Reflections on Swedish medieval rural archaeology
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Introduction

It can scarcely be said that medieval archaeologists have made the greatest contribution to the study of medieval agrarian settlement in Sweden. More honour is due to historians and historical geographers, who have a long tradition in this field.

Historians constantly return to the problems posed by the countryside. They have studied administrative conditions in particular, but also «true» problems of settlement history such as colonization and desertion. A classic work in this field is Erik Lönroth's Statsmak och statsfinans i det medeltida Sverige (1940). There have also been studies of individual regions, such as Finnveden and Värend in Småland (Härenstam 1946. Larsson 1964). This research reached its highest point hitherto in the Nordic project on desertion, which was initiated at the Nordic Historians' Congress in Bergen in 1964. Although this was an interdisciplinary project, it was dominated by historians. Apart from a joint final report from the project (Gissel et al. 1981), a number of separate studies from the different countries were published. In Sweden there were studies of Söderslätt, the plains of southern Scania (Sw. Skåne) (Skansjö 1983), Vedbo in Småland (Bååth 1983), western Sweden (Skarin 1979), Närke (Brunius 1980), Värmland (Östergård 1977), and Torndalen (Sandström 1983, 1984).

The initial contribution of the historical geographers was their in-depth analysis of the organization of the landscape, carried out mainly on the basis of the important Swedish land survey maps. Sven Dahl's studies (1942) of the Scanian hundreds of Torna and Bara, and Staffan Helmfred's study (1962) of Västansång in Östergötland are good examples of this. The Department of Human Geography at Stockholm University pioneered important studies of the genesis of the cultural landscape, under the leadership first of David Hannerberg, then of Staffan Helmfred and Ulf Sporrong, where field material took on increasing importance (Lindquist 1968, 1975. Sporrong 1971, 1985. Widgren 1983). The research was gradually to shift its focus to the prehistoric material, with special interest concentrated on the origin and course of village formation. The only real exception is Sven-Olof Lindquist's studies (1975) of Brunnbo outside Skara in Västergötland, which focused on changes in the late Middle Ages.

It should also be recalled that prehistoric archaeology had a tradition of settlement history which emerged after the Second World War, where names like Björn Ambrosiani and Åke Hyenstrand deserve special mention. Their main source material was graves (Ambrosiani 1964, 1987. Hyenstrand 1974, 1987).

It can be said that landscape research up until about 1980 was a separate responsibility for each discipline. There was relatively little interdisciplinary work, apart from a few isolated efforts, but from the 1980s a distinct new tendency was visible. Studies of the landscape were to a great extent concentrated in largescale interdisciplinary projects. An important stimulus in their development was a conference held in 1979 by the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities on the theme of Man, the Cultural Landscape and the Future (1980). The papers presented dealt not only with the historical development of the cultural landscape but also with the way the findings can be used for planning.

The new projects have had different goals and different organization, but what they have in common is an aim to use interdisciplinary research to try to understand landscape development in areas of varying size. Important projects for the Middle Ages have been the Bar-brakte Project in Uppland (Broberg 1992) and the Ystad Project in Scania (Andersson and Anglert 1989. Berglund 1984, 1991). The latter project studied six thousand years of landscape development in two hundreds in southern Scania. The medieval period was of course just one part of this huge project, but what was new was the close cooperation between different branches of scholarship, which made it possible to reconstruct, at least hypothetically, the landscape of the High Middle Ages.
ized the potential of the archaeological material. Nor should we forget that medieval archaeology is a young discipline (Cinthio 1655, 1888. Andersson 1990).

When Swedish medieval archaeologists got under way with rural investigations in the 1970s, it was mostly as a result of inspiration from Denmark. It is also characteristic that it was in Scania – a Danish landscape until 1658 – that the first breakthrough came.

To put it very crudely, there are two themes in Danish rural archaeology, which have both had a great influence on rural archaeology, even outside Scandinavia. One is the very detailed study of a single village, where the medieval archaeologist has been especially concerned with its origin, development, changes and above all organization. The foremost representative of this approach is Axel Steensberg, as exemplified by his investigations of Store Valby and Borup (1976, Steensberg and Østergaard Christensen 1974). His work was one of the sources of inspiration for John G. Hurst in England when he – along with M. W. Beresford – started the comprehensive and detailed investigation of Wharram Percy in Yorkshire (Beresford and Hurst 1990). Hurst 1971 (1989, 1984). In all these cases the investigation has encompassed not just the settlement but also the village territory as such.

Whereas this type of study was geared to a whole range of questions, Torben Grønngaard Jeppesen concentrated his investigations in Funen on the establishment of the medieval village. The archaeological work was carried out primarily to obtain datable material to allow a determination of the age of the village and thereby provide data for the study of the medieval village and its origins. The method and the conclusions developed in Funen had a considerable impact on subsequent work in Sweden, as we shall see below.

A look through the Swedish medieval archaeological literature from the mid-1970s on shows that it was not until the start of the 1980s that an interest began to make itself felt in published writings. The main emphasis then was on the chronology and character of early medieval village formation. Although the concrete inspiration came from Denmark, the problem had already been touched on, for example, in investigations at Gårdlösa by Berta Stjernquist (1981b) and at Hagestad by Mårta Strömberg (1961, 1963, 1979–80), but their archaeological interest was primarily concentrated on the pre-medieval period. In the Gårdlösa publication (Stjernquist 1981b) the medieval conditions were described by a human geographer (Helmsfrid) and a historian (Skansjö). The same was true of the Hagestad Project, where the human geographer David Hannerberg (1984) dealt with the Middle Ages and modern times. This meant a clearer orientation to the organization of the landscape than if an archaeologist had dealt with the period.

Malmö Museum was to be something of a pioneer in research into the medieval village. The first investigations to provide medieval material were carried out at the start of the 1970s. They were occasioned by the development of rural areas just outside the city. The main period they concerned was the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages. The questions were largely about settlement continuity, but also settlement types (Billberg et al. 1981, Mandahl 1986). The excavations were thus relatively close to those conducted by Stjernquist and Strömberg.

The High Middle Ages were also to come into focus during the rescue investigations in Malmö in the 1970s (Fosie: Reinsert 1983; Hylle: Rosborn 1983). In the Ystad area, Lilla Tvären was excavated as early as 1971 and then again later in the 1970s to provide material from both the Early Middle Ages and the High Middle Ages (Billberg 1989, 23ff.). We should also include here the surveys conducted by Aina Mandahl in collaboration with the Department of Medieval Archaeology at Lund University Historical Museum and the Scania Local History Association. The surveys were intended to localize the medieval villages with the aid of early maps and archaeological material (Mandahl 1983, 1986).

A completely different part of the country, Jämtland, also saw important work during the 1970s. It concerned the deserted farms which were added to the register of antiquities at this time (Seling 1972). It is striking, however, that archaeological material was used so little in the Swedish part of the deserted farms project, also in the 1970s. It was really only in the part of the project concerning Torndalen that archaeological material took on any importance (Gissel et al. 1981, 50ff., 244ff. Skansjö 1983. Sundström 1983, 1984).

It was thus in the 1970s that archaeologists began seriously to take part in the discussion of the medieval countryside. They concentrated on a few problems: the origin of settlement and (to some extent) the desertion issue. I shall describe some of the archaeological finding concerning the origin of the villages.

The origin of the villages from the point of view of medieval archaeology

near Malmö had come to an end in the eleventh century. He drew the conclusion that there had then been a concentration in the area which is designated as Fosie village on the eighteenth-century map. The same can be observed at Tygelsjö and Hindby (Billberg et al. 1981, 32 ff.).

Berta Stjernquist’s excavations at Gärdfösa allowed her to draw the conclusion that the Viking Age settlement ceased at the end of the Viking Age. There is no archaeological evidence for the medieval village settlement, but the village of Gärdfösa for which there is evidence from the seventeenth century at the latest was in a different location (Stjernquist 1981 a, 1981 b, p. 23).

Further examples could be adduced to corroborate the pattern, such as Hagestad in the parish of Lüderup (Strömberg 1979–80). In these cases it was clear that Viking Age settlement ceased, from which it could be concluded that the settlement had moved.

Excavations in the centre of medieval villages have shown the other side of the coin: that an earlier settlement was established on the site after the Viking Age. Some excavations at Fosie outside Malmö in the 1970s were directly concerned with the Middle Ages. Some of them were on a rather small scale, but they at least yielded medieval finds. A trench was dug in 1972, and although it was not bigger than 110 m², an occupation layer one metre thick contained finds from the eleventh and twelfth centuries up to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the oldest layers there were trenches and post-holes dug into the subsoil. The stratigraphy revealed that the use of the area had alternated between habitation and cultivation in the Late Middle Ages. Settlement from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could also be documented. In an area near the church, a number of wells was found, ranging in date from the eleventh century to the thirteenth or fourteenth. The biggest excavation, however, was conducted in the Bätyxyx district in 1978. The site that was dug had been occupied by a farm until the breakup of the village in 1804. The excavation uncovered a house built on a stone foundation, probably in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. It was in use until the start of the fourteenth century. The dwelling house was separate from the outbuildings. There are indications of another establishment, perhaps from the end of the twelfth century (Reinsort 1983).

This shows clearly that the farm was moved to a new settlement location in the thirteenth century at the latest, perhaps earlier, but that this did not mean an end to shifts in settlement.

A similar picture was provided by an excavation at Hyllie, also near Malmö, at the same time. The oldest layers contained Wendish pottery. The only trace of buildings were post-holes; no other remains were observed. The next layer was dated to 1250–1350. It contained post-holes and thin layers of clay daub. After that, all traces of further settlement are absent. We know from the eighteenth-century map, however, that there was a four-wing farm built around a courtyard. A transition from post-built houses to houses built on sills might explain the lack of traces, according to the excavator (Rosborn 1983, 133 ff.).

There are other examples from Scania. An extensive excavation in 1983–84 at Önnerup, just west of Lund, revealed settlement from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century. From the initial establishment phase of the village there was a sunken-featured building and at least six certain long-houses. Two buildings with sill-stones from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were excavated. The features included trenches which are usually assumed to have marked farm boundaries. Plot divisions thus existed right from the establishment of the village (Stenholm 1986).

From the Ystad area may cite the findings from Baldringe, Baldringetorp and Lilla Tvären. At all three sites the investigations suggest that permanent settlement was established at the end of the tenth century or the start of the eleventh (Billberg 1989, 17 ff.).

These findings cannot be automatically generalized to apply outside southwest Scania. Since there have been relatively few excavations outside this area, we have only glimpses of the situation in other parts of the country (cf. Broberg 1992). This means that we have no good basis for a discussion of continuity.

The investigations in western Sweden paint a confused and obscure picture. Settlement from the Early to the Late Middle Ages has been found at Eldsberga east of Halmstad in Halland, with post-built houses in the earlier phase and houses on sill-stones in the later (Augustsson 1990). The picture here is thus close to what we see in Denmark and Scania.

At Varla outside Kungsbacka, excavations in 1989 uncovered remains of settlement from the sixth century until the nineteenth. The results have still not been published in detail, so it is difficult to determine exactly what happened on the site. What has been presented in particular is a farm from the eleventh century with a big house of Trelleborg type, along with other structures which can be assigned to this period. It seems, however, as if there was continuity on the site, since the finds appear to suggest that there was settlement here until the time of the great enclosures (Lundqvist 1990).

There have been few excavations in Västergötland. Very small-scale digs in village plots at some places in central Västergötland, using the methodology developed in Fruen, have revealed pottery from the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages, but nothing older. The material is too small to allow certain conclusions to be drawn. There may nevertheless be an indication from the excavated sites that
settlement was re-established during the Viking Age (Classson 1990).

There are also examples from further north. At Lingnäs in Uppland it is possible to observe movement within an area, where the Viking Age village is succeeded by a medieval village a short distance away (Broberg 1990). There is thus clear area continuity, but one may question whether there was site continuity.

Pollista in Uppland, on the other hand, shows continuity from the ninth century until modern times. There is direct site continuity with slight shifts (Svensson 1987, Åquist 1992). Sanda, also in Uppland, existed from the eighth century until about 1150, when there was at least a quantitative change. The settlement seems to have shrunk drastically, although it continued to exist. This may be due to a special role for Sanda in the time up to the mid-twelfth century (Åquist 1992).

A clear example of this problem comes from Kyrklösa in the parish of Å in Jämtland, which was investigated at the start of the 1980s. The excavation of a relatively limited area revealed three different building complexes, dated to the Migration Period, the Viking Age, and the Middle Ages. The Viking Age remains are very few in number compared with from the other periods, but it has at least been possible to identify a house from this period. The settlements from the different periods do not overlap each other. There were shifts, but they were small. It is possible, however, that there is still discontinuity. This is quite clear in the case of the Migration Period and the Viking Age, but it cannot be ascertained between the Viking Age and the Middle Age. The finds range from the Early Middle Age to the fifteenth century, when the settlement appears to vanish (Olsson 1989).

South of Leksand by the river Österdalån, it has been possible to demonstrate continuity, at least from the Viking Age up to the seventeenth century, and in some cases even longer, until the enclosures at the start of the nineteenth century. At this point the settlement was moved from a location near the river to a new site further away from it. There are hints of an earlier prehistoric settlement. Internal changes can also be followed in a pollen chart which shows agrarian expansion in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages, a slight regression in the Late Middle Ages, and then a new expansion between the oldest period and the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. There are relatively few finds. We see once again a situation where the Viking Ages and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are well represented, but the intervening period is poorly represented. The excavators nevertheless claim that there is continuity in this case right through the Middle Ages (Ergård/Syse 1984, 4ff.).

All the examples show a rather complicated and ambiguous picture of the development of villages and farms. This is of course hardly surprising. Continuity and discontinuity are difficult questions, since both can be found in one and the same settlement, although at different levels and in different parts. One can speak of site continuity (or discontinuity) or area continuity (or discontinuity). To put it simply, the former term means that we find the farm/village especially the buildings – on the same spot, whereas the latter means that the occupation area, the territory, is the same, although the houses may have been moved for various reasons from site to site within it. There can thus be continuity in one sense along with discontinuity in another sense. Our chances of observing continuity or discontinuity can also be complicated by amalgamation, equalization or shrinking of settlement. What can excavations actually tell us about these questions? It should at least be possible, even when the archaeological material is limited, to see when a restructuring has taken place, regardless of whether it was a move or only a contraction of a farm plot or a minor shift of settlement.

**New tendencies**

The excavations reflect the archaeologists’ concentration on the actual farmsteads. It is reasonable to assume that a continued discussion of villages and farms will not be possible until we include land use as a whole. In other words, we must take account of the entire production unit in our investigations. This has been the case in the large interdisciplinary projects that were so typical of the 1980s. This has also had consequences for the orientation and methodology of the archaeologists. In
the Ystad Project they collaborated with palaeobiologists, plant ecologists, human geographers, and historians to obtain a holistic picture of landscape development, not just in terms of geology and plants, but also to find out the role played by social and economic factors, and perhaps not least relations of power, in changes of the cultural landscape through time (Andersson/ Anglert 1989, Berglund 1991). The Lingnäre Project had similar aims and was also based on broad cooperation, although it encompassed a much smaller area, a few farms (Broberg 1990).

In this context the production and internal organization of farming became more prominent problems for archaeologists as well. This is evident from Anders Broberg’s dissertation from 1990 and Ingrid Billberg’s essay (1989) in the medieval volume from the Ystad Project. Both discuss the possibility of calculating the scope and orientation of production, despite the lack of written sources.

Neither of these projects actually dealt with the internal organization of the farm or village in the sense of studying the function, character and technology of settlement. This was done, however, in a study of an outland farm in the Gothenburg area, Björjsjöås (Sandberg 1987). Chronologically it concerns mainly modern times, not the Middle Ages, but it is still of interest here.

Out of the field tradition of human geography and the archaeological and scientific experience gained from the Ystad Project, there developed a project which is still in progress and has not yet published its findings. The project is studying a deserted farm in Ydre Hundred in Östergötland, on the border with Småland, by the lake Västra Lägern and the surrounding area. It is obvious that this is a farm known as Hemvidakull which was deserted in 1466 and later turned into meadow land (Bååth 1983). The site has a highly complex fossil landscape, where there are evidently remains from the Iron Age onwards. It is possible to discern different division systems. It is probably also possible to reconstruct the areas cultivated during the Middle Ages. A farm structure has also been found, probably datable to the Middle Ages (Connelid 1991). The area has great potential for teaching us about the medieval forms in the fossil landscape in the type of cultural landscape that can be found in much of southern Sweden; this is also an integral part of the project.

The project is entitled »Can One Live on a Deserted Farm? The Medieval Culture Landscape-Ecology and Social Change«. The programme for the project sums up the theoretical points of departure as follows:

The subtitle of the project suggests two different ways to approach the explanation of changes in the cultural landscape. Scholars have claimed either that the long-term development of the agrarian landscape can be explained from an ecological point of view, or else that social organization has determined the shape of the cultural landscape. We argue that a synthesis of these two models is necessary to explain changes in the cultural landscape. We have been influenced in this by, among others, Robert Dodgshon and his studies of Scotland. If one assumes that different social structures have been reflected in the landscape by giving rise to different ecosystems, then a combined ecological and social analysis is necessary for an understanding of the landscape and its changes.

We have chosen to focus on the question »Can one live on a deserted farm?« as a key to the problem. This contradictory question contains all the dimensions of the problem. At one time the farm was independent, but in a phase of restructuring it was placed in a changed agro-ecosystem and was given a different economic and social role, one consequence of which was that it ceased – at least for a period – to be an independent unit. In our preliminary studies, Norra Vedbo (the hundred adjacent to Ydre) has given clear indications of such a restructuring during the Middle Ages.

To be able to explain the social change that took place between the early Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages, reconstructions of the local agro-ecosystems must be made. We must establish whether the deserted farm could have been an independent unit during its existence, or if its long-term survival required that it was part of a social and economic structure. There are two conceivable ways to envisage how this relation of dependence could be reflected in the farm’s agro-ecosystem.

1. Being part of a larger structure, the
farm can evaluate risks differently than if it had been wholly dependent on its own resources. In this way, for example, grain production can be maintained in climatically marginal areas. In the event of crop failure, there may be guarantees in the farm of a social fund. When a farm like this is deserted, we cannot say with certainty that the climatic factor was decisive. It could equally well be the case that the farm was deserted because the social structure that made these guarantees was disrupted.

2. The farm may have had a specialized role within an estate system. In this case, perhaps it was far from possible to feed the population of the farm within its own limits. Animal husbandry, hunting, fishing and craft work could have been the basis for the role of the farm in the local social structure. As long as the social structure is maintained, the farm has its need for grain met by redistribution.

These two examples are intended to show the depth of the question: «Can one live on a deserted farm?» The answer depends not just on areas, climate and soils, but just as much on social conditions. It can be rephrased as: «On what conditions can a given area serve as a basis for a household?» The reconstruction of the agro-ecosystems of different periods is thus decisive for the social interpretation (Project programme, January 1990).

Similar tendencies to those seen in this programme can also be seen in new research which has been started in what are completely new parts of Sweden for medieval archaeologists, such as Värmland and inner Norrland. Here we find different types of economy, based particularly on hunting and fishing along with farming, but also with ancillary occupations such as iron production. In some areas hunting and fishing provided supplementary resources, whereas in others they were the main source of livelihood. The archaeological source material in such cases includes pitfalls and fishing sites with their fences and plot divisions. Research into the latter is at present developing vigorously. There are still problems in determining the function of the remains and in the context in which they should be placed (Broadbent 1987, 1988. Norman 1988). The pitfalls with their different character in different parts of the country suggest large differences between hunting for special purposes and hunting as part of a much larger economy. This is evident from the large systems that are found in northern Värmland and further north. But how much of this comes from the Middle Ages? We may assume that they were used over a long time (Hvarfner 1975. Magnusson 1975. Selinge 1974. Spång 1981, 1985). These types of economy must also be a topic for archaeologists in the future. We could go on in this way, listing the various things that are waiting to be studied and put in the research perspective of interpreting the landscape: mills, roads, quarries and the like. But we can only understand their place in the system by seeing them in a landscape perspective that includes both nature and culture (Andersson 1991. Magnusson 1989. Myrstad-Rindehjer 1991. Svensson 1991).

A problem that is common to all medieval rural investigations is that the medieval field forms are largely unknown. This is an area where there is still much to be done. Temporal boundaries are rather diffuse. The Middle Ages in this context must be a broad concept. It is more a matter of studying the agrarian landscape until the start of the nineteenth century.

A sort of summing up
If we compare development in Sweden with research trends in Denmark, we see clearly how the line from Gønzaard Jeppesen initially influenced the organization of archaeological investigations, and perhaps above all the interpretations, but we can see an aspiration towards a more holistic view of the landscape. The interest in using archaeological theories and methods to approach the landscape as a social and economic unit is obvious (see Broberg 1992 for a good picture of this development). The breadth is also evident in the way archaeologists have begun to study completely new landscapes. We have thus left the stage where the origin of villages was seen as the only major problem concerning the organization of the landscape, and we have also realized that the type of results presented for Fynen by Gønzaard Jeppesen cannot automatically be applied to other areas.

Yet the research interest has also been expanded to include the mental landscape as well - the way people perceived the landscape around them. This has entailed attempts to get at the conceptual world of the farmer and his family. In a recently presented work, Stig Welinder (1992) has attempted this in a study of a nineteenth-century croft in Dalarna. Archaeological material plays a certain role, but other types of source have been used as well. This is the first attempt to study the cognitive landscape made by a Swedish archaeologist. The models come from geography and American historical archaeology.

Much of what has been mentioned towards the end of this survey is research under development. We do not know what the final results will be. What should be noted is that archaeologists are now interested in a wider range of problems, that new parts of Sweden are being examined, and that the theoretical approach is much broader. It will be interesting for the future to see whether development will continue the trend of interdisciplinary cooperation, or whether research will follow other paths.

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