

*Pol Rime y clay f
ca.*

PACT

7

1982

Revue du groupe européen d'études
pour les techniques physiques, chimi-
ques et mathématiques appliquées à
l'archéologie

Journal of the European Study Group
on Physical, Chemical and Mathema-
tical Techniques Applied to
Archaeology

SECOND NORDIC CONFERENCE ON THE APPLICATION OF SCIENTIFIC METHODS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Helsingør (Elsinore), Denmark, 17-19 August 1981



STRASBOURG
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE — COUNCIL OF EUROPE
Assemblée parlementaire — Parliamentary Assembly

The Medieval town – A Danish project

Abstract

The paper presents the work in progress under the auspices of the Danish Research Council for the Humanities since 1977 in eleven selected Danish towns with the aim of illuminating the earliest history and topographical development of these towns in the Middle Ages.

After the Second World War large area excavations have dominated European urban archaeology. However, such large-scale excavations are not financially practicable in Denmark. Consequently, "The Medieval Town" tries to conduct small archaeological explorations based on a total collection and registration of all relevant topographical sources. More than 15,000 written archaeological, scientific and cartographical data have been transferred to punched cards and the information plotted on standard maps of the towns. Having worked up all these data the project has started excavations in the eleven towns. The paper presents a series of the results obtained during the working-up stage and the subsequent excavations which are in progress this summer (1981).

The project will be finished by the end of 1981.

After the Second World War professional archaeologists all over Europe became interested in urban archaeology. Because of the enormous destruction it was possible to excavate large areas in the towns, and remarkable results were obtained, especially in Novgorod, the German cities and, during the last three decades, also in England. These were all large-scale excavations, but in Denmark such excavations have not yet taken place. This is mainly due to the expense involved, but also because building activity has been less intensive than in other European countries.

The first professional Danish urban excavation took place in Ribe in 1955. Here the National Museum excavated a small area between the Cathedral and the castle bank (Stiesdal, 1968). From 1960 and onwards the archaeological activity grew in towns like Ribe, Viborg, and Århus, and during the 1970s many other Danish towns were investigated (Olsen, 1973). Most of these excavations consisted of small sites and search trenches laid out as rescue excavations prior to building activities. They were not part of a systematic research programme and the results were often scattered.

Large-scale excavations are extremely expensive, and present economic strains force us to find other ways than the large area excavations for exploiting the archaeological wealth of the towns. This is what we try to accomplish by the project called "*The Medieval Town*".

This project was set up by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities in the autumn of 1977. The work will continue till the end of 1981, plus one more year for preparing the results for publication.

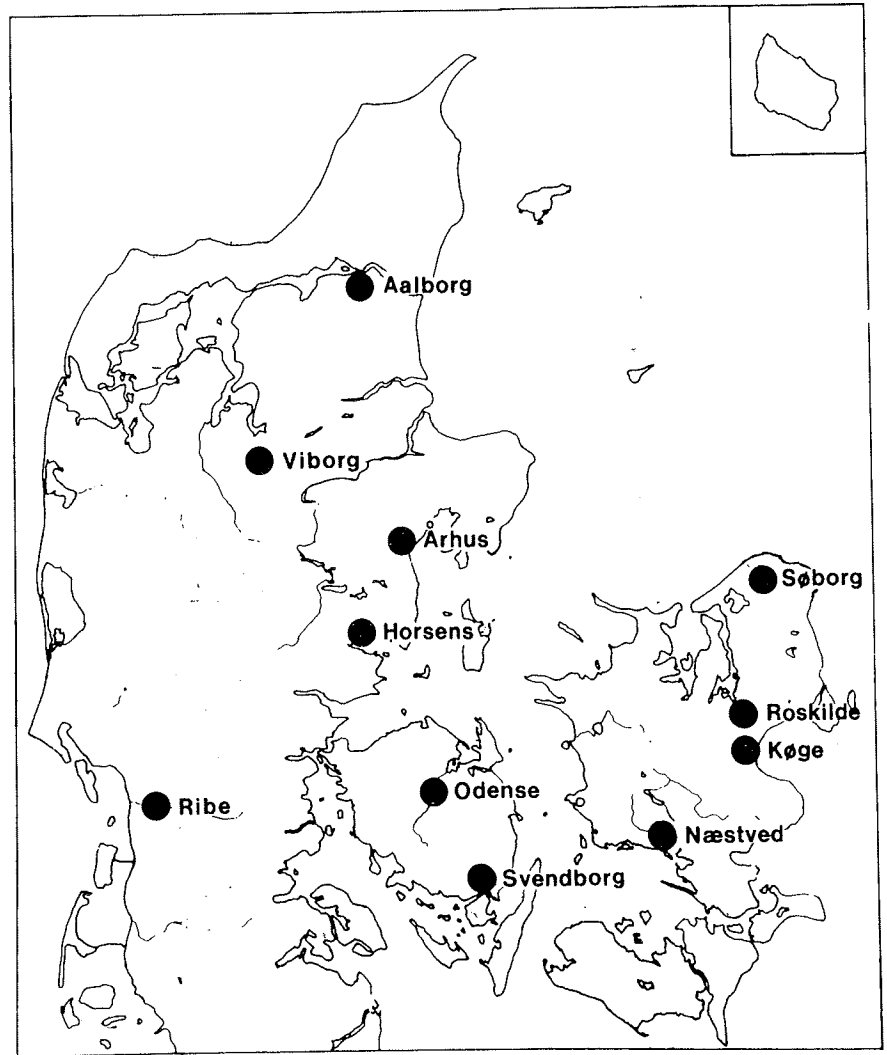


Fig. 1. The 11 towns involved in the project.

Instead of involving ourselves in an intensive excavation at prohibitive costs at any single place, we aimed at an abundance of minor archaeological investigations of carefully selected sites in several towns. As we can dig very small areas only, minute preparations are even more indispensable than usual. The basis for selecting excavation sites is a thorough topographical registration and analysis of the available evidence concerning the Medieval topography in the towns involved. All written material as well as stray finds and excavated finds, cartographical sources and geological and geotechnical borings have been recorded. No excavation is carried out anywhere until the registration has been duly completed and analysed. This principle ensures that excavation will take place only where archaeological evidence is likely to be accessible and where it is most needed for solving the main

questions of the project, viz. 1) *the determination of the age of the towns*, and 2) *the determination of the topographical development in the towns*. Of course, this means that we get fewer proper finds, and a less detailed knowledge of various types of buildings, housing conditions, etc. than we might have had from large excavations. We are convinced, however, that the method chosen will enable us to answer the two basic, historical questions with almost the same degree of certainty as a wider scheme of excavations might have done. Certainly, the work will provide a strong foundation for future archaeological investigations in the towns involved.

Denmark has more than fifty towns with a Medieval history, and the project could not deal with all of them considering the economy and timeframe of the work. Eleven towns were selected, among which are the five Medieval cathedral towns in present-day Denmark: Roskilde, Ribe, Århus, Odense, and Viborg, and one deserted town, Søbørg in North Zealand. The towns of Aalborg, Horsens, Svendborg, Køge, and Næstved complete the list. Figure 1 shows the locations of the towns selected.

All the information from the different groups of sources was recorded by means of a special punch-card system. The project has recorded a total of more than 15,000 cards from the 11 towns. Punched cards were the first step; the next was to transfer the registered information from the cards to topographical maps, a method which has been very useful in urban archaeology (Cam, 1933-34; Jope, 1952; Biddle, 1973). As the basis for the mapping we have chosen to use the oldest exact surveys for land assessment, most of them from the 1860s at which time none of the towns had yet been subjected to industrial development. All the evidence was plotted on an elaborate system of transparent sheets, each containing specific information (e.g. the age and distribution of archaeological finds, remains of fortifications, streets, church plan of the town, stone versus wooden houses, evidence of private and ecclesiastic ownership). These transparencies were then superimposed on the basis map of the town, either alone or in a multitude of combinations to illustrate our knowledge and to guide us to new conclusions. The maps and the analyses of them were then the basis of the excavations which took place in 1979-1981.

The town of *Roskilde* provides an example of the work with these maps. Here small finds have been collected for many years. What could this reveal about the town (see fig. 2). We knew that the town covered quite a large area in the 12th century, when the fortification was laid out and most of the many parish churches were built. But the small finds indicate that as early as the 11th century the town covered the same area. This is quite an interesting piece of information, which later was substantiated by some of the excavations in different parts of the town. But the small finds also show that the town, surprisingly enough, holds its position in the later part of the Medieval period, and does not, as many think, lose its importance to other trading towns (Nielsen and Schiørring, 1979). So before the excavation phase a lot of new achievements were gained from the analyses of previous information (Olsen and Schiørring, 1980).

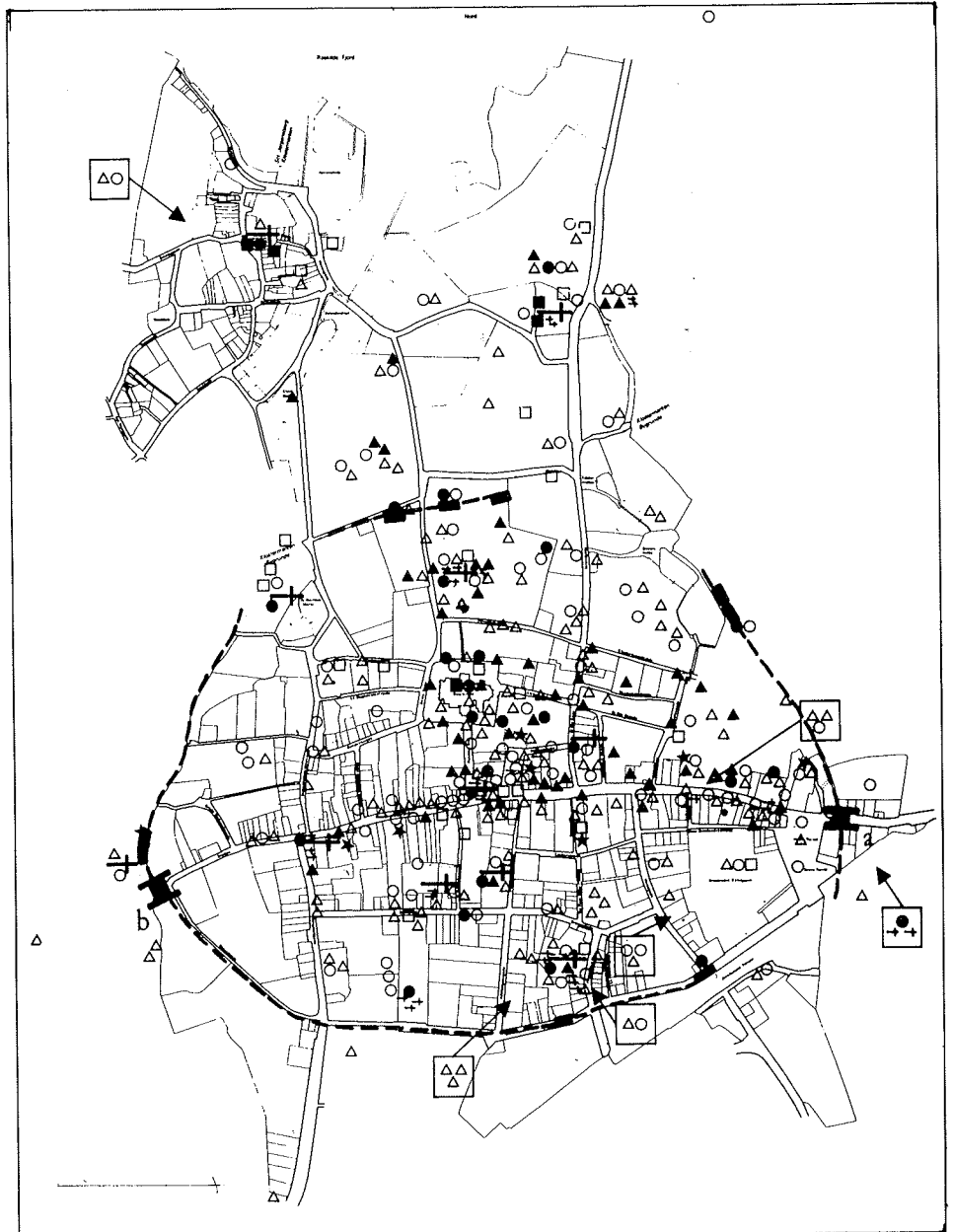


Fig. 2. Roskilde. Map showing all finds from the town. ■ before ca. 1075, ● 1075-1241, ▲ 1242-1560, ★ wells, † churches (small ones: graves), — — town fortification from 12th century. The open signature indicates small finds and the solid one the remains of buildings or other structures.

The first excavation of the project took place in 1979 (Madsen and Schiørring, 1981) in Ribe, but first during 1980 and 1981 a massive campaign was started in all 11 towns. More than 35 urban excavations have been carried out by the project in close co-operation with the local museums. The excavation objects (e.g. fortifications, private, or ecclesiastic buildings) have varied from town to town according to special local topographical problems. All in all, the excavations have been quite successful and the small trenches (see fig. 3) have often given more information than one could have hoped for.

In *Aalborg*, mentioned as mint-place around 1040, excavations have revealed the earliest settlement yet from the middle of the 11th century lying in the present centre on both sides of the river *Østerå*, which was the natural harbour of the town in Medieval times. In addition to this, the town fortification has been examined. In the old thingplace and cathedral town *Viborg*, one had believed until now that the oldest part of the town was situated on the hills, close to the cathedral. The analyses of the small finds from the town now suggest that the oldest part must have been close to the lake just east of the town. Excavations this summer (1981) proved the existence of a very early settlement dating from around 1000, where craftsmen's houses and their environment were predominant. Furthermore, the excavations showed that the lake surface in the early Middle Ages was 2 m lower than today. This gives a completely different topographical picture of the town and opens up new possibilities for further studies. In *Svendborg* and



Fig. 3. An example on the small trenches from the excavation in Bispehaven, Ribe in 1980. In the long and narrow search trench a Medieval house was excavated. The picture shows the youngest floor layer from the 15th century. Below this were three more floors, going back to the beginning of the 14th century. Below this house were pits from about 1200, showing an intense human activity in this area, which is situated in the western part of Ribe.

Køge the fortifications were investigated, and in *Køge*, excavations took place in the harbour area as well. In *Odense* all the trenches were placed in the outskirts of the old town to verify the age of the town's expansion, which seems, as can be seen in many of the other towns, to have taken place in the beginning of the 13th century. These were just a few examples to give some impression of the work done.

Many questions were asked and many answers given in all the towns involved, but let me go a bit deeper into the cases of two specific towns to show the nature of some of the problems facing us.

The town of *Næstved* on Zealand is mentioned in 1135 and as a market town as early as 1140. It plays a certain role in Baltic trade, and was to a large extent in the hands of the Benedictine abbey of Skovkloster, 1 mile northwest of the town. All these were well-known historical facts, but we asked: How far back beyond 1135 could we expect to find a settlement on this spot? An excavation was placed very close to the old bridge which connects *Næstved* with a smaller rural settlement called Little *Næstved* (also mentioned in 1140). A trench was laid out from *Farvergade* to the river. The excavation showed an earlier settlement dating back to the 10th century with traces of a blacksmith. On top of that lay a thick layer, containing lots of Baltic ceramics from the 11th century. None of these layers differ from what we find in the large villages from the Viking Period. Therefore, we are unable to say that these layers indicate an urban settlement, but rather merely a continuous habitation in the place. The layers from the 12th century show signs of both trade and craftsmanship and must be regarded as traces of an urban community. The area seems to have housed craftsmen of different kinds. A kiln for roof tiles, dating just after 1319 (coin-dated), was later overlaid by a street, which again was destroyed by a 17th century potter. All together it represented settlement of over 800 years. This small excavation trench brought the settlement at *Næstved* further back than any other town in Zealand, a remarkable fact for *Næstved* and our knowledge.

In *Ribe* we have been working with problems of a much more complex nature. Today the town has a fairly well preserved structure, going back to the Middle Ages. Since the 1950s archaeologists have been studying this town (see fig. 4). The Medieval town was concentrated on the south bank of the river, between the romanesque cathedral and the royal castle of *Riberhus*. One of the main problems in *Ribe* was the continuity and development of the town. In 1973-75 Mogens Bencard excavated an early settlement dating back to the 8th century, but between 800 and 1100 no traces of the town have yet been found. The written sources mention it quite frequently during this period. Ansgar founded a church here in 860 and bishops are known from the 10th and 11th centuries. A few finds have been made north of the river, dating from the 10th century, and it was here the project began to excavate in order to gain information about the period between 800 and 1100.

Four excavations were carried out and they all gave the same result: no traces of any settlement from the Viking Period. In all the trenches we noticed that there

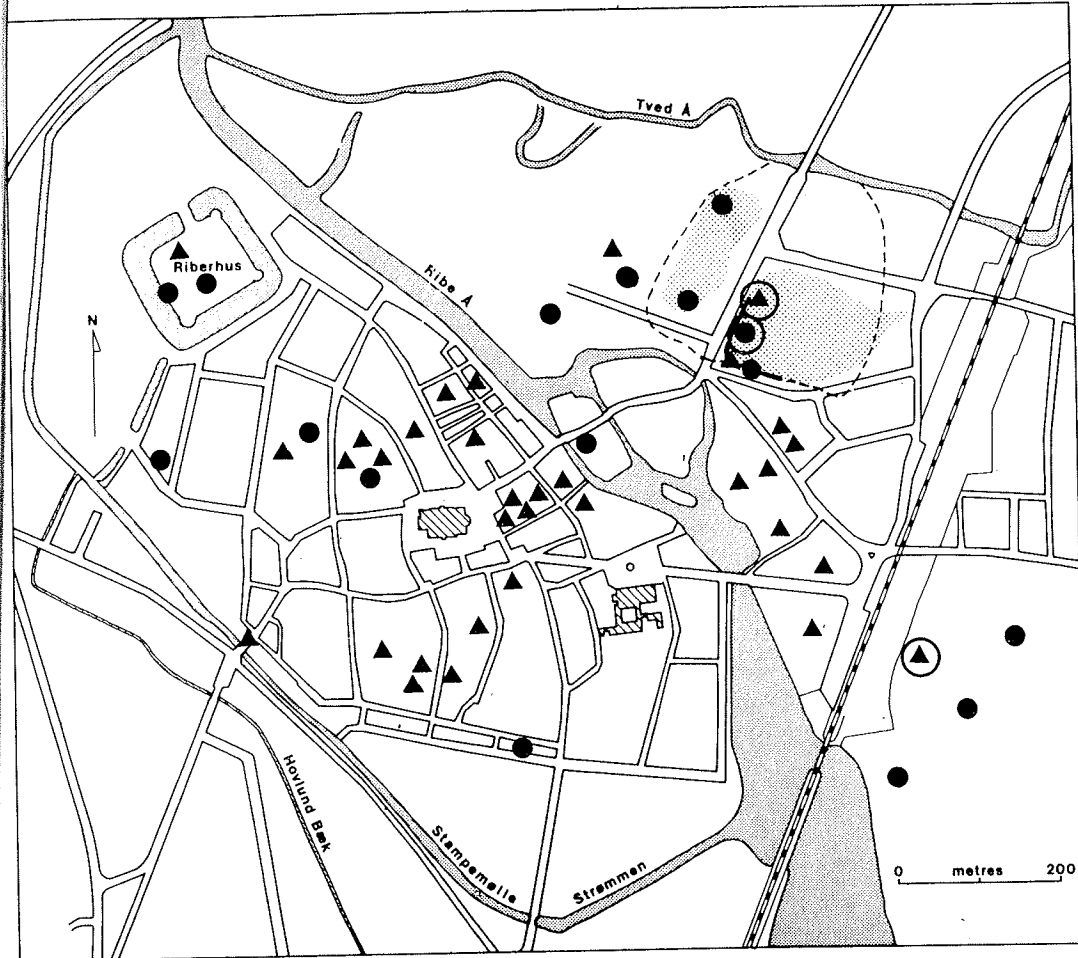


Fig. 4. Ribe. Map showing all archaeological excavations in the town. Those marked ▲ are excavated before 1977, and ● excavated after 1977. The dark area north of the river is the area excavated in the beginning of the 13th century and to the east and north we have not traced the limits. The dotted line in the same area indicates the size of Viking Age Århus to show how large an area that was dug away, and that it is possible that Viking Age Ribe could have been placed here. The encircled excavations have produced finds from the period 800-1100.

had been very massive earlier excavations, which had taken away all layers on both sides of the northgoing street of Saltgade. These excavations could be dated to the beginning of the 13th century. Earth had also been removed under the street but not in the same amount as on the sides. Here deposits dating from around 1200 and onwards were found. The answer must be that some rather important and very radical changes took place in Ribe in the beginning of the 13th century. During these years the town was completely remodelled. A fortification with waterchannels was laid around the town and the royal castle was constructed in the first decade of the 13th century, as our diggings on the bank show. Gates

were built to the south and north, the latter placed at the end of the artificial mill dam, which was constructed when the King built his royal mill at the north boundary of the town some time around 1250 (mentioned 1255). All these constructions required a sizeable amount of earth and it appears that some of it came from the north side of the river and that the remains of the Viking settlement in Ribe have to be found as filling in the mill dam. Excavations in the dam had to be given up, unfortunately, because of the large quantity of water.

Also the parish churches indicate that the earliest settlement area was placed on the north bank of the river. Three of them were situated on the north side and three on the south. The churches dating to the 12th century must indicate some continuity backwards in time. When the remodelling had finished some time after 1240 the northern part was called 'suburbium' and was more or less abandoned. From the written sources we can see that streets had been closed down and taken over by the town. A whole town area was demolished by the King, which shows his power here in the mid-13th century.

But south of the river changes had also taken place during the first half of the Medieval Period. In the western part our excavations have shown an intensive private settlement dating to a time prior to 1250. From this time and onwards the area had been taken over by three monasteries. Perhaps the land was donated to the monasteries by the King, who probably had his first manor somewhere close to the church of St. Clement, and who moved to Riberhus castle during the early decades of the century.

With its many excavations, the project had added considerably to the mosaic, which forms the development of Ribe during the Viking and Medieval Periods.

It is still too early to draw any conclusions from the many excavations and preliminary analyses of the results. But it is surprising that such small investigations have brought so much new information in view of the limited amount of money and time available. The method is most successful in an early stage of urban archaeological investigations. It is, however, necessary to continue the work with more detailed excavations and in some cases also by digging larger areas. But the groundwork is laid in the 11 towns, and that was indeed one of the main purposes of the project.

REFERENCES

- BIDDLE, M., HUDSON, D. and HEIGHWAY, C., 1973, *The Future of London's Past*, London.
- CAM, H. M., 1933-34, *The Origin of the Borough of Cambridge*, in *Proc. Cambridge Antiquarian Soc.*, XXXV, p. 33-43.
- JOPE, E. M., 1952, *Excavations in the City of Norwich 1948*, in *Norfolk Archaeology*, XXX, p. 287-323.
- MADSEN, P. K. and SCHIØRRING, O., 1981, *En udgravning i Ribes »nye grav« og et fund af keramik fra 1500- og 1600-årene*, in *Hikuin*, 7, p. 209-254 (English summary).
- NIELSEN, I. and SCHIØRRING, O., 1979, *Roskildes middelalder på kort*, in *13 bidrag til Roskilde by og egns historie*, Roskilde Museum, p. 93-110.

- OLSEN, O., 1973, *Die frühen Städte in Dänemark – Forschungsstand*, in *Kiel Papers '72*, p. 72-79.
- OLSEN, O., and SCHIØRRING, O. (eds.), 1980, *Ti Byer, oplæg til udgravningerne under »Middelalderbyen«*, published by the project; p. 1-214.
- STIESDAL, H., 1968, *An excavation in the town of Ribe, Denmark*, in *Rotterdam Papers*, p. 155-160.

O. SCHIØRRING

Institut for middelalderarkæologi, Moesgård
DK-8270 Højbjerg, Denmark