

Medieval State Expansion and the Outpost Model – the Case of the Swedish North

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Core-periphery; outpost model; power; state-expansion

For the issue of early state expansion we need a wide spectrum of case studies, and we need to test various explanatory models on these, to be able to question the ‘truths’ and to construct new general hypotheses for future work in the field. In this paper a small contribution is given on the basis of many years of research (Mogren 2000) in the Swedish historical province of Hälsingland, now part of Gävleborg county and situated at the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, around three driving hours north of Stockholm.

Hälsingland

Hälsingland is in the oldest written sources understood as settled land within the parts of the archdiocese of Uppsala lying north of the forest Ödmården. However, this excludes the areas of the interior with Saami inhabitants and also the province of Jämtland, which was part of the Uppsala archdiocese, but politically affiliated to Norway from the late 12th century onwards. Thus all the coastal historical provinces west of the Gulf of Bothnia, except Gästrikland, were understood as Hälsingland. This Hälsingland concept was probably secondary to the concept of Hälsingland proper, which is understood as the two high medieval rural deaneries of Alir and Sunded, and to what is today understood as Hälsingland. Henceforth in this presentation the more restricted concept is understood.

Hälsingland is part of the region of the southern taiga, where coniferous forest is predominant. The forest covers 83% of the area of the province. Bogs and mires cover an additional 12%, which leaves a very small portion of the

landscape suitable for cultivation. Arable land is confined to the areas in the river valleys and around the lower lying lakes, where alluvial deposits have formed after the latest glaciation.

These conditions have created two principal landscapes, a lower, warmer landscape with arable land and the main settlement areas, and a higher, colder landscape with uncultivable till and marginal settlement, an outland landscape as we understand it.

The settlement history can be grasped only in broad outline. Some indications about an expansion from the early Iron Age onwards are given by the Ancient Monuments Register, and place names give another broad outline of medieval settlement expansion.

With very limited arable land, the complementary trades were relatively important, in the outland areas even decisive for reproduction and survival. Hunting, trapping, fishing, iron production, crafts and trading are activities that have shaped the cultural identities of Hälsingland.

Theory

Anyone who wants to obtain an understanding of the complexity of societal relations must take a stance regarding the concepts of power and resistance. Giddens has an advantage in the distinction he makes between power and authority (e. g. in Giddens 1989), and this viewpoint is applied here. According to this view coercive power could imply a loss of authority. In line with this I find it necessary also to consider concepts like ‘countervailing power’ and ‘collaborating power’ to grasp the full extent of the process.

When the main focus is on exogenous élite structures and their expansion into new territory a stance in the centre-periphery debate is necessary as well. These take-off points lead to the choice of explanatory model. An attempt has been made to test the 'outpost model' launched by Guillermo Algaze for quite another place in time and space, Sumerian Mesopotamia (Algaze 1993), on this north Scandinavian material. Algaze suggests that the prospect of short-term gains can make local élites in the immediate periphery of the centre benevolently disposed towards trade connections with the centre, and therefore not opposed to the establishments of centre groups on the periphery. In the earlier stages of expansion, quite simply for reasons of cost-effectiveness, a system of isolated outposts is established in the peripheral territory, which above all mirror tendencies towards an economic hegemony, beyond the area in which the centre can exercise direct political control. Such a system could work only under conditions of socio-political and economic asymmetry. The outpost system tended to disappear when historical development led to an equalisation of the asymmetries. Once that happened, more for-

mal – but also more expensive – systems of supremacy had to be introduced.

In order to understand the expansion process better, a working model originating from Timothy Earle and developed by Edward M. Schortman and Patricia A. Urban in their Mesoamerican field of study (Schortman/Urban 1994), has been applied. While keeping a basic holistic comprehension of the process, they have, for analytical reasons, studied the economic, ideological and political dimensions of expansion separately. There is no reason for assuming that these three dimensions always coincide. Political and economic underdevelopment, *sensu* Wallerstein, only occurs when the centre succeeds in monopolising three specific spheres in relation to the periphery: the centralising of exports from the periphery and the distribution of imports within it, technologies of production and transport, and a military threat which is effective over large areas.

The landscape of power

In putting all the available data together it becomes evident that Hälsingland was beyond any form of control by the *svear* during the late Iron Age. At the end of the Migration period in the late 6th century a marked change in settlement patterns and a sharp decline in societal complexity is discernible in the archaeological record. This can be described as a societal collapse, during which society disintegrated to a lower level of complexity. An explanation, based on Tainter's comparative studies of collapsing societies (Tainter 1988), can be put forth suggesting that the collapse was caused by declining marginal return in the élite's communication of power. Thus the collapse had internal causes.

Very little is known about Hälsingland during the German Iron Age and the early Viking Age (ca. AD 550/600–900), but after the societal restart endogenous power structures must have been gradually rebuilt, founded on riches from iron production and fur trade. A very tentative landscape of power can be sketched, using hillforts (which, in fact, all are still undated), silver hoards, status graves, onomastic indications and, for a later period, rune stones. The oldest known runic inscription is the inscribed iron ring from Forsa, which probably

Fig. 1: Map of the road Norrstigen (the Northern Path) and its relation to the six medieval royal manors of Norrland (from Friberg 1951).

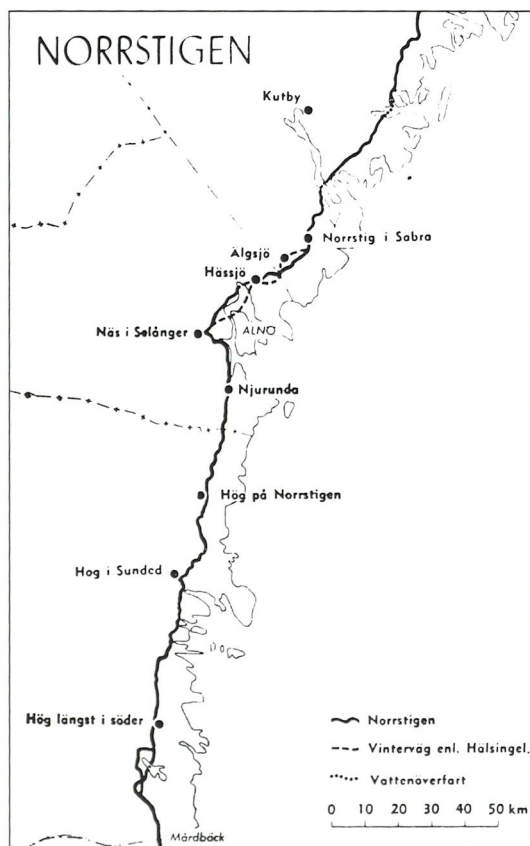




Fig. 2: Section of the rampart construction of the small short-lived fort at Vågbro, Norralla parish (photo by the author).

dates from the 9th century (Liestøl 1979). The inscription is the oldest known judicial text from northern Europe, stating that endogenous judicial assemblies existed that early.

The rune stones from Hälsingland all date from the 11th century. Out of 19 stones and fragments in all, five of them display a manifest regional identity through the special staveless runes used. A certain ideological influence is discerned during the 11th century in the Upplandic iconography of the rune stones and their Christian symbolism, but no stones tell of trips abroad or of political figures from outside the province. The overall impression is therefore one of a self-contained society with no real exogenous power discernible (Åhlen 1995; Sandqvist 1999).

Icelandic sagas, certainly not fully reliable sources, give a picture of unstable and competing overlordships in northern Scandinavia. It is probable that elite groups in Lake Mälaren valley and in Norway have been able to collect tribute intermittently, but it is impossible to deduce that this had any de facto effects at the local, everyday level. In the earliest written sources mentioning Hälsingland, all of them foreign, the area appears to be seen as an entity, which is not hierarchically inferior to any other.

During the 12th century the majority of the population was christened and at the end of the century the archbishop of Uppsala received tribute when he visited Hälsingland. The 13th century saw the parishes forming (Brink 1990), but the entire century seems to have been characterised by the recurrent frustrations of both Church and crown in enforcing tithe and tax collection.

The middle or second half of the century is the probable period when the crown established its first permanent outposts, *sensu* Algaze in the territory, in the form of royal manors (see fig. 1 and 4). They must be seen as turnover places during the first decades, without any territorial control.

During the second decade of the 14th century the Church managed to gain relative control in the sense that ecclesiastical rent was more effectively extracted. Even then, the collection of secular tribute was still undertaken within an indirect system with a royal officer, the *kungsåre*, who travelled through the lands of the north in winter. This official is mentioned also in the Hälsinge law, which was codified between 1320 and 1340, most probably in the earlier part of the period. It seems to be during this period, the minority reign of King Magnus

Eriksson (1319–1331), that the lords of the regency decided to incorporate Hälsingland fully into the kingdom. This is evident from the codification of the law, and from extensive colonisation projects in the far north. The *kungsåre* functioned into the 1330s, and in 1347 a bailiff is mentioned for the first time. At that point the indirect rule of the northern lands had ended.

The royal manors gradually developed into administrative centres. The first permanent military presence probably came with the establishment of the small and short-lived fort at Vågbro (fig. 2). A supply organisation was also created, by establishing fishing-, hunting-, and cattle raising stations in the archipelago.

The process was nearing completion in the middle of the 14th century, but shortly after came the civil war years – following the Mecklenburgian invasion in 1363 – with unstable conditions. Relative control of the province was not established until after 1398, when the vitalian privateer fleet was defeated. The establishment of the timber castle Faxeholm as an administrative seat for Hälsingland marks the zenith in a development that had started centuries earlier, but which did not gain momentum until in the third and fourth decades

of the 14th century. Why the crown intensified its efforts during that period is still open to debate, but it is suggested here that the main underlying factor was the growing need for supplying the towns of the Lake Mälaren valley, where urbanisation had been very swift and intense during the 13th century. The triggering factor, however, should be looked for in the development of international relations after the 1323 Nöteborg treaty with Novgorod. Norrbotten was a frontier society and to be able to control a frontier, the central élites had to control the intermediate areas as well.

The power content of the state concept

It is useless to discuss issues like state formation or state expansion without discussing the *de facto* power content in the state concept. A survey of some core elements of state power (taxation, border formation, judicial systems and attempts at trade monopolisation) has therefore been made and compared to the data provided by archaeology and event history.

The difficulties of imposing taxation is evident from the written record and there are indications of a lingering primitive tribute system, replaced by proper taxation only in the 14th century.

The oldest known attempt by the central élites in Sweden and Norway to divide the earlier disputed rights to claim tribute in the north, by establishing a borderline between the kingdoms, is a set of locally agreed border treaties from the 13th century, compiled into a codex in the early 14th century. This borderline was touching on Hälsingland's north-west part and was subject to considerable dynamism over time. Disputes over the border were recurrent well into the 15th century.

Before the written law, there must have been a set of *consuetudines*. The existence of endogenous judicial organs as early as in the 9th century is evident from the inscription of the Forsa ring. The Hälsingland law is considered as codified during the regency. If there was an earlier version of the codex than the one we know, it could not have been older than 1297, because the law is to a large extent copied on the Uppland law from that year. *Legifiers*, chief judges, are mentioned already in 1312 and 1314.



Fig. 3: The ruin of the Vålsta tower, Rogsta parish (photo by the author).

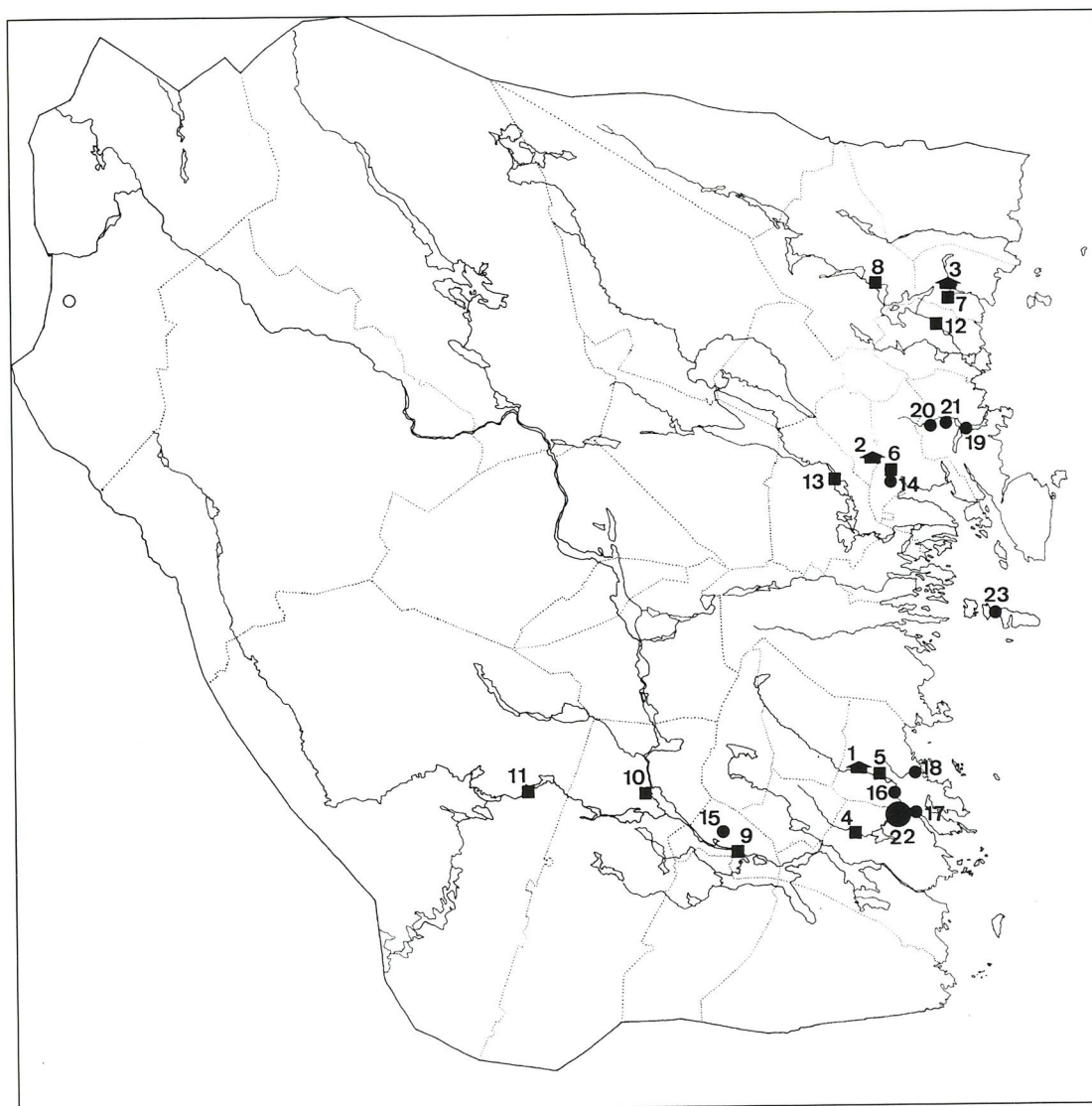


Fig. 4: The landscape of power and resistance in Hälsingland. In the map are marked a number of sites with clear connections to power structures in one form or another. The map mirrors to some extent a set of research lacunae, but in general terms the picture of a circumscribed landscape of power emerges, "islands in a sea of non-power". 1 Royal manor in Norrala; 2 Royal manor in Hög; 3 Royal manor in Jättendal; 4 Söderala church; 5 Norrala church; 6 Hälsingtuna church; 7 Jättendals church; 8 Bergsjö church; 9 Segers-ta church; 10 Bollnäs church; 11 Alfta church; 12 Harmånger church; 13 Forsa church; 14 Tunaborg hill-fort; 15 Djupa hillfort; 16 Medieval fort at Vågbro; 17 Possible barrage at Stugsund; 18 Barrage at Stäckfjär-den; 19 Barrage at Stegsundet; 20 Vålsta tower; 21 Fröland tower; 22 Faxeholm timber castle; 23 Drakön possible royal supply station (map by the author).

An attempt at monopolising trade, in the sense that Schortman and Urban have presented as a prerequisite for turning a periphery into a dependency, took place in the mid 14th century, when the crown declared the Bothnian staple. It declared that all merchants around the Gulf of Bothnia, except the citizens of Åbo (Turku) were compelled to sail to Stockholm with their goods and sell them there. This had very limited effect on the traders from the western coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, and in 1446 King Kristoffer felt constrained to ex-

empt the *Hälsingar* from the staple (cf. Friberg 1983). The result of this examination is that these data also fit well into the general picture.

The power in the landscape

Medieval power in its materialised form can still be seen in the landscape of Hälsingland. In Rogsta parish, situated about 2 kilometres from each other, were two masonry towers at Vålsta (fig. 3) and Fröland, which lack parallels

within Hälsingland. They probably stem from the 13th century, and are interpreted as the last exponents of an endogenous élite structure in the area.

The royal manors, in Norrala, Hög and Jätten-dal parishes, just like their equivalents to the north in Selånger, Säbrå and Bjärträ (fig. 1), are not known archaeologically, even if the sites are well known. They are placed in sites with large grave mounds from the Roman Iron Age and Migration period, but the connection is indirect. The old power centres were chosen as judicial assembly places during the Late Iron Age-Early Medieval period, and when the crown later established its first outposts in this territory, it chose these places because of the assemblies, for control as well as making use of the authority of the past *sensu* Bradley (1993). The assumption of a late phase of establishment is corroborated by datings from adjacent fortificatory and harbour structures in three of the six royal manors of the north. In Bjärträ in Ångermanland and in Selånger in Medelpad the material record starts after the middle of the 13th century, with emphasis in the 14th century. In the small Vågbro fort in Norrala (fig. 2) the datings fall entirely within the 14th century, and the period of use is seemingly very short.

Of the 32 medieval parish churches of Hälsingland, ten of them which have towers in some form are of interest in a discussion about the landscape of power (fig. 4). The first documented rural deaneries are Bollnäs and Forsa, but Söderala stands out as a likely first rural deanery in the south judging from the architecture of the church itself, and Hälsingtuna might have filled the function in the north before Forsa. At present nothing indicates that Hälsingland had any masonry churches before 1200 AD (Bonnier 1995). The earliest one is possibly Söderala, which must have been built around or just after that year.

The timber castle Faxeholm was erected on a small island in an inlet from the Gulf of Bothnia leading to the central areas of Söderala and Norrala parishes (fig. 4). It was built by the vitalians, privateers fighting for Mecklenburg 1391–1395 and later continuing on their own and as allies to the descendants of the late marshal of the realm Bo Jonsson. These descendants, who disputed the inheritance with the crown, functioned for a few years as a sort of 'opposition party' based in Åbo (Turku).

Faxeholm was built in late 1395 or early 1396 and is mentioned again twice in 1398 when it was first besieged by the crown's troops and later given up to the representatives of the crown. After that it functioned as the administrative centre of Hälsingland until it was torched and destroyed during the Engelbrekt rebellion in 1434.

The area within the palisade was ca. 8000 square meters and the palisade itself was replaced once with a sturdier construction. Three phases can be discerned in the archaeological record of the castle hill summit. The earliest phase, from which a smithy and a storage-building with macrofossil remains have been documented, ended with a devastating fire.

The second phase, from which a kitchen building with a fine osteological material was recorded, ended with the Engelbrekt rebellion. It is evident from the archaeological record that the castle was destroyed in a battle. During this second phase an iron-working complex was built up in the southern, low-lying bailey area. A third phase of the castle has been dated numismatically to 1528, or just after, in which probably a temporary army camp was set up in the ruined castle site.

The landscape and the power

The explanatory outpost model of Algaze made much sense in this context, and the working model of Schortman and Urban helped to see the state-expansion process in its complexity, but also as a holistic concept. All available data give a notion of insufficient crown control of the landscape. This is of course self-evident for most situations of the medieval period, with the given technological level, but the forested landscape of Hälsingland, sparsely populated and with considerable distances, enhances this insufficiency. It is not so simple as a contrast between controlled and uncontrolled areas. A landscape of resistance, or a landscape of indifference, can be mental as well as spatial. Even the relatively strong fort of Faxeholm may be seen as an exponent of insufficient control, given the conceptual framework of Giddens.

Issues like the negation of power, the temporality of the landscape and the authority that the past lends are difficult to study archaeolo-

gically, but must be on the agenda henceforth. The development in areas like Hälsingland can be more successfully studied with conceptual instruments like these, and the understanding

of the landscapes of power and resistance as dynamic processes can be turned into a deepened understanding of what actually happened in history.

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