

Willy Groenman-van Waateringe, *Leather from Medieval Svendborg. The Archaeology of Svendborg, Denmark, Band 5*. Odense University Press, Odense 1988. 120 Seiten, 130 Abbildungen.

One of the greatest problems facing urban archaeologists today is the publication of their material finds. The diverse and often very large material groups provide an insight into the economic and social structures of the individual settlements, and in relation to environmental evidence, diet and the minutiae of daily life come sharply into focus. As the interpretation of the finds is heavily dependent on comparative studies,

and, in a medieval context, the international distribution of particular commodities, finds reports from major urban excavations are eagerly awaited by archaeologists faced with the same problems and researching similar material in different geographical settings. The delay between excavation and the appearance of a definitive monograph has brought this approach to the problem of publication into disrepute, and most large urban projects now resort to the fascicule format to ensure unity and ease of access. Presenting major urban programmes on a site to site basis does, however, risk an uncoordinated and piecemeal approach lacking perspective and with much of the synthesis being left to the reader's discretion as the series progresses. The editors of the Svendborg series of volumes are to be commended for espousing an alternative course with their choice for thematic publication whereby individual specialists present an overview, combining the evidence from all 23 sites excavated between 1972 and 1986 in a single volume. That 5 volumes had already appeared by the end of 1988 is no mean achievement.

As far as the small finds are concerned, thematic publication encourages a unified and up-to-date synthesis, smaller find groups can be seen in perspective instead of going unnoticed as a note to an appendix and the significance of find distribution within the town can be explored in a way that is impossible in the separate site report. This type of thematic fascicule publication should act as a strong stimulus to ongoing discussion between the various specialists and the excavators themselves and it allows recent developments to be incorporated and new avenues to be explored. The major drawback of the approach is, however, that the various kinds of evidence cannot be fully related and integrated, nor can the associations between different categories of evidence be investigated. Inevitably, specialist discussion raises questions which, it is to be hoped, will be tackled in the final synthesis once all the material evidence has passed the review. The fascicule is a stimulus to the specialist concerned, but lays a heavy responsibility upon the project coordinator, for without the integration of the accumulated evidence, the disparate studies will remain of interest only to specialists.

Groenman-van Waateringe's volume draws together the leatherwork, predominantly footwear, but also including sword and knife sheaths, sling pouches, belts, purses, a glove and fragments of a highly decorated saddle. The leather comes from 8 major sites, dating to between 12th and 16th century, widely scattered throughout the town. The basic evidence is clearly presented by context and date, with discussion and synthesis being concentrated in the final chapters. The individual sites are briefly described, but it is unfortunate that the numbering of the sites does not correspond directly to the town plan which is most thoughtfully pasted into the back cover. The plan folds out as a permanent guide to the location of the scattered excavation sites while the book is in use, thus clarifying find distributions and site relationships. This is an excellent feature. It is also a control on the value of the evidence being discussed, and it is useful to see how many sites failed to produce any leather at all before assessing the significance of distributions or of the absence of certain elements. Contexts with leather are, however, quite widely scattered over the town area and though perhaps not closely enough to give a real insight into diversity or social differentiation, they would seem to give a fair sample.

As is usual in Medieval contexts, the leather is dominated by footwear, usually in fragmentary condition, but here the author's experience with other large and unwieldy urban complexes has resulted in a concise, quantifiable and visually pleasing presentation of the evidence. Text is cut to the minimum and the results are presented in tables and diagrams easily accessible to the non-specialist, who is thus encouraged to incorporate the evidence of the leatherwork into the interpretation of other material categories. Presentation of the results by site, before going on to give an overview of Svendborg as a whole, is particularly important for other specialists dealing with medieval leather complexes as it retains the diversity of find composition between the excavated locations (eg. the high proportion of manufacturing off cuts in sites 449a and 482). However, the individual footwear types are only presented in an overview of the 8 sites together (fig. 6.1.2: the figure references are particularly cumbersome): site 607a (no. 15 on the plan and no. 8 in the site descriptions p. 11) alone is also shown separately (fig. 6.1.1). Though some of the other complexes are indeed rather small, separate listing would have been useful for identifying variations, in particular because this single large complex seems to dominate the character of the town as a whole. In combination with other find groups or sources of evidence, slight variations might still highlight economic or social differences between the individual sites. The two tables are, moreover, difficult to relate as the overview is arranged by century, while site 607a is presented by excavators phase. It must, however, be stressed that with a little effort it is comparatively simple to extract the information from the report oneself. The form of publication is versatile enough for the material to be approached with different questions in mind.

The footwear is classified on the basis of (a) height and (b) fastening method. Where very fragmentary material is concerned, a primary division on fastening method is perhaps to be favoured, since this remains identifiable on even quite small pieces, while the height can only be assessed in more complete specimens. Though the unnatural representation of the reconstructed shoes does rather detract from the appeal of the illustrations, the informative value is high, requiring very little in the way of explanatory text. The balance between conveying information and the often attractive appearance of the original is difficult to achieve and as a general rule it is probably better to err on the side of simplicity, since shading and stippling all too often mask essential interpretative details.

The overview per century is interesting in showing the shift from the northern tradition of wide boots and leash shoes to the more general European tradition of button and laced boots from the 14th century onwards. Other diagrams offer a wealth of information, though until all this can be placed in a wider, regional perspective it remains open to a variety of interpretations. For instance, the cutting pattern of button boots (European type) differs from that of the northern leash shoes. Is this a cultural preference, a practical consequence of the different fastening methods or a question of economy?

Largely thanks to the work of Groenman-van Waateringe and a handful of colleagues, N-Europe leads the way in the regional study of shoe fashion. Sites such as Haithabu, Lübeck, Oslo, Schleswig and now Svendborg are presented systematically in a manner allowing quantification and accurate analysis of trends. The extent of the available information allows divergence from the expected pattern to be identified, leading to a more dynamic view of the societies which produced and used the shoes in such numbers. At first sight the N-European material seems to contrast quite markedly to that from Britain, the Netherlands and sporadic finds from the rest of Germany (too little is published elsewhere for useful comparison). It may well be questioned in how far this is a result of the relative uniformity of publication style, for it is impossible to quantify the larger British find groups accurately. The recent, and most welcome publication of London footwear (another excellent example of the policy of thematic small find publication) provides only incidental parallels, for there is no attempt at quantification in any meaningful sense (F. GREW and M. DE NEERGARD, *Shoes and Patterns. Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 2* [1988]). Furthermore until major urban complexes such as Amsterdam, Dordrecht and Köln are published, these areas lack the frame of reference essential for the interpretation of smaller find groups.

A fascinating section (p. 77 ff.) tackles the question of foot health. Ever since A. GANSSER-BURKHARDT, *Das Leder und seine Verarbeitung im röm. Legionslager Vindonissa* (1942) identified crippling foot abnormalities on the basis of nailing patterns on Roman footwear, almost any irregularity in footwear has been taken as evidence for deformity and disease. Groenman-van Waateringe approaches the problem scientifically by measurement of the pattern of pressure exerted on the sole. A pattern of pressure points is compared to the 'normal pattern' to identify abnormalities. Though this material was carefully selected, it may be questioned whether excavated leather is really suitable for such fine analysis. The single layer sole of the medieval sole will register any abnormality in gait more readily than the multi-layer soles of Roman and post-medieval footwear, but equally, they wear rapidly and chance factors (incidental use, scuffing on stones) will affect the leather disproportionately. Furthermore, we have little information on the effects of burial or of compression amongst other (often hard) objects. Wear need not only be related to foot defects: foot use is also a factor. The 'flat feet' of nos 11 and 19 more probably reveal that the owner used his right foot on a spade while digging, symmetrical 'flat feet' could even be caused by the pressure of the stirrups while riding, while wear on the front of the shoe is more likely to be caused by kneeling or squatting. On the whole, though, despite some reservations, confidence in the method is strengthened by the fact that the majority of wear patterns are 'normal', in contrast to the largely crippled legionaries of Vindonissa.

Some minor points: p. 22, 1640/50 is obviously a misprint for 1540/50. The British term 'Tudor' is surely inappropriate for Danish material and only serves to perpetuate the British view that European fashion change is somehow linked to English politics. The combination of multi-layer soles and pointed (usually ladies) shoes begins to appear in the Netherlands after c. 1480, with toes gradually broadening: the really wide Kuhmaul shoe remains relatively rare. The find group 126a (p. 24) could therefore be dated to quite early in the 16th century. Some of the datings would appear too early: the side laced boot fig. 5.8.27.2 dated to the 12th century, is more at home in the 14th century. The table of shoe types per century brings out the probable inconsistencies with particular clarity, with telltale gaps in the sequence. Here the excavators need to look at the stratigraphy in the light of the now quite refined dating evidence of the footwear itself.

Of the remaining finds, the sword sheaths form an important group. Most come from Møllergade 1 and 6 and are dated to the 13th century. All seem to belong to broad, slashing swords with a relatively blunt point (Oakeshott type XII) and are suspended by means of slits through which the divided ends of the sword belt passes. Additional diagonal slits point to the arrangement familiar from early English brasses where the split end of one side of the belt is used to lace the lower, carrying side of the belt. This method does not seem to be depicted on French or German monuments. Though several sheaths are quite closely paralleled in an early 14th century group of sheaths from Leiden (eg. 7.3.3.4; 7.3.5.12; the shortcomings of the method of figure reference is particularly obvious here!; C. VAN DRIEL-MURRAY in: *Bodemonderzoek in Leiden 1988/89* [1990] 153 ff.), there are marked differences in the decorative motifs used. Only one sheath with a triangular top occurs in Leiden, as against 9 in Svendborg, raising the possibility that this is a predominantly 13th century feature. Several of these are illustrated upside down (p. 89; 102): this occurs so frequently in Scandinavian publications that it has become almost a convention. The fragmentary condition of the sheaths (similar to the Leiden examples) might suggest the residence of a sword scabbard maker here, though it is perhaps significant that the percentage of low shoes in Møllergade is rather high. In a 13/14th century context low shoes are commonly regarded as a status indicator. This is something to be born in mind when the other find categories are examined.

The growing importance of urban archaeology must mean that numerous other leather complexes await publication throughout Europe. This stimulating and admirably illustrated volume provides not only an insight into the role of leather in the economy and society of Svendborg itself, but also provides a valuable introduction to the methodology and the presentation of equally large complexes elsewhere. There is much practical assistance in the identification of stitching and shoe typology, as well as an extensive bibliography. With this volume in hand, the task of publishing the leatherwork from urban excavations should seem a less daunting task.

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