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The migration period farm in Östergötland, Sweden - continuity or devastation?

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In Sweden, the abandoned farms dating from the 5th and 6th centuries AD (the Migration Period) have traditionally been the most clear-cut example of a break in continuity during prehistoric times. The view which Stenberger published in the Vallhagar publication has played an important role in the study of Swedish prehistory. Stenberger writes that "few areas show so sharp a break in continuity of prehistoric settlements as Öland and Gotland" and interprets the evidence of the many deserted farmhouses as "an almost universal end to occupation" (Stenberger 1955, p. 1168). The element of discontinuity in the landscape during this period has been stressed, for the simple reason that the clearest examples of discontinuity the deserted farmhouses have been the main object of study. In Becker's terminology, Stenberger in fact inferred a break in population continuity on the whole island of Gotland from the evidence of a break in place continuity (cf. Becker 1977).

In new approaches to the continuity problem, this view of the period 400-600 AD has been seriously questioned. Not only the scale of the break in continuity, but also the reasons for it have been discussed. Alternative explanations of the desertion of the farmhouses have been put forward. A summary of the research on the island of Öland has been published by Näsman (1978). The archaeological evidence for Stenberger's dramatic view of the desertion of farmhouses on Öland has recently been re-evaluated by Edgren (1979). Renfrew has shown, with international examples, how sudden changes and discontinuities in culture systems and settlement patterns may be explained by inherent factors in the system rather than by external factors such as migration and war (Renfrew 1978a, 1978b). In explaining changes in the settlement and agrarian landscape leading to the development of the typical Migration Period farm of the island of Gotland, Lindquist has seen the change as having been caused by the introduction of more and more intensive forms of agriculture (Lindquist 1974).

Dan Carlsson has argued for the possibility of continuity in the settlement areas on Gotland during the 6th and 7th centuries and against the "tendency to equate the desertions of the house foundations with a disertion of the cultivated lands". He formulates a hypothesis that "the Migration Period farms generally have a continuation in the historical farm" (Carlsson 1977, p. 37). He has supported this hypothesis by comparing 18th-century maps with deserted-house foundations and stone walls dating from the 6th century. The actual desertion should, according to him, have affected only 10 per cent of the farms.

The discussions referred to above have pointed to further dimensions of the continuity problem. Not only the scale of continuity (place continuity, settlement-area continuity or regional continuity) discussed by Becker, but also differences in the aspects investigated have characterized the Swedish debate (cf. Thrane 1977). Carlsson's conclusion, based on comparisons of 18th-century maps and the distribution of house foundations and stone walls dating from the 6th century, supports the possibility of a structural continuity, where the basic units the farms have been constant over time, but from this evidence no conclusions can be drawn about settlement continuity within the area. The farms and their lands may have been waste for varying spans of time and later resettled in more or less the same form. Investigations by Carlsson now in progress may, however, be able to prove settlement continuity within a small area with
house foundations dating from the 3rd century to the 14th century AD. The houses dating from the later Iron Age (600 - 1050 AD) were constructed without stone walls and are therefore not registered in the Inventory of Ancient Monuments.

A third aspect of continuity is the evidence gathered from the vegetational development. In the discussion of settlement continuity, pollen diagrams have been widely used. They give descriptions of changes in the human exploitation of natural resources. Diagrams from large parts of Scandinavia often show a very similar pattern, with periods of expansion and stagnation in the cultural landscape (Berglund 1969, Welinder 1977, pp. 17-20). However, the lack of knowledge of the dispersal of pollen makes it difficult to establish the area described by the pollen diagrams. Furthermore, the sampling points for most pollen diagrams from southern Scandinavia have been chosen for the purpose of studying the vegetational development since the deglaciation and very seldom for the special purpose of investigating continuity problems. The strength of the pollen diagrams in that respect, however, is their continuous recording of pollen spectra, a degree of accuracy in representation very seldom met with in other prehistoric source material. The changes in agrarian production to which the pollen diagrams bear witness can, however, not be equated with changes in settlement and population. A situation is in fact possible in which changes in agrarian production are neither caused by nor the cause of population changes but are due to changes in exchange systems in the society (cf. Odner 1972). The aspects of continuity described by pollen diagrams may be called production continuity.

The three aspects of continuity - settlement continuity, structural continuity and production continuity - can all be studied at the three levels described by Becker. They are, of course, interrelated and the classification only serves to point out the limitations of different methods of studying continuity. In fig. 1 an attempt has been made to classify some contributions to the study of continuity during the first millennium AD on Öland and Gotland and in Östergötland.

The Migration Period farm in Östergötland

In the eastern part of Östergötland, an abundance of stone walls and abandoned settlements dating from the period 0 - 500 AD can be found. However, the house foundations either completely lack traces above ground or are defined by only a slight terracing. It is therefore very difficult to make an estimate of the number of deserted settlement sites. The interest shown by research workers in this province has also been much weaker than in the Baltic islands. The first work on prehistoric farms and the cultural landscape was published by Lindquist in 1968 (compared with 1933 for Stenberger's publication on the farms on Öland).

Unfortunately, a very small number of settlements dating from this period have been completely excavated. The investigation of Hallevy in Skärkind is still the only one to have been published (Lindquist 1968, Baudou 1973). The settlement site at Hallevy was finally abandoned in the 7th century. No thorough investigations of the settlements in the whole area have, however, been made. A recently completely investigated settlement at Rappestad has been radio-carbon dated to the first few centuries AD (Anders Hedman, Riksantikvarieämbetet, personal communication). In trial investigations of four settlement sites in the Fläret area carried out by the author, only datings to the period 300 BC to 500 AD have been obtained (Widgren 1978). Concerning settlement continuity in Östergötland, it can thus be concluded that the material gathered up to now suggests a break in place continuity on a certain number of farms occurring sometime between 500 and 700 AD. No investigations of the settlement-area continuity have been made and the total number of deserted farmhouses in the province is impossible to estimate.

Production continuity

From the eastern part of Östergötland, two pollen diagrams can be used in the discussion of the development of agrarian production during the first millennium AD. The diagram from Lake Striern (Göransson 1977) does not give any unequivocal evidence of sudden changes in the human influence on the landscape during the critical period 400 - 700 AD. Fossil forms from that period are also very scarce in the Striern area, which may very well have seen few changes in the cultural landscape during this period. Two consecutive pollen spectra from the Striern area however, lack evidence of cereal-growing, which may indicate reduced human activity during the period (Göransson 1977, p. 126).

Lake Flären, which is situated within an area with vast systems of abandoned stone walls, presents a rather different aspect. The pollen diagram from Flären shows an overgrowth of pasture lands during the critical period. A maximum of pollen from birch is interpreted as
an invasion of Betula verrucosa on drained soils earlier covered with juniper. There is a decline in the cereal frequency from 1.2 to 0.2 per cent during the critical period, but no break can be proved in the continuity of cultivation (Widgren 1977).

Structural continuity

In order to test the hypothesis that the Migration Period farm had its continuation in an historical farm, an area of 25 km² in Skårkind, Östergötland, has been investigated, by comparing the landscape known from historical times with the fossil traces of the early Iron Age landscape. Cadastral maps from the period 1696–1769 AD, covering 98 per cent of the area, form the basis of a reconstruction of the settlement and land use during the 18th century. Within the area, there were 10 vills (with 2–5 farms each) and 5 single farms, 35 farms in all. All the farms and vills practiced a two-course rotation, to judge from the maps. The average area of these farms was 14 ha of arable land and 17.5 ha of meadow land.

Three of the single farms had names of late origin (-torp), suggesting establishment in the period 900–1200 AD. Their relatively late establishment is also supported by the evidence of the boundaries. The late farms form enclaves within the older vills. Altogether 12 vills or single farms may thus be of prehistoric origin (names ending with -stad, -by and -vild). According to the hypothesis of the continuation of the farm from the 6th century onwards, the farms in these vills should have originated in Migration Period farms.

In a field survey, all the abandoned stone walls and house terraces in the area were recorded. Two settlements had been recorded and documented earlier (Augustenhill and Skårkinds prästgård; Lindquist 1968; Klang & Widgren 1973). Two more settlements, along with vast systems of stone walls, were found. The system of abandoned stone walls has no connection with the historical landscape. Property boundaries in the 18th century often cut across the systems of stone walls. Two of the settlement sites are situated on or very close to later boundaries. Outside the investigated area, there are also examples of parish boundaries cutting through farm complexes dating from the period 0–500 AD. The traces of the cultural landscape during this period thus bear witness to a spatial organization totally different from the cultural landscape of historical times. The early Iron Age cultural landscape is characterized by single farmsteads of loosely grouped hamlets. The stone walls enclose large areas of former meadow land, while visible traces of arable farming only cover small areas. The abandoned landscape probably represents an infiel system with intensively tilled and fertilized fields and enclosed meadows. The proportion of infiel area to meadow area in such a system would probably be 0.1–0.2, while the same proportion in the 18th century was 0.8 in the investigated area.

The comparison of the historical landscape and the traces of the early Iron Age landscape within the area thus leads to the conclusion that a very radical restructuring took place between the two cross-sections studied. The actual date of this restructuring is, of course, difficult to establish. Parts of the stone-wall system may have been in use long after the abandonment of the settlements, but some evidence suggests that this system had already fallen out of use in prehistoric times. In many cases, the construction of graves during the late Iron Age destroyed parts of the stone wall system.

Conclusions

Investigations on Gotland during the last few years have led to the dramatic view of the devastation of a large number of farms during the period 400–600 AD being seriously questioned. Explanations stressing the inherent factors in the settlement shift have been proposed. On Gotland, it has also been proposed that many of the farms were continuously settled during this whole period, implying a continuity in the resource areas.

In Östergötland, a very radical restructuring of the agrarian landscape took place in the period 400–600 AD or somewhat later. The number of deserted settlement is difficult to estimate, but the farming system and the resource areas connected with each settlement underwent great changes. No structural continuity can be established. Although no break can be proved in the continuity of cultivation, a very sharp decrease in agricultural production indicates that there was an agrarian crisis during the same period.

References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Scale level</th>
<th>Settlement area</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agrarian production</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gotland: Pålsson 1977</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gotland: Pålsson 1977</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Östergötland: Göransson 1977</td>
<td>Widgren 1977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gotland: Carlsson 1977</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Settlement</td>
<td>Öland: Stenberger 1933</td>
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<td>Gotland: Stenberger 1955</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Östergötland: Lindqvist 1968</td>
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<td>Saudou 1973</td>
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Fig. 1. Some contributions to the study of continuity on Öland and Gotland and in the province of Östergötland.