

**Identification**

<i>Nomination</i>	The Hanseatic Town of Visby
<i>Location</i>	The Island Region of Gotland
<i>State Party</i>	Sweden
<i>Date</i>	11 October 1994

**Justification by State Party**

Visby, which comes within the first of the four categories of historic town listed in paragraph 29 of the *Operational Guidelines*, qualifies for inclusion on the World Heritage List under **criteria iv and v**, as set out in paragraph 24(a).

A comparative study of the 220 Hanseatic towns carried out for the Council of Europe puts Visby among the very few highly recommended towns because it retains its medieval street plan, many of the medieval buildings, and its well preserved city wall, all dating to the earliest times of the Hansa. It was the leading town of the Hanseatic League when trade began with the east in the 12th and 13th centuries. Preservation of the town is assured by the protected status accorded to over 200 medieval buildings.

As a result of the economic stagnation of the town in the 14th-18th centuries, the town underwent no alterations. When Gotland began to flourish again in the 18th century a new Swedish law ruled that houses should be built in stone in return for tax exemption. As a result the citizens of Visby re-used the medieval houses, many of which were partly in ruins; new housing could be built on the medieval vegetable plots and on the site of the destroyed Visborg Castle.

The cultural value of Visby was discovered early in the 19th century. The architecture of the town was given special protection, as a result of which it has been possible to preserve it.

**Category of property**

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Visby is a *group of buildings*.

**History and Description***History*

By virtue of its position, Gotland has played a dominant role in Baltic trade for many centuries. Gotlanders were among the first to recognize the enormous potential resources of Russia in furs, wax, tar, and timber, and they founded trading houses along the coasts and rivers leading into the heart of Russia. Russian goods were being shipped from Gotland into western Europe, to Schleswig, Frisia, and England

Excavations have indicated that there was a trading settlement in the early Viking Age on the site of Visby, among others along the coasts of the island. These banded together for the protection of their chains of trading posts and to assert their interests vis-à-vis the rulers of the territories through which they passed (and also against their rivals) into a federation or *Hansa*. By the 12th century Visby had come to dominate this trade: all the commercial routes of the Baltic were channelled through the town.

With the foundation of Lübeck in 1158-59 German merchants began to expand their sphere of interest into the Baltic. Good relations were established between Lübeck and Gotland. German merchants settled in Visby,

which became the only trading place on the island with the privilege of trading with German towns, and hence the main centre of the Hanseatic League in the Baltic. The Germans were followed by Russian and Danish traders; guild houses and churches were built in the town, and stone warehouses were constructed along the harbour. The earlier small wooden buildings were replaced during the 13th century by large stone houses, built in parallel rows eastwards from the harbour. Pressure on the original centre was such that the surrounding land was used for housing, as well as the erection of churches and guild houses. During the 13th century Visby changed from a simple Gotland village to an impressive international town, enclosed by a strong defensive wall, and increasingly divorced from its rural hinterland.

The 14th century saw Visby losing its leading position in the Hanseatic League, following a series of disasters. The Black Death struck in 1350, when over 8000 people died in the town. The island was occupied by the Danish army in 1361, to be followed by the pirates known as the Vitalian Brothers in 1396; they were driven out two years later by the Order of Teutonic Knights, who occupied the island in their turn. The incessant warfare and piracy of the 15th century severely affected trade in the Baltic and the economy of Visby deteriorated. The 15th century saw further misfortunes for Visby, when it was the centre of prolonged battles between the Danes and the deposed Swedish king, Erik of Pomerania, who made it the headquarters for his attempts to win back his kingdom. The end of Visby's greatness came in 1525, when it was stormed by an army from Lübeck which put the northern parts of the town to the torch.

In the 18th century, a hundred years after Gotland returned to Swedish rule, Visby experienced a revival of trade and industry. New buildings were added, both on the ruins of earlier ones and in new areas on the cliff and around Visborg Castle. The Swedish law of 1757 that exempted those who built in stone from taxes, in order to conserve timber, was of crucial importance for Visby, which continued to grow and prosper. The 19th century saw the construction of schools, a hospital, and a prison and the growth of a small shopping area on one of the main streets.

#### *Description*

The area proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List is effectively that enclosed by the medieval *City Walls*. This remarkably well preserved defensive circuit, some 3.5 km in length, was built in the 13th century and substantially modified in the 14th century. In its original form it was 6 m high, without towers; these were added at the end of the 13th century and the height of the wall was increased by 3-4 m, with an internal parapet walk. Outside the walls there are ramparts and ditches, especially well preserved in the northern part.

From the town gates in the north, east, and south roads (possibly prehistoric in origin) lead from the cliff to the harbour, giving Visby its characteristic *townscape*. Dating in its present form mainly from the 13th century, the streets are irregularly laid out, suddenly becoming broad or narrow in places. A similar street pattern existed in the heart of the later city in Viking times and can still be traced from the plan. The warehouses were built along three main streets parallel to the harbour, with which they were connected by a network of narrow alleys, some still surfaced with cobbles, as they were in the Middle Ages.

Medieval Visby had more *churches* than any other town in Sweden - fifteen within the walls and two outside. They served various functions - parish churches, guild churches, monastic churches, and hospital churches. They show several phases of building, beginning with a great burst of activity in the early 13th century. With the Reformation in the early 16th century all but one were abandoned and allowed to fall into decay. St Mary's Cathedral began in the 13th century as the parish church of the German community and is largely Romanesque, with Gothic additions from around 1300. Of the other medieval churches, the ruins of those dedicated to St Clement, Our Lord, St Peter and St John, the Holy Spirit, St Catherine, St Lawrence, St Nicholas, St Olaf, and St Gertrude (all dating from the 12th/13th centuries with the exception of the last-named, from the 15th century) are conserved and managed by the State.

In Visby there are over two hundred *secular buildings* with substantial medieval elements surviving. Almost all of them originated as stone warehouses, built during the boom period of the early 13th century. They are all relatively similar in shape and size. They are rectangular in plan, with gables end-on to the street, and consist of between five and seven storeys. On each floor there are one or two rooms separated by a stone or wooden partition and with separate entrances. Most of them have cellars. In some cases the ground floors are roofed with barrel or cross vaulting, supported on pillars with ornate capitals: these probably served as sales premises. The second storeys often have magnificent windows, suggesting that they were used for public display and entertainment. The top storeys are often vaulted in stone, as a fire-protection measure. Decoration is used

sparingly, generally restricted to quoins, corbie (stepped) gables, and door surrounds: these were primarily functional buildings, equipped with entrances for goods and hoists. The main constructional material is limestone, with decorative elements in brick and tiled roofs.

The best preserved and most complete of these medieval warehouses is the Old Pharmacy on Strandgatan, with vaulted rooms on the ground and top floors, a latrine cellar, a medieval well, and original surrounds on doors, windows, and apertures. Other notable buildings are von Lingen's House on Sankt Hansgatan and a number of houses in the narrow streets running down to the harbour.

In addition to the wealth of medieval stone buildings, a number of wooden buildings survive. Notable among these are the Old Residence (Gamla Residenset) and the Burmeister House on Strandgatan, both from the mid 17th century and with lavishly painted interiors.

In the eastern part of the town, within the walls and below the cliff, the medieval vegetable plots were built over in the 1740s with small wooden houses of horizontal plank construction, which survive intact, as do the late 18th century houses in Swedish vernacular style built on the site of Visborg Castle, blown up by the Danes when they left the island in the late 17th century.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

The property is in multiple ownership. A number of properties in the central area and the City Wall are owned by the Municipality of Gotland; other properties belong to the Historical Museum, Gotlands Fornsal. The medieval church ruins are owned by the Swedish Government, and the medieval cathedral of St Mary is owned and managed by the Cathedral Parish Board.

The City Wall is protected by the Act concerning Ancient Monuments and Finds (Swedish Statute Book SFS 1988:950), as are the historic church ruins. The law requires that a protected area of an ancient monument must include a large enough area of surrounding ground to preserve the remains and to afford them adequate visibility and emphasize their nature and significance.

The Hanseatic town of Visby is also protected as a National Heritage Monument under the provisions of the Conservation of Resources Act, which protects the designated area from use for purposes other than those consistent with specified interests of national importance (which include the maintenance of cultural interests). Under the terms of the 1987 Building and Planning Act a conservation area of 77 ha has been established; the designated area includes 485 buildings listed under that act, including 118 which are also listed in accordance with the Act concerning Ancient Monuments.

### *Management*

The City Wall is managed by the Central Board of National Antiquities (Riksantikvarieämbetet), which is responsible for the management of the ruined ancient churches, as well as six of the State-owned buildings in the town.

In 1974 the Municipality of Gotland approved its programme of aims for the conservation of the area enclosed by the City Wall, and this was followed in 1993 by approval of a programme for policies, goals, and strategies for the town.

The Building Control Committee of Gotland issued *Råd och riktlinjer för bevarande av Visby innerstad (Advice and guidelines for the preservation of the Hanseatic Town of Visby)* in 1989, following which the conservation area was approved. Since 1934 the protected area outside the City Wall has been treated as a park, with restrictions on building and land-use, and there are also various town-planning regulations that have been introduced over the intervening period relating to increases in the heights of buildings in the buffer zone.

On a wider level, there is a plan for the whole of Gotland, *Vision Gotland 2010*, the overall aim of which is stated as the preservation of the island's cultural heritage: all development must pay due regard to this policy. The Hanseatic town of Visby plays a strategic role in this plan.

## **Conservation and authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

Interest in Visby and its buildings began in the 1860s and 1870s, when the Government provided funds for the restoration of the City Wall and the church ruins. In 1912 a town plan was adopted which fixed the existing appearance of the town as "a town plan established by age"; at the same time the areas outside the City Wall were laid out in accordance with the garden city ideals of the time.

A committee was set up in 1965 in conjunction with work on the preparation of a general plan, and it produced its report, *Visby stad inom murarna (Visby, the town within the walls)* in 1973. On the basis of this report, the whole town was declared to be an environment of historic and cultural value to which special consideration must be given. The principle underlying all building is adaptation to existing forms, details, and materials. The 1989 *Advice and guidelines* contains detailed advice for the various municipal bodies on the preservation of squares and open spaces, the closed streetscape, paving, street lighting, vegetation and greenery, shops, signs, television aerials, and satellite dishes. Property owners are given advice on facade materials, colour schemes, roofs, windows, doors and doorways, stairwells, flats, walls and ceilings, floors, wooden and metal fixtures and fittings, installations, and rules for rebuilding.

Every property under legal protection in the old town is fully documented and is provided with an individual maintenance plan. Government financial support of up to 90% is given to excess project costs incurred as a result of the special historical value of properties.

### *Authenticity*

The urban fabric and overall townscape of Visby is its most important quality, and this is entirely authentic within the area proposed for inclusion on the World Heritage List. Only the area of the now-silted medieval harbour is significantly different from the medieval townscape, but this is disposed as an open space to order to preserve its original open appearance.

Inevitably the passage of time since the first construction of the medieval buildings of Visby has resulted in often considerable changes in appearance. However, there are very few examples of total reconstruction, and even these have maintained the roof lines of the medieval townscape. Equally, there are almost no examples of the an excessively archaizing approach to restoration of early buildings.

The immediate environs of the walled medieval city have been sensitively protected for most of the present century as a result of the "garden city" approach to planning control, resulting in the creation of considerable areas of open space and strict control over building heights.

## **Evaluation**

### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS delegation visited Visby in April 1994 and had discussions with responsible officials at government, regional, and municipal level, as well as spending two days visiting the town and its surroundings. This visit was preceded by discussions in Stockholm with officials of Riksantikvarieämbetet. An expert opinion on the significance of the site was provided by Professor Øivind Lunde (Riksantikvaren, Norway).

### *Qualities*

Visby is the best preserved and most complete of the earlier Hansa towns. The town wall with its gates, towers, and turrets dating mainly from the 13th century is practically intact. The ruins of a dozen Romanesque churches constitute a powerful testimony to its past, as do the well reserved medieval street plan and remains of more than two hundred warehouses and merchants' houses from the Romanesque period.

### *Comparative analysis*

The Hanseatic town of Visby may be compared with other cultural properties under more than one category heading - for example, as a north European walled town, as a medieval townscape, as a Hanseatic League town, etc. It would rank highly in any individual analysis: it is the most complete walled town in Europe north of the Alps; its townscape and layout is exceptionally well preserved in what is essentially its late 13th century form; of the medieval trading towns of the Hanseatic League and its contemporaries it is rivalled only probably by Bruges (Belgium) and perhaps Tallinn (Estonia) in its completeness, although both of these towns have other qualities, both positive and negative. (It is relevant to note that there are seven Hanseatic League towns already on the World Heritage List - Goslar, Lübeck, Quedlinburg (Germany), Vilnius (Lithuania), Bergen (Norway), Krakow (Poland), and Novgorod (Russia) - but of these only Lübeck played a role equivalent to that of Visby.) If all these factors are taken into account, Visby has a level of value and authenticity that amply qualifies it for inclusion on the World Heritage List. It accords fully with historic town category i as set out in paragraph 29 of the *Operational Guidelines*: "Towns which are typical of a specific period or culture, which have been almost wholly preserved and which have remained largely unaffected by subsequent developments."

In the opinion of Professor Lunde, three of the Hansa towns are "in a class of their own" - Tallinn (Estonia), Bruges (Belgium), and Visby, an opinion with which ICOMOS is in full agreement (see above, "Comparative analysis"). It considers that the fact that neither of the other two towns is yet on the List (neither country has yet ratified the World Heritage Convention) should delay the inscription of Visby, which has an added historical importance.

### *ICOMOS comments*

The level of conservation and protection in Visby is high, as might be expected in Sweden, with its long tradition of concern for its cultural heritage. This applies not only to the urban fabric and defences but also to individual buildings: there is a high degree of civic pride that is manifested by the appearance of the historic town. This is underlined by the care that has been given to the setting of the town and its surrounding area for over eighty years and the existence of an effective buffer zone.

The climate of Gotland is such that it is a tourist centre for only a very short period of two or three months each year, focused on the eight days of "Medieval Week" in August. This is an imaginative and admirably staged event which attracts visitors from far and wide, and great care is taken to ensure that the town itself suffers no major adverse material impact. However, the short, intensive tourist season inevitably results in some damage from vehicles, the intrusion of undesirable signage, and litter pollution. Whilst ICOMOS sympathizes with the understandable wish of the Municipality to derive maximum economic advantage from Visby's tourist potential, it hopes that it will be vigilant in ensuring that the realization of this potential does not inflict permanent damage on the qualities for which the town is recommended for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

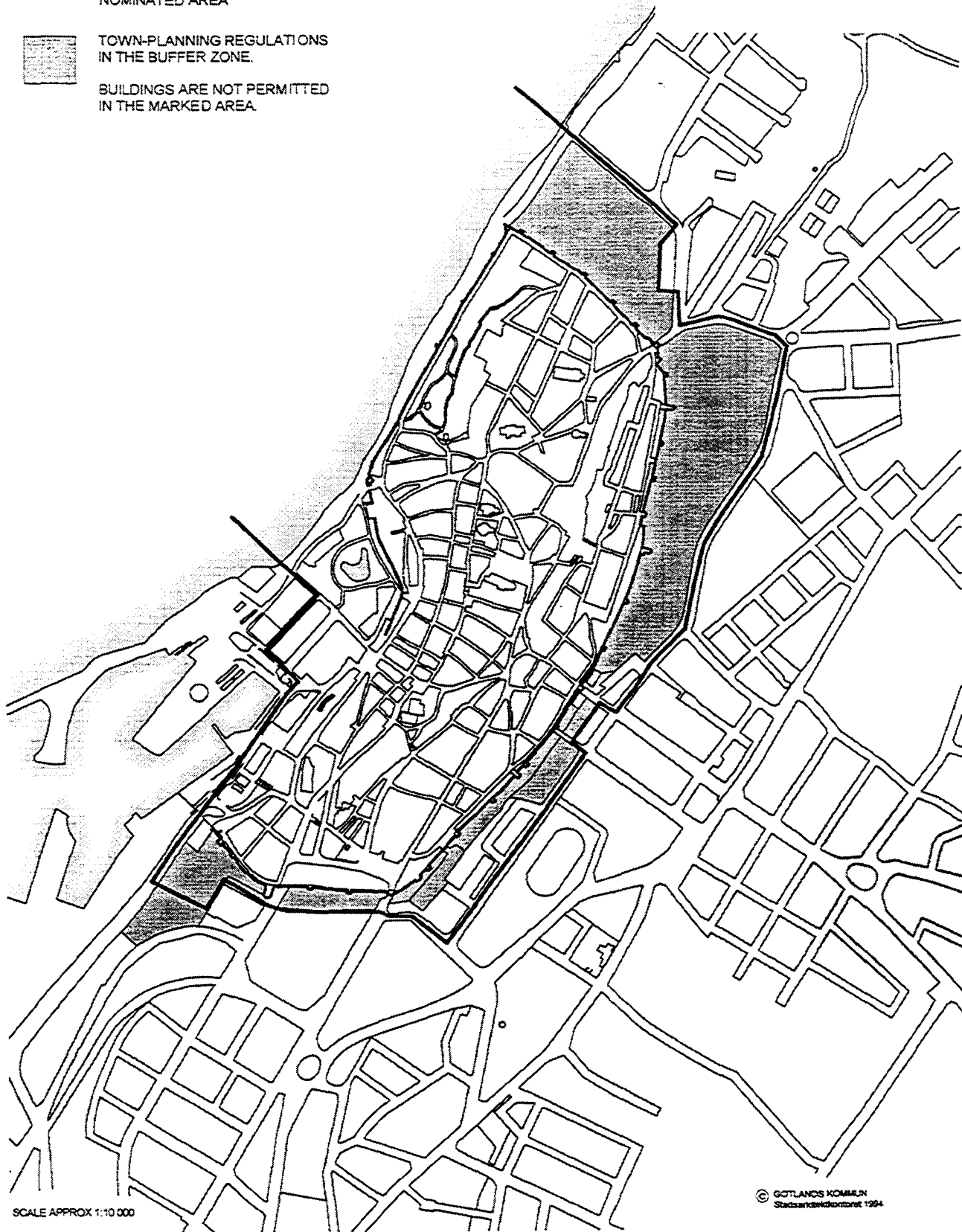
### **Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iv and v*.

Visby is an outstanding example of a north European medieval walled trading town which preserves with remarkable completeness a townscape and assemblage of high-quality ancient buildings that illustrate graphically the form and function of this type of significant human settlement.

ICOMOS, September 1995

- PERIMETER OF THE NOMINATED AREA
- ▨ TOWN-PLANNING REGULATIONS IN THE BUFFER ZONE.
- ▨ BUILDINGS ARE NOT PERMITTED IN THE MARKED AREA.



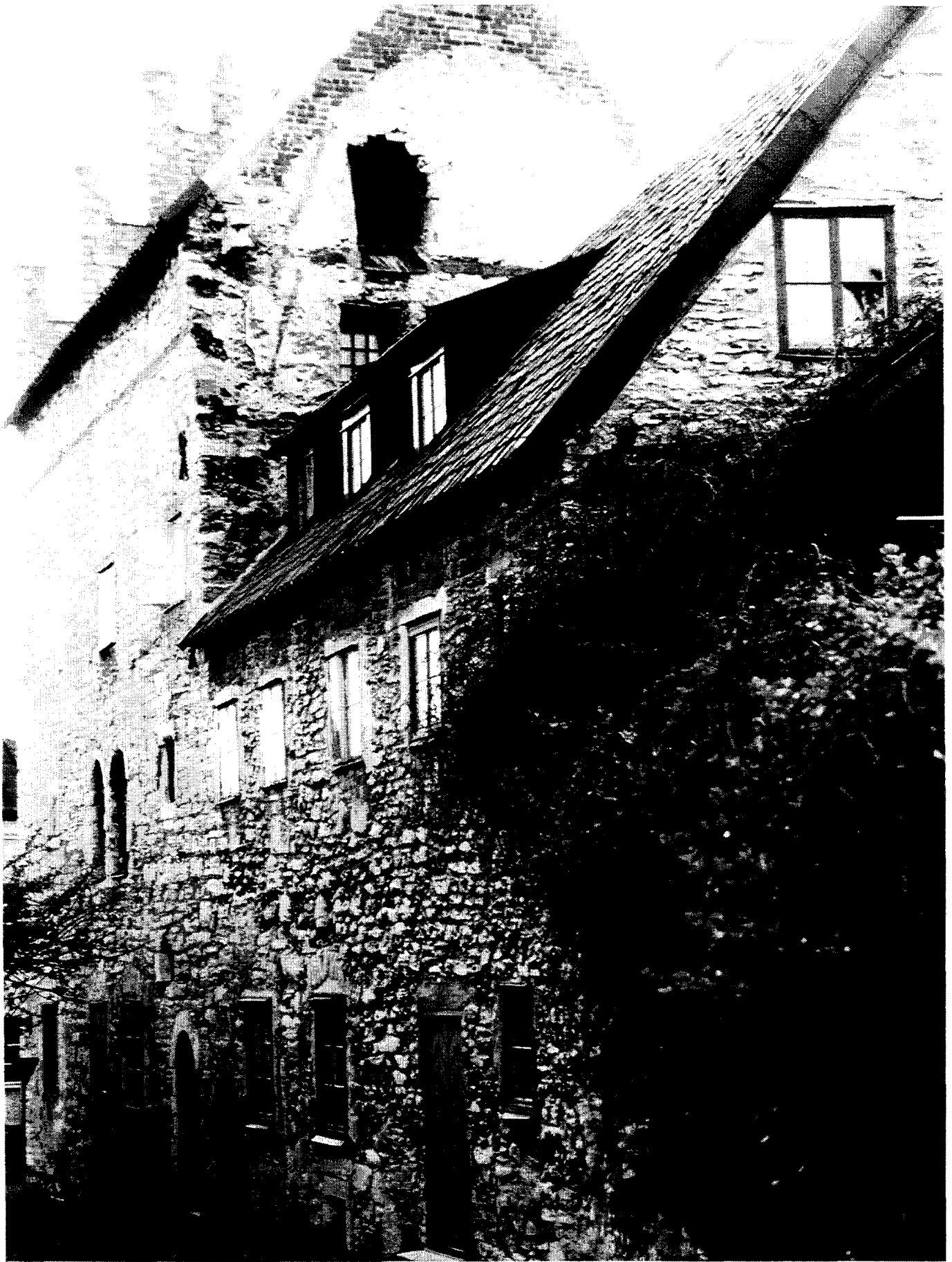
Visby : plan indiquant la zone proposée pour inscription  
et la zone tampon /

Map showing the nominated area and buffer zone



Visby : vue d'ensemble de la ville montrant les murs d'enceinte  
et la cathédrale /

General view of the town, showing the city walls and  
the cathedral



Visby : Lübeck Alley, maisons du moyen âge /  
Medieval houses in Lübeck Alley