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Early Land Organisation around the Gulf of Bothnia

ABSTRACT The area around the Gulf of Bothnia is a distinct region with historic roots. In 1809, after the peace treaty at Fredrikshamn, the area was divided into a Swedish and a Finnish (Russian) part through a new border on the Torne River. Earlier the whole area on both sides of the Gulf, in Sweden as well as in Finland, belonged to the same taxation district and was subject to the same taxes based on winter hunting and summer harvesting.

The cultural landscape in this region can be seen in cadastral maps from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the villages, which were large compared to those in other places in Sweden and Finland, the same division of the arable land can be seen in the Torne river valley in the west as in the eastern coastal area to Kronoby in the south. South of the Torne River valley traces of this land organisation can be seen on the early maps.

This land organisation had social causes depending on the main industry in the area of hunting and fishing. The roots of both social organisation and early taxation lay in the east as opposed to most areas in Sweden and Finland, in which a westerly influence dominated.

KEYWORDS Sweden-Finland, Gulf of Bothnia, land ownership, social organisation

Introduction

A modern map with present-day national borders often presents a picture that is different compared to an earlier situation. Historical studies concerning neighbouring countries between which the borders earlier ran in a different area or did not even exist must take such a fact into ac-

count in order to understand the historical situation. This is the case when studying the border area in the north between Sweden and Finland around the Gulf of Bothnia, an area with special prerequisites, which for a long time formed a distinct region. To some extent, this is true also in modern times but based on other kinds of resources than in the past; an article in 2001 described the area as harbouring five universities and several companies with a close cooperation in modern technology (Forsberg 2001).

From the Middle Ages to 1809 Sweden and Finland were under one rule. Through the peace treaty at Fredrikshamn, which ended the war between Sweden and Russia and through which Sweden lost Finland, a new border in the north between the two countries was drawn in the Torne River. All along the frontier between the two countries the border is drawn in separating waters: the Baltic Sea, the Bothnian Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia. The northernmost border was also drawn in a watercourse but in a much narrower one. Nowhere else along the frontier do Sweden and Finland come as close to each other as in this area. For a long time, the villages in the Torne River valley had owned and used land on both sides of the river, but through this new boundary the villages were split in two so that one part became Swedish and one part Finnish. What kind of cultural landscape was thus divided and what type of local economy had shaped it? To what cultural sphere did it belong? Those are questions that will be discussed in this paper.

For several years I have studied the cultural landscape in southwest Finland and in the north of Sweden, and in most villages in these areas the organisation of agricultural land was connected to the taxation of the land and, in many places, introduced by the government as an administrative measure. This was probably the case in parts of Finland during the beginning of the Swedish reign, foremost in Finland Proper and in Tavastia, where the arable land in several villages was organized strictly according to the rules of *solskifte* ['sun division'] as practised in Eastern Central Sweden at least from the thirteenth century. Traces of this land division can be seen in most Finnish areas where Swedish colonisers had settled. The influence in these areas clearly went from west to east. But in one area the earliest known land organisation did not conform to this pattern. This was in the region around the Gulf of Bothnia and particularly in the coastal area of present-day Finnish Lapland and in the Torne River valley in Sweden.

Norra Botten. A special region

In the sixteenth century the area around the Gulf of Bothnia was regarded by the Swedish government as a special region for tax purposes called *Norra Botn* ['North Bottom'] or *Botten* ['the Bottom'] (Friberg 1983) and this referred to both the west and the east side of the Gulf. The west side was later

called *Västerbotten*, ['West Bothnia,' 'the west side of the Bottom'] and the east side *Österbotten* ['Ostrobothnia,' 'the east side of the Bottom']. In tax rolls from the mid sixteenth century both *Västerbotten* and *Österbotten* were listed under the administrative province of Korsholm, an area comprising present-day *Österbotten* and Lapland in Finland (Jonsson 1971). According to another author, the same taxes were levied in *Västerbotten* and the Parish of Kemi in *Österbotten* during the late Middle Ages (Ahnlund 1946). The Parish of Kemi, first mentioned in 1327 (KLN 1971: 398), covered the area around the Kemi River with its outlet in the Gulf of Bothnia some twenty kilometres to the east of the Torne River (Fig. 1).

Taxation

At this time, taxes in this northern area were of two kinds, a summer tax and a winter tax. The winter tax was called *bågaskatt* ['bow tax']. According to the provincial law of Hälsingland from the fourteenth century, which at

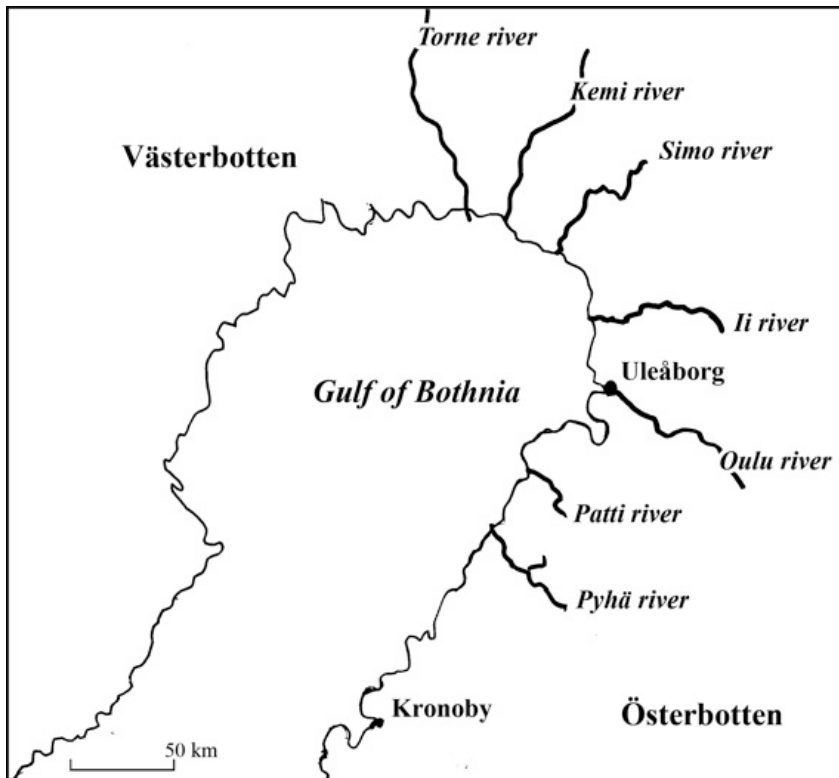


Fig. 1. The investigated area around the Gulf of Bothnia.

this time was valid in the whole of northern Sweden, every adult man who was strong enough to draw his bow was obliged to pay one winter skin of a squirrel (Swedish *gråskinn*) (Holmbäck & Wessén 1979). In areas further south, the tax could be paid wholly or partly in money, but in Torneå and Kemi, the northernmost parishes on the west and east side respectively of the present-day border, it was paid in kind, in squirrel skins (Ahnlund 1946), probably because the quality of the skins in this northern area were of the highest quality and much in demand among persons of rank. It could also have been a reflection of the local economy in which money played a minor part at this time. The *bågaskatt* was an ancient form of taxation with roots in the east, dating from before the Swedish crown had control over this northern part of the Gulf of Bothnia. It had earlier been more widespread and lived on the longest in these northern areas (Ahnlund 1946). It was abolished in 1606.

The summer tax was the main one and it was based on the ownership of arable land. However, not only the quality of the land was taken into account when the tax was determined but also other economic resources such as woodland, fishing water and meadowland. In the tax roll of 1539 the tax in the Parish of Torneå was 24 *penningar* (the currency at the time) per *spannland* (1 *spannland* = c. 1,840 square metres), whereas the other seven parishes in the vast region of Västerbotten paid between 8 and 12 *penningar* for each *spannland*. It is obvious that this high level of tax was not based on the arable land alone: in Torneå each farm (*nominatus*) had on average 2.5 *spannland* compared to the rest of the province in which the farms had areas of 6.4 to 9.9 *spannland* per taxation unit.

The winter tax was obviously the oldest tax in the area, dating from a time when agriculture was of very little importance here. The tax based on the ownership of land was a later addition and one that was modelled on the situation in more pronounced agricultural areas than the area around the Gulf of Bothnia. It was founded on the Swedish land assessment in *markland*, which in turn was based on the current monetary system (Roeck Hansen 2008). The taxes of the time tell us that hunting here had a long history as part of the economy and was still important, whereas agriculture played a minor role. What they cannot tell us is how the land was organised and owned. This evidence can be found in the cadastral maps from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which show a land organisation that was still unaffected by the land reforms that came later, during the second half of the eighteenth and during the nineteenth century. The evidence of the maps will be discussed below.

Land Ownership and Social Organisation

On a present-day map some villages can be seen which show traces of how land was owned before the 1809 border was erected. Several villages still exist on both the Swedish and the Finnish side of the river, for instance Kukkola, Karunki and Korpikylä. Cadastral maps from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries of course show similarities in land organisation on both sides of this river, but more interesting is the fact that the same type of organising the land in the villages also continued on the Finnish side of

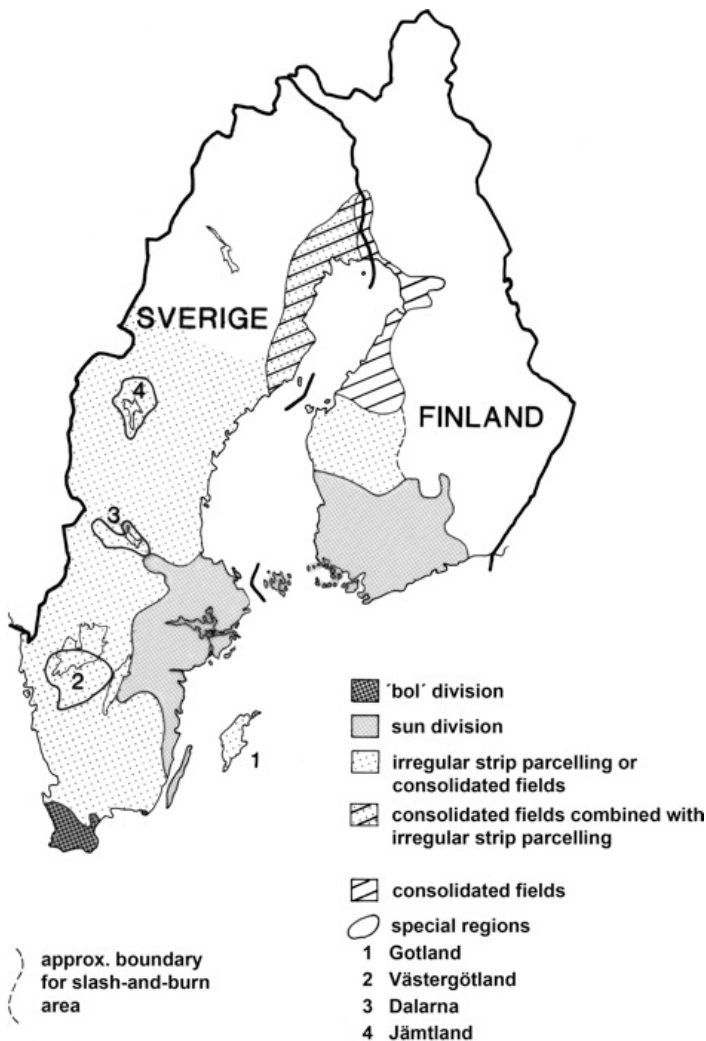


Fig. 2. Land-owning systems in Sweden and Finland around 1700. After Sporrøng 1994 with the addition of systems in Finland and northern Sweden. From Roeck Hansen 2008: 80.

the Gulf of Bothnia, the water that separates the two territories. From the Torne River valley to an area south of Uleåborg (Oulu) in Finland, the villages in the coastal areas and around the rivers Kemi, Simo, Ii and Oulu were all organised in the same way. This similarity continued down the east side of the Gulf of Bothnia to the Kronoby valley, with some difference: in the northern part of the area the arable land was yearly cropped, while further south, beginning from an area between Uleåborg and Kronoby, a two-year crop rotation was practised (Fig. 2).

The farms in these villages were situated singly or two to three in consolidated areas with small privately owned fields or fields with unsystematically mixed ownership. Nowhere in this area was there an open-field system where all the farms in a village had shares, a land organisation that was common further south, in Sweden as well as in western Finland. The parcels were small and irregularly shaped (Fig. 3). The villages in the area were in general large compared to others in both Sweden and Finland; according to the land registers from the mid sixteenth century, the villages in the Torne River valley had up to 38 farms. The concept of village in these northern



Fig. 3. Alavojakkala, the Parish of Nedertorneå 1681. The village is situated about 10 kilometers from the coast on the east side of Torne River. In 1681 there were 38 farms in the village and they owned land on both sides of the river. On the west side seven single farms were situated on their own land and another four in pairs in two consolidated areas. East of the river there were eight single farms and three in pairs in consolidated areas. In two of the other consolidated areas there were three and six farms respectively. In these areas with several farms the ownership in the arable was irregularly mixed. The figure shows a part of the village with the largest consolidated field. From Roeck Hansen 2002: 61.

areas was however not the same as further south. Settlements here were separated into taxation units with separate names by administratively constructed boundary lines. This was often done by the land surveyor when mapping the villages by drawing a straight line across the land furthest away from the farm buildings in two neighbouring settlements. The result was what has been termed territorial villages (*Bebyggelsen i Finland på 1560-talet*, 1973). These constructions were however not stable and the names and range of the settlements could change over time.

On both sides of the Gulf land organisation changed further south. On the Swedish side a new element could be seen, irregular strip parcelling of the fields. Mixed ownership and strip parcelling, the form of land organisation common in Eastern Central Sweden and further south, began to appear in the villages in the river valleys to the west and south of the Torne River valley. However, in those villages where an open field is documented in the cadastral maps from the early eighteenth century, there were always consolidated areas as well (Swedish *gårdsgårdar*), a relict from an earlier form of economy. Strip parcelling was a later development of the agrarian landscape, probably introduced by the Swedish government in the fourteenth century or somewhat later and made possible by the rapid shore regression in the area, which had resulted in new cultivable land. It is the shore regression that makes it possible to give an approximate dating of the two kinds of fields: the strip fields are all situated at a lower level than the consolidated fields. The latter are usually found above the 10-metre level dated to the ninth century, and the strip fields between 10 and 5 metres above sea level, a level dated to 1400 AD (Roeck Hansen 2002). In Finland strip parcelling began in the villages of southern Satakunta and was used in most villages in Finland Proper, Tavastia and Nyland (Roeck Hansen 1996).

Land organisation around the Gulf of Bothnia can thus be seen to be clearly different from the way in which land in agrarian settlements in other parts of both Sweden and Finland was arranged where mixed ownership was the rule. What then was the reason for the fact that the cultivable land, foremost the arable land, was here consolidated or in mixed ownership among some farms in a village but never involving the whole village? Villages are usually established because there is a need for cooperation in the utilisation of scarce resources like arable land. The kind of cooperation depended on the economy of the settlement. In this case the ownership structure of the arable land documented in the cadastral maps shows that farming was not the main industry here. The fact that most of the arable land was privately owned and consolidated was an indication that in this part of the economy no cooperation was usual. The small areas of arable land also indicate that agriculture was not an important part of the economy. So we

must ask what kind of resource utilisation other than agriculture made it necessary for people in this area to live in conglomerated settlements.

We have to look for an economic resource that was shared and that needed several hands in cooperation to be utilised to explain the fact that people lived in villages. As pointed out by many authors, the answer here is hunting and fishing, particularly salmon fishing. Several sources point out the rich fishing that was to be had in many of the rivers in Västerbotten, the richest in the Torne River (Friberg 1983). In northern Ostrobothnia the rivers Kemi and Oulu were said to be particularly rich in salmon and fishing was here practised by farmers in several villages in cooperation. During the Middle Ages, the economy in general in this area, described as the Wilderness of Finland, was based mainly on cattle rearing, fishing and hunting. The areas of arable land were small (Edgren & Törnblom 1993: 369). Regarding the Torne River valley, Jonsson and others have pointed out that the areas of arable land were small compared to what was found in other agrarian areas in northern Sweden and that fishing was the principal industry (Jonsson 1971: 245). This was the reason for the forming of villages; fishing as well as hunting, particularly seal hunting, were activities that required groups of people. Furthermore, permanent arrangements for catching fish, particularly salmon, were owned in common and this was another factor that constituted a tie within a group of people larger than a family, a village.

The ownership of the land and the way it is documented in the detailed early maps give us not only the physical layout of the agrarian landscape in these northern river valleys, but they also offer the key to understanding the social structure of these villages, a structure that depended on the utilisation of the natural resources that were the most important to the local industry.

Political Influences

Even if land organisation in this area was primarily the effect of resource utilisation, there were also political and administrative influences. Earlier studies have demonstrated the extent of the influence of the Swedish Crown from the late Middle Ages on land organisation in northern Sweden and in the western parts of Finland (Roeck Hansen 1996; 1999; 2002). In the cadastral maps this influence could be seen in the form of village open fields in which strips were mixed more or less systematically. But in the villages around the Gulf of Bothnia such land organisation was absent, from the Torne River valley in the west to Kronoby in the east.

What had decided this change in the use and ownership of agricultural land? It may of course have been caused solely by a geographical boundary to do with conditions of soil and climate but a political reason is also

possible. On the Finnish side, between Kronoby and the area around the rivers Pyhä(joki) and Patti(joki) south of Uleåborg, the western border that was agreed upon in 1323 in the peace treaty between Sweden and Novgorod at Nöteborg is presumed to have run (Tarkiainen 2008). According to the peace treaty, the area north of this border was to be used and taxed jointly by Swedes and Russians. By and by the Swedish crown extended its sovereignty over the area but that was much later and land organisation in the settlements in the river valleys was then well established. It was an organisation with ancient roots in the east and also the one that was best suited to conditions in this northern area, conditions that were also reflected in the early taxes.

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