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Urbanization, Continuity and Discontinuity

Towns have existed for several thousand years. Towns and cities are a part of the wave of urbanization that flows throughout history. When we study towns and central places within one area, it is important to bear this in mind. The objects of our study are not unique. They are parts of a process that extends over a long time in most parts of the world. But since urbanization is not linked exclusively to any particular historical period, it is important to have some tools with which to bridge the chronological and geographical boundaries that we have established. These are often obstacles that prevent us from seeing continuity or discontinuity in the historical development. If we look at Scandinavia, we find this problem between prehistory and the Middle Ages. This is especially evident in the outlook on urbanization and the interpretation of central places. This was admittedly a time of change, above all with the coming of a new religion, Christianity. Yet, these changes did not happen overnight; they extended over a long time when old and new were mixed.

Urbanization was one of these changes. Its expressions were different at different times, but there were still common features over time. We can talk of both continuity and discontinuity. Perhaps we have placed too much emphasis on the latter. The distinction that is made between prehistoric and medieval times has also been far too sharp because the researchers concerned with these periods work from completely different premises. One can see this in many of the terms that are used for central places by prehistorians on one hand and by medieval scholars on the other.

I want to bridge these differences, since I believe that urbanization is a universal phenomenon with a common foundation even in different periods and different geographical areas. For me, the central functions are fundamental when the concept of urbanization is to be defined. In this essay I wish to discuss the concept of urbanization once again, but place the emphasis in a way that is different from what many, including myself, used to do, in order to arrive at the more general features of the concept of urbanization. On the basis of that discussion, I provide some examples of central places in northern Europe, especially Sweden, from different times between the sixth century and the High Middle Ages (c. 1150-1350).

Urbanization over time – common functions, different expressions

In an essay from 1997, archaeologist Charlotte Fabech listed a number of designations that have been used, trying to describe the content of the places: central place, aristocratic settlement, elite milieu, residence, magnate's milieu, trading site, magnate's farm, power centre, cult site, central sanctuary, etc. (Fabech 1997, 146). Archaeologist Michael Müller-Wille has produced a similar list, in even more detail (Müller-Wille 2010, 380-383). All these terms have functions of a central character but they differ as regards the main focus of the activities and also when it comes to the structural conditions. Both Fabech's and Müller-Wille's lists show that one risks painting such a diverse picture that one loses the coherence of the early urbanization.

Medieval scholars place special emphasis on the chartered town, the borough. But designations such as *pre-urban*, *early urban*, *Frühstädte*, and the like underline that at least some early central places can be viewed in relation to the fully developed medieval towns. But another consequence is that many places that are a part of urbanization are forgotten and not made visible.

Historian Adolf Schück formulated many years ago a definition of town that is surprising in its openness: dense settlement, the inhabitants of which, because of their shared trading interests, form a social unit in an economic or judicial sense, or both (Schück 1926, 4).

It is my thesis that researchers prefer to see the differences that are reflected in the historical context and in the form, and not the more general concept of urbanization, that is, people's need for central places and sites at which to meet and assemble.

There are some important premises for the discussion I want to carry on here. At one level, the central functions are the same from one period to another, while the forms of the physical and administrative structure of the town or place can differ. Urbanization comprises not only towns in a more formal sense; it is a broader concept. There are many places where only one or a few central functions are present, where there is no real built-up settlement. This applies, for example, to certain harbours or market sites. A few years ago, archaeologists Jan Brendalsmo, Finn-Einar Eliassen, and Terje Gansum published a collection of articles subtly titled *Den urbane underskog* (The Urban Underwood), where such places were examined (Brendalsmo et al. 2009). The Norwegian authors underline that there are central areas where the functions are scattered in the landscape. These are called this decentralized urbanization, which is a good label. The term is new but the phenomenon as such became a serious part of the discussion already at the Nordic historians' congress in Trondheim in 1977, in the articles about Iceland and Norway. In subsequent discussions it has also been applied to places like Bohuslän and the Kalmar-Öland area (Helle & Nedkvitne 1977; Thorláksson 1977; Blomkvist 1979; Andersson 2002). The central functions were not, as in the towns, assembled at the same point, but they were still accessible to everyone in the area.

All this is an expression of one and the same process, which I would define as urbanization. At bottom, there is the human need for contact, to find rationality in one's life. People made their way to a place where they could carry out economic transactions, meet other people, hear news, perform cultic acts, and so on. At many of these places, people chose to settle down. For many reasons the places became attractive for permanent settlement. People could thus live close to the available societal resources.

More complex societies developed out of this, differing from other places. People were drawn to these places, which took on different physical forms, depending on where they were located and which period they arose in. Such places also became interesting to control, and then, as the next stage, to fortify, in order to protect both the people in power and those who lived and worked there. These places often acquired a special legal status as well. It is this kind of place we normally call a town.

This, however, is not a linear process. The one does not follow automatically from the other in a constant upward motion. Only relatively few of the places with some form of centrality went through the whole scale and became towns. It is possible to detect these phenomena in most societies. And this applies by no means only to Europe. Towns, however, are not the only built-up societies that exist. Rural villages were often also built-up settlements, but usually they lacked any functions that extended beyond the boundary of the village. True, some medieval villages had churches, and although these had a central function, it was centrality at a low level.

Towns and villages nevertheless share certain features. In Italy one can see great changes in towns from the tenth century onwards, while the entire village structure was simultaneously changed through *incastellamento*. This meant that villages were placed on heights in the landscape; they were densely built up, and they often had a castle and surrounding walls. In terms of pure physical structure, the difference between these villages and the towns was a question of size rather than appearance.

There are thus a great many grey areas between different types of settlement. It is not entirely easy to draw the dividing lines. If we proceed from archaeological evidence, where our first step is to look at the physical remains, we can find ourselves in difficulty when we want to classify places. The simplest thing, as was often done in earlier research, is to let the legal status of the place decide. That is important because it marks the formal position the places had and it tells us which settlements at the time were regarded as towns. But in places where we do not have this legal evidence, we cannot use this as a criterion. This kind of status was certainly not lacking in early times, as we see from Birka, which obviously had some type of independent organization for the town.

But the question remains: are there shared features between places that were a part of urbanization at different times? As I said above, we have been accustomed to strict periodization and hence detect discontinuities. If we stick to the idea that the central functions were the basis for urbanization, as I have maintained earlier in this essay, we can nuance this discussion. It is possible to do this without ignoring the fact that the functions can be expressed differently in different times and in different geographical contexts.

When I base the definition of urbanization on central functions, it means a change from the usual way of defining the concept. A fundamental definition was formulated in 1942 by demographer and statistician Hope Eldridge Tisdale: 'Urbanization is a process of population concentration. It proceeds in two ways: the multiplication of points of concentration and the increase in size of individual concentrations' (quoted from de Vries 1984). According to this definition, which was to set its stamp on the subsequent discussion, it was thus the quantitative population growth that lay behind urbanization.

A few years ago, Swedish historian Sven Lilja gave an interesting summary of this discussion. Very briefly, it may be said that his article is a critical examination of how certain researchers have tried to define towns and urbanization. In addition, Lilja wishes to concretize the composite character of urbanization. He does so on the basis of the idea that it is difficult, not to say impossible, to establish theoretical definitions of towns and urbanization. But behind this there is also his conviction that urbanization is not something exclusive to the last few centuries, but has existed for a much longer time, over 1000 years in Sweden (Lilja 2008, 193-194).

When it comes to the concept of urbanization, Lilja bases his discussion particularly on Jan de Vries's *European Urbanization 1500-1800* (1984) and on different papers of French historian Ferdinand Braudel, especially his paper *History and Social Sciences. The Longue Durée* from 1980 (Braudel 1980). De Vries sees problems with Tisdale's definition as cited above, finding it too quantitative. Urbanization involves something more than this. He therefore talks about *demographic urbanization*, which is a term for the redistribution of the population of an area from the countryside to towns (quoted from Lilja 2008, 199). As regards urban behaviour, patterns of thought, and activities, whether they arise in the countryside or in the town, he uses the term *behavioural urbanization*, which Lilja translates as cultural urbanization. The third form of urbanization is what de Vries calls *structural urbanization*. By this he means the concentration of activities in central places. He also says that structural urbanization reflects changes in society in the emergence of large-scale, coordinated activities. Lilja interprets this to mean that de Vries, like another researcher, sociologist Charles Tilly, 'links one process of social change, urbanization, with another, the development of large-scale activities. The result is the emergence of an urban network, that is, a structural change of society that is one aspect of urbanization' (Lilja 2008, 200).

Lilja thinks that de Vries goes too far. The term urbanization is intrinsically ambivalent and should remain so. He says that we 'ought to view it as a term for different related and interlinked social processes along a sliding semantic scale from a minimum definition, which we can call demographic urbanization, to an optimum definition, with roughly the meaning [...] ascribed to the term cultural urbanization. [...] The concept thus becomes susceptible to operationalization.' The operationalization that Lilja chooses is demographic urbanization.

Lilja then applies this to Sweden. He shows some interesting diagrams of the development of towns in Sweden since the Viking Age, based on assumed and real population figures. A logarithmic diagram in particular provides a starting point for discussion. What can be said about the Middle Ages, as Lilja also points out, is that the material is almost non-existent, and the nuances that can be found in the long-term development are difficult to detect. But by linking the diagram to development in Europe, the long-term perspective says something about the trend of urbanization over time. It is in this context that Lilja uses Braudel to interpret the processes in the three perspectives. His general conclusions can be summed up as follows:

1. Urbanization should be defined operationally as demographic urbanization in de Vries's sense. This method gives an unambiguous quantitative measure which indicates, rather than defines, social processes regardless of whether these should be called *urban* in themselves or should rather be regarded as background variables to urbanization.

2. Urbanization is a process. Its social context is a society in change, not states of society in chronological succession. It seems better to think of *tendencies* rather than *phases* and *stages* in an analysis of urbanization.
3. Urbanization is a dependent variable in a social context. It is not self-explanatory. It cannot be regarded as a closed, self-generating process.
4. Urbanization is a composite social process. It cannot be reduced to a universal definition with the aid of qualitative criteria. It must be explained at different levels with a clear correspondence between the observed urbanization aspect and the level of explanation (Lilja 2008, 221).

This is of course a simplified summary of certain points in Lilja's essay, but it can serve as a point of departure for my continued discussion, where I link up with what I have said above. I apply a different perspective to urbanization. I emphasize the central functions as the basis of urbanization but say nothing about demographics. This is in contrast to Lilja's conclusions. The very long-term perspective that he applies makes demands of measurability. There the description of demographic urbanization is a reasonable method, but as he himself says it is not self-explanatory. Urbanization is a composite social process.

Prehistory and the Middle Ages are difficult to handle from a demographic perspective. Lilja is fully aware of this, and in his diagrams he has to work with reasonable assumptions, such as that the urban population amounted to 1 per cent at the start of the period and rose later in the Middle Ages to 3-4 per cent. In the broad picture these seem like perfectly reasonable assumptions, but they scarcely allow any nuances. We know that the thirteenth century was a period when urbanism was expansive, that stagnation set in some time in the middle of the fourteenth century and that growth began again in the Late Middle Ages, but then with certain towns getting bigger while others remained small. The latter also applies to most of the newly founded towns.

But there is another aspect that needs to be considered. Urbanization, as we have seen, is not solely a demographic phenomenon which can be linked to specific places. Towns do not grow up everywhere, but despite this there are places with many of the functions that justify the growth of towns in other areas. They do not even have to be places with permanent settlement; they can be, for example, sites with seasonally recurring markets.

To identify the type and character of the places, I have often used the designations *topographical*, *internal legal* and *administrative* criteria. The topographical criteria describe the morphological character of the place, that is, the picture one gets of the settlement and the town plan, while the legal and administrative criteria show the juridical status of the place: a borough charter, town laws, town council, mayor, seal, and so on. All these data must be positioned chronologically and geographically (Andersson 1972; 2003). But perhaps it would be better to follow historian Knut Helle when he talks of an urban structure, which he then divides into physical structure, economic structure, social structure and legal-administrative structure (Helle 2006, 16-17). In relation to my criteria, Helle has added economic and social structure. The central functions are the general base, while the different structures differ chronologically and regionally.

It is of course a deficiency that neither Helle's model nor mine includes the demographic aspects. I have previously tried to compensate for this by attempting to determine the area covered by buildings during the Middle Ages. There are many problems of source criticism in these calculations. They were performed some time ago. It is possible that the better archaeological material available today could allow us to go further and arrive at more certain results with greater chronological precision (Andersson 1982).

I do not include de Vries's and Lilja's designation 'cultural urbanization', nor does Helle. This term refers to urban behaviour, mentality, and activities. In his dissertation *En kapitalistisk anda* (A Capitalist Spirit), Peter Carelli is one of few archaeologists to have discussed issues of urban identity. He argues that an urban identity developed in Denmark in the twelfth century. He thinks that 'the foundation for this was the emergence of a collective awareness of the existence and distinctive quality of urban life. This sense of community was further developed through interaction between individuals and society which gradually reinforced the distinctive features. This mass-psychological development resulted in a pronounced urban identity. Town life and the urban environment were what united all the townspeople – regardless of sex, age, social standing, or legal status – and what defined the town' (Carelli 2001, 99-105, quotation 105).

Of course this is not a complete explanatory model, but it allows us to group different types of places and also makes it possible to handle fluid boundaries and grey areas in a practical way, but the basis is, and remains, that the first step is to emphasize the central functions. This opens the way for a broader definition of urbanization than merely stressing the demography (Andersson 2003, 314-317). It can also be presumed to bring us closer to a more general foundation for explaining urbanization as such.

It might of course be objected that the criterion for urbanization is not very strict if even places with relatively few central functions are regarded as fitting the definition. However, as I have said, the interesting thing is the human need for meeting places. This is the start of all urbanization. Where the dividing line is drawn can then be debated. Are markets that take place at a set time of year a reflection of the same movement that in other cases leads to central places with permanent organized settlement?

How we should designate places is a question that can always be discussed. We have a battery of terms. I have used 'central place' for those which have functional criteria, built-up area for those with topographical criteria, and town for those with legal and administrative criteria (Andersson 1972). The problem lies in the latter designation, since we lack written evidence for the Viking Age and in part for the Early Middle Ages. It is hardly wrong to call Birka a town in a Viking Age context. It meets virtually all the criteria. There are also administrative criteria, which is unusual for that period. There are shared features over time: the centrality, the dense settlement. The legal forms vary over time. However, one cannot demand that all the structures must be demonstrable if we are to be able to talk of a town. The legal-administrative structure, in particular, is something that can rarely be elucidated before the High Middle Ages, because of the lack of source material. We shall look more closely at that problem later.

Even back in the Middle Ages, the definition of places was vague. We see this in the terminology. A commonly used Latin word was *villa*, which could mean both town and village. Sometimes this was clarified by writing *villa forensis*, that is, a villa with a market square, and thus a town. When people used the word, it seems that the built-up character was primary, and perhaps the

legal status of the place was not so interesting. On seals, the word *civitas* was used most of the time. This often referred to a city that was the seat of a bishop, but it was also used in the case of Stockholm. Was it the legal status that was emphasized here, or was it considered that this was a different category of towns from those designated as *villa*, which were more comparable to villages? This causes uncertainty (Andersson 1971, 25-27, 83-86, 107-108).

To sum up, I think that urbanization is a broad concept embracing a broad range of places with some form of centrality. Standing out in this group are places which acquire an urban structure, and among these we have the more fully developed towns in a formal sense and the form that Brendalsmo and others call decentralized urbanization. But the places must be defined in relation to the spatial and chronological context in which they exist.

Continuity and discontinuity

How are we to handle the problem of continuity and discontinuity over a long time, or rather over our traditional period divisions? Let me start with an example that illustrates the difficulty.

In recent years, the National Heritage Board has conducted a number of excavations in the town of Skänninge in Östergötland (Hedvall et al. 2013), which, at least for me, was an eye-opener as to how the transition from one central-place system to another can be observed. In the published report on the excavation, I had the opportunity to develop my thoughts about this in a closing comment (Andersson 2013). I use that text again below, with some additions. One of the really big results of the excavations was the new picture it painted of early medieval Skänninge with its three big farms. A church was attached to each farm. On the farms, or at any rate two of them, traces of crafts were found. But there were also distinct traces of the exchange of goods, including international trade in some form. There is thus no doubt that the farms together functioned as a central place in the landscape.

We thus have three big farms with buildings grouped relatively closely together. But they do not give a place with a built-up character. In their structure they probably looked like other big farms in the area. But each one of these three farms had a church attached to it. We can link this to the way archaeologist Anders Andrén, in his dissertation *Den urbana scenen* (The Urban Scene) from 1985, shows that towns with roots going back to the centuries before the 1200s are characterized by the occurrence of more than one church. His study concerns medieval Denmark, but the results can also be applied to Sweden. An extraordinary example is Lund, where the number of churches is more than twenty. In its earliest phase, the churches can be perceived as private churches, before they became parish churches. The early properties in Lund do not differ from those excavated in the surrounding landscape. It was not until the end of the twelfth century that settlement in Lund was arranged so that the plots were linked to a street grid. Andrén has used the term *förtätad landsbygd* or 'congested countryside' to describe settlement in the first centuries of the town (Andrén 1984; 1985, 77-81).

One may wonder whether these changes were a marker *for* something or *against* something. We can of course view it as a marker against the old society, but perhaps we should nevertheless bear in mind that a rejection of tradition is hardly ever total. It is obvious that the religious element is strong in some prehistoric communities. If you look at, say, the Iron Age places as Uppåkra in Skåne, Gudme in Fyn, or Helgö in Mälaren, you see buildings where sacral rituals obviously took place. At all three sites the adjacent settlement consisted of one or more big farms (see e.g. Arrhenius 2011; Jørgensen 2011; Larsson & Söderberg 2012).

Although the religion had changed, it seems as if settlement in Skänninge continued to build on an older tradition of a farm with a cult building, while the meaning changed in relation to the tradition, as the old cult was replaced by Christianity.

But then there was a break in the development. In the thirteenth century, the changes in Skänninge become very clear. The place acquired a more regular townscape. Its area was not particularly large but the plot division was fairly regular. The three big farms disappeared. A rampart was built around the town. Of the churches, two became monasteries while the third, All Saints', was extended to become the church for a rural parish. A new church, Our Lady's, was built as the church of the urban congregation. A castle was erected. All this took place gradually during the thirteenth century.

It was a radical change that occurred. It reflects a transition from a family-based central place to a burgher community, from private churches to parish churches and monastic communities, facing outwards in society and not tied by family and kin. All this was made visible through the restructuring of settlement. The leading families no doubt still exerted influence in the town, but it is obvious that they shifted their interests from the built-up area to the surrounding countryside. Other groups entered the town, the most noticeable being German merchants. The twelfth-century inhabitants had also had long-distance contacts, admittedly, but through permanently resident merchants they had their contacts professionally channelled out into Europe. Here we may remember Carelli's thesis that an urban identity was created in this period.

The general conclusion I would draw from the Skänninge excavations and the other examples is that the watershed between the early medieval central-place structure and that of the High Middle Ages is greater than that between the prehistoric and the early medieval structures. Broadly speaking, many of the most important central places up to the middle or the end of the twelfth century were composed of individual farms. They often housed a private church, which further emphasized the attachment of the place to an individual family. These were places with central functions, not least in economic terms, but they were not a part of any overall urban administration. In their case, one can draw the lines back to sites like Uppåkra, Helgö, and Gudme, even though the cult had changed.

We should also remember here that one can detect another line in urbanization with a link backwards in time. I am thinking of early places like the Viking age Birka with dense settlement and long-distance economic contacts, located on water routes and more town-like in a medieval sense, as pointed out above. Sigtuna as a medieval place can be included here. These two 'lines' from Uppåkra and Birka and comparable places then converged when the high medieval town emerged.

At the end of the twelfth century and during the thirteenth century, then, a group of central places crystallized, with special privileges established by royal charter, with a special internal organization in the form of government by a council, with a special overall ecclesiastical structure. The private churches were transformed into parish churches or were incorporated in new ecclesiastical contexts such as monasteries or the like. Another characteristic feature was the presence of castles at towns, usually linked to the king but sometimes belonging to other members of the leading stratum, as in Skänninge, where the castle belonged to the bishop. This was a part of a general change in Swedish society during the period, displayed in the

reorganization of national government, in new international contacts, and in the development of new economic structures.

The picture presented here, where the watershed in urbanization comes around 1200, has received further support in a recently published study by archaeologist Ola Kyhlberg (Kyhlberg 2012). Briefly, he argues, on the basis on a number of aspects, that the Iron Age did not come to an end at the point where it is traditionally placed; it was only with the changes that occurred in the thirteenth century that “the long Iron Age” ended - hence the title of his book.

When I proceed from the central functions of the places, I am to some extent applying de Vries’s designation ‘structural urbanization’. The starting point of this discussion is geographer Walther Christaller’s book *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland* from 1933 (Christaller 1933 [1968]). That discussion has since developed in a very sophisticated way, and today it includes different forms of statistical and mathematical calculations (Carter 1995). But when studying the Iron Age and the Middle Ages, we really have to simplify this. The occurrence of central functions becomes the primary variable. With the aid of these one can position the place in a spatial system. This system is in principle a hierarchical place system, where certain places have a supra-regional or regional significance, while others are only tied to a local context. It can also be difficult in a medieval context to determine in detail what this order might have looked like. But one example can be given.

In the Mälaren area, we see that Stockholm at an early stage, from the late thirteenth century and then with increasing clarity in the Late Middle Ages, acquired a supra-regional significance while other towns around Lake Mälaren had a more limited role alongside or under Stockholm. This picture is above all founded on the economic functions. If we look at the ecclesiastical functions, Uppsala with its archbishop had a strong role, with the other episcopal towns under it, and so on. Stockholm, on the other hand, played a more modest role in this context. In this way we get different ‘urban landscapes’ which overlap each other in different ways.

Summing up

The aim of this essay was to see how we can bridge the differences that exist in the scholarly treatment of urbanization in different periods. How are we to be able to draw long lines and how are we to assess continuity and discontinuity over time? So, how should we define urbanization? My answer is, briefly, as follows: Urbanization is a societal process in which the basis is the need for and the occurrence of central functions – economic, cultic, and administrative – as a rule geographically determined. These are linked together in built-up areas of varying size, sometimes only in central areas or decentralized urbanization. In some cases, larger places develop or are established, which acquire a special legal status in one way or another. A small proportion of these towns will then be incorporated in an international network (which does not prevent other places from being somehow indirectly affected from outside).

What these places have in common in different periods is the central functions, while the urban structures change over time and differ from one area to another. Perhaps this would be a way for us to escape the muddle of existing designations. I maintain that the central functions themselves, whether they are economic, cultic, or administrative, are the basic and shared

features, whereas the structures of urbanization are, so to speak, the result of the historical and geographical circumstances.

The background to the development is economic and demographic, and dependent on power relations. It is not a linear movement that makes a central place into a town. If we look at an area or a region, there can be continuity in the sense that the central functions continue to exist but are shifted in the landscape.

With these views as a foundation, we can discuss continuity and discontinuity in urbanization over time. Continuity can be found in the central functions, while the urban structures change over time. From this starting point, I claim that the prehistoric central places like Gudme, Uppåkra, and Helgö have shared features with the early medieval structures in Skänninge and Lund. The change that took place in urbanization at the end of the twelfth century and in the thirteenth century – one effect of which was a development from a family-based structure to a burgher structure, manifested for instance in parish formation – was a far more radical change in urbanization than the transition from prehistoric times to the Early Middle Ages. What was new was that certain urban places acquired special privileges through borough charters, government by a town council and later separate laws for towns. Also new is the look of the settlement. The earlier settlement with large farms was transformed into denser settlement with regular plots. An urban identity was created. This did not prevent the survival of the old prehistoric structure in the type of places that Brendalmo has described as decentralized urbanization.

What I have tried to point out is that centrality is the most important factor for a number of places, regardless of the time. Centrality is what gives the fundamental continuity. But if we take the urban structures into consideration, we can see, at least in Sweden and probably in Scandinavia as a whole, a continuity from prehistoric times into the Early Middle Ages, whereas there was a major change in the late twelfth century and in the thirteenth century. This clearly stresses once again the significance of this period when it comes to the organization of the state and also, as Kyhlberg shows, in a range of other areas.

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