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This is the published version of a paper published in *Ymer*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Widgren, M. (2010)

Reading the prehistoric landscape.

Ymer, 130: 69-85

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-42474>

THE LANDSCAPE CONCEPT

Can prehistoric societies and the spaces that they were operating within be meaningfully understood by researchers living more than 1000 years later? In answering that question, I take as my starting point the concept of landscape. It is a polysemic term, one with many different, but closely related, meanings. Whereas the main definition of landscape in the English language is as ‘a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery’ or ‘the art of depicting such scenery’, it can also mean ‘the landforms of a region in the aggregate’ or ‘a portion of territory that can be viewed at one time from one place’ (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary Sept. 2009). In the Swedish language, the concept of landscape (Sw. *landskap*) is not so immediately connected only to pictures and the scenic aspect. It can refer to a portion of territory that can be viewed from one spot but it also refers to old Scandinavian pre-Christian lands or provinces (Hägerstrand & Sporrang 1993).

In his article ‘Recovering the substantive nature of landscape’, Kenneth Olwig showed how the English connotation of landscape as scenery was developed via Dutch landscape paintings from an older German concept that relates to the territory, the conditions of that territory and the customs and rules under which the land was governed (Olwig 1996). This understanding of landscapes as lived-in territories is, of course, in line with Swedish usage of the word *landskap* when referring to the old, pre-medieval lands that preceded the State in Nordic countries. Similar words exist in most languages, often alluding to land, soil, earth, and people and nation. On the other hand, the specific Anglophone landscape concept is missing from, or was only recently added to, many other languages of the world. In current usage, the term ‘landscape’ thus refers to at least three different aspects, as shown in Table 1.

Through the medium of the English language, the visual aspect of the landscape concept has become a part of Nordic languages. However, we also know that what we see is dependent on what we know and what we value. The landscape concept therefore also opens up

Table 1. Landscape concepts.

Landscape as scenery	Representation Idea (mental construction) 'A way of seeing'
Landscape as institution	Customary law Social order, land rights 'A way of communicating, a way of acting'
Land as a resource	Land use Production Capital

the various ways different people may perceive the same surroundings or the same image. The Germanic and Nordic landscape concept, on the other hand, focuses on the people on the land, their territories, their traditions and the social institutions that govern these territories. Finally, landscape is often used as an equivalent to 'land', and the ways in which it has been transformed by labour and served as a basis for both biological production and accumulation of wealth (Widgren 2004).

When we talk about 'landscapes', we are thus dealing with three different, but closely interrelated, concepts. Together these concepts offer important insights and analytical tools for considering how we relate to our physical environment and to social structures. At the same time, the concepts provide a key to the material analysis of landscapes as something substantive and materially existing 'out there'.

I have thus argued that the reading of landscapes can be seen as a powerful approach in social science (Widgren 2006). Sometimes taking a starting point in the landscape can open the way for an understanding of social structures and power relations that are not evident to social scientists and historians using other sources. However, landscapes and social structures do not have a one-to-one relationship.

Using landscapes as an entry point into social relations demands careful consideration of the socio-spatial dialectic. Landscapes are the result of

human decisions and of social relations. However, not all events in society and all aspects of power relations are expressed transparently on the ground. During certain periods and in certain contexts, individuals and societies make clear and readable imprints in the landscape, while other societal changes leave few or faint traces.

(Widgren 2006, p. 57)

A CHECKLIST FOR READING LANDSCAPES

The analysis of landscapes can never achieve the same exactness as, for example, a chemical analysis. Nevertheless, a structured reading of landscapes is possible. Such a reading can be compared to wine tasting as it contains several types of observations. Furthermore, as in wine tasting, it is possible to agree on a structure for these observations, some of which can be objectively measured whereas other judgements are more qualitative. A group of experts might agree on this latter type, in what is called an intersubjective judgement. However, there are other judgements, both of wine and of landscapes, which are truly subjective, individual and not shared among a larger group of persons. A structured reading of landscapes can follow this path.

Form. Forms are easy to agree upon. The landscape comprises convex and concave forms, points, linear forms and areas. Projected into the plan of the map fields can be circular, rectangular or irregular, have a reversed S-shape, or even be shaped like a banana. Classification of the morphology of the agrarian landscape is well developed, and in the 1960s a group of European landscape researchers agreed upon an international terminology (Uhlig & Lienau 1967).

Function. The mere classification of forms, however, tells us nothing if it does not help us understand the function of that form. Similar forms can have different origins and different functions. A clear classification of the form helps in talking about features in the landscape, but does

not solve the really interesting questions: what purpose did this form have, when was it constructed and by whom?

Process. Landscapes may seem static, especially when examined in photographs. However, all landscapes are undergoing processes of change. Sometimes these changes are fast, sometimes slow. In analysing and understanding landscapes, we can make use of the concept of process in two ways. First, a person with a trained eye, perhaps familiar with the region or with the features in the landscape, can see changes even in a still photograph or by looking at a landscape where no apparent change is happening. One example might be a newly cleared patch in the forest or a formerly arable field in the process of regrowth with bushes and trees. Another way to see processes is motivated by the signs of past and long-since finished processes. Sometimes labour processes, daily routines, etc., have been ‘fossilised’ in the landscape so that age-old practices can be read from that landscape. Such changes tell us about societal or natural forces that drive the changes. Even the most stagnant landscape is the result of historical processes. Few landscapes lack revealing signs of the history they have gone through. Most landscapes are littered with historical evidence, be it a dismantled railway, the curving streets in a medieval town, or the property structure established during enclosures in the 18th and 19th centuries. A close reading of landscapes – past and present – must look for these signs of ongoing and past processes.

We can thus conclude that *form*, *function* and *process* are important constituents in a formalised reading of landscapes. They can even be seen as creating a straightforward, neutral and scientific way of reading landscapes. However, all experiences from such readings (showing landscape photos to students, being exposed to landscapes abroad) tell us that the imagination is too restricted to understand new landscapes just by considering these three questions in the checklist. Swedish students may be clever enough in reading and recognising their native, and also British and American landscapes, but can have problems in understanding, for instance, African rural landscape images.

From one cultural sphere to another, the way people have used their land differs. Differences in culture, land tenure, class structure and power relations make their clear imprint on the landscape. This is where the cultural understanding of landscapes as (different) ways of seeing and understanding the world becomes an important analytical tool. The checklist, form–function–process, must be completed in association with the concept of context.

Context. Landscapes have developed in different cultural, social and economic frameworks. To understand landscapes, one must therefore always ask about the context in which it was developed. This analytical step involves transcending the obvious (i.e., what may seem obvious to the observer) to imagining other possible contexts. When analysing landscapes of the past, it helps to remember the phrase ‘the past is a foreign country’ (Lowenthal 1985) Sources other than the landscape forms have to be mobilised to reconstruct the social and cultural context in which people shaped different landscapes.

PREHISTORIC FIELD SYSTEMS IN SWEDEN

The checklist suggested above should ideally work for all types of landscapes – urban, rural, present, and past. In the following part of this chapter, I give some illustrations of how a close reading of forms in ancient, abandoned, agrarian landscapes can give insights into their functions and processes, and their contexts.

One of the most important sources for the investigation of early agriculture is the land itself. Clearing and cultivation have in many cases left a permanent and clear imprint on the landscape. Especially in a country such as Sweden, where much of the land consists of till (unsorted material deposited directly the ice: Sw. *morän*), these remnants can now be seen in pasture and forests abandoned by later, more mechanised farming practices. In many parts of Sweden, the clearing of stones is a precondition for cultivation and efficient

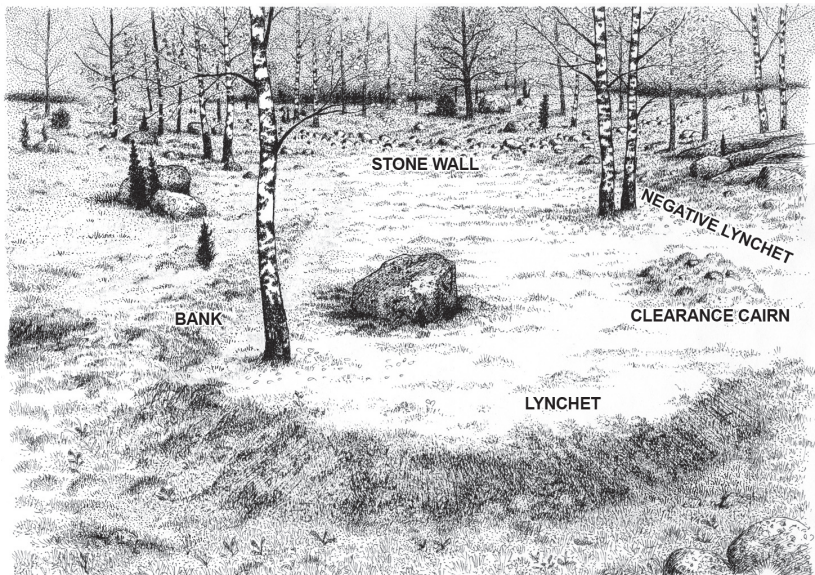


Figure 1. Features in fossil agrarian landscapes. Drawing by Charlotte Rinaldo.

tillage. Therefore, the remains of this clearing – in the form of clearance cairns – are the most common traces of previous agriculture. Furthermore, when land was lying bare after tillage, precipitation contributed to the sculpturing of the fields in the form of accumulation downslope and erosion upslope. In that process, low terraces (English special terminology: *lynchets*) have formed downslope. The contrasting form upslope is usually called a *negative lynchets*. Similarly, on light sandy soils, wind erosion can have contributed to the accumulation of sand and soil on the banks between fields and also to a sunken surface in the middle of a field (Figure 1).

Different ways of working the soil can also have contributed to the morphology of the cultivated landscape. During the medieval period and later, a fully fledged plough with a mouldboard was used in western Sweden and the fields were then often ridged so that a characteristic pattern of *ridge-and-furrow* was developed. The plough equipment that was used, before, during the Iron Age was an *ard* (or scratch-

plough), which lacked a mouldboard. To achieve a thorough preparation of the soil, the lands were cultivated in a criss-cross pattern, which was often connected to square fields and to the accumulation of soil on the banks between fields.

In many cases, stones were used to construct walls that acted as barriers for livestock, preventing them from entering the fields. In the first millennium AD, on the islands of Gotland and Öland, houses were often constructed with rather substantial stone foundations. All these traces form the basis for reconstructions of the prehistoric agricultural landscape.

During the past 50 years, historical geographers and archaeologists have documented such areas of ancient fields and settlements in different parts of Sweden, especially in the central and southern parts. This has been based on a series of thorough and detailed mapping exercises in the field, in rough pastures and in woodlands. Based on this, four types of ancient fields can be distinguished, which together give insight into farming and society during the Iron Age.

CLEARANCE CAIRN FIELDS IN THE INTERIOR OF SOUTHERN SWEDEN

The interior parts of southern Sweden – *sydsvenska höglandet* (the southern Swedish highlands) – exhibit a type of natural landscape that differs from the valleys and plains that surround it. In contrast to many more intensively cultivated areas of Sweden, after the last deglaciation this area was never covered by the sea or by the different lake stages of the Baltic Sea. These highlands are above the highest shoreline, that the sea and the different lakes stages formed after the deglaciation. As a result, the till left by the ice was never wave washed and sorted. Consequently, there are few broad valley bottoms but instead large areas covered with till, boulders and stones, which has created a landscape unsuitable for modern farming. On the other hand, the silt fractions in these soils are still there, rich in minerals and with a capacity to retain

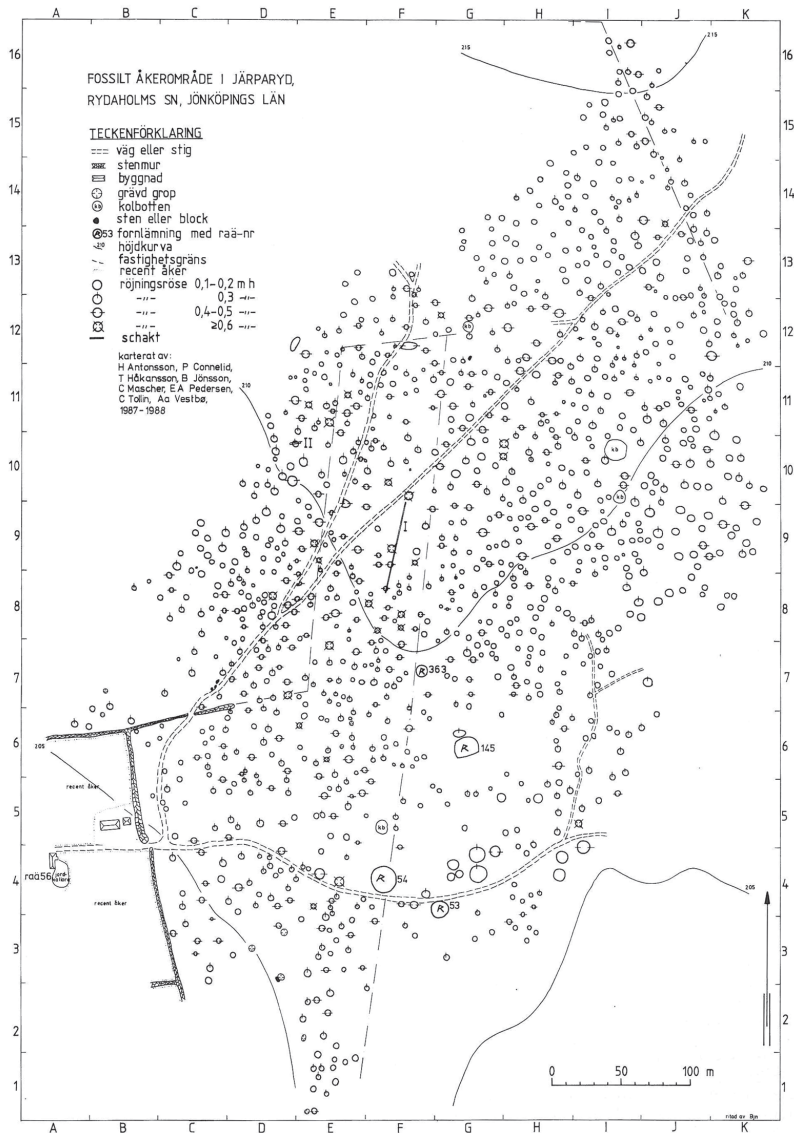


Figure 2. Clearance cairn field in Järparyd, southern interior Sweden. 800 BC to 400 AD. No individual fields are visible. The pattern of clearance cairns reflects the clearance of several partly superimposed irregular fields over a long period (from Pedersen & Jönsson 2003).

nutrients. In a typical situation *under* the highest shoreline, these fractions were washed down to the valley bottoms and plains where they now form a rich cultivable clayey soil.

These lands were not the most attractive for early farmers, but with the technology of that time, these stony soils were less of a hindrance than they are for modern steel ploughs. Farmers cleared the land of stones and, as a result, large areas of cairn fields remain in the present woodlands. The remnants of these field systems cover substantial parts of the present forests, well beyond what later became infields and meadows. These cairn fields often have a long and complex history. Many of them originated in the Late Bronze Age, from the ninth to sixth centuries BC and some of these areas were still in use as agricultural fields into the early second millennium AD.

There are few visible boundaries between separate plots in this type of ancient field, but where it has been possible to reconstruct the form of the separate fields, they are small irregular, rounded fields of the size of in the order of a hundred square metres. Some short- or long-term rotation of fields must have been used on these lands. This, together with the evidence from vegetation history, bears witness to a mosaic-type of landscape with small cultivated fields alternating with secondary woodlands (Widgren 2003)

‘CELTIC’ FIELDS ON GOTLAND AND IN SKÅNE

On Gotland and in the southernmost province of Sweden, Skåne, the field systems were of the same character as in continental northern Europe. They consisted of extensive areas of ‘Celtic’ fields – small quadrangular and rectangular fields bounded by sandy or earthen banks. Investigations of some of the many extensive field systems of this type on Gotland show that such field systems emerged in the eighth century BC and were still functioning until the second century AD (Figure 3). Whereas ‘Celtic’ fields from this period are common in Denmark, they are less well documented in nearby Skåne, but the scant evidence suggests they were common the-

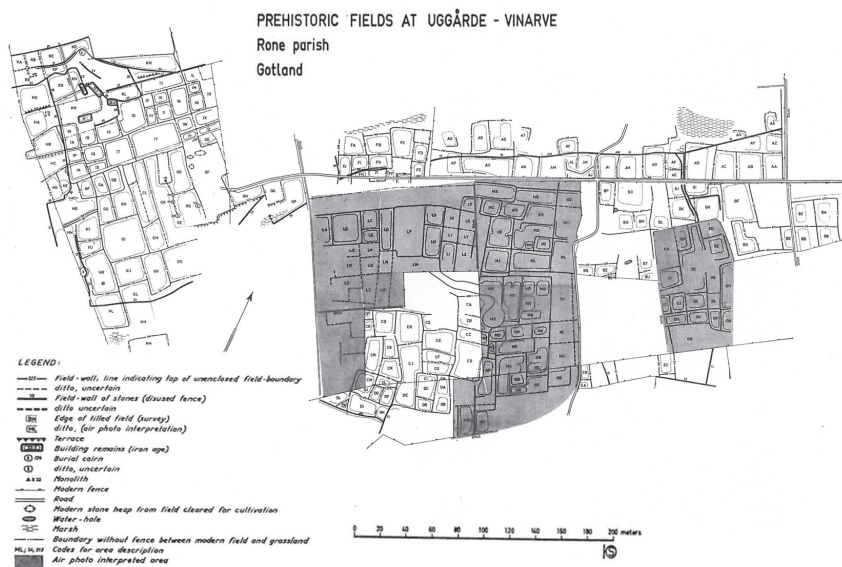


Figure 3. 'Celtic' fields at Vinarve on Gotland. 800 BC to 200 AD. The quadrangular form of the fields is related to criss-cross ploughing with an ard (from Lindquist 1974).

re during the first millennium BC. The fields were tilled with wooden ards, and since about 800 BC, these were equipped with separate wooden shares. From excavations of fields in different parts of Sweden, the characteristic criss-cross pattern associated with ard tillage has been documented (Lindquist 1974, Carlsson 1979).

STONE WALL ENCLOSURES IN EASTERN SWEDEN AND ON THE BALTIC ISLANDS

In the provinces of Uppland and Östergötland and on the islands of Öland and Gotland in the Baltic, large systems of stone-walled enclosures were built in the first part of the first millennium. They epitomise a specialised type of farming where the raising of cattle and sheep was closely integrated with the cultivation of small, well-manured fields. The stone walls connected several single farmsteads in a common grazing organisation (Figure 4).

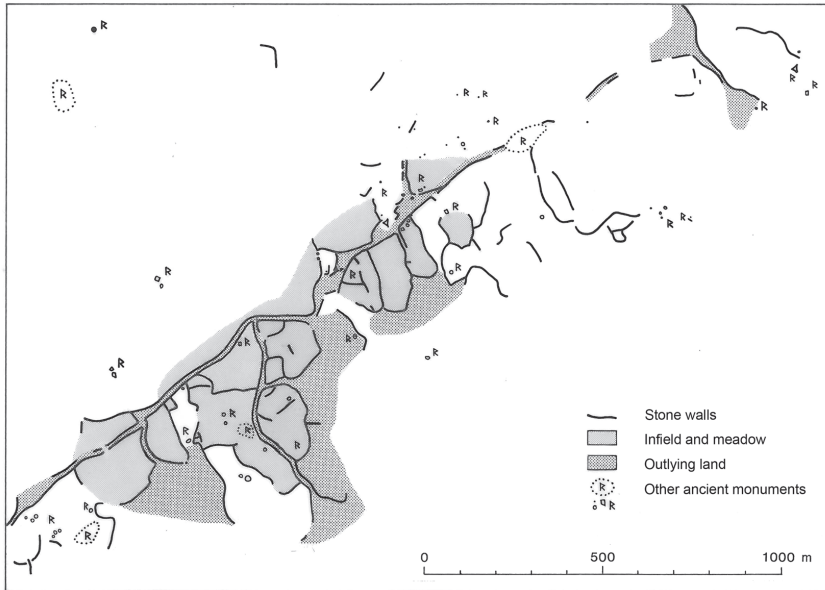


Figure 4. Collapsed stone walls in Särstad, Östergötland. AD 200–500. Note the long double rows of stone walls, which had been used as cattle paths or drove-ways. They give witness to past processes of daily transport of livestock from common pastures to the farmsteads (source of illustration) (from Widgren 1986).

On Gotland, this type of stone walls directly overlies the previous landscape of 'celtic' fields. Enclosed areas of cultivation of crops and hay meadows intended for the collection of winter fodder became clearly separated from outlying areas for grazing. Especially on the islands of Öland and Gotland, there was at the same time a trend towards increased sheep farming. It is clear that the whole landscape changed during the first few hundred years AD. From the form of the stone wall complexes, we can infer that there was increased competition for land. Land had to be separated more clearly for different purposes. We can also see that the integration of the livestock component and the arable land became more important. Such long stone-walled cattle paths are usually found in farming systems where there are daily movements of cattle, as for milking. The wider political and economic

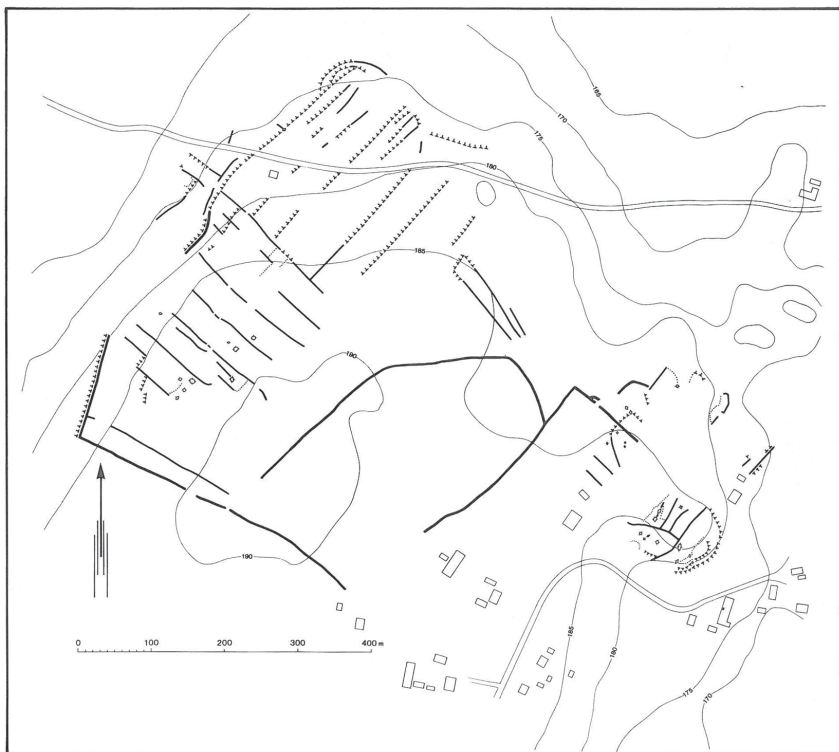


Figure 5. Strip fields in Månstad, Västergötland, first millennium AD. These strip fields represent a first division of the land into almost equal parcels. In contrast to what is seen in the 'celtic' fields of Gotland (Figure 3), the form of the fields can hardly be related to tillage. The broad strips are most probably remnants of a division of the land based on a system of rights. Inside some of the broad strips in the western part of the field system can be found small irregular plots that relate to cultivation (from Widgren 1990).

context in which we should understand this intensification must be sought in the fact that the first 500 years AD in Europe was a period of increased trade and exchange, which also affected the northern regions, well beyond the direct political influence of the Roman Empire. It seems clear also that the Scandinavian countries were affected by increased economic specialisation (Widgren 1983, Pedersen & Widgren 1998).

STRIP FIELDS IN WESTERN SWEDEN

In south-western Sweden, another type of field pattern, which originated in the first millennium AD, can be found. In the forests and pastures in Västergötland and Halland, a large number of localities with long and straight lines of stones and earthen banks were found in the mid-1980s. They did not resemble anything that had been found before. The lines form a regular pattern of several strips but, in contrast to strip fields that are found on 17th and 18th century cadastral maps, these strips are often much broader. A closer analysis of the fields documented in Figure 5 shows smaller divisions and signs of cultivation inside the broad strips. An important distinction in the terminology of forms in the agrarian landscape is that between *ownership parcels* and *working parcels*. In this case, the broad strips demarcate ownership whereas the actual cultivated plots, the working parcels, were much smaller. We can thus draw the conclusion that the geometry of the fields in this case was not caused by the technology of cultivation but rather in the social sphere. There are strong indications that such fields started to develop in the middle of the first millennium AD in Västergötland, but the most recent dates obtained from Halland point to the late first millennium AD and into the first few hundred years of the second millennium. It is not easy to reconstruct the social context of these fields with certainty, but when similar field patterns have been documented later in history and in other parts of the world, they have often been related to a social context where land rights are based on kinship and a perceived or real genealogy (Widgren 1990, Mascher 1993).

THE REGIONAL PATTERN

The map in Figure 6 gives a rough picture of where the different forms of ancient fields from prehistory and the Early Middle Ages in Sweden can be found. Clearance cairn fields can be found throughout Sweden but they are best preserved in the interior of southern Sweden above the highest shoreline. Extensive areas of contemporaneous 'Celtic'

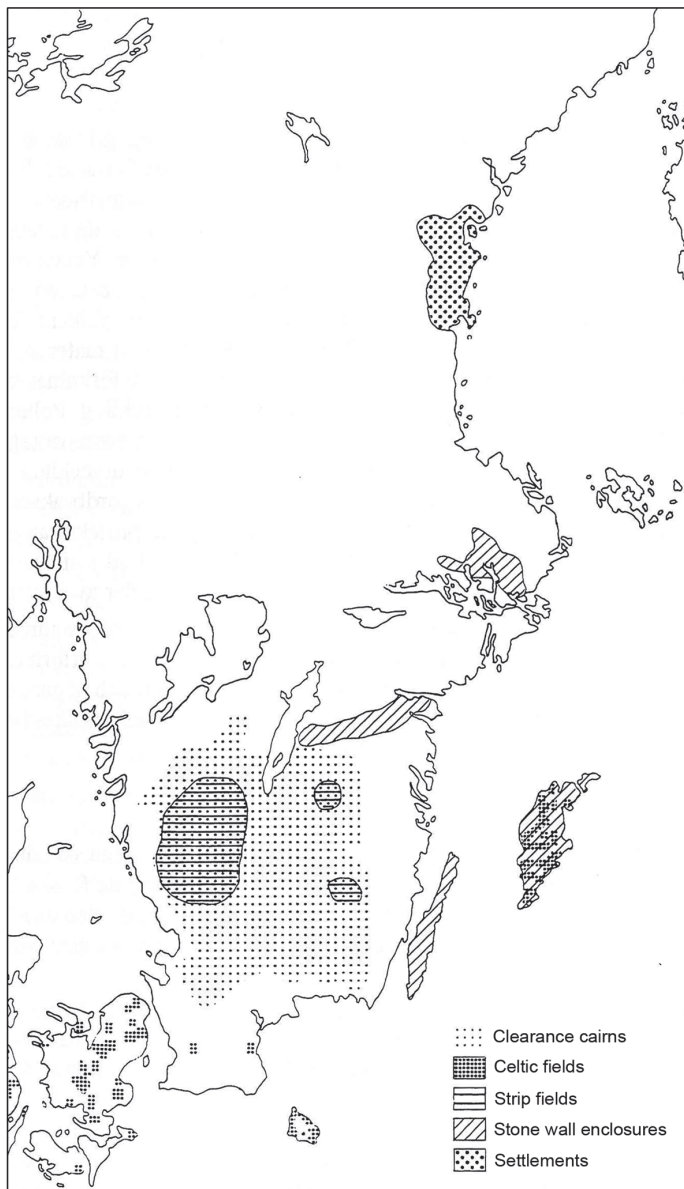


Figure 6. Distribution of different types of ancient fields and settlements from the first millennium A.D. The map was compiled in the mid 1990s and since then new finds have been made, especially of strip-parcelled fields in Southwestern Sweden (from Widgren 1997).

fields are found in Denmark, were most probably common also in large parts of Skåne in southernmost Sweden and have been well documented on the island of Gotland. A clear division between east and west is manifested in the different distribution patterns of the stone-wall complexes and the broad strip fields. The specialised large stone-walled enclosure complexes characterise some provinces in the eastern part of Sweden, from the Baltic islands in the south to the province of Uppland, north of Stockholm. On the other hand, the broad strip fields from the latter part of the first millennium have a clear south-westerly distribution, with some scattered occurrences also in the eastern part of the southern interior. This characteristic difference between west and east is a phenomenon that can also be found in other later cultural and social phenomena in the historical geography of Sweden.

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