

Topographical and Functional Changes in the City of Lödöse during the Middle Ages

By Kristina Carlsson

1. Introduction

Lödöse lay in west central Sweden, close to the Danish and Norwegian borders and the Swedes had to use a narrow corridor to reach the sea for trading along the North Sea coast (fig. 1). It was built on the east bank of the river Göta Älv, an important transport route vital for the foundation of this merchant town and also the border between Sweden and Norway (fig. 2).

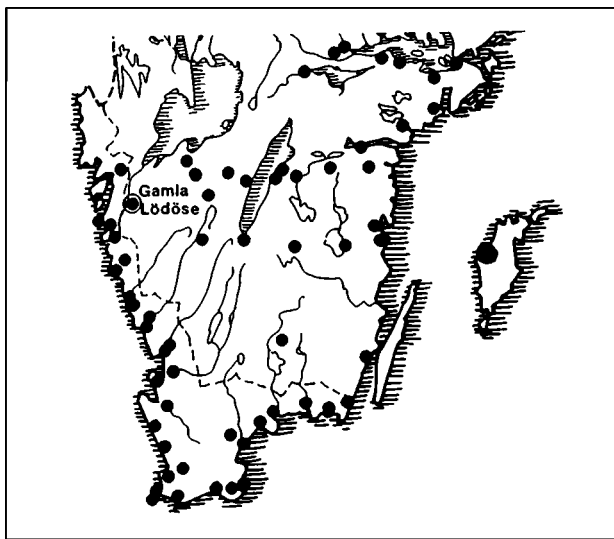


Fig. 1. Lödöse is the most westerly of Swedish Medieval towns; it lies beside the Göta Älv which flows out into the North Sea through a narrow corridor.

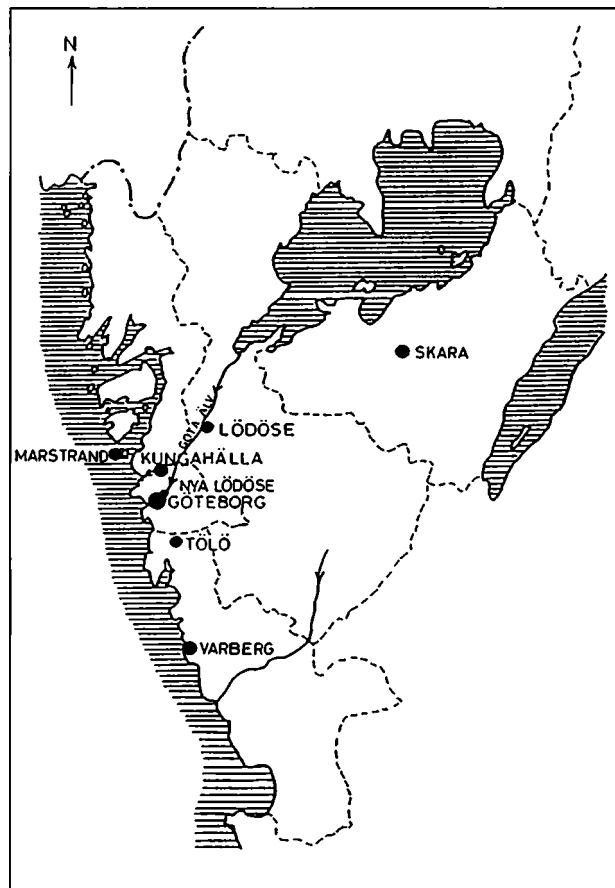


Fig. 2. Situation of Lödöse in present day West Sweden seen from an Early Medieval perspective.

About 10 km north of the town rapids make the river unnavigable. The settlement was founded at the mouth of one of the branches of its tributary, the Ljuda; this gave the city its name and provided an important route for transport eastwards along its valley.

The earliest building remains so far known in Lödöse date from the middle of the 11th century (dendrochronological dates)¹ and what we call an urban settlement seemed to be in existence by the first half of the 12th century. Lödöse remained a city for 600 years before the loss of its charter in 1646.

About one quarter of the Medieval city has been excavated over the past hundred years (fig. 3). This means that we should be able to reconstruct its topographical and functional organization. We have recently started systematic study of the archaeological evidence from previous excavations.

This presentation is based mainly on preliminary results from three excavation areas representing different parts of the urban area, all of which contained remains of buildings from the early period up to the middle of the 14th century. Its aim is to highlight the periods of change in lay-out and the character of buildings evidenced by the archaeological material and to illustrate the functions which remained static or changed site within the city. It must, however, be regarded only as a starting point for future investigations.²

2. The first 150 years

The earliest settlement in Lödöse seems to have been concentrated along the banks of the northern branch of the River Ljuda. Remains of buildings and evidence for various crafts imply a settlement with possible royal connections immediately south of this

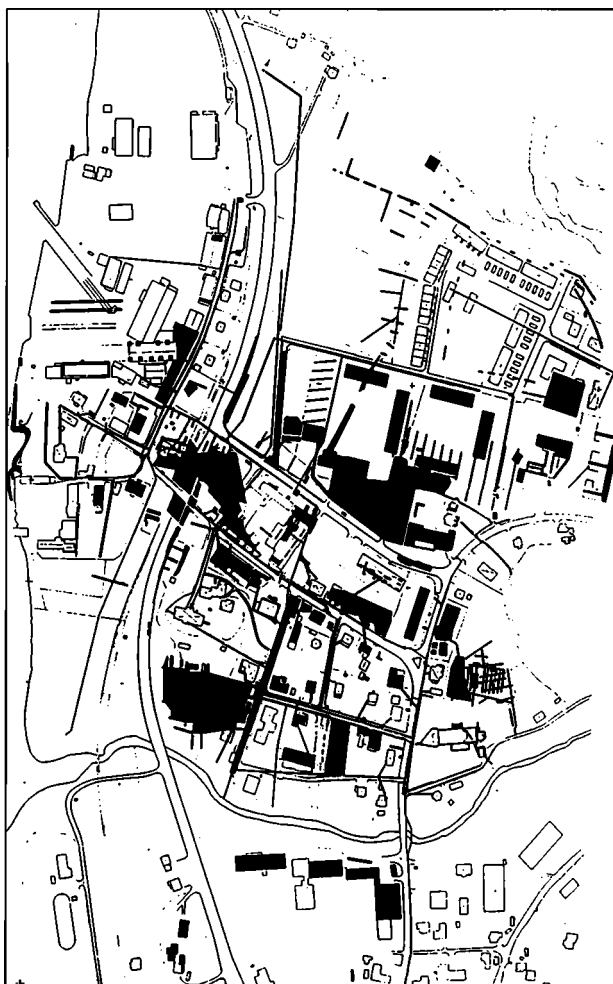


Fig. 3. There have been about two hundred archaeological excavations in the old town of Lödöse over the past hundred years.

branch of the river (fig. 4). The remains of long ditches, 8 m apart and probably from the period just before the regular settlement, have recently been fo-

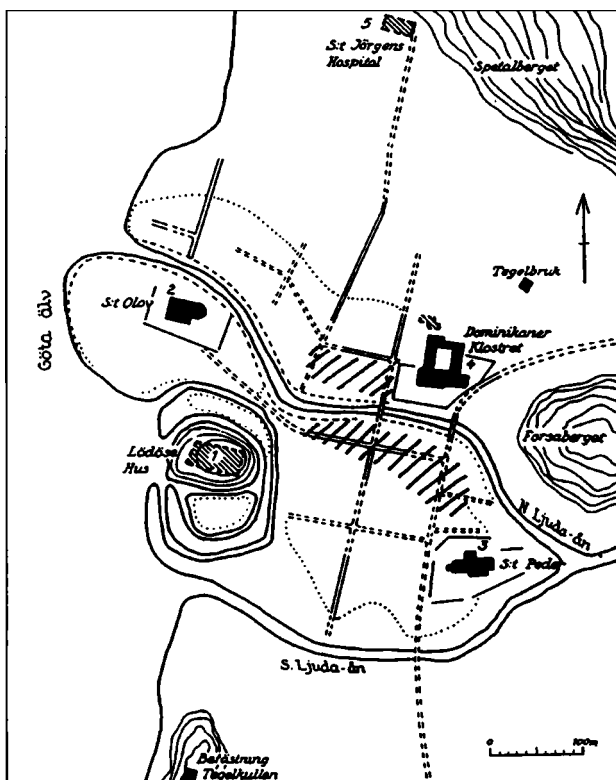


Fig. 4. Map of Lödöse showing the extent of settlement before 1100.

und in this area and elsewhere in the vicinity: immediately south of the River Ljuda and to the east and north. The ditches served as plot divisions for at least a hundred years, sometimes as ditches, sometimes crossed by later streets.

Structures such as wattle-lined ditches, hearths, areas with large earth-fast posts, and (in one case) a palisade have been dated to the period before the middle of the 12th century (fig. 5). None of the refuse from crafts can as yet be certainly associated

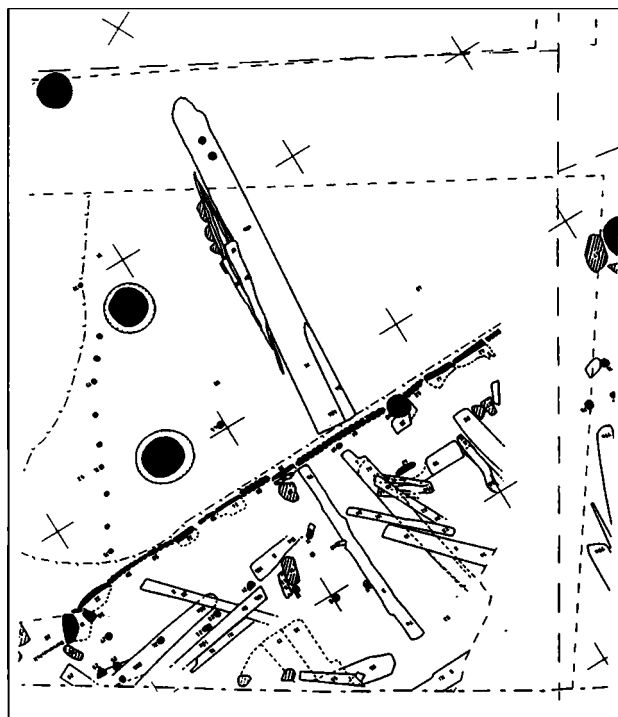


Fig. 5. A palisade wall probably from 1100; this is one of the earliest wooden structures found in the north of the town.

with these remains of early settlement but we hope that the work which has just started will help us to understand this a little more.

By the beginning of the 12th century the craft activities, especially in the central areas of the town, probably had a long tradition. The settlement expanded during the 12th century and became more densely populated (fig. 6). Remains of leather used in the striking of coins at a royal mint from *c.* 1140-50 have been found in the town centre; this activity continued for about two hundred years (fig. 7). The-

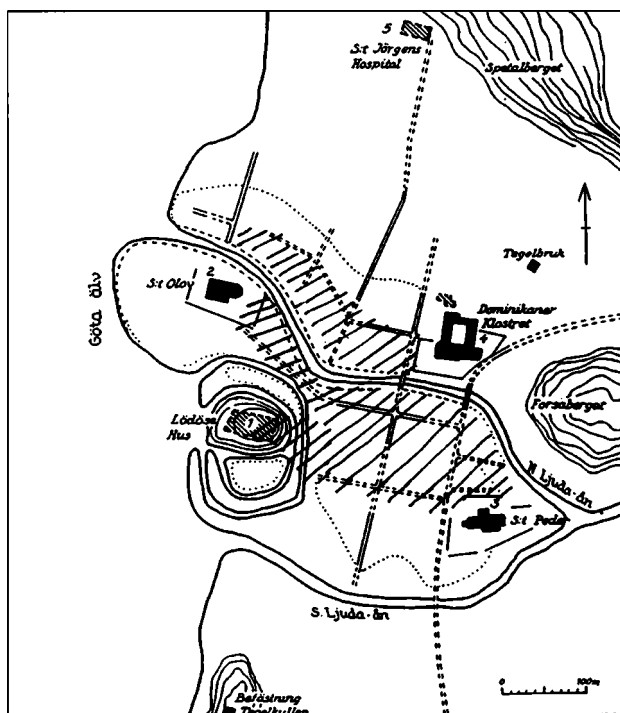


Fig. 6. Map of Lödöse showing the extent of settlement in the 12th century. All the churches were present by this time but only later acquired the size as they appear on the map.

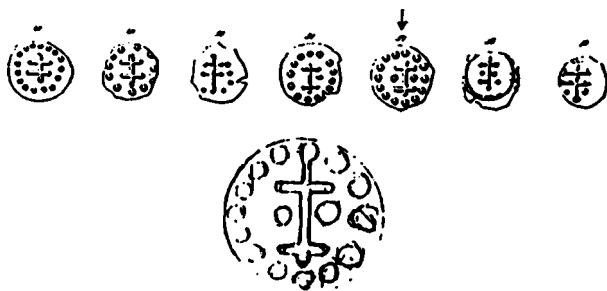


Fig. 7. The earliest coin minting so far known in Lödöse dates from c. 1150. The mint mark is identifiable, but not the mint master (Ekre 1991).

re was also evidence of several other crafts in this area during the 12th century: textiles (c. 1500 fragments of textiles and more than one hundred spindle-whorls have been found), leatherworking, tanning, bone and antler working (figs 8, 9).³

In this early phase the settlement to the north of the branch of the river seems to have been a farm; there are no waste materials from crafts and this is the only place where an excavated building included

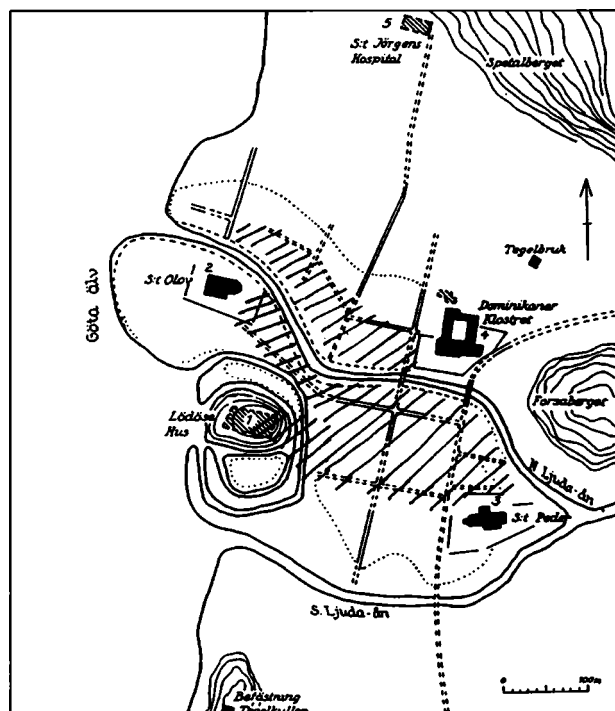


Fig. 8. Map of the archaeologically attested craft sites in Lödöse, not distinguished chronologically (compiled by Carlsson and Ekre). Boat building Iron smelting Textile working Brickmaking. Iron smithing Gold/silver smithing Wood working Coopering. Bronze/copper working Comb making Leather working Mint.

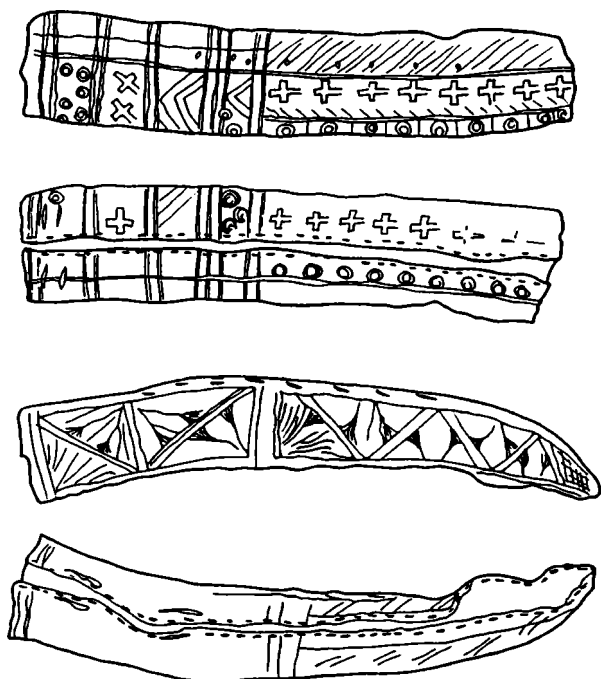


Fig. 9. Two leather knife-scabbards made in Lödöse showing high quality craftsmanship.

a byre (fig. 10). It is interesting to note that we found remains of long ditches here, dating from the period before the regular settlement.

Elsewhere, buildings, alleys, yards and streets were laid out following a regular pattern and most of the buildings seemed to have faced the streets. About 80 per cent of them were built with oak framing. At the same time there were three stone churches in Lödöse. One, probably the oldest, was dedicated to the Norwegian King St Olof, one to St Peter, and one to St Mary. Following A. Andrén, it may be claimed that this multiplicity of churches and a royal

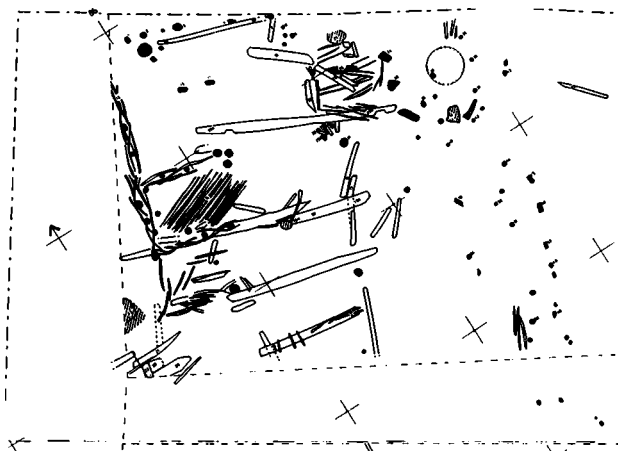


Fig. 10. The earliest known parts of a cattle shed from the north of the town, constructed of wattle walling with wattle infill.

mint characterize a town established in the 11th century.

A small stronghold, recorded as having been destroyed by fire in 1227, was also built in this period which might be described as the first urban phase of Lödöse (Andrén 1985).⁴

3. The city at its height, 13th-14th century

Excavation results show that the town plan was changed again in the early 13th century. The most obvious changes are the construction of an extensive moat system and the start on the reconstruction of the castle which had been destroyed by fire; they took several years to complete. In some cases the moats were dug through sites which had previously been built on (fig. 11). These were areas containing the mint and other crafts with royal authority – thus they may have been the site of royal property. It is also noteworthy that sometime before the middle of

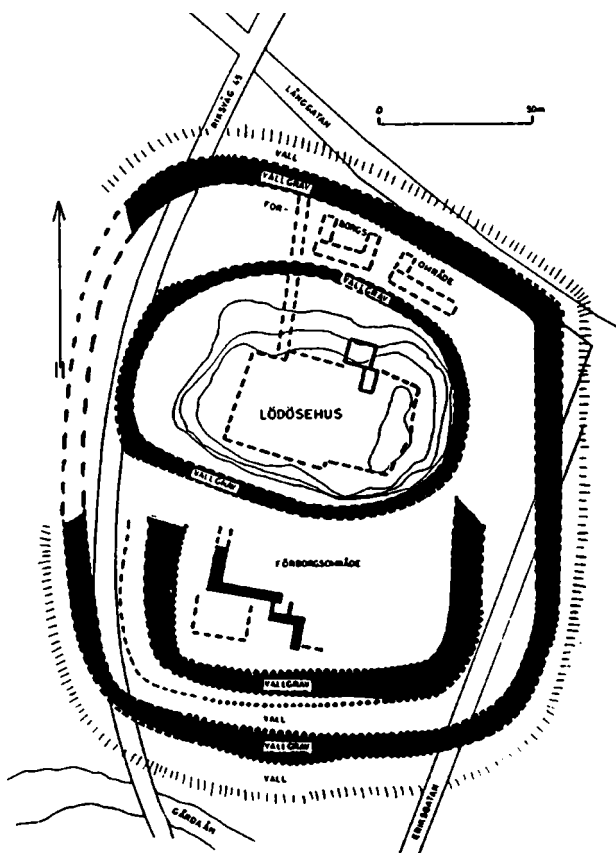


Fig. 11. Plan of Lödöse castle at its greatest extent. Excavations in 1991 showed that the moat in the west continued around the whole castle. After Ekre 1991.

the 13th century the Norwegian king built a royal manor on his property on the other bank of the Göta Älv, at Torskog in 1246. We must wonder why that happened then and not before.

The church of St Mary was rebuilt in 1243 and became the church for Dominican friars. Craftsmen,

using skills such as brickmaking, were employed and the production of bricks began. The churches of St Peter and St Olof were rebuilt at that time, and changed dramatically. At the end of the 13th century a hospital was built to the north of the city.

General topographical changes are also noticeable by the position and character of the buildings on the sites. In some areas in the east of the city the house gables faced onto the streets; elsewhere they still lay alongside the streets. Timber-framed buildings remained the most common in Lödöse (fig. 12). There must have been a good supply of timber at this period as, at least in the town centre, even the streets were partially built of timber. Stone was used in the outer areas.⁵

Craft manufacture increased and in the area with presumed royal connection no fewer than ten diffe-

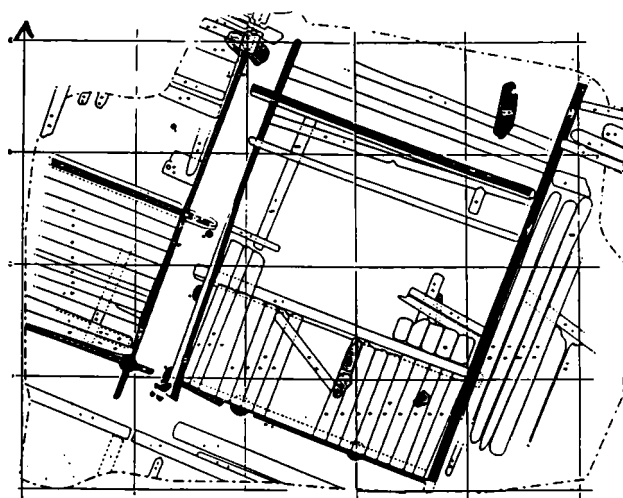


Fig. 12. Plan of one of the timber-framed buildings excavated in the centre of the town.

rent crafts have been found. The mint continued in the same area as before, partly in the same buildings as the goldsmith who had been hired to make punches for the beltmaker. Decorative stamps on leather, e.g. stamps with the royal *Folkunga* coat of arms, show that there was close co-operation between craftsmen and royal authorities.⁶

Tailors, weavers, wood-turners and coopers started or continued their trades in the centre of Lödöse during this period. Shoemakers seem to have moved from the eastern fringes to the centre.

A group of workshops and other buildings used by coppersmiths for at least three generations (c. 150 years) have been found by excavation in the east of the town. About 2 tonnes of slag from an excavated area of 500m² indicate large-scale production.

Dwellings, blacksmiths' forges and furnaces were built to the north of the small river at this period. Several brick kilns in connection with clay-preparation areas were also constructed close to the monastery (fig. 13).⁷

Trade, including production for export, intensified at this time. Iron bars and other products are thought to have been exported from Lödöse. The development of northern Sweden was probably associated with the growth of Lödöse as an international trading centre and the town continued to be of great importance to the Swedish royal authorities as it was the only route to the North Sea.

4. After the 14th century

The changes which began in the 13th century continued. When, in the middle of the 14th century, King Magnus Eriksson moved his mint closer to the metal-working areas in the north there was a great change at Lödöse as the mint had been the central point of

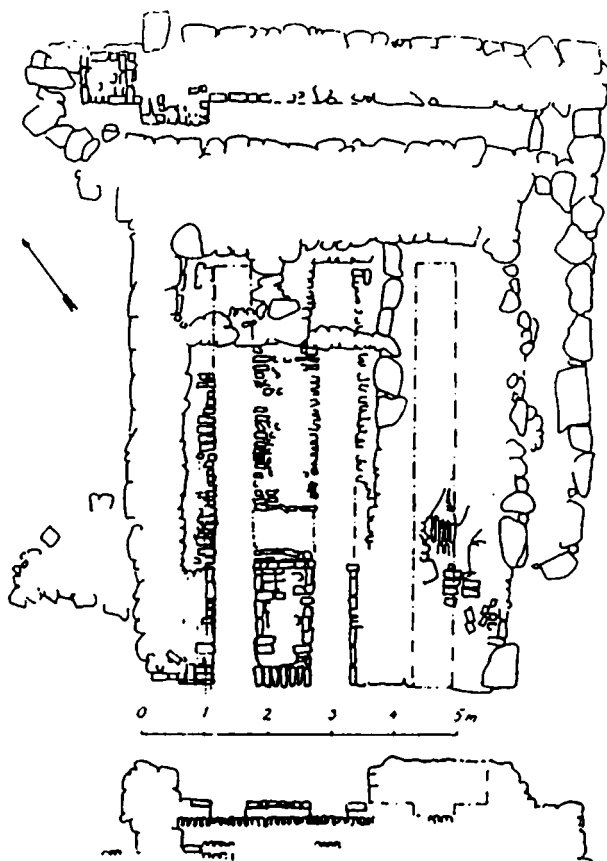


Fig. 13. Plan of one of the three brick kilns excavated in Lödöse. After Andersson 1967, fig. 10.

the city for almost two hundred years. This signified a significant topographical and functional change in the city – production became more important than tradition.

1368 was a fateful year in the history of Lödöse. The Hanseatic merchants set fire to the city, completely destroying large parts of it. This was closely lin-

ked to political developments in west Sweden whereby there were different alliances between the Scandinavian kingdoms. Subsequent to this, Lödöse's function as an international trading centre changed. The town was partially rebuilt, with the concentration in the western area close to the River Göta Älv and near to the old church of St Olof. St Olof's church may have been rebuilt and have acted as the main church at this time. The areas close to the river may have been shipyards.⁸

In 1473 the inhabitants of Lödöse were asked by the governing bodies to move to an area which was better suited for trade, so New Lödöse was founded at the mouth of the Göta Älv.

The settlement of Lödöse survived for another 170 years; it was mainly a regional centre and it progressively moved westwards towards the river. The remains of buildings from 1400-1600 have mainly been found in the west of the early urban area.

Lödöse lost its town charter for *c.* 60 years in the 16th century. The charter was eventually regranted, but without success, and was removed in 1646 when the present town of Gothenburg was founded.

Notes

1. Bråther 1982; 1983
2. Carlsson & Ekre 1980; Carlsson 1982
3. Carlsson & Ekre 1980; Ekre 1973; Carlsson 1981.
4. Andren 1981.
5. Ekre 1986
6. Ekre 1989/90; 1986
7. Carlsson 1981.
8. Ekre 1973, 1988.

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