

Leather Artefacts and Leather Working in Turku, SW Finland: Tracing the medieval technology and fashion

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Medieval Finland; leather working; shoemaking; footwear; leather artefacts

Introduction

In 1998, Turku Provincial Museum carried out an excavation on the property of the Åbo Akademi in the medieval town area of Turku, SW Finland (Fig. 1). An area covering 1,350 sq. m, with cultural layers of 3.5 m – over 4 m thick was excavated. The youngest archaeologically excavated layers and structures were from the 18th century. The oldest layers and structures are dated to the latter half of the 14th century (for the general outline of the excavation: Pihlman 1999a; Seppänen 2002; Suhonen 1999).

From the excavation, the largest assemblage of archaeological leather material in Finland up to the present, was recovered. The material will be comprised of over 10,000 accession numbers consisting of over 50,000 individual finds or fragments. The material is being catalogued and analysed. The results achieved will be part of the upcoming thesis of the author of this article, dealing with leather working and leather artefacts in medieval Turku. In the following, some aspects and preliminary inferences from the material are presented (earlier report concerning the leather material: Harjula 1999).

Leather, as well as other organic materials, such as bone, wood and textiles, were well preserved in thick organic deposits of the oldest contexts of the excavation. On the basis of the preliminary dating of the find contexts, the corpus of the leather assemblage can be dated from the earliest settlement of the area – the latter half of the 14th century – to the first half of the 15th century. From the latter half of the 15th century onwards, the number of leather finds decreases and finds from the 16th cen-

tury onwards are missing almost completely. This is mainly because of the thinness of the late medieval layers, the inorganic nature of the Modern Age layers, and also because of the disturbances of the layers of certain periods, especially of the latter half of the 16th century and younger.

The leather artefact material is comprised mostly of footwear (88%), which is typical for excavations in medieval towns with suitable preservation conditions (on the causes for the over-representation of shoes: Groenman-van Waateringe 1988, 8 f.). Other artefact types of leather are, for example, sheaths and scabbards, purses, bags and cases, bands, straps and belts, mittens, sling pouches and miscellaneous items, for example, patches, cut decorations and items of uncertain function.

In addition to these artefact groups, there is also material indicating to leather working and shoemaking in the excavated area. Skin-scraping waste and skin-scraping tools are evidence for the primal leather working. A large number of off-cuts, shoemaker's lasts and pre-forms of shoe parts are evidence of the shoemaker activity. In the following, some remarks on the above mentioned material are presented.

Footwear

The footwear terminology used in this article follows the terms of Larsen (1992) and Swann (2001). The footwear of the assemblage can be divided into three main groups. Most of the shoes are types of turnshoes. The second group consists of one-piece shoes. The third group is the pattens.

In the material, thong shoes are clearly giving way to other types of turnshoes. All thong

shoes in the assemblage are low ones. They are represented only in the oldest phase (the latter half of the 14th century) and are few in numbers even then. Thong shoes have been found from other archaeological excavations in Turku, for example, from the Old Great Market (Vanha Suurtori) and the Rettig plot (Fig. 2), where the oldest archaeological signs of town settlement from the end of the 13th century have been found (Pihlman 1999b). The thong shoe was considered to be the oldest type in Turku already by Niilo Valonen in the 1950's (Valonen 1955).

Another type of turnshoe represented in the assemblage, is a strap shoe. Their frequency seems to be greatest in the earliest phase (the latter half of the 14th century). The portion of strap shoes decreases already in the first half of the 15th century at the expense of other shoe types, especially the front laced shoe. However, strap shoes remain in use throughout the 15th century.

The most popular shoe type through the whole period from the latter half of the 14th century to the first half of the 16th century are the front-laced shoes. These can be divided into

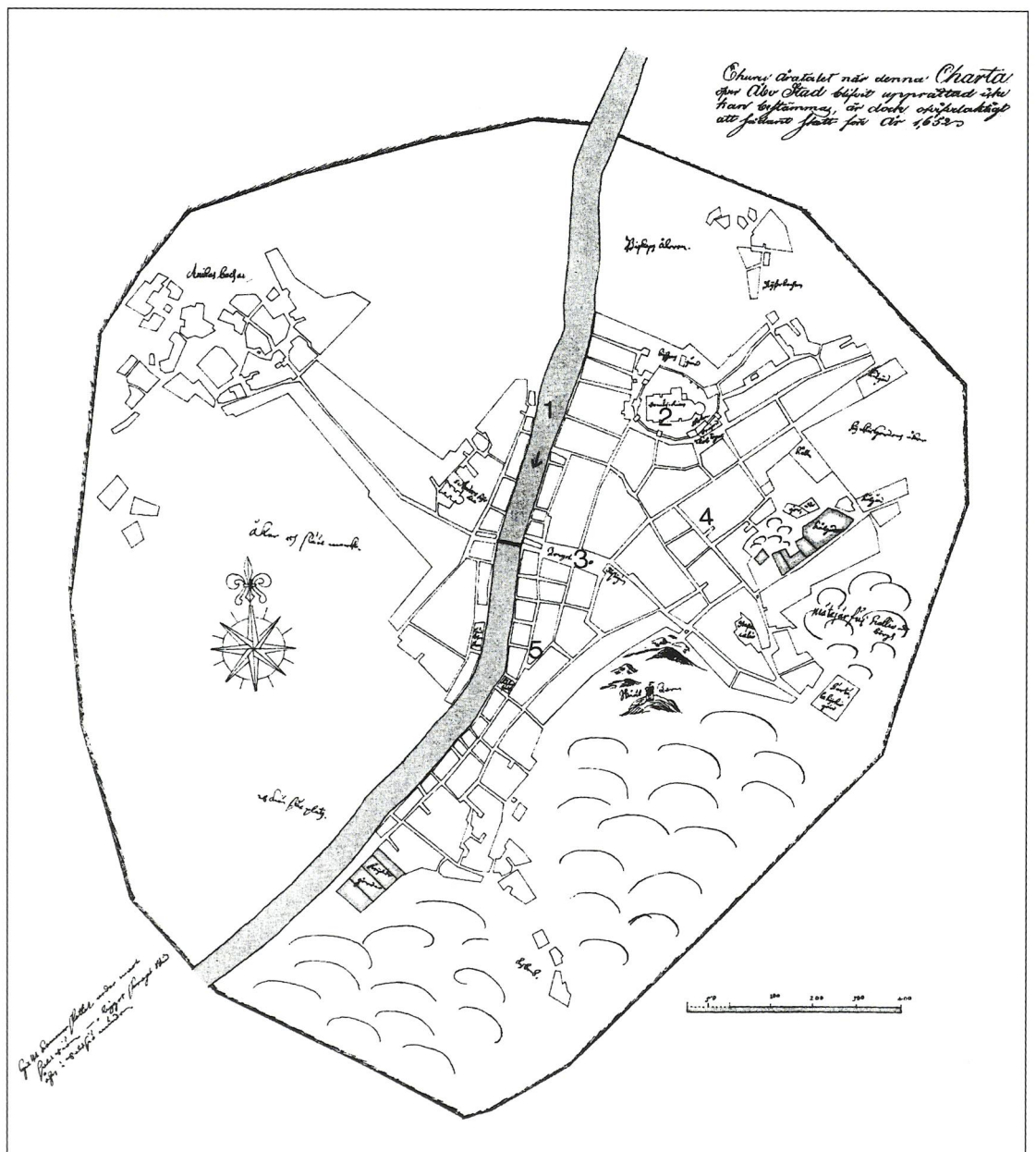


Fig. 1: Town plan of Turku in 1634 by the surveyor Olof Gangius. 1 = River Aurajoki; 2 = Cathedral; 3 = Old Great Market; 4 = Åbo Akademi plot; 5 = Rettig plot.

two groups, low and high shoes. High shoes often have a separate shaft, the upper edge of which can be decorated with indents and a row of punched decorations with different motifs.

Side-laced shoes are found in the latter half of the 14th century and the first half of the 15th century. Side-laced shoes are few in numbers compared to other turn shoe types of the assemblage.

Buckled strap-shoes already occur in the latter half of the 14th century, but they become more popular in the 15th century. The most common type is a shoe with one buckle, but also variants with a pair of buckles occur. Close parallels to buckled strap-shoes in the assemblage are found in material from Helgeandsholmen, Stockholm (Zerpe/Fredriksson 1982, 224).

The boots are of three types. Front-laced boots, toggle-fastened boots and high boots with a separate vamp part. Of the children's shoes the toggle-fastened boots, probably used in winter, are most common.

As to material, there are also shoes which can be categorized as one-piece shoes (Fig. 2). These are, so far, the only medieval one-piece shoes found in Finland, but close parallels can be found in the Baltic area and Russia in the Middle Ages (Bebre 1983, 1997; Izjumova 1959; Sarv 2000, 83). The one-piece shoes from Turku seem to be handicraft of good quality, and are probably professionally made, except for one shoe, which is a children's shoe made from a piece of re-used leather, originally a shoe shaft. One-piece shoes of this assemblage can be dated from the latter half of the 14th century to the 15th century.

In addition to the above-mentioned shoe types, there is also one wooden patten. This was made from a single piece of wood and has two stilts. In the assemblage, there are also straps from over 40 pattens. Over half of the patten straps are decorated, usually with carving, scraping or with stitches.

Elaborately decorated pattens have been considered fashion accessories to protect the feet and shoes of the well-to-do (Grew/Neergard 1988, 91). In the assemblage in question, highly decorated straps seem to be more frequent at the end of the 14th century than in the 15th century. Straps from the contexts, dated to the 15th century, have a simple decoration or no decoration. This could be con-



nected to the use of pattens becoming more widespread in the 15th century. There are also some long-toed shoe soles from the so called 'poulaines', from the late 14th and the first half of the 15th centuries. These can also be connected to the fashion phenomenon of the upper strata of society.

Fig. 2: A one-piece shoe (NE509160) from the assemblage. From the context of the late 14th century. (Photo: Maarit Ahola / Turku Provincial Museum).

Some remarks on other artefact groups

The second largest leather artefact group after footwear are the knife sheaths and scabbards. Many knife sheaths in the assemblage have some kind of decoration. The techniques used have been engraving and stamping. Common decoration motifs are linear, lattice, plaits (engraving) and dots and rings (stamping). Sword scabbards have simple decoration or are plain. In the material, there are also some sling pouches. Four of these are made from re-used leather and one is cut from a hide. Whether these are children's toys or weapons, used, for example, in fowling, is difficult to determine on the basis of the artefacts. The same artefact could have functioned well as a children's toy and as a weapon. Moreover, playing/practising with weapons has also been part of the enculturation process of a child in medieval Europe. An intriguing artefact group is the leather cases, one of which contained a set of seven wooden wax tablets for writing (Fig. 3). In addition to the case with the tablets, there are at least three other cases with probably the same function. The cases for wax tablets have parallels in Europe, recent publications are from Iceland (Hallgrímsdóttir 1991; Sigurðardóttir

1991) and York (O'Connor/Tweddle 1992). All the cases in the assemblage are of elaborate handicraft. The investigation of their origin and a closer study of the cases themselves has yet to be made. Along with many stylus finds, the cases emphasise the significance of reading and writing also in medieval Turku.

Leather working

Literal sources concerning leather working in medieval Turku are very sparse. Only three shoemakers are mentioned in documents. The first mention is from the first half of the 14th century and the other two from the first half of the 15th century. Furthermore, a belt-maker is mentioned in the middle of the 14th century (Kallioinen 2000, 289–305). These craftsmen are identified by their names. The documents do not tell us anything of what comes to the practising of their profession. The artefacts of the assemblage are for the most part rubbish, cast away by the town dwellers and thus cannot be connected to the possible leather artefact manufacturing in the area. It cannot be assumed that the products of handicraft would end up in the same contexts where they were made. However, in the archaeological material discussed here, there is evidence which clearly indicates leather working in the area or in the near vicinity. There is a large amount of skin-scraping waste from the earliest contexts of the excavation. According to the preliminary test carried out, the scraping waste derives from vegetable tanned leathers. Thus, the waste might be connected to skin-scraping after the initial tanning phase or to the phase after the tanning process when the skin was pared down to the required thickness. The skin-scraping of iron also belongs to the primal leather working.

A large number of leather off-cuts from the second half of the 14th century and the first half of the 15th century indicate shoemaking or some other kind of leather artefact manufacturing. On the basis of the shape, at least part of the off-cut material derives from shoemaking. Also two shoemaker's lasts and possible pre-forms or cutting models for soles (sole shaped leather pieces without stitches) are evidence for shoemaking.

The material, indicating to shoemaking and leather working in general, needs further

study, especially concerning the distribution of the material both in time and space. However, so far at least one concentration of off-cuts can be connected to a building or building complex (dated to the early 15th century) with a possible tanning vat.

Import versus local manufacturing

The question of local manufacturing and imported artefacts is a difficult one to solve. Because of the lack of documents concerning the production or merchandise of leather artefacts, the conclusions must be based on the artefacts themselves. Certain items, such as the above mentioned leather cases with close parallels in Europe, are easy to interpret as im-



Fig. 3: A leather case (NE209210) from the context of the late 14th century. The case contained seven wooden wax tablets of beech (*Fagus*) for writing. Both sides of the case are decorated with stylised bird motifs, peacocks? There were remnants of orpiment and cinnabar pigments on the figures, so they were originally painted, most probably orange and red. (Pigment analysis: Seppo Hornytzkyj, Finnish National Gallery, Laboratory of Material Research; Preliminary identification of wood: Tuuli Timonen, Botanical Museum, Finnish Museum of Natural History; Photo: Maarit Ahola / Turku Provincial Museum).

ports, either as merchandise or personal belongings. In both cases their origin is most probably abroad. The problem is more complex when it comes to, for example, footwear or knife sheaths.

One solution, and probably the only possibility to solve the question could be a detailed comparison between artefacts found in Finland and abroad. Variants with no parallels abroad and maybe with an exceptional manufacturing technique could be classified as local

manufacture. Artefacts with close parallels abroad, concerning manufacturing technique or style, could be of foreign origin. Of course, the problems related to the criticism of sources are many. Ideas, patterns and the craftsmen themselves moved from one area to another. The high proportion of foreign citizens in Turku in the Middle Ages is well known. Thus, distinguishing an imported product and a local product made with a pattern from abroad remains a difficult task.

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