

The houses of townsmen in medieval Turku (14th–16th century) some aspects on the living conditions and town planning

Liisa Seppänen

14th–16th century; Turku; wooden building; construction; town planning

The paper presents an entity of medieval wooden buildings in the central town area of Turku (south-western Finland) found during the excavations in the end of 1990's. The excavated area covered nearly 1300 square meters and revealed the remains of several dwelling houses and other buildings. The focus of the paper is on the changes in the building stock, the use of space and the living conditions in that area. Other topics discussed are the urban elements and town planning of the area and the social structure of the inhabitants.

Introduction

The Provincial Museum of Turku conducted archaeological excavations in the central town area of Turku, (south-western Finland) in 1998. The excavated area, which is the site of the main building of Åbo Akademi, covered nearly 1300 square metres, but unfortunately the construction work done in the early 20th century had destroyed about 300 square metres of the research area. The thickness of the preserved cultural layers was approximately 3.5–4 meters. The area is situated about 150 meters south from the cathedral and 100 meters southeast from the Old Great Market (Vanha Suurtori/Gamla Stortorget) on the eastern bank of the Aura river. During the Middle Ages, this area was the northernmost part of the Mätäjärvi quarter, the name of which originates from the gradually overgrown lake that became isolated from the sea around 500 AD. By the late Middle Ages, the Mätäjärvi lake was nothing but a moist wasteland, probably used as a dumping area by the neighbouring settlement (Salonen et al. 1989, 172–173).

Due to the earlier littoral nature of the surrounding area the soil was very moist in the Middle Ages, which most likely complicated the use of the area, and affected the construction activities and the chosen building techniques. The habitation of this area began at the end of the 14th century and according to the present interpretation, within the following time period of 150 years there were four distinctive building phases.

Especially the oldest medieval layers revealed well-preserved remains of several dwelling houses, warehouses, wells, fences and pavements as well an abundance of various find materials. Most of the buildings and constructions were made of wood and the only stone building found probably dates from the 17th century.

The oldest inhabitation

The foundation of Turku in south-western Finland is a question that has been tried to solve since the end of the 19th century. The oldest evidence of the existence of the town, the town seal, is attached to a document dated to 1309 (Gardberg 1971, 220; FMU 259), but the first documentary mentions of the town and its privileges derive from 1323 and 1324 (Pihlman/Kostet 1986, 8; REA 34 and 36). According to some previous researchers, Turku gradually developed and expanded from the nucleus born around the cathedral in the first half of the 13th century (Gardberg 1969, 36; Rinne 1952, 179). This hypothesis was quite widely accepted and redistributed almost as an evidenced fact up to the 1990s. Markus Hiekkänen has recently presented a hypothesis, that Turku was actually founded some-

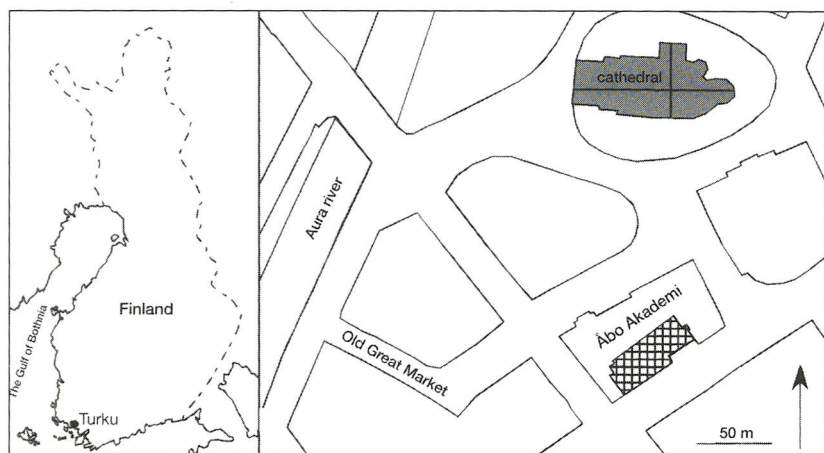


Fig. 1: The map presenting Turku, Finland and the excavated area (marked with a hatch) in the centre of Turku.

where between the 1280s and 1290s, and that the area of its habitation at that time reached farther than was previously assumed. He mainly bases this argument on the studies concerning the distribution and dating of the ceramics presented by Aki Pihlman (Pihlman 1995), and on the evaluation of the findings from the archaeological excavations conducted in the central town area (Hiekkanen 2001, 627; 2002).

The prehypothesis concerning the area under examination in this paper was that it had been inhabited during the 14th century, and the excavations proved this to be the case – the oldest dwelling houses and other structures belonging to it have dendrochronologically been dated to the 1360s (Zetterberg 2000). Unfortunately, some of the structures could only be partially exposed, but most likely around this time at least three dwelling houses were built in the area. Almost all the medieval wooden buildings were constructed using a simple corner-joint technique, the use of which has continued in some forms up to the present. The same kind of technique was used in the late Iron Age, and according to recent research, simple joint constructions have been known in Finland already during the Late Neolithic period (Leskinen 2002).

The simplest housetype of the area had only one room with a fireplace in the corner. One of the oldest houses consisted of two separate rooms with one of the rooms being heatable. The size of the dwelling room was only about 11 square metres, and the fireplace was situated in the corner beside the doorway. Unfortunately the other room was partly destroyed so that only about 5 square metres of it was preserved. There were two separate doorways

leading to each room, and there was no evidence of a doorway in the partition wall between the rooms.

The dwelling room did not have any proper floor constructions, but part of the room had been covered with short boards. However, the other room had a proper floor made of narrow logs supported with joists. A further similar floor level was constructed on top of this earlier one later on, using the same technique. The dwelling houses of the area normally had floors made of planks or narrow logs, but no floors made of stone were found. Anyhow, there is evidence of stone floors also in Turku from the Middle Ages. The excavations conducted in the summer of 2001 in the town area (the Rettig's slope) ca. 300 meters southwest from this area revealed two houses interpreted as bathing houses or warehouses with a floor made of flagstones (pers. comm. Saloranta 2002).

According to this material, the use of joists in Turku can be traced at least to the end of the 14th century, even though there were differences in floors of buildings in the same area within the same period. The oldest buildings were built directly on the soil without any proper foundations, but normally the floors were grounded with a thin layer of sand, and this practice continued all through the Middle Ages. The chinks of the logs were filled with moss, and in some cases the walls were sealed up with clay from the outside. Sheets of birch bark, used as insulation to prevent the lowest logs and floors from decaying, were also found in their original contexts. The evidence of the roof material was very limited. The roofs were

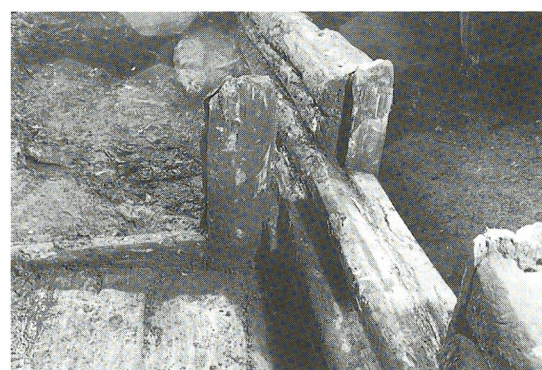


Fig 2: The doorway from outside leading to the dwelling room. To secure more economical heating, the doorways were laid 20–30 cm above the floor level (Photo: Liisa Seppänen 1998, Provincial Museum of Turku).

most likely made of peat and beams lined with birch bark.

Next to the single room house there was a farmyard with an approximate size of 30 square metres. The farmyard was at least partly surrounded by a fence on the other side of which there was a building for livestock and a draw well. The soil containing manure and bone material gave proof for a variety of animal husbandry. The bone material of this yard has been analysed, and the material (236 kg) contained mainly domestic nutrient species such as bovines, pigs, sheep, goats and hens. According to the material, many animals had been slaughtered young and used for food and the production of hides (Tourunen 2002).

All in all, there were at least four different dwelling houses in the area at the end of the 14th century. In general, the outbuildings belonging to the dwelling houses were quite well constructed and also the size seems to be quite comparable to a single dwelling room. There was one building for livestock, the size of which was about 17 square metres. Unfortunately, the dwelling house next to it remained partly uncovered and the size and the type of it could not be defined.

Inhabitation and building activity intensifies

According to the dendrochronological analysis, the next building phase of the area can be traced to around the first decade of the 15th century. During this time the area be-

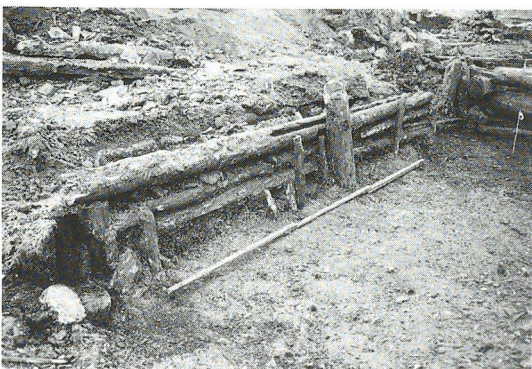
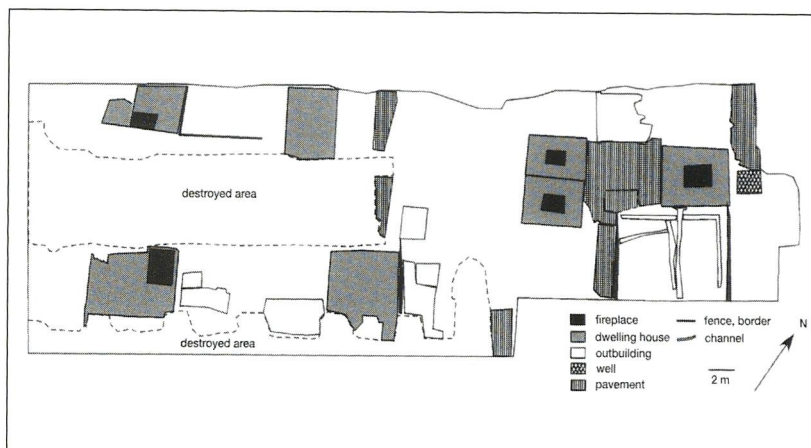


Fig. 3: The yard from end of the 14th century to the beginning of the 15th century was partly surrounded by a fence made of brushwood and slender tree trunks supported by small posts (Photo: Janne Harjula 1998, Provincial Museum of Turku).



came more densely built than before. Some of the new dwelling houses were built upon the older houses using their levelled remains as groundings. The size of the buildings and rooms grew slightly, compared to the buildings from the previous phase. There was one dwelling house with an approximate size of 42 square metres, but the room division of the house could not be solved due to the incomplete state of preservation.

The first distinct remains of a privy were also unearthed from this period. The seat cover of the privy was found inside an oblong narrow floorless crib which was partly built on top of an older warehouse, the structures of which functioned as groundings for the crib. The privy was situated on a yard next to the house mentioned above.

The housetypes used were a single and a two-room house with a fireplace in the corner. From this period there is also a two-room house with a fireplace in both rooms. It is also notable that the fireplaces were situated in the centre of the room. It is interpreted that the fireplaces were not in use simultaneously, but the older one was covered when a new fireplace was built into the other room. Belonging to the same plot, there was also a workshop consisting of a room with a fireplace situated in the centre. The frame of the building had been partly built on subterranean posts which were isolated from the lowest horizontal logs by slagstones. This building has been dendrochronologically dated to the beginning of the 15th century (Zetterberg 2000, 6), and it probably functioned as a shoemaker's workshop. The yard between these two buildings was completely covered with thick logs based on the joists. On the uncovered side of the

Fig. 4: The drawing presents the houses, outbuildings, pavements and other constructions in the period of the early 15th century. The two separate sections of the excavated area which were completely destroyed in the construction work done in the early 20th century are shown with the dashed line.

yard there were remains of small frames made of planks and posts, which possibly had been used as drying racks for hides. Next to the workshop there was a wooden channel system and a well made of a half-timber construction with horizontal wall timbers fitted into grooves on framing posts. This kind of technique was only used for two wells and the privy mentioned above, otherwise the dominating technique was the edge-joint technique as nearly everywhere in the Baltic region at this time. The animal husbandry still had some importance in the activities of this phase, but its meaning probably diminished due to more productive activities such as shoemaking, tanning, textile dyeing and weaving. Concluding from the rich and versatile material it seems very likely that some sort of commercial activities were also practised in the area. As a whole, the functions of different houses and the organisation of the whole area seem to be more developed than in the end of the 14th century.

Changes in the town planning and house types

More distinctive changes in the buildings and town planning seem to have happened during the first half of the 15th century. The area was partly rebuilt around the 1430's and 1440's, probably due to the fires that have been mentioned in some documents (Dahlström 1929, 265–266; Kuujo 1985, 178; REA 514, 522; FMU 1902).

The twin cabin, a building with two rooms and an entrance room between them, was a new house type of this period. The one room served as a storage room or as a workshop while the other one was reserved for residential use mainly. The size of the single rooms varied from 17 square metres up to 26 square metres remaining more or less the same as in the previous building phase. However, due to the entrance room the size of the buildings even grew to 63 square metres. The first evidence of the use of corner stones as basements derive from these buildings but otherwise the buildings do not represent any further technical advancements.

There is also the first evidence of a street paved with stones from this period. This street lay between two buildings both of which rep-

resented the twin cabin type. The one building was parallel to the street, but the other instead faced the street sideways. The street had been divided lengthwise into two equal parts and the half next to the bigger building was paved with cobblestones while the other half was paved with planks. Later on, toward the end of the Middle Ages, the same street had been totally paved with cobblestones.

The end of the 15th century showed the next building phase which did not bring any remarkable changes in the building stock. The only visible technical advancement concerned using a row of stones as a basement of a dwelling house. The cultural layers were distinctively thinner than earlier and the soil was more minerogenic which has affected the state of the conservation of the material as a whole.

In general, the same place has been in the same use for the whole medieval period, meaning that a new dwelling house replacing the older one was built nearly identically on the same place, and correspondingly, the same yard areas have been reserved for animal husbandry, household activities or waste management. Although the functions were more centered, and the use of space was more intimate and confined than in the countryside, this kind of medieval town yard probably contained basically the same elements as the corresponding rural yard.

The social structure of the inhabitants

With the help of buildings, yards and find material one can draw conclusions of the sources of livelihood and the standard of living in the area. Animal husbandry brought only certain self-sufficiency as far as meat, dairy products and wool was concerned, but most likely the major part of the food consumed was produced in the surrounding countryside. The material evidence suggests that also fishing and hunting of small game belonged to the life of a town dweller.

The organised structure of the building stock and especially the find material suggest that the inhabitants of the area were quite well-off or at least far above their subsistence level. Activities of professional or semi-professional craftsmanship characterise this area as a middle-class residential area. This kind of inter-

pretation is also supported by plenty of evidence from writing and counting abilities, the mastery of which was necessary on a certain level to self-employed professionals and tradesmen. Imported goods and luxury items give reference that these people had at least materially tried to present their capacity as a member of the community or even to rise above their actual social status.

The most likely explanation for the solely wooden constructions in this area is that the

moist soil was not suitable for the construction of stone buildings which are recorded from the medieval Turku as well. Furthermore, it is likely that the construction was affected by the functions and the ethnicity of the people inhabiting the area. Though foreign people and contacts influenced and formed the ongoing urbanisation process of the town, it seems that it was not only divided into ecclesiastical and secular sections, but also according to the population and its activities.

Bibliography

- Dahlström 1929 S. Dahlström, "Åbo brand 1827. Studier i Åbo stads byggnadshistoria intill 1843 I", in: *Bidrag till Åbo stads historia*, Andra serien XIV, Åbo 1929.
- Gardberg 1969 C. J. Gardberg, "Den medeltida stadsplanen i Åbo", in: *Åbo Stads Historiska Museum Årsskrift* 32–39, 1968/1969.
- Gardberg 1971 C. J. Gardberg, "Turun kaupungin historia 1100-luvun puolivälistä vuoteen 1366", in: *Turun kaupungin historia kivikaudesta vuoteen 1366*, Turku 1971.
- FMU I *Finlands Medeltidsurkunder. Samlande och i tryck utgifna av Finlands Statsarkiv genom Reinh. Hausen I. B 1400*, Helsingfors 1910.
- FMU II *Finlands Medeltidsurkunder. Samlande och i tryck utgifna av Finlands Statsarkiv genom Reinh. Hausen II. 1401–1430*, Helsingfors 1915.
- Hiekkanen 2001 M. Hiekkanen, "Domestic Building Remains in Turku, Finland", in: *Lübecker Kolloquium zur Stadtarchäologie im Hanseraum III*, Lübeck 2001, 627–633.
- Hiekkanen 2002 M. Hiekkanen, "Die Gründung der Stadt Turku", in: *Civitas et castrum ad Maris Baltici. Questions on the archaeology and history of the Baltic in the Iron Age and Middle Ages. A collection of articles dedicated to Dr. habil. hist. Prof. Andris Caune, member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences on his 65th birthday* (in print).
- Kuujo 1985 E. Kuujo, *Åbo stads historia 1366–1521*, Åbo 1985.
- Leskinen 2002 S. Leskinen, "The Late Neolithic house at Rusavierto", in: *Huts and Houses. Stone Age and Early Metal Age Buildings in Finland* (in print).
- Pihlman/Kostet 1986 A. Pihlman/J. Kostet, *Turku*, (= Keskiajan kaupungit 3. Varhainen kaupungistumiskehitys ja nykyinen suunnittelu), Turun maakuntamuseo 1986.
- Pihlman 1995 A. Pihlman, *Keskiaikaiset savi- ja puuastiat Turun kaupungissa ja Turun linnassa*, Unpublished licentiate's dissertation at the University of Turku, institute of archaeology.
- REA *Registrum Ecclesiae Aboensis eller Åbo Domkyrkans Svartbok*, Facsimile version with addition to the 1890 edition, National Archives of Finland 1996.
- Rinne 1952 J. Rinne, "Turun tuomiokirkko hiippakunnan hallinnon elimenä", *Turun tuomiokirkko keskiaikana III*, Turku 1952.
- Salonen/Räsänen/
Terho 1989 V. P. Salonen/M. Räsänen/A. Terho, "Mätäjärven paleolimnologinen kehitys/ Mätäjärvis paleolimnologiska evolution", in: *Turun Mätäjärvi/Mätäjärvi i Åbo* (= Raportteja/Rapport 10), 169 B 176, Turun maakuntamuseo/Åbo landskapsmuseum, 1989.

- Tourunen 2002 A. Tourunen, *Karjanhoito keskiajan Turussa. Arkeo-osteologinen analyysi Åbo Akademin tontin eläinluuaineistosta*. Unpublished master's thesis at the University of Turku, institute of archaeology.
- Zetterberg 2000 P. Zetterberg, "Åbo Akademin päärakennuksen tontin (Turku/I/74) arkeologisen kaivauksen puulöytöjen dendrokronologinen iänmääritys, osa I: ajoitusnäytteet FIT6601-FIT6625", in: *Dendrokronologian laboratorion ajoitusseleste 175*. Joensuun yliopisto, Karjalan tutkimuslaitos, ekologian osasto, dendrokronologian laboratorio.

Address

Liisa Seppänen
Department of Cultural Studies/Archaeology University of Turku
Itäinen Pitkätie 1, FIN-20014 Turku
liseppa@utu.fi