

Town and Fortification in the Early Modern. A complex relationship

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Abstract

Which is the relationship between town and fortification? In a traditional perspective this has largely been considered a question of defense of the civilian population. However, this factor, though certainly important in several cases, cannot be seen as the only relevant factor addressing the problem. There are also other traditional explanations. One of these relates to questions of paying custom for selling and buying items. The fortified enclosure would make control of payment easier. A third factor, also frequently mentioned has to do with general control of a population inside the walls, *i.e.* controlling movement. These factors, but also several others, will be briefly discussed in relation to a set of primary examples from the Swedish realm, but also certain examples beyond the Swedish context, mainly taken from the Mediterranean macro-region. Most certainly, the relative relevance of various factors is not always the same, and this variability may be of major importance when addressing major fortification. Accepting for variability will allow us to start to understand better certain general problems, and will illustrate the importance of looking closer at the evidence (in form of texts, drawings, tangible remains, etc.)

Keywords: Fortification, town, explanation.

1. The Early Modern fortification and the town

Which is the relationship between town and fortification? In a traditional perspective this has largely been considered a simple, related to the question of defence of the civilian population and to facilitate military operations. However, this factor, though certainly important in several cases, cannot be seen as the only relevant factor addressing the problem. Actually, there has been numerous different arguments as to this question, and I will not attempt at any encyclopedic list here. Most certainly, the relative relevance of various factors is not always the same, and this variability may be of major importance when addressing major fortification. The question will be discussed briefly in relation to a small set of examples from the

Swedish realm, the Mediterranean macro-region and the Americas.

The traditional explanation to fortification is certainly an important factor, and would correspond to a large number of instances. However, the first and most important observation to make here is simply to point at the large amount of cases in which highly exposed towns were not fortified, or possessed only simple and inadequate fortification. It would actually be interesting to look at a large number of cases, and see if there is not a certain tendency that the locations most exposed to external violence had remarkably inadequate fortifi-

cations in the period they were most exposed. There are macro-regional differences here.

However, the issue is far from simple or straightforward even for the Mediterranean case. In certain cases, like Florence for example, the town has medieval walls but no major new and relevant fortifications in the beginning of the Early Modern, perhaps due to the strength of the Florentine at that moment, which made fortifications less relevant. The case of Lucca, a nearby town, is very different, possessing a very advanced Early Modern Fortification.

Another important issue is that in several cases, the fortifications only protected parts of a site, a question we will return to. There is also an important added dimension here, while considering the subdivided spaces within a town dominated by different elite groups, which was still often walled in at the beginning of the Early Modern, as in the case of Rome.

Beyond the traditional explanation, several other explanations have been suggested. One is related to the question of customs, and the ways payment was administered. The argument would be that advanced fortifications with few entrances allowing for easy transport would make the process simpler. This argument has, evidently, relevance and should not be left behind. However, the level of investment necessary for an advanced fortification seems (perhaps) to be very high, if the only purpose would be to facilitate the process of customs.

There are also certain explanations which relate to the control of the population inside the walls of the fortifications. This line of argument also applies, at least in certain cases. In relation to this explanation, macro-regional differences must be considered. In certain macro-regions (and in particular local cases) the walls of the fortified town were not the limit of the population directly linked to the town. In several cases, not least in the Nordic region, large and important segments of the population lived outside the perimeter of the city wall. This population thus escaped the means of control established by the presence of the

physical wall. Thus, the direct link between control and the wall is not always present.

Yet another type of explanation link buildings to particular types of thinking, in a Foucaultian or Deleuzian sense. To take an example, we may look at Hirst discussion on space and power (2005). In a review, Edensor elegantly summarized the argument. Hirst “investigate the effects of buildings through a Foucauldian perspective, charting the transformations through which buildings have been apprehended according to the power–knowledge axis provided by the discursive formations organized around medieval churches, panoptical prisons and artillery fortresses” (Edensor, 2006, p. 722). Here there is an idea of a link from architectural space to specific mental modes of thought. At the same time, in the case of a fortification, the physical walls create and sustain certain social divisions, thus reinforcing the mental base. Such arguments were popular at the time Hirst wrote his famous book. But while the walls and their distribution certainly help sustaining certain social forms at a particular point in time, the physical structure in its more general form, in the distribution only of its major walls, can be used in a large number of ways, and the “skeleton” does not by itself correspond to a determined way of thinking. We can easily see this in a large number of cases, in which the same skeleton of a townscape alter social character in a dramatic sense over time. The case of certain old city cores, which were by c 1920 considered sanitary problematic and often even “slums”, have, when preserved, been transferred to high status areas, housing wealthy population, tourist related activities, and advanced shopping facilities. This process of “gentrification” counts, for example, for the “Old Town” (*Gamla Stan*) in Stockholm, Sweden, but also in so many other cases. Only by looking at details and particular uses can we find a link from architectural form to social form (Cornell, Hjertman, 2018).

Finally, I will mention two explanations which are of a somewhat different kind. One of these is related to status, which may have been a relevant factor in certain cases. Possessing a

“new” and heavy architecture in the form of an advanced fortification may well have been a relevant factor in the quest for status in a number of cases. In certain cases this may have been the primary purpose, in terms of the elite responsible. Another factor, which can be linked to the question of status, but which must not necessarily have such a link, is simply the question of aesthetics. A large fortification may in certain cases have some kind of aesthetic value, which in itself constitutes a factor to take into consideration.

This list, which is far from exhaustive, demonstrates that the ways to approach function or meaning of complex fortification differ substantially. While there is a lot of difference in how to think about the relative importance of these explanations to fortification, it would actually seem obvious that all have some relevance, even if the exact phrasing may be discussed for each type of explanation. It could even be argued that there is no given simple and straightforward explanation to fortification. Rather, we must accept that there are different explanations, and some will be of major relevance in one case, while of little or almost no importance in another. In most cases, however, there is more than one explanation, while the relative importance of these explanations may vary considerably. In order to illustrate this general argument, I will sketchy and briefly mention some cases from different macro-regions.

2. Early Modern Sweden

The Nordic Early Modern urban forms emerge slowly. Denmark relatively quickly adopts new town models, although relatively simple (Riis, 2012). I would argue that the Early Modern in Sweden can be construed as to start in the fifteenth century, even if there are certain prior developments which could be considered proto-Modern. The Early Modern thus construed is much linked to the construction of a new kind of political state organization, a process initiated in the fifteenth century. Sweden as we conceive it today has a kind of start here, even if the formal independence of this new state

form came only in the first half of the sixteenth century. Of course, there are attempt at establishing a Swedish state already in the thirteenth century, and it did had certain interesting dimensions in terms of organization, but was still relatively fragile. Early Modern Sweden in the sixteenth century largely was about the beginnings of state organization, which had a strong side based on the military, and new kinds of production and trade. When it comes to towns, they were small as compared to the continental metropolis, *e.g.* Paris, and housed only some hundred inhabitants in general. Only Stockholm had a couple of thousand inhabitants, but was not a large town in a continental comparison. In general the towns were fairly “rural”, housing a relatively large number of peasants (Sandström, 1996; Lilja 2000; Ersgård, 2013). The role of the state was large in certain cases, but there also major actors among the nobility and among certain merchants. The participation of various actors during this period is stressed by several Swedish historians (Linge, 1969; Lindegren, 1980, 1984; Linde, 2009; Sandström, 1996; Troebst, 1994; Margolin, 1977; Vries, Woude, 1997). There was no general trend to a general market, rather mixed developments, opening market relations in certain cases and contexts, when closing markets and exchange forms in other cases (Sandström, 1996; Lindegren, 1980). In terms of towns and fortification, the development is relatively slow, with certain partial exceptions, like in the case of the castle of Kalmar and the Castle of Stockholm, both oriented towards the Baltic Sea. However, none of these involved a general fortification of the town as such (Larsson, 2018). In the seventeenth century there were two projects at Kalmar which involved a general fortification of large segments of the town, first, in a star form partially resembling Palmanova. This particular Kalmar project was physically initiated at the terrain but eventually abandoned, and later in the same century a more Baroque fortified town of a relatively small size was constructed (Larsson, 2018; Tagesson, 2018; Ahlberg, 2005).

In the case of the Göta Estuary region, in today’s western Sweden, the Swedish state only

slowly came to gain full control. An important project from the late fifteenth century was the town of Nya Lödöse (Alin, 1913; Rosén, Larsson, 2018; Öbrink, Nielsen, Williams, 2018; Hjertman, Naumann, Vretemark, Williams, Kjellin, 2018; Cornell, Larsson, 2016; Cornell, Rosén, Öbrink, 2014), which from the middle of the sixteenth century came to play an important role in as an harbour for the intensified export of wood-based products and iron, initially to Lübeck and other Hansa towns, eventually to England and later to the Dutch area (Cornell, Nilsson, Palm, Rosén, 2018). The town had less than 2000 inhabitants; it was a large town for being Sweden (Rosén, 2018, 2011; Eliassen, 2018), but in a broader west European perspective it was still a small town in 1500. The city plan was partially of a new kind, and it was evidently founded and planned. The town of Nya Lödöse never had an operative defence, no fortification worthy of that name. There was an earthen wall and a shallow ditch, but even cows are said to have walked over it. The town was highly exposed in relation to war, and was partially abandoned during a period during the sixteenth century, but later re-populated after two or three decades.

There were some kilometres away a simple largely wooden fortress, closer to the estuary of the river Göta. For a while a large number of the inhabitants of Nya Lödöse were housed below this castle, but this only increased the vulnerability of the population (Scander, 1966; Sandin, Wennberg, 2008). There was also an attempt at another town, placed opposite to the castle on the side of the River Göta. However, this attempt, often called Karl IX's Gothenburg (or the *Färjestaden* town) never prospered (Scander, 1975) and had a brief duration of some years only. Thus, we can conclude that the safety of urban population was not a major issue in this case.

As we saw in the case of Kalmar at the Baltic shore and in the Nya Lödöse case in Western Sweden, there was little interest in complex fortification of towns as such during the sixteenth century in Sweden. But as we noted for Kalmar there was also a change in the area of

the estuary of the Göta River in the the seventeenth century. Here, a highly advanced plan was staked out for the new town of Gothenburg (Göteborg), founded in 1621. Slowly, in a process lasting some centuries, this became a fortified town of a relatively advanced type, also exhibiting canals and other new elements. This was a huge investment, and the town was given several exceptions when it comes to state taxation, and was considered what we can call a free zone. There had never been any spatial arrangement of this magnitude in the region, and it must have been considered something fairly special. It could, perhaps, even be seen as a kind of Other in the landscape, a foreign new "thing", a sort of truly "modern" event (Cornell, Rosén, 2018). However, this gigantic investment in a fortified town only once truly played a role in the context of warfare; and in this case, the sheer magnitude of the fortification made the enemy abandon the idea of a military attack against the town as such, though they already possessed the recently buildt castle in the estuary. Thus, in the the fortification of Gothenburg was never put to test in an actual military attack. If it had a military effect, it was by making a possible enemy think twice. There is however, another point of major relevance. When finishing the defence system of Gothenburg, the general picture had changed considerably, and the danger of attacks at this part of Sweden were not very high. In a sense, the fortification came into existence at a point when it was little needed, while it had not existed when it would have been of major importance.

3. The Italian peninsula and the Western Mediterranean

There is no possibility to make an adequate discussion, even if it were to be superficial, for the Mediterranean macro-region or even for its western parts. While "international" trade is certainly important, other factors like production and the regional setting are often forgotten or only discussed briefly (se *e.g.* Conforti, 2005). Braudels old study on this region during Filip II is still relevant, like his even more ambitious *Civilisation and Capitalism* (Braudel

1967, Braudel 1979a, Braudel 1979b), in which towns are given a special place in a larger history. Still, some of the differences and more intricate connections we are discussing here tends to disappear in the general pattern suggested. Another common theme, of course, is the question of the state and its forms (Anderson, 1974; Bonney, 1991; Clark, 1995; Ertman, 1997). Clark and Ertman stresses the construction of bureaucracy, and this point is most certainly of importance. Bonney stresses dynastic relations, and the difficulties to finance war as major parameters. Anderson gives major importance to the state as a controller of production, which is also a variable, though its importance varied considerable in space and time.

Suffice thus, here, to make some few very general observations, mainly related to the Italian peninsula. What first must strike us are three features, which stand-out in comparison to the Nordic case. First, there is a presence of older large scale edification, stretching back to the Roman Empire and beyond, including elements of fortification; this is not present for this period in the Nordic area. Second, we see a larger number of different attempts at creating and sustain new kinds of states, within complex systems of alliances, varying over time. Third, there is solidification, in the Early Modern period of a kind of structural and processual difference between Northern and Southern Italy (*e.g.* the classic study by Villari, originally published in 1967, Villari, 1993; Marino, 1988; Cornell, Nilsson, 2017). In Villari's view there were possibilities for another development in the South in the sixteenth century, which never was realised. It is indeed strange how a massive investment in sheep can have so different eventual outcomes as they had in Southern Italy as compared to England in the sixteenth century (Cornell, Nilsson, 2017). Whatever may be the cause for this, we see in the Northern half of the Italian peninsula a rich and varied set of states in the Early Modern, states which, in varied ways, invested much in warfare. But they also showed much interest in architecture, science and art, and we see here early developments of what we call

Renaissance. The interplay between the three mentioned fields, and their articulation to a certain interest in history and remains from the past, is a fascinating field of study (see the classic appraisal published by Burckhardt, 1860; Cardinali, 2002, 2018a, 2018b; Braunfels, 1953; Keller, 1979; Antal 1948). Of special interest are, perhaps, certain observations by Antal, in which we see how styles were not static, and how the order of passage could vary, and even in the case of an individual painter, who could move from Renaissance to Gothic. When we move from painting to large scale architecture, the level of investment is different, the time necessary for the completion of an object, and above all the resources, and the amount of people involved in varied ways. There is here a need for a relationship between the wealthy individual or individuals to the artist, the architect, which must –indeed– have been tricky and difficult. Now, as war was an important feature, both in real life, and in imagined worlds, it was also a kind of art, and it could be linked to other arts, like architecture.

Here we must reflect briefly on the role of the state as an administrative body. We can see how, for example in Rome, there is a slow process of centralisation over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which the Pope attempts at eliminating closed off areas within the town, dominated by autarchic feudal groups. Order concerning the height of walls, the making of new streets, demolition and new building projects were parts of this process. Still by the eighteenth century this was not a finished process, and Pope Alexander VII failed to open the Corso all through from Piazza del Popolo to the Capitol (*e.g.* Formica, 2019, pp. 29-35; Metzger, 2002). When the town was so divided, an efficient general system of defence was difficult, and the points defended by the central authorities became certain specific spots and areas.

4. The Americas and beyond

In order to finish this brief discussion, the particularity of the pattern in the Americas in the Early Modern can be discussed (Cornell, 2015,

2007; Cornell, Velazques, in press; Cornell, Hjertman, 2015). In this case, the location of fortifications in the sixteenth century, and even the seventeenth century, is clearly related to areas in which the colonial Spanish power had difficulties to maintain power, and wished to do so. In general, the protection of civilian population was not a major concern. The gridiron pattern was used frequently when making outlines for new towns, and became a bluemark for so many towns in the Americas in the following centuries. This pattern existed in Europe, particularly in certain smaller villages, and as fragments from the Roman period in certain town. But it was not a common feature, so there was not a sort of export of an established European model from the period. Apart of inspiration from Roman military camps, and surviving Roman patterns in certain towns, the Tenochtitlan pattern, the main city of the Aztecs, inspired the planners. Also

Tenochtitlan had a patterning based largely of squares.

The relative success of the colonial powers varied considerably. The only truly “successful” conquest, if looked at from the conquerors point of view was the highland of México. In all other areas there were major difficulties. Newly established towns were hard to populate. As I have discussed elsewhere, the indigenous settlement in the periphery of colonial control, often exhibit very special traits, and in several cases little influence from European settlement planning.

Thus, while war was key to the colonial power in the Americas, fortifications has little to do with the civilian population. In order to finish this small expose, we must conclude that it will be necessary to look much closer to the varied uses of complex fortification.

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