

# The Aboa Vetus Excavation

Minna Sartes

*Finland; Turku; medieval; excavation; museum*

## The medieval town of Turku

Turku lies on the south-west coast of Finland. In 1229, the country's cathedral and the bishop's residence were moved to Koroinen, which lies about two kilometres upriver from the medieval centre of Turku. During the 13th century, the vessels of German merchants grew larger and it was no longer possible for them to sail that far upriver. The Germans were the first to settle in the area of Unikankare, which was to become the centre of medieval Turku. In the 1280s, construction began on the new cathedral in the Unikankare area, at the mouth of the river Aurajoki construction of a stone castle began, the first in Finland.

When the cathedral was ready in 1300, Turku began to grow quickly and soon became the most important merchant centre in Finland. The oldest part of the town grew around the cathedral. There was also a Dominican convent one kilometre downriver from the cathedral.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the town spread from the cathedral to the convent. This new area was called the Convent Quarter and this is where the Aboa Vetus excavation was carried out and where the Aboa Vetus Museum, built around the excavated remains, is now situated. Aboa Vetus means 'Old Turku' in Latin.

During the 15th century Turku was among the three largest cities in the Swedish realm, Stockholm being the capital and the largest city. There is no information about the population of the two second largest cities, Turku and Kalmar, but both had a built up area of around 15 hectares.

The great fire of Turku in 1827 and the subsequent new rectangular town plan totally de-

stroyed medieval Turku, and today no medieval part of the town remains to be seen. This is why urban excavations are so important for the study of medieval Turku. The Aboa Vetus Museum is also significant because it offers the opportunity to see centuries-old buildings and their various components in their original state.

## Archaeological research in Turku

The value of Turku's medieval heritage began to be appreciated in the late nineteenth century, when observations concerning old buildings discovered during excavation work were first recorded. Around the turn of the century, historian J.W. Ruuth and archaeologist Juhani Rinne carried out extensive studies of the medieval town plan and related buildings. The decades of research carried out by Rinne in Turku included the cathedral, the Turku castle, the convent of St. Olaf, and also stone buildings at the present site of Aboa Vetus, conducted e.g. in 1928 when the Rettig residence was built.

Archaeological research declined in Turku after Rinne's activities, owing to different kinds of interests among later archaeologists. In the 1950s, Niilo Valonen conducted an excavation in connection with the construction of a long sewer drain along the east bank of the Aurajoki river. The material documented by him still remains to be studied in its entirety. Since the 1970s, there have been several excavations, among which the Aboa Vetus excavation is especially extensive for Finnish conditions. More important than the actual size of the excavated area, however, is the fact that the site was originally in the centre of the old town of Turku.

The Aboa Vetus excavation is the first one in Turku to have revealed as many as twenty components of masonry buildings, several wooden structures, two sections of streets, several lanes and one large square.

## The Aboa Vetus excavation

Excavations in the area of the present Aboa Vetus Museum started when the Matti Koivurinta Foundation, which is a private foundation in Turku, purchased a large building called the Rettig Palace in the centre of Turku in 1991. The original plan was to renovate the building for the foundation's art collection. During the renovation work, which included building a storage room for the works of art, the first ruins were discovered. The renovation work was halted and the foundation had to rethink its plans. In the end, after negotiations with the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Antiquities, a decision was made to conduct a large archaeological excavation and to build two museums instead of one art museum: a museum of contemporary art, and a museum of archaeology and history.

The remains at the site are very well preserved, because Hans von Rettig built his residence in the area in 1928. The foundation for the building was excavated with spades and shovels. The old cultural layers and structures that did not have to be removed were left in place. After the Rettig Palace was completed, structures remained protected under the grounds of the large walled-in garden that was laid at the site. In many other places in the old centre, medieval remains and layers have been destroyed by building activity.

In 1992 and 1993 the Turku Provincial Museum carried out excavations in the garden of the residence on the side of the Turku Cathedral, where the entrance hall to both museums is now situated. These investigations revealed streets belonging to the medieval town plan, flanked by rows of masonry cellars with vaulted ceilings. A section of the medieval Jokikatu street, running for several dozen metres, was excavated.

The National Board of Antiquities took over the excavation in the early winter of 1994. A research plan was drawn up. It consisted of various scientific methods of analysis and dating. Archaeological excavation was intensive and lasted for the whole year of 1994.

The excavated sections were once among the most densely populated parts of medieval Turku, inhabited by wealthy merchants and craftsmen. Urban settlement had spread into this area from the vicinity of the cathedral by the 14th century, or slightly earlier. The area is located about 400 metres from the cathedral. The total size of the excavated areas is circa 1200 square metres.

## Results from the Aboa Vetus excavation

In describing some of the preliminary results from the excavation I shall concentrate on the main structures discovered.

When excavations began at the Aboa Vetus site in April 1994, the surface layers of the garden were excavated with a small excavator. The remains of a building which was torn down in 1928 and which had already been excavated with an excavator by the Turku Provincial Museum in 1993 were discovered. These remains, most recently used as the cellars of a tobacco factory, were in use for a long period of time, dating from the Middle Ages to the 20th century.

At the depth of one metre, the first fixed remains came to light. A terrace or an embankment wall of large stones, flanking one side of a square paved with cobblestones was among the first discovered structures. The other side of the square was bordered by the building complex that had last served as the tobacco factory. This square is shown in a map of the area drawn by surveyors during the Russian occupation of 1743. The excavated area is so large, that we can gain important information about the scale of the Russian map.

Most of the stone wall and the paved area were removed in the excavation, although a part of the wall and the pavement were left in place to indicate the eighteenth-century street level on the site.

After the removal of the eighteenth-century structures, the excavation became even more exciting. The oldest available map of Turku is from 1634, but it does not show individual buildings as in the 1743 map drawn by the Russians. Consequently, there was no prior information on possible structures in the area. Furthermore, the Russian map shows a large area uphill from the wall that was marked as a

vegetable garden, so it was not certain whether there would be anything of particular historic interest in the lower strata.

However, not long after the removal of the wall and the cobbled pavement, large grey stone components of walls and vaults began to appear. The excavation gradually brought to light an ensemble of several cellars mostly constructed of grey stone. These building components were flanked by an old narrow street. On the other side of the street was the building of the tobacco factory. Accordingly, the edge of the seventeenth-century street and the eighteenth-century square coincided. The street is shown in the map from 1634. The most significant discovery in the building complex was a stone-vaulted cellar measuring 8 x 15 metres, originally belonging to a building of at least two storeys. Special features of this building include several large windows and the presumably one-room plan of the second floor. The room would thus have had a floor area of approximately 120 square metres. Except for the medieval town hall, rooms of similar size are not known from Turku. Results from dendrochronological analysis show that the trees used in the wooden foundation of the house were felled in 1411. It is probable that the house was built soon after. This building complex, and the street, were buried probably in the middle of the 17th century, and the square was built on top of them.

The earliest phase of the building complex was most probably erected in the early 15th century, at which stage remains of older occupation on the site were buried or destroyed. There is, however, evidence of older history at a location that is south-west of the stone building. Here the occupation layers were excavated down to the underlying clay. Unfortunately, this area is not very large, and many of the structures and features were damaged when the fifteenth-century building was erected. They also extend to the south-east beyond the site. Signs of earlier occupation include the remains of at least two separate wooden houses or buildings. A great deal of medieval objects and artefacts were also recovered from this area.

#### *Address*

Minna Sartes  
Nova Museum in Turku  
It. Rantak 4-6, FIN-2700 Turku  
minna.sartes@aboavetusarsnova.fi

In connection with the excavation, research has been conducted by:

Supervisor: Docent Markus Hiekkanen;  
Archaeobotany: Dr Terttu Lempiäinen;  
Arthropod studies: Anssi Junnila, MSc;  
Conservation of building remains:  
Mirja Kanerva, MA;  
Dendrochronology: Pentti Zetterberg, Lic.Phil.;  
Head archaeologist: Minna Sartes, MA;  
Mortar analysis: Dr Thurborg von Konow;  
Osteology: Hannu Poutiainen, MA;  
Palynology: Docent Irmeli Vuorela;  
Radiocarbon dating: Docent Högne Jungner;  
Stone buildings and 3D modelling: Docent Kari Uotila.

### Reconstructions of the site and its surroundings

Since we do not have a medieval part of the city left to be seen today, we are trying to reconstruct it with a computer. All structures are recorded with a computer-assisted three-dimensional documentation and they can be added directly to the current survey and mapping system of the City of Turku. New technology also permits studies of parts of Turku beneath the existing urban fabric, as it is now possible to map buildings precisely and establish the locations of past streets and houses under the ground. A digitised database containing the structures in the area of the Aboa Vetus museum and all other old stone buildings in Turku has been launched – a unique venture for Finland. The database will make it possible for the first time to study the whole medieval town plan of Turku and to create simulations and reconstructions of the development of the town. Results from scientific research will also be used to help the reconstruction. Research related to 3D computer reconstructions is carried out by Docent Kari Uotila, who is also studying the stone structures revealed by the Aboa Vetus excavation within the Finnish Virtual Archaeology (SuVi) project that is also presented in the poster session of the Medieval Europe Basel 2002 congress.