east. Frank and Gills make this particularly clear: "From a world system perspective medieval Europe was socially, politically, and economically quite backward or less developed in comparison with contemporary cores in the world system, all of which lay to the East." (Frank/Gills 1996, 24).

I shall not go any further in this presentation of research. There are good summaries for those who want a quick overview. Here I should refer especially to Hall 1999. Some collections of essays giving a good overview of the discussion are: Frank/Gills 1996; Kardulias 1999.

But I do want to make some comments that are relevant to our theme. It can be said that there is a great difference in how the participants in the debate view the issue of world systems. On the one hand, there are those who claim that there is almost a regular relationship between centre and periphery, and on the other hand there those who interpret the many contacts, sometimes relatively loose, that develop between different areas as evidence of world systems. In the latter case it becomes more a description than an explanation. There is a risk here that the concepts become so watered down that they mean nothing.

Yet there is a very important point in this whole debate which we must bear in mind. Nothing happens in totally closed rooms. There are contacts and actual relations of dependence in one respect or other, even over long distances. The question is whether we can formulate them in terms of centre – periphery relations.

Since Wallerstein, the discussion has often been conducted in economic terms. Yet there is also another tradition of centres of significance for world history, a tradition going back to historians like Toynbee. These place much more emphasis on cultural aspects. There has therefore arisen an opposition between a cultural concept, “civilisation”, and an economic concept, “world system”. But do we need to draw such sharp boundaries? In a relatively brief foreword to Frank and Gill’s book *The World System*, William H. McNeill takes up this question and tries to find solutions from a different point of departure, which is worth quoting:

I conclude therefore, that if the notion of a world system were tied more explicitly to a communications network and if more attention were paid to changes in that network as new means of transport and communication came into use, the notion of a ‘world system’ would gain greater clarity and power. Moreover, the polarity between the terms ‘civilization’ and ‘world system’ would disappear and the language of world-historians might gain

greater precision if communications networks were to become the focus of attention. (McNeill 1996, XII. For a discussion of world systems and civilizations see Sanderson 1995).

As archaeologists we are moving on ground which is actually not totally alien when we hear or see statements like this. In archaeological analyses it is often important to trace contacts and patterns of contact. And McNeill’s conclusions feel very close to our archaeological reality. There are opportunities to go further in the archaeological sources, whether this concerns the artefacts, the monuments, or the use of the landscape.

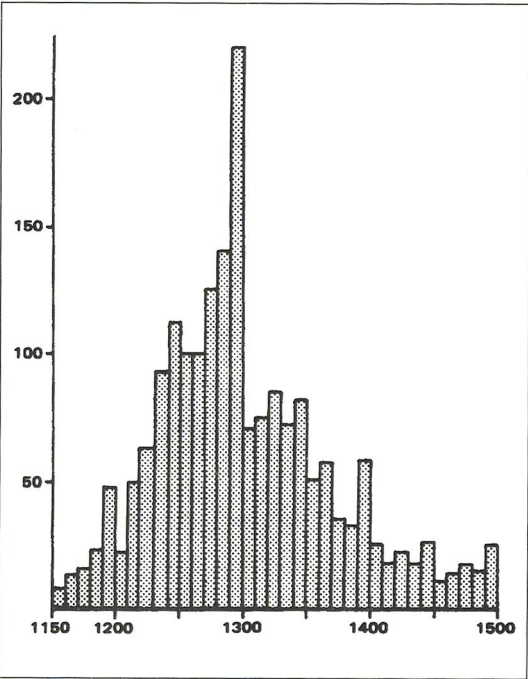


Fig. 6: The extent of urbanisation in “Central Europe” (after Andrén 1985, 33).

The example of urbanisation

To be more concrete, I would like to take an example from a research area in which medieval archaeologists have been very active in recent decades, namely medieval urbanisation. I want to take up Abu-Lughod’s thesis of a thirteenth-century world system. In her book there is an illustration showing plans of four cities, from Zaytun, an important port in China, to Bruges in Western Europe. All four – Zaytun, Cairo, Troyes in France, and Bruges – show a similar development from the ninth or tenth century to the thirteenth, characterised in all cases by vigorous expansion (fig. 4) (Abu-Lughod 1989, 357).

For those of us working with Western and Northern Europe the picture is easily recognisable. In Anders Andrén's dissertation I have found a couple of illustrations elucidating this expansion (figs. 5–6). In these pictures we see clearly the Western European development from c. 1000 to c. 1500, showing particularly marked growth during the thirteenth century (Andrén 1985, 32 f.). This would have been even more clear if the maps had also shown places with only occasional urbanisation tendencies. In the Mediterranean area everything is much more complicated to unravel, since there is both a Roman and an Arabic heritage to take into consideration. The centuries from the tenth century onwards, however, play an important role for urbanisation. In most of Europe it is possible to trace a process that was certainly not contemporaneous, but the time lags were smaller than one might think. Urbanisation developed quickly, and in the twelfth century above all it grew in strength, to culminate in the thirteenth century.

If we then move to the coast of East Africa, we also find a chronology that in broad outline is not very different from that in Western Europe. I am thinking here of places like Ungwana, Gedi, Malindi, Kilwa and so on (fig. 7). The current datings here often suggest a beginning toward the end of the first millennium A.D., but culminating in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. The content is not very different from what we find in Western Europe: city walls, rulers' palaces, religious buildings, besides large residential areas and trading quarters (Connah 1987, 150 ff.).

This was a simple and superficial chronological comparison. If the dates are reasonably correct, it can possibly say something about contemporaneity. It does not prove anything about direct links. Yet it is nevertheless thought-provoking, particularly in the light of Abu-Lughod's thesis of a world system 1250–1350 (Her boundaries are not as sharp as her title might seem to suggest). But how can we now take this discussion further, and how can we connect it to the discussion of centre – periphery in this context?

If we want to test whether there is any link, it is natural to use this conceptual model. Yet we must not use it in a simple diffusionist system. As Abu-Lughod stresses, there is no centre from which everything proceeds, as there is in Wallerstein's world system. In fact, there are a

number of centres (cores) which in one way or another influence each other without thereby creating the relations of dependence that Wallerstein's model builds on. In certain periods these centres are in greater contact with each other and perhaps they also form more direct contacts. If we take the example of urbanisation once again, it is reasonable in the case of Western and Northern Europe, and perhaps also East Africa, to see the Mediterranean area as one such centre from which ideas were spread and where certain preconditions were set down. But the Mediterranean area was in contact with other centres far away to the east, with influences going in both directions. Perhaps it is an undercurrent like this that is the common factor. This includes the need for central places where power could be exercised, economic activity controlled, protection and defence ensured, and so on. The actual form taken by these then depends on local circumstances. In some cases the result is not even towns in the traditional sense. Other types of central place are the outcome of this process. And, as we have seen, perhaps not even central places in a geographical sense are necessary. Examples of such networks have already been mentioned. But the periphery also becomes distinct and its significance very clear.

The discussion of African urbanisation has increasingly emphasised the link between the coastal towns and the interior when it comes to the economic foundation for urbanisation. The same may also be valid for Scandinavian urbanisation. It applies not only to certain economic preconditions but also to local and regional political and administrative aspirations. This way of viewing centre – periphery may of course run the risk of turning into a totally anachronistic figure of thought in which we see the whole world united in a fine-meshed network of contacts. Naturally, that did not exist. It is necessary to apply both macro- and micro-perspectives, but in the end they must be combined.

It is nevertheless striking that this development took place simultaneously over large areas. Should we see this as a result of currents and/or influences in a boundary-transgressing context? Perhaps in an even greater context than we in Scandinavia, for instance, talk about when we stress the German influence on the organisation of the town system in the Middle

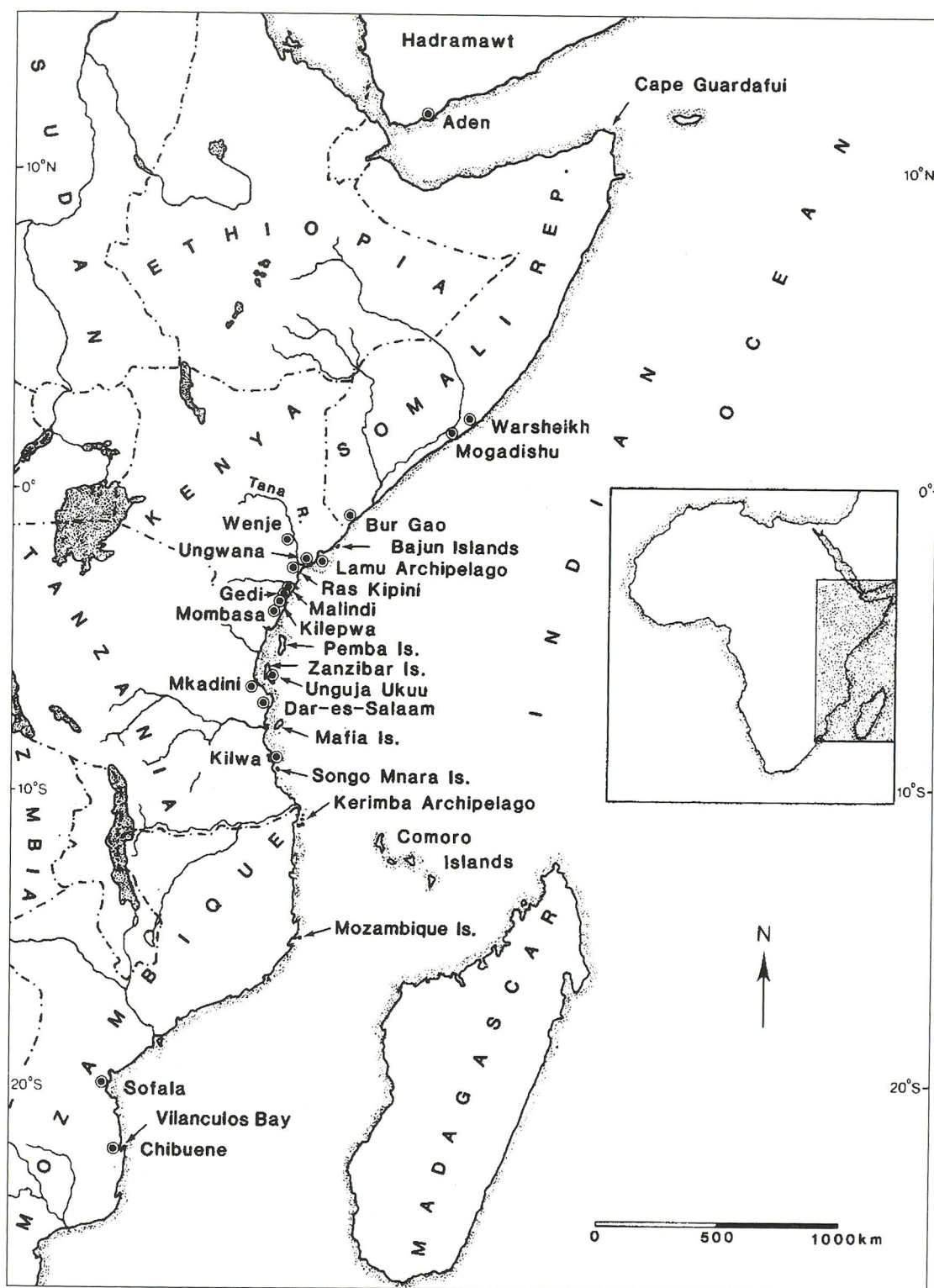


Fig. 7: Archaeological sites on the East African coast (after Connah 1987, fig. 7,1).

Ages. We should maybe broaden the perspective even more. Perhaps we are dealing with much broader contacts of various kinds, direct and indirect, which contribute to the indigenous development. If this is the case, we should probably also consider other things that happened and in some way or another wove a

fabric in which urbanisation was just one of the warp threads. It is clear that the rural village structure underwent a radical change at the same time and that medieval states began to be organised. Nothing can be seen independently of all the other things that were happening.

Summary

I have briefly outlined different levels of scale in the discussion of centre – periphery, from a local to a more global perspective. I have tried to show that the concepts of centre and periphery cannot be applied without qualification. Different realities are concealed behind them. The common factor is nevertheless that they signal some kind of contacts, in the form of giving and taking, of power, of stakeholders, of dependencies, and of communications. When employed in the right way, they give us a very useful analytical instrument, which says something important about the reality.

What can the medieval archaeologist do in all this? This research field has primarily been a battlefield for historians, social scientists, and to some extent prehistoric archaeologists. With my example of urbanisation I have tried to show that there is an area when medieval archaeological evidence plays an important role today. The urban archaeological material has created a much better foundation for further discussion of urbanisation in many respects.

It is possible, for example, to trace at least nearby contacts in the archaeological record, but we have also found material which came from far afield, and which has been studied too little. Swedish research shows clearly how our knowledge of easterly contacts has expanded in recent years, particularly as a result of studies of pottery but also of other material. Contacts with Byzantium are becoming more visible (Roslund 2001; Staecker 1999).

This is not a new way for archaeologists to work. The important thing is that, proceeding from the potential that a centre – periphery perspective can give, we can formulate the questions somewhat differently and thus reach an understanding of how the contacts took place and the character they had, and how re-

ceivers and senders were affected by the contacts, and even the degree of mutual dependence between them.

It is essential to study the foreign material in context through comparative studies of different forms of social structure: towns, villages, castles, etc. We must do this so that we do not just look at a single category; instead we should try to see common features in these different structures in society. This is a large task, too large for one individual, but appropriate for joint projects. A close-up study of, say, the form and function of urbanisation in a number of areas, both inside and outside Europe, could give us a better basis for a discussion of centre – periphery relations at different levels and in different settings. But we must never forget the whole, and the inspiration for our own thinking that comparison entails.

How can I sum up what I have been trying to say?

- medieval archaeology must break out of its national boundaries and work across them much more;
- important questions here concern dependencies, contacts, communications over areas of varying size;
- centre – periphery analyses, used with consideration for nuances, can be a good tool;
- we medieval archaeologists must also get involved in the really big discussions about these contacts and dependencies over long distances; in other words, we must relate to world system theories;
- finally, we should contemplate a European project about, for example, urbanisation covering large areas, including comparisons of driving forces, organisation, composition, topography, and chronology, and focusing on questions of centre and periphery.

Translated by Alan Crozier

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