

The Danish Medieval Town

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In 1977 *Statens Humanistiske Forskningsråd*, the Danish Research Council for the Humanities, initiated a research project called *Middelalderbyen*, the Medieval town. The scope of the project was to analyze the physical town, trying to trace the development in the plans of eleven Medieval Danish towns. The following will be a summary of the background of this project, its beginning and programme, and finally of some of the results.

In the early 16th century Denmark was densely dotted with towns, especially along the coasts of Kattegat, the straits and the Baltic Sea. In fact, only eleven of a total of c. ninety did not have a neighbouring town within a distance of 30 km or roughly 20 miles.

The c. ninety late Medieval towns (the "c." accounting for some towns with only a short lifespan) lay within the realm of the late Viking Age kings, which remained the core of the Danish kingdom all through the Middle Ages. But only c. 65 of the towns lay within the borders of present-day Denmark. The territories east of the Sound were ceded to Sweden in 1660, and Schleswig was conquered by Germany in 1864 and only partly recovered in 1920 after a plebiscite. To describe the urbanization of Medieval Denmark, one has to take the whole kingdom into consideration. But the more detailed Danish research is apt to confine itself to the modern Danish state.

The Medieval period in Denmark counted as the centuries between the Viking Age and the Renaissance. The time limits are, of course, slightly fluid. The Church established a Medieval trait in the late Viking Age, and Renaissance thinking had begun to influence Danish minds in the late Middle Ages. But generally speaking, the Middle Ages are the period from the mid-11th century to 1536 when the Reformation of the Church put an end to so many of the important Medieval institutions.

Towns, being centres of human habitation, early attracted the interest of historians. In some towns the tradition of historical research goes back to the 18th century. A wave of patriotism after the Schleswig wars (mid-19th century) combined with the re-urbanization due to industrialization promoted the tradition, and the work was carried out by enthusiastic, and sometimes very knowledgeable, amateurs. Nearly all Danish towns had their history written in the late 19th century or at least before the Second World War.



III.: Denmark's boroughs around 1536, shown with a 15 km zone around each. Reproduced from V. Lorenzen, *Vore Byer*, København 1947.

The source material employed by the local historians was mostly written sources to the extent such originals or transcripts were available locally. The archaeological sources in a modern sense were hardly understood and only extant Medieval buildings and in some cases ruins were taken into account. Though Danish prehistoric archaeologists in this period were considered pioneers, developing excavation methods and interpretations, the concept of stratigraphy and typology of objects did not influence Medieval archaeology. Stray observations of odd structures were sometimes recorded, but only rarely systematically collected. Investigations which included digging at some sites of major monuments as castles or monasteries were primarily aimed at unearthing walls. Such excavations were carried out by the staff of *Nationalmuseet*, the National Museum (Copenhagen).

Some of those employed in investigations and photographic documentation of the old townscape ventured out to write the first surveys of Medieval Danish urbanization and town development, e. g. Hugo Matthiessen and Vilhelm Lorenzen. For decades their observations and points of view strongly influenced the debate, although historians tended to diverge from discussing cities to discussing the concept of the city, town definitions etc. The tail-end of this attitude is found in *Urbaniseringsprosessen i Norden 1. Middelaldersteder* (Oslo, 1977), the proceedings of the 17th Meeting of Nordic Historians.

In the 1950s it became clear that information revealed from the underground of the towns could be added to the source material in the archives. The first excavation applying methods borrowed from the prehistoric archaeology was carried out in Ribe in 1953, and soon other excavations followed. The building boom in the 1960s induced the risk of losing enormous amounts of archaeological information; but then legislation, the Conservation of Nature Act of 1969 with its section 49 on rescue excavations, facilitated the conditions for rescue excavations and thus also to some degree archaeological work in the towns.

Rescue excavations tend to be random excavations. The post-excavational work presses itself on with great force and may threaten to engulf much of the resources, both concerning manpower and economy. One way to economize, at least in the long run, and at the same time increase the scientific profit, is to stress what could be called pre-excavational work. This was the conclusion reached in 1976 by a group of students at the then quite young *Lærestolen for Middelalderarkæologi*, Moesgård, the department of Medieval archaeology at *Aarhus Universitet*. The student group had made a case-study using Horsens as an example. This work is to be considered a pilot-project for the *projekt Middelalderbyen*. *Projekt Middelalderbyen* was financially supported by the Research Council which appointed a steering committee with members repre-

senting Medieval research in universities, archives and museums. The actual investigations were handed over to younger scholars. The scientific goal has been to investigate the origin and the Medieval development of the townscapes and to set a standard for comparable studies. The methodological goal has been to maximize the yields of archaeological work, stressing the pre-excavational phase of investigations. A further incitement to support this course was the fact that many written sources had become easier to utilize due to a massive growth in the field of publishing. Practically all Medieval documents are now accessible in print. The documents include royal grants, bonds, deeds of conveyance, etc., preserved from some but far from all, ecclesiastical institutions. Cadastres and other registers are comparatively rare. The written sources had not been used in a similar context since the pre-War writing of town histories.

To accomplish the thorough analyses, only eleven towns were selected for the work of the project. These were to be chosen from the 65 Medieval towns in present-day Denmark. They had to represent the larger provinces of Denmark, some main traits according to periodization, and variations in functional and economic conditions. The discussion of definitions was avoided by choosing towns which for certain had been regarded as such by Medieval people. Out of the 25 towns in Jylland, five were selected: Ribe, Horsens, Århus, Viborg and Aalborg. From the island of Fyn two out of ten towns were chosen: Odense and Svendborg. And four of the 25 towns in Sjælland were investigated: Næstved, Køge, Roskilde and the deserted town Søborg. None of the five urban areas in Bornholm were included.

The most flourishing period of Medieval Danish urbanization fell within the years 1200–1350. Out of the c. ninety towns in Medieval Denmark, c. twenty towns were older and ten younger than 1200 and 1350 respectively. Towns originating from the early urbanization period are over-represented in the project, partly due to a desire to reveal urbanization trends during the Viking Age (c. 800–1050). The five episcopal sees, Ribe, Århus, Viborg, Odense and Roskilde, are among these older towns, and they were also considered musts due to their functional importance. Svendborg, Køge and Søborg belong to the founding boom of the 13th century. None of the 15th century towns was chosen.

The pre-excavational inventory, besides going through the editions of written sources, took form of a search in the archives of museums and elsewhere. One of the fields of interest was observations of archaeological character, another information on the local geology, especially recordings of the thickness of cultural deposits. Also copies of old maps have been collected. In 1980 an interim report on the work was presented to promote discussion preceding the next phase in the project: archaeological excavations. It had, since the start of

the project, been planned to find some sites which seemed to promise a maximum of results, in view of the scientific goals, from a minimum of digging. Some excavations were carried out, financially supported by the project, others were rescue excavations where the pre-excavational work of the project was made use of. During the following years the digging amounted to an average of excavations or trial trenches at ten sites per town.

The project is now in its final phase: the publication of the results in a monograph for each town. The guiding idea of comparability is reflected in the reports in so far as a common stock of topographical elements has been investigated with due regard to variations in historical settings and amounts of written sources. Although the tables of contents may vary, all reports contain chapters on the basic geographical conditions, the extension of the cultural layers, boundaries of the town possibly in the shape of defence works, gates, mills if any, etc. The ecclesiastical institutions have received close attention and their numbers are in some towns almost overwhelming. Streets and markets are important features of the infra-structure and are treated accordingly. Also exploitation of the building plots has been a field of investigation. Town halls and other secular institutions have, similar to the ecclesiastical institutions, been described as to their situation and, if possible, their appearance, but not their functions. The reports include a chapter on the fate of the town caused by the Reformation with the closing down of monasteries and in some cases parish churches and the re-organization of the old hospitals. Finally the chronological aspects are summarized both in Danish and English, and also the captions to the numerous maps and other illustrations are printed in English. All volumes have indexes and some various kinds of appendixes.

Till now, i. e. late 1988, five volumes have been issued in the series called *Middelalderbyen*: "Ribe" by Ingrid Nielsen (1985), "Køge" by Marianne Johansen (1986), "Næstved" by Aage Andersen (1987), "Odense" by Anemette Christensen (1988) and "Viborg" by Hans Krøngaard Kristensen (1988). The publisher is Centrum in Århus. These volumes will be briefly summarized in the following.

Cultural layers from the 8th century constitute *Ribe* as the oldest Danish town. It held already at an early stage interest for the Christian missionaries and was selected a bishop's see by the Bremen bishop of the mid-10th century. Until 1103 the bishops of Hamburg-Bremen held the primate-ship of the Danish Church. Medieval Ribe expanded south of the site of the 8th century settlement. The city contained, besides the cathedral, four parish churches, four monasteries, two hospitals, and a royal castle. Fortifications and a water-mill were built c. 1250. Until the 13th century it was the only important Danish port of trade with Western Europe, and together with the flow of imported

goods, e. g. stones for the cathedral, came also a spiritual import, such as the first Franciscan friary in Denmark. The Medieval town plan of Ribe is marked by many major changes. It has been the purpose of the survey to describe the features and date the changes. But in a broader perspective the most important result is perhaps the demonstration of the flexibility of the townscape characterizing Ribe in the period in question. This must contribute to putting an end to the belief that Medieval towns are of stable and inflexible types.

Køge, published as volume 2 in the series, is the youngest of the towns selected for the project. It was founded in the 1280s in response to the kings' need of a harbour at the east coast of Sjælland to compete with the Roskilde bishop's København (Copenhagen). The layout of streets and the market square clearly indicate previous planning. The original town plan was only altered in minor details during the Middle Ages, and thus the town represents the ideal townscape of the 13th century. Its fortifications were contemporary to the founding. These limits were adequate all through the Medieval period in spite of economic – and probably also demographic – growth. Excavations seem to indicate that growth within the city limits was made possible by changes in the exploitation of building plots. After c. 1450 an intensive use of the plots succeeded a more open building pattern. City life was characterized by trading enterprise, and the town had only one parish church and one friary instituted as late as 1484.

Næstved originates from the 12th century. A Benedictine monastery was founded here in 1135 at a site which had contained human inhabitation at least since the 10th century. In 1140, the settlement was granted borough privileges by the king. The development of the town greatly depended on the dominating monastery even after the latter's relocation in the 13th century to a site outside the town. During the 13th and 14th centuries, Næstved was the leading trade center of Sjælland in spite of its harbour being situated c. 5 km from the city. To some degree it stagnated during the 15th century, but the late Medieval buildings bear evidence of continued wealth and activity. Considering Danish conditions in general, a great number of Medieval secular brick-buildings have survived. The town, which remained without fortifications, contained two parish churches, two mendicant friaries and two hospitals.

Most of the Danish towns lay at navigable rivers or by the coast. *Viborg* is one of the rare inland towns, situated by Hærvejen, the main communication line along the watershed north–south through Jylland. Viborg's oldest history has for long attracted interest and discussion, the extremely scarce written sources indicating an origin in the 10th century. It thus came as no surprise that this dating was confirmed by excavations, but the location of the settlement revealed in course of the project's work gave rise to new ideas on both the origin and the Medieval development of the townscape. C. 1300 a royal castle

was established at the city, an enterprise by which the water-level of the lake, Viborg Søndersø, was raised 2 meters, and a built-up area along the shore of the lake was sacrificed. The discovery of this submerged area has produced new fields of investigation for archaeologists. In the late 11th century Viborg was chosen as a bishop's see, and in the surroundings of the cathedral twelve parish churches and four monasteries were erected. Fortifications built c. 1150 only protected part of the built-up area, with one of the parish churches lying outside the ramparts.

In 988 an *Odense* bishop is mentioned in a document as one of the suffragans of the archbishop of Bremen. Near Odense, at the time of its entrance into history, lay Nonnebakken, a ring-fort probably of the Trelleborg type which is dated to c. 980. The oldest settlement layers within the later city boundaries are dated to the 11th century. The Medieval city contained, besides the cathedral and chapter, four parish churches, and further five monasteries and two hospitals were erected in or near the town. A considerable economic expansion in the late 15th century also induced an expansion of the built-up area to the north and the west. The city was surrounded by ramparts which were rebuilt to protect the enlarged community. This development shows a marked difference from Køge and its wider living space which allowed expansion within the originally established limits.

The remaining reports will according to the plans be issued in near future. E. g. volume 10 in the series "*Middelalderbyen Roskilde*" by Ingrid Nielsen is due by the end of 1989.

The results of *projekt Middelalderbyen* are demonstrated in the printed reports. But the main importance of the project will probably be found elsewhere. The concept of pre-excavational work has been widely adapted. The course of the project has demonstrated the practicability of the working process. And even if this kind of preparations for future and not yet predictable excavations is still not quite the norm, at least it tends to be considered the ideal.

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ASPECTS OF DAILY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL DENMARK

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and

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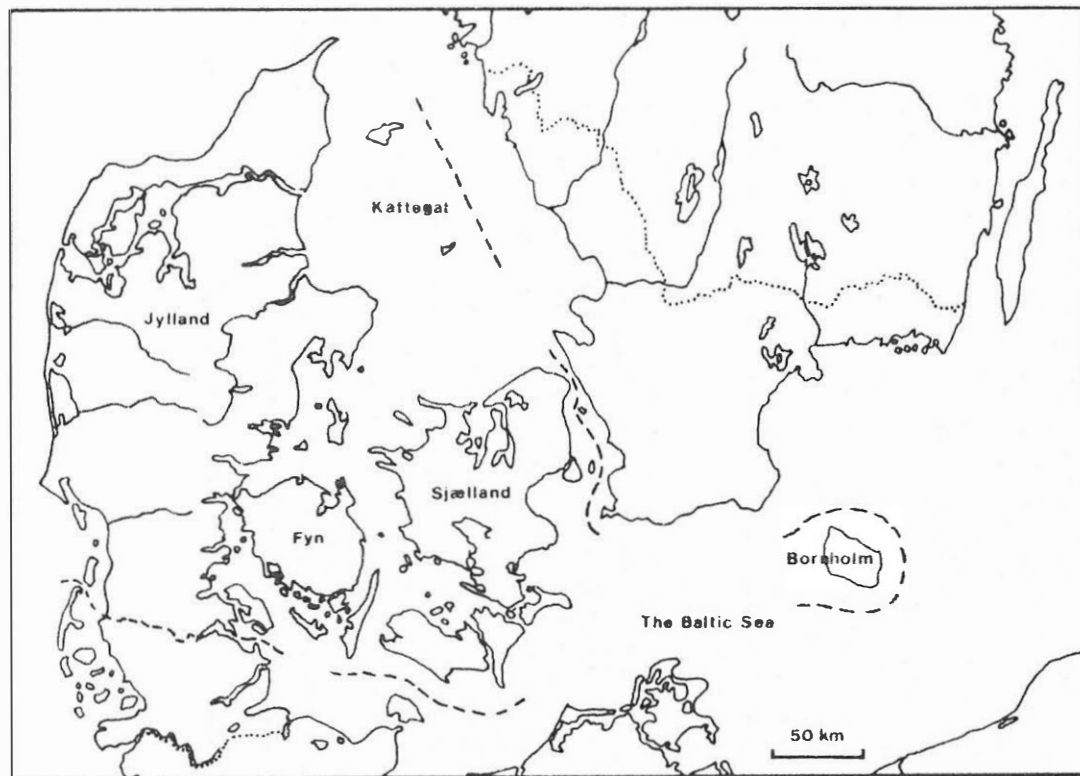
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Introduction

The articles in this issue all deal with current research on life in medieval Denmark. Though comprehensive within their respective fields, they represent only a part of the multi-faceted research currently being undertaken in Denmark, in spite of the adverse work and job situation of many younger scholars. Due to a very short deadline for articles, many scholars were unable to comply with our request for a contribution but expressed interest in participating in international communication of current research. We hope to bring more articles on research on medieval Danish life at a later date.

In Denmark, no particular stress is laid on the topic: medieval daily life. Yet, the by now established social and economic history as well as the renewed interest in political history, has made historians focus on daily life and on its material as well as mental aspects. The articles by Nanna Damsholt and Brian Patrick McGuire concern the religion and the Church of medieval Denmark and their fusion with secular life.

With the development of the discipline of medieval archaeology, our understanding of the material aspects as well as the physical frames for medieval life has been greatly expanded. In contrast to the finite number of written documents, the quantity of archaeological sources keeps increasing, adding valuable information to our knowledge of medieval society. The challenge to historians and archaeologists has been to combine and interpret written, artistic and material sources as Ebbe Nyborg discusses in his article while Marianne Johansen and Ingrid Nielsen present a project combining archaeology and written sources. All three authors are historians as well as archaeologists. In this connection, one might mention the periodical *hikuin* (published by Forlaget Hikuin, Moesgård, DK-8270 Højbjerg, Denmark) which began in 1974 and appears at irregular intervals, the latest volume being number 14 (1988). The periodical brings articles on medieval archaeology primarily in Danish but also in Swedish and Norwegian with resumes in English. Special issues have been devoted to church archaeology, urban archaeology, coins and pottery. We should also like to mention the research tool *Nordic Archaeological Abstract* (NAA) which indexes all articles on medieval archaeology (see p. 95).



The Jutland peninsular and the Danish islands. The borders of the core of the Medieval kingdom are marked with dotted lines and the modern boundaries with broken lines. The areas in present-day Sweden were the medieval province of Skåne (Scania), Halland and Blekinge.

Ingrid Nielsen has also produced the map, accompanying the introduction, which shows the medieval as well as the present boundaries of Denmark. As she and Marianne Johansen point out in their article, the latter boundary also determines the boundaries of much archaeological and historical research. In part to make up for this, meetings have been held between Danish and Swedish historians and archaeologists (the latter primarily from Skåne) dealing with aspects of the town-country relationship. The publications of these meetings are mentioned in the article by Bjørn Poulsen.

The article by Jens E. Olesen on tolls and toll collection deals with a topic, hitherto seen as part of political or financial history; but this was, in fact, of great importance to the common people, especially the many men and women engaged in trade or commerce whether on international, inter-regional or local level. Similarly, his other article, describing the development of the royal chancellery, reminds us that bureaucracy and bureaucrats, whether viewed negatively or positively by contemporaries, are neither modern phenomena nor ones, appearing during Absolutism.

Bjørn Poulsen's article makes us aware that medieval people did not live and produce in isolation but were integrated into the European economy, though the extent of involvement and the awareness of international connections would vary according to time and place. Poulsen also stresses that town and country, so often seen as mutually exclusive, were both part of the daily life of many medieval women and men.

The contribution by Helle Reinholdt and Bodil Møller Knudsen points to the gender aspect, so often overlooked in traditional history which has concerned itself mainly with the action of men. We have chosen not to have an article on "Women and Daily Life" which would make women merely one ingredient in the daily life of men but have urged the authors to include the gender aspects, making the reader aware that history, whether of daily life or of extraordinary events, is made by women as well as men.

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