

Deserted farms in outlying land in Mid Sweden

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Jämtland (S); agrarian crisis; deserted farm; expansion; outlying land

There are about 600–800 deserted farms in Jämtlands län, the provinces Härjedalen and Jämtland in Mid Sweden (fig. 1). Many of them were cleared around AD 1000 and abandoned about AD 1400. Thus, they generally reflect the European medieval expansion prior to the agrarian crisis coinciding with, possibly caused by, the Black Death, which may have caused the desertion. The farms, however, were not cleared in virgin forest, and they were not left to be overgrown by brushwood. Rather, the period of the farms was an episode, a parenthesis, in the long-term use of outlying land.

In Jämtlands län the agrarian expansion and crisis in addition coincided with political and economical change.

dom, and possibly at about the same time the Uppsala archiepiscopal seat (Brink 1996).

The process of political change was triggered by the desire of the élite to act together with and exchange goods with the élite in adjacent provinces within the emerging kingdoms. In that way the aristocratic families were able to maintain their Germanic life-style, which in the process was transformed into the medieval Catholic life-style. The *hov*-farms were transformed into the sites of the first churches, many of them later to become parish-churches (Holm 2001).

Thus, politics was the control and administration of external exchange of surplus production.

Political change AD 900–1200

The central part of Jämtland, around Lake Storsjön, in the 10th century was ruled by a number of élite families seated at *hov*-farms (fig. 1). The chieftains performed the pagan ritual, the *blot*, during feasts in their halls, where the female-male reproduction of the world and the ideology of the warriors were displayed.

During the 11th century the élite had to re-think its position in relation to the emergence of Christian kingdoms in the west, i. e. Norway, and south, i. e. Sweden. The élite accepted Christianity, which was manifested by the erection of a rune-stone around AD 1050–1080 and the oldest, archaeologically known, wooden churches, built around AD 1100–1120.

According to the Islandic sagas the Jämtlandic élite alternately paid taxes to the Norwegian and Swedish kings during the 11th century. During the 12th century, perhaps in the 1180s, the area turned a part of the Norwegian king-

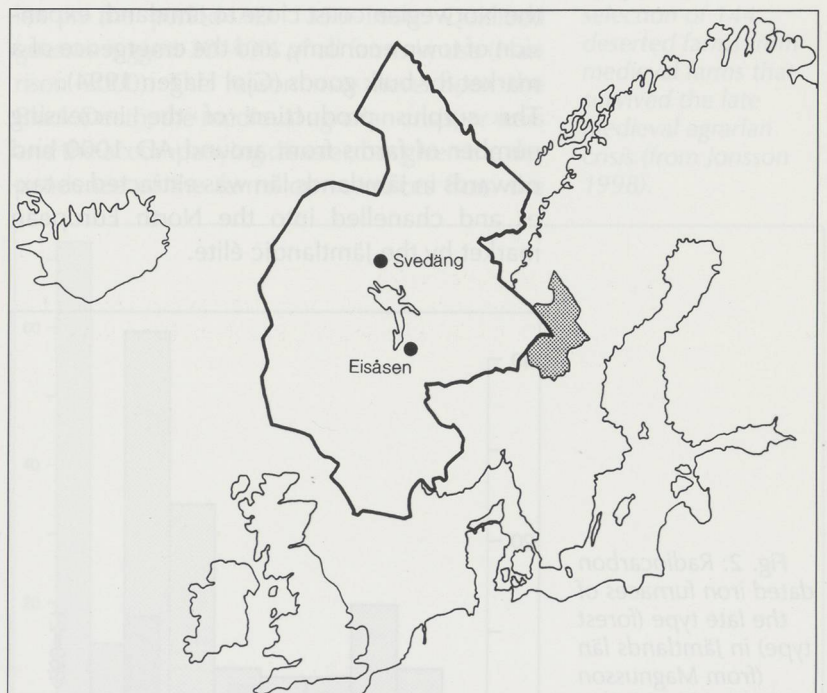


Fig. 1: Jämtlands län in Mid Sweden and the two deserted farms Eisåsen and Svedäng in relation to the central farming area around Lake Storsjön.

Surplus production and market economy

The economic basis of the Jämtlandic élite was its farms in the agriculturally favourable Lake Storsjön area and the exchange of products from the outlying areas (swedish: *utmark*) in the forest areas and in the foothill mountains. It is reasonable, as is indicated in the Icelandic sagas, that the peasants at the farms in the outlying areas were clients of the élite or in other ways dependent of the élite. The suggestion is that the élite administrated and got the gains from the surplus production in the outlying areas.

Archaeologically known is in the first place iron-smelting and elk-hunting. Around AD 1000 new kinds of iron-furnaces were introduced. In these new furnaces iron was produced with higher productivity than before. In addition the number of furnaces in use increased (fig. 2). All in all much more iron was produced. The number of pitfalls in use had its optimum around AD 1000–1200 (fig. 3; it is to be observed the datings refer to the top-soil below the bank surrounding the pits or the wood used in the construction of the box at the bottom of the pits).

Thus, the surplus production in the outlying areas increased and reached a maximum in the period following AD 1000. This was also a time of foundation of towns, e. g. Nidaros at the Norwegian coast close to Jämtland, expansion of town economy, and the emergence of a market for bulk goods (Gjøl Hagen 1994).

The surplus production of the increasing number of farms from around AD 1000 and onwards in Jämtlands län was extracted as taxes and channelled into the North European market by the Jämtlandic élite.

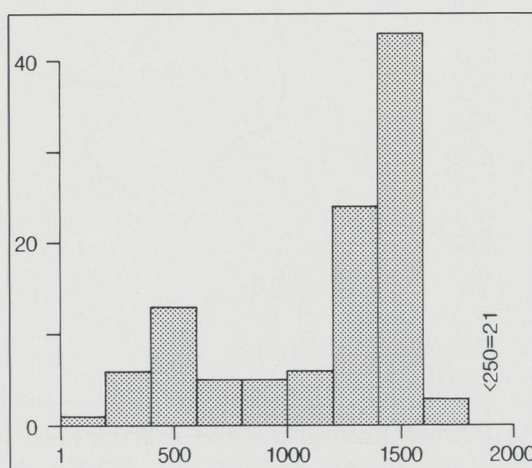


Fig. 2: Radiocarbon dated iron furnaces of the late type (forest type) in Jämtlands län (from Magnusson 1986 with additions by Camilla Olofsson 2002).

The new farms around AD 1000–1200

There are 22 radiocarbon datings of charcoal from clearance of arable land in Jämtlands län. That is charcoal collected under clearance cairns and lynchets downslope the cleared land. No less than 15 datings are from the period AD 1000–1200. Three datings are from the period AD 1200–1400, while the remaining datings are considerably older. The period of political change and expansion in the use of outlying land was also a period of expansion as concerns farming.

Dozens, possibly hundreds, of new farms were established in the centuries around AD 1100. The typical position in the landscape of these farms is not known. The excavated once certainly do not form a representative selection.

The deserted farms, which is not the same as the farms established in AD 1000–1200, on the other hand, are typically localised close to farms that were never deserted. Close to half of them had fences in common, and two thirds of them are situated less than 1.5 km away from a continuously settled farm (fig. 4).

It cannot be unambiguously stated that the new farms were cleared in marginal positions, in less favourable land away from Lake Storsjön. That is, however, the case with the only to reasonably well and in full excavated deserted farms, Eisåsen and Svedäng (fig. 1). Both were situated a few kilometres away from their nearest neighbour, surrounded by forest at 400–500 m above sea level.

The arable land of both farms was about 4 ha. At Eisåsen it was situated close to a small lake. The pollen diagram (Zetterström 1998) leaves no doubt: corn was sown and harvested at the farm. The datings of clearance charcoal span the period AD 200–1200. Thus, it is indicated that the medieval farm was established in outlying land already in use. The pollen diagram indicates the same. Clearance charcoal at Svedäng is dated to the period AD 1000–1100 (Gauffin 1981). Some of the land was cleared twice.

The establishing of the Eisåsen farm is possibly indicated by the earliest radiocarbon datings of humus from the manure and stubble in the arable land to around AD 1000–1100. The humus contains pollen grains of i.a. grass, barley, and nourishment-demanding weeds like goose-foot. The cleared land was used for hay-meadows, grazing, and manured arable land.

At both the excavated deserted farms the living-house consisted of two or three rooms in file. At each farm two rooms had a fireplace of its own. In fact it is difficult to tell whether the building-complexes are to be seen as one longhouse with two or three rooms, or as two houses lying close to one another. The interpretation is important: Did one farm correspond to several households or families? That discussion will not be continued here.

The refuse fauna from Eisåsen indicates a mixed economy: cattle, elk, sheep and pigs being the most common mammals in descending order. In addition fur animals like hare and beaver were hunted, likewise birds like capercaillie and geese. The most common fish species are perch and pike. At Svedäng there are considerably less numerous bones excavated. To the list of species at Eisåsen reindeer and bear can be added.

Eisåsen was situated close to a number of iron-production sites, while Svedäng was situated close to an impressive line of pitfalls. Both farms seem to have been well integrated in the exploitation of the resources of the outlying land. Possibly both yielded some kind of surplus-production to enter the market.

Change around AD 1350–1450

The two excavated rooms at Eisåsen are radiocarbon dated – bones have been used for all in all nine datings – to the periods AD 1150–1400 and AD 1250–1400, respectively. The beginning of the intervals is less well established than the end. The rooms may have been contemporarily built as parts of one and the same house, or perhaps they were not. The data suggest that the houses were settled not until after the establishing of the manured arable land. That is food for thought. There are no relevant radiocarbon datings from Svedäng, but the latest artifact is a sherd of a Siegburg jar. Both farms may have been deserted around AD 1400, that is, no refuse was deposited at the known houses after that date.

The date of the desertion of the farms corresponds to the time of the general European medieval agrarian crisis, whether it was caused by or merely accentuated by the Black Death. It is hard to tell if this date is typical of a main part of the deserted farms in Jämtlands län. The earliest historically documented deserted

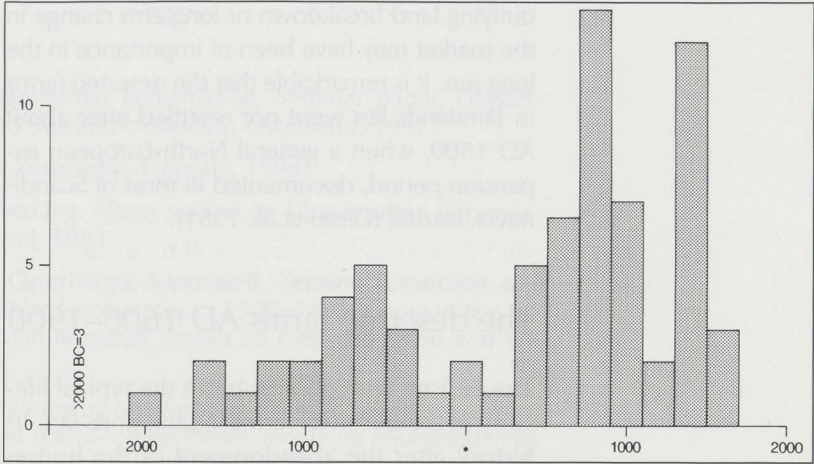


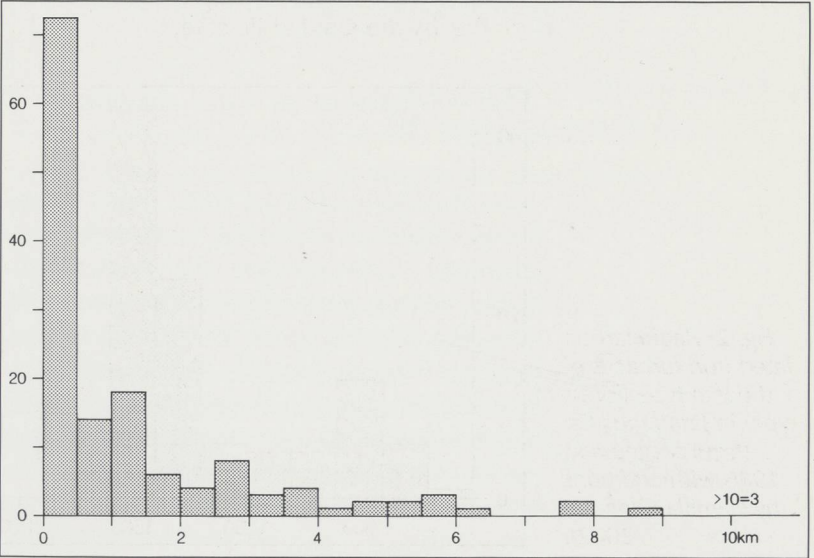
Fig. 3: Radiocarbon dated pitfalls in Jämtlands län (from Bengtsson 1997).

farm was mentioned in 1379. In an indepth case study of the sixteen deserted farms in Sunne parish (Nordqvist 1999) it could be documented that six farms were still inhabited after 1410, one of these six farms still after 1471 and another two still after 1549. Out of these six farms three were reported as deserted in 1568, and one inhabited still in 1566 was reported as deserted in 1700.

Some of the deserted farms obviously were abandoned during the agrarian crisis around AD 1350–1450. Others were abandoned during the period of wars in AD 1550–1650. For the main number of the farms the date of the desertion is simply not known.

Hundreds of farms were deserted in Jämtlands län in the period AD 1350–1650. Qualified guesses suggest 20–40% of all farms in use (Harrison 2000). The reason may have been the Black Death, the medieval agrarian crisis, or wars and the accompanying disaster, but given the dependence of the farms on resources from the

Fig. 4: The distance of a representative selection of 144 deserted farms from medieval farms that survived the late medieval agrarian crisis (from Jonsson 1998).



outlying land breakdown or longterm change in the market may have been of importance in the long run. It is remarkable that the deserted farms in Jämtlands län were not resettled after about AD 1500, when a general North-European expansion period, documented in most of Scandinavia, started (Gissel et al. 1981).

The deserted farms AD 1600–1900

The Eisåsen farm demonstrates the typical life-story of the deserted farms in Jämtlands län. Its history after the abandonment of the houses about AD 1400 is the same as that of hundreds of other Jämtlandic deserted farms.

It is worth repeating that the farm was established in land that had already been in use for perhaps close to a millennium in about AD 1000–1100. There are no indications that the hay-producing meadows, grazing areas, and arable land was not in continuous use also after AD 1400. It is, however, not until the 16th century that there are explicit data documenting that the peasants of the village Bingsta used the former farm as their outlying land for e. g. hay-production. In the mid 18th century the land was owned by three Bingsta peasants who used it for their shielings (swedish: *fäbod* or *säter*). In about 1850 the shielings were moved further away from the village, because the cows had found their way home to the village, which they preferred to the cowshed of the shielings – it is said by the present-day villagers. The area was overgrown by pine-forest. Corn-cropping ceased at that date or perhaps already at an earlier date. This event cannot be dated in the pollen dia-

gram, where it, however, is well seen, or inferred from the historical documents.

Thus, the land of the deserted farms turned into extensively used outlying land owned, or at least paid tax for, by the former neighbours of the deserted farms. This was economically profitable, and possibly the reason why the deserted farms were not resettled. The peasants of the farms and villages that had survived the agrarian crisis in the Late Middle Ages and decades of wars around AD 1600 had the motifs and means to prevent resettling. That is at least one idea worth discussing, together with its implications as concerns the relation between the peasants and the élite during the early medieval expansion period and after the agrarian crisis, respectively. The surplus produced by the peasants in the outlying land possibly was of less importance in the overall economy and in the market in the 17th century compared to the 12th century.

The concept “deserted farm”

As concerns the concept “deserted farm” it is notable that the farms were not established in virgin land, and that they were not totally deserted. The farm period was a short interval in a long time of use of the outlying-land resources in the area where some of the farms are situated. The main part of the deserted farms was once situated close to farms that were not deserted. The process of desertion in about AD 1350–1650 in Jämtlands län was more of a process of change than a process of desertion. The key-concepts are extensive and intensive land-use and the use of the resources of outlying land.

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