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Ourselves and others – a change of identity according to time and location

Susanne Pettersson

Scandinavian culture; Finn-forest; local identity; smoke ovens; Viking Age costumes

Introduction

There are a lot of rules for our actions and identifications. Laws and restrictions from the government or the local society control some of them while others only exist in the mentality of people. Being a part of the European Union has stressed two sides of our identity, one for the need and power of belonging to a large group and one for the loss, or increase, of a local identity. Other possibilities of identity conflict could be found in the loyalty to the family contra profession and in a rural or urban behaviour. Even the distance from home will affect our identity. Going abroad makes us more likely to act as Swedes, while a meeting with other Swedes gives identifications to a city, a village or even the street or farmstead where we live.

Interpretations out of archaeological materials are subjective tasks following the archaeologist's previous experiences, actual interests and theoretical frameworks. Power and social ranking have often explained similarities and differences in the archaeological material (e.g. Hyenstrand 1984) while identification to a local society (e.g. Svensson 1979) or ethnical identity (e.g. Arnstberg 1976) more often have been a task for ethnologists. A wide terminology of culture identity has been used for the following examples, partly to avoid a long discussion of ethnicity (cf. Arnstberg 1976) and partly to connect two kinds of identity into one study.

Scandinavian Finns?

Sparsely populated woodlands in the middle of Sweden became scenes for colonisation by Finns during the 16th and 17th century. This colonisation could very simplified be explained by two main factors. Measures from the Swedish government encouraged new settlements, and a special slash-and-burn technology developed in the Savolax district made it possible to use coniferous forest for cereal production of rye (for further discussion about the complexity of this colonisation e.g. Blad 1995, Broberg 1988). One area populated by Finns during this time was the forested area of Värmland. Together with Finn-farms on the Norwegian side of the border they formed a unit known as the Finn-forest (*Sw: Finnskogen*). Even though Finland was a part of Sweden at that time (fig. 1) they brought another culture and identity to their new surroundings, mostly defining themselves from others by the variations of buildings and the slash-and-burn technology. Personal names could include their former 'nationality' and their old language was used for generations. The last people known speaking the old Savolax dialect died in Värmland during the middle of the 20th century.

During field-works for the Central Board of National Antiquities in northern Värmland in 1990, a lot of settlement remains were registered. Most of them were crofter's holdings and shielings (*Sw: säter, fäbod*; settlements used in the summertime for extending the area of grazing), but even some deserted Finn-farms were located. One of the registered sites had a name referring to a former shieling, 'Gammelvallen', while the remains looked more like a deserted farmstead. Further investigations of written sources indicated this to bee the first site of a Finn-farm, Avundsåsen, first registration of taxes in 1658 and re-established to another location about 1727 (Blad 1992). In order to gain knowledge of chronology, function,

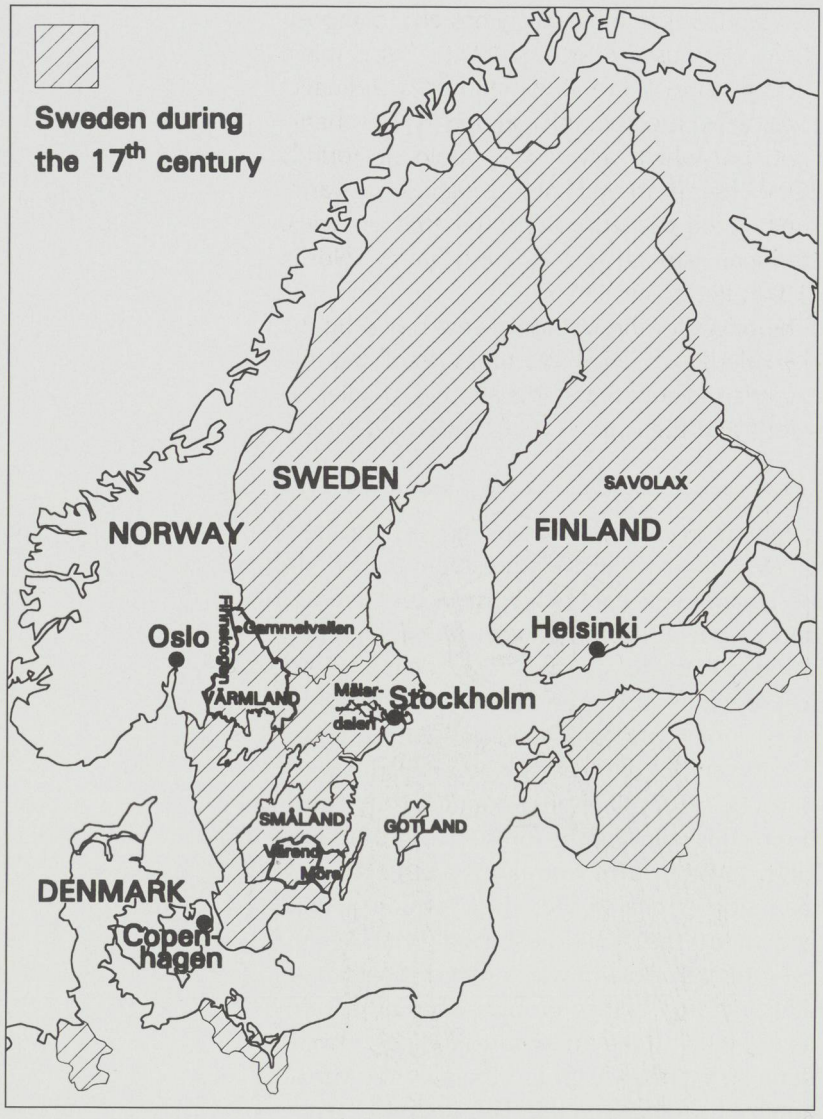

Fig. 1: Reference map, made by S. Pettersson 2002.

cultural characteristics and land-use within the settlement an interdisciplinary project was initialised in 1991.

The project started with a mapping of the area, and 332 remains, mostly clearing cairns and agricultural terraces, were documented. One part of the infield area became of special interest from the beginning, due to smaller cairns and terraces. Two clearing-cairns and one agricultural terrace were archaeologically investigated and at least two phases of agricultural land-use could be identified. Dating of the layers and six pollen analyses confirmed an agricultural land-use already during medieval times, as well as cultivation during the 17th century (VM archive report 28767 and 1995-11-16). Much more to our surprise was the small amount of rye-pollen, too small for a sure identification of rye cultivation at the site. With the aim of finding a dwelling house with a smoke-oven and accompanying find material, a house-foundation with a big cairn was selected for archaeological investigations. As expected, the cairn revealed elements from a smoke-oven. Earthen benches and a storage pit in front of the smoke-oven were other constructions known from different Finn-farms (e.g. Hämäläinen 1945, 98; Nikander 1916, 51). The artefacts, a total of 271 registered finds, were well adjusted to a farmstead in the woodland. Items for both agricultural activities and hunting were found, while other objects could be connected to activities in the kitchen, the clothing, different handicrafts or the building itself. Osteological analyses contributed to the results by indications of fishing (two jaws and some scales), hunting (rabbit) and a livestock of cattle and sheep/goats. Bones likely from a hen could be either domestic or wild (VM archive report, Jane Sjögren).

Even though the clay-pipes were mostly fragmentary and no stamp marks were found they could be roughly dated to 1630–1730 (VM archive report 28767). Two coins, one silver-coin from 1632 and a copper-coin from 1719–1726 (KMK dnr 711-4090-1995) gave almost the same dating, if the time of circulation for silver-coins will be included (at a maximum of 40 years; personal communication Kenneth Jonsson 2002-03-18).

The total set of buildings and building elements identified within the project could be compared with a standard setting on a Finn-farm in the following way. One dwelling house with a smoke oven (*SW: rökstuga*) was partly excavated and two kilns for drying cereals (*SW: ria*) were confirmed by corn analyses of barley and small amounts of wheat (VM archive report 1995-11-16). One smithy was exposed by finds of iron slag and a cattle house was interpreted by the remains, while a storage building was the result of excavating a possible pit for storage. Buildings expected but not identified would be a sauna and a cooking house that might be hidden among at least four unidentified house foundations with cairns (for the total setting of buildings; Torsby Finnkulturcentrum 2000, 5; results from the project; Bladh 1992, VM archive report 28767 and 1995-11-16). But could these results be used for identification of the Finns?

This question can not be answered without further investigations and references. Very little is known about building techniques from

the 17th century and absolutely nothing from the neighbourhood. Even Swedes partly used smoke-ovens, earthen benches and kilns (e.g. Erixon 1953). Artefacts and cooking did not seem to differ from a common pattern at the time, so without knowledge from written sources the remains could only be identified as a farmstead from the 17th century.

Use of the slash-and-burn method is known from written sources according to convictions for illegal clearance. The first inhabitant of Avundsåsen, Matts Mattson, had even one of his fines specified to barrels of rye (Ericson 1996, 261). Since this cultivation mostly was located to other parts than the infields, it was not investigated within the project. Results of agricultural land-use within the site before the establishment of the Finn-farm might explain why this area was not the most suitable place for the settler's speciality of using fully-grown coniferous forest. Another explanation could be that the first inhabitant of Avundsåsen was born in another part of Sweden (Ericson 1996, 260) and maybe already assimilated to 'Swedish' cultivation. Quick adjustment to stationary fields is known for several Finns in the second generation (Bladh 1995).

Assimilation is a complicated process, and the Finn-forest has sometimes been described by an own identity based on the use of smoke ovens (dwellings, saunas and kilns) and the slash-and-burn technology. A mixture of elements from Sweden, Norway and Finland are known from the whole Finn-forest (Torsby Finnkulturcentrum 2000, 5–15) and maybe not only used by the Finns. The use of smoke-ovens could be an expression of cultural identity, but, as stated above, we need more references before a final interpretation. Using a former language seems at this time be the most significant way to hang on to the former identity. It is clearly one way of defining themselves and keeping 'others' on the outside, but that is a subject for other disciplines and not traceable in the archaeological material.

Local identities or one Scandinavian culture during the Viking Age?

Scandinavian Viking Age women are usually pictured in a dress with two oval brooches, a third brooch and most often even some beads (fig. 2). Exceptions are made by the island of Gotland where other brooches and compositions were used (Carlsson 1983). But is this a true picture? Were all women of Scandinavia dressed in a common costume? No, probably not, but which differences could be found? One attempt to find some geographical variations were carried out as two archaeological seminar papers in the late eighties (Norlin 1986; Pettersson 1990).

The origin for these studies were based on the knowledge of local costumes from the old agrarian society. Standardisation for smaller regions and their mixture of elements from dif-

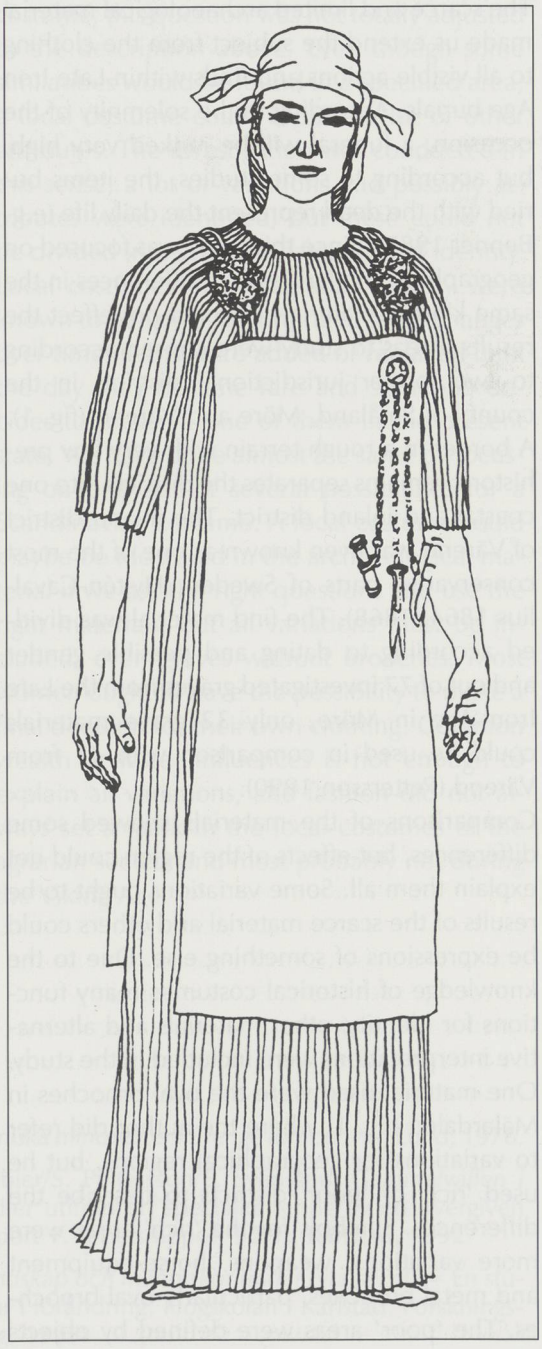

Fig. 2: Viking Age women (Grenberger 1980, 89).

ferent times were characteristic for these costumes. Most of them seem to have a history in the medieval clothing, and the first descriptions of them as old-fashioned are known from the beginning of the 17th century (Henschen-Ingvar, I. 1947–1955, 1168). Local costume did not only show the geographic origin they were also full of attributes and accessories of gender, family, profession and social ranking. The amounts of attributes were closely connected to the people one might meet and the solemnity of the occasion. Most of these attributes could be left out in the daily life on the farm (Nylén 1983).

The scarce and limited archaeological material made us extend the subject from the clothing to all visible actions and finds within Late Iron Age burials. According to the solemnity of the occasion, a funeral will be ranked very high, but according to some studies, the items buried with the dead represent the daily life (e.g. Bennet 1987). Since this study was focused on geographical similarities and differences in the same kind of materials it would not effect the results. Areas to study were chosen according to two former jurisdictional districts in the county of Småland, Möre and Värend (fig. 1). A border in a rough terrain with very few prehistoric remains separates the districts into one coastal and inland district. The inland district of Värend was even known as one of the most conservative parts of Sweden (Hyltén-Cavallius 1864, 1868). The find material was divided according to dating and possible gender and out of 77 investigated graves from the Late Iron Age in Möre, only 32 grave materials could be used in comparison with 41 from Värend (Pettersson 1990).

Comparisons of the materials showed some differences, but effects of the region could not explain them all. Some variations ought to be results of the scarce material and others could be expressions of something else. Due to the knowledge of historical costumes many functions for identity, other materials and alternative interpretations were included in the study. One material used were the oval brooches in Mälardalen (fig. 1) where the author did refer to variations for geographical regions, but he used 'rich' or 'poor' districts to describe the differences. Symbols for the 'rich' areas were more variations, weapons, horse-equipment and metal brooches, particularly oval brooches. The 'poor' areas were defined by objects such as combs, simple iron items and beads without other items of gender (Jansson 1985, 152–153). Since Möre revealed a wider variation of brooches, more weapons, more inhumation burials (and the only gaming pieces) it mostly fit into the 'rich' area of Mälardalen. Värend, on the other hand, showed more similarities with the 'poor' area according to graves with spindle whorls, combs and beads without other items for gender, but there were still too many exceptions and 'rich' and 'poor' materials seem to be mixed in the same parts of the districts.

One effort to obtain some results were made out of a change of the geographical scale. The district of Möre now became a study of parishes, and the variations found became specific for every grave field included. Inhumation burials, weapons, horses equipment and graves with brooches were most likely not to be found at the same site (Pettersson 1990). Similarities and differences in the material must accordingly be explained by more than one interpretation. A model of four geographical levels, presumably the same as levels of identity, weere presented as a final result (Pettersson 1990, 24).

The first level seemed to be an area for a common culture according to similarities in climate, livelihood and social structure. In this case, the focus could be set on a Scandinavian culture during the Viking Age. Spatial distribution of oval brooches would represent this level, since it is closely connected to Scandinavia and the Scandinavian colonisation (Jansson 1985, 12). The next level was not so easy to define by the artefacts, but the location of pre-historic graves have been used several times for defining societies and territorial units during pre-historic times (e.g. Burström 1991, Hyenstrand 1984). Most of these territories fit the medieval jurisdictional districts so they could represent the next level. A region connected to a presumed administration would most likely include administrators, and some variations in the find material could accordingly be indications of these people. The third level would be a closer connection to the neighbourhood defined as a district (*Sw: bygd, bebyggelseområde*) where the inhabitants have the possibility to meet on a regular basis. The final level will represent the family and family traditions. Most people know how difficult it could be to make changes in traditions, but at some occasions even individual actions could be identified.

Another very important factor, not so easy to study, is the absence of metal brooches in most of the female graves from the Viking Age. It is very difficult to estimate how common the use of oval brooches was in a female costume, since most identifications of female graves have been conducted through the existence of brooches, particularly oval brooches. According to the material from Birka, only 157 out of more than 1.100 investigated graves included one or several oval brooches (Jansson 1985, 11). Presuming half of the investigated graves to be female graves, less than 30% would include oval brooches. The same figure is known from Gotland, even if it includes other kinds of brooches (Carlsson 1983, 88). Both materials included variations from one to four brooches in the composition.

Final discussion

These two studies have enlightened some of the complexity of identification. Most people have a need to be 'someone' even if it sometimes could be in the sense of belonging to a certain group. One problem for archaeologists would be finding a relevant material for these studies. In the example of the Finns, building technique and methods of cultivation were used to specify identity; but they most likely did not use the slash-and-burn technology to communicate their origin. It was one way to get food on the table. The knowledge of that technology and the surrounding forest gave them the possibility to use it. Presence and absence of smoke-ovens could involve an active choice of identification. Lots of Finn-farms are known for extensions of the building including a fireplace and a chimney, commonly named as a Swedish part (*Sw: svenskstuga*). Different functions and tradition might explain the use of two kinds of fireplaces, but it could even be active choices of adaptation to the local society. A building could be seen by anyone passing, and it would clearly be connected to its inhabitants.

The other example represented one person within a possible group of identity. Analysing the material revealed several problems, and the geographical scale had to be questioned. The area of investigation changed from two jurisdictional districts to include other parts of Sweden and then back to separate grave fields within a Scandinavian culture. Another problem was the original issue of finding a local costume, this question was not totally adjusted to the description above. Even though some similarities would be found in a specified area, a local costume could include a lot of other attributes. The investigation was conducted in this sense, a lot of variations and possibly attributes were identified, but these could not be divided into separate categories of identity. Local costumes of the agrarian society were known to be 'alive' according to small changes over time. Items were added or replaced until the day they became rare and someone decides to preserve one of them in the present state. We have done almost the same by focusing on one out of several possibilities for a Scandinavian costume. A local costume could maybe be identified in the archaeological material if we ask the right questions and use the right materials, but all variations must be included, even graves without brooches. Most women ought to have the possibility to make a final decision for their own clothing. Common wealth or faster influences is not enough to explain all variations, and fashion did not always set a mark in the local costumes of the agrarian society and most probably not during the Viking Age.

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KMK — Kungliga Myntkabinettet, Stockholm.

Personal communication — Kenneth Jonsson, Professor in Numismatic, Stockholm.

Personal communication — Per-Arne Olsson. Employed by the Hunting and Fishing Museum, Ransby, Värmland. Information from the parish register in Dalby.

Address

Susanne Pettersson
Herrhagsgatan 15c, S–65218 Karlstad
sussie-p@telia.com

Nordvärmlands Jakt & Fiskemuseum
Ransby, S–68060 Sysslebäck