CHAPTER 3

Water and Urban Space in Late Medieval Stockholm

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the interconnections between water and multifaceted urban space. As a vibrant coastal city and major commercial center Stockholm provides an intriguing case study; it is located on an island surrounded by water and access to water has been crucial for trade and the success of the city. With the help of source material such as court records and craft ordinances the chapter examines how use of and access to water was regulated in late medieval Stockholm. Additionally, analysis of 16th century paintings and the oldest city map illustrates the imaginary aspects of water and space, showing how urban space and its water borders were conceived by citizens. Empirical evidence is discussed within a theoretical framework of the Lefebvrean notion of three-dimensional space. The chapter demonstrates how questions related to the access to, use of and right to water show long historical continuity.

Introduction

In modern school books, Stockholm, the Swedish capital, is often depicted as a city connected by bridges. Water is a significant part of the city’s identity, a fact that shows in many ways. For example, after the royal wedding of Princess Victoria in 2010, the bride and bridegroom took a cruise on the surrounding waterways. In this article, I study how water shaped, constructed, and affected the urban space of medieval Stockholm. Within the theoretical framework of space, this article discusses some of the essential elements of everyday life that affected every urban inhabitant: the use of and access to water.

My starting point is the Lefebvrean notion of three-dimensional space: physical space—or perceived space—is the material and concrete surroundings where spatial practices take place. These spatial practices are created through the routines and actions of everyday life that connect specific places. These places could be, for example, a marketplace, a well, and a home. Mental space—or conceived space—encompasses the abstractions and conceptualizations of physical spaces and places. These representations of space mirror
what a specific place signifies to a person (or a group or community). Social space—or lived and experienced space—represents social values, traditions, and collective actions. In this representational space, social actors (people) interact, adopt, and transform their environment, and places bear symbolic meaning (Lefebvre; Bertuzzo; Swyngedow; Cassidy-Welch). In research, these three dimensions can be separated and used as conceptual tools for analysing a phenomenon. However, in reality, these dimensions interact, and when a physical place is connected with the worldviews and values of contemporary people, it becomes a social and mental place. In the medieval world, these imaginary and mental aspects of space had a great impact on how the physical space was perceived and utilized. In the context of medieval urban society, the concepts of space and spatiality have been applied par excellence to social topography (Lamberg, “Introduction”; Lamberg, Dannemännern).

Stockholm was chosen for the case study in this article for several reasons. Firstly, it represents a major urban centre and coastal town in the Baltic Sea region, and it grew to become a dominant metropolis (by contemporary standards) in the early modern period. Stockholm was established in the middle of the thirteenth century and it has been the capital of Swedish realm since the Middle Ages. With a population of 5,000–6,500, late medieval Stockholm was the largest city in the Swedish realm and one of the leading cities in Baltic trade. Tallinn and Riga were approximately the same size as Stockholm, whereas Lübeck had over 20,000 inhabitants (Graßmann; Lilja; Mänd). Secondly, the preserved, comparatively rich medieval source material offers a unique opportunity to examine the connections between water and the three dimensions of space. With the help of written sources, it is possible to study how the use of water, access to water, and waste management were regulated from various perspectives. The illustrative sources offer fruitful material for examining the mental and imaginary aspects of water and space in the context of medieval Stockholm. In addition to the medieval source material, up-to-date geological and hydrological knowledge is applied in order to understand the possibilities and restrictions that nature provided. Scholars have been able to reconstruct the social topography of medieval Stockholm quite well, thus making it possible to investigate the relation between water use and space. Thirdly, Stockholm sits on mixed water: it is a place where fresh and salt water meet. It therefore makes an interesting starting point for inquiry. Finally, the use and access of water in medieval Stockholm is still quite an unexplored field. For example, the basic studies on medieval and early modern Stockholm handle water supply and sanitation only briefly in a few paragraphs (Dahlbäck; Ahnlund; Hult et al.). Furthermore, the journal of water, Tidskriften Vatten, has published a few articles that briefly handle the history of water supply and sanitation,