

# Medieval rural archaeology in Sweden: an introduction to the field and presentation of two recently excavated sites

By Eva Svensson,<sup>1</sup> Emma Bentz,<sup>2</sup> Katalin Schmidt Sabo<sup>3</sup> and Kenneth Svensson<sup>4</sup>

The discipline of medieval archaeology (c. AD 1050-1500) has a fairly long history in Sweden. Even so its rural branch developed relatively late in comparison to many other European countries, for instance Great Britain. In this article Emma Bentz gives an introduction to the history of medieval rural archaeology in Sweden and notes some current trends (see further Bentz 2008). The following sections by Katalin Schmidt Sabo and Kenneth Svensson discuss two recently excavated rural settlements situated in the southern and central parts of Sweden respectively.

## Medieval rural archaeology in Sweden yesterday and today: a brief introduction By Emma Bentz

The introductions of articles and textbooks concerning life in the medieval period often start by noting that during the Middle Ages 90% of the population lived in the countryside. Despite this oft-cited statistic, medieval peasants and their material remains have long been absent from archaeological research. Medieval archaeology, which had its roots in the era of romanticism, was traditionally more concerned with easily identifiable objects and the obvious remains of the social élite. This resulted in early excavations and investigations that focussed on castles, churches, monasteries and towns. This seems to be especially true for Sweden, where major excavations and research on medieval rural sites are rather a recent phenomenon compared to many other European countries.

Two main causes for the late establishment of this field of research can be distinguished. The first can be found in the ambiguous antiquarian status of medieval villages (Swedish *bytomter*), where sites had to be abandoned permanently in order to be protected as ancient monuments. Since the location of medieval villages often coincides with more recent settlements, they were considered partly settled, and therefore have not always been protected. Second, there are internal disciplinary conditions that have had a constraining influence on the establishment of medieval rural archaeology in Sweden. Intense urban redevelopment set the focus on the necessity of excavating medieval town centres and this was considered a more urgent task for medieval archaeologists from the 1960s onwards. For many years urban archaeology had priority and was the core of the subject. Other factors that acted to limit the study of rural sites included doubt about the prospects for recovering material remains and reconstructing the nature of peasant

life. The difficulties of excavating these remains were often emphasized (i.e. thin layers, fragmentary remains) and this led to concerns about their archaeological potential. An underlying notion that peasant life was unchanging over the centuries was also unhelpful: as a consequence, it was thought that everything 'knowable' about the medieval countryside could be deduced from ethnology and history.

In the course of the 1980s the situation summarized above slowly began to alter. The change was most clearly distinguishable in Scania and in the Lake Mälaren region, two of the most densely populated parts of Sweden, where land development was intensified. At the same time, the discipline of medieval archaeology began to pay more attention to this category of remains. By 1962, when regular teaching of medieval archaeology began at Lund University, the medieval countryside had been declared an important part of the study of the past, though in reality not much happened. Other tasks were considered more urgent, most notably the excavation of urban sites, so medieval villages remained in the shadow of the towns. When later a more continuous interest emerged, there were few domestic examples of early pioneering work that could serve as a source of inspiration. Instead, inspiration came from neighbouring Denmark as well as from related disciplines such as human geography. A Danish project (*Landsbyens opståen og udvikling på Fyn*) initiated in the mid-70s and devoted to the study of the origin and development of the stationary medieval village - replacing a pattern of 'migrating' villages - became very influential and is sometimes even referred to as a paradigm within the field of medieval rural archaeology in Sweden. This is perhaps especially true for the province of Scania, situated close to Denmark and with a well-established academic exchange. As students of medieval archaeology - then only taught at Lund University - took up positions in other parts of Sweden, the new questions were also applied to rural sites in other parts of the country.

Whilst there are some regional exceptions, today rural medieval archaeology can be considered an established field of research. Major excavations of urban sites have become rare and instead infrastructural projects outside the towns have led to a high number of large-scale archaeological investigations of medieval villages.

The question of the origin and further development of medieval villages remains central, but it is also possible to distinguish new tendencies. The first concerns the increasing attention paid to rural settlements situated in the more forested regions of Sweden. Partly caused by the pattern of rescue archaeology, villages on the fertile arable plains have long dominated our traditional view of medieval rural settlements, and have thus constituted a kind of 'norm', whereas forest settlements were less well-known. A second trend, spurred on by the many excavations in villages situated in close proximity to larger

<sup>1</sup> Department of Health and Environmental Sciences, Karlstad University, Sweden. Eva.Svensson@kau.se

<sup>2</sup> Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Abteilung Frühes Mittelalter, Mainz, Germany. bentz@rgzm.de

<sup>3</sup> Archaeological Excavations Dept, Swedish National Heritage Board, Sweden. katalin.schmidt.sabo@raa.se

<sup>4</sup> Arkeologikonsult. Kenneth.Svensson@arkeologikonsult.se

medieval towns concerns the relationships between town and village. Traditionally the villages were seen as constituting a rather passive hinterland to the urban centres. New studies tend to emphasise similarities between these categories of settlements, for instance giving attention to finds material and certain architectural features and functions. A last tendency that deserves mentioning is that increasing numbers of post-medieval rural settlements are now being investigated archaeologically.

### Enterprising peasants in medieval Skegrie

By Katalin Schmidt Sabo

In Scania, in southernmost Sweden, neighbouring medieval villages were located close to each other (Fig. 1). The towns were few in number and small, so the village was the most common form of settlement, and the economic base where the vast majority of the population lived. The villages on the plains were established according to a continental pattern in which farms were gathered in a village core (Schmidt Sabo 2005). In Skegrie, a village near the southern coastline, an archaeological excavation in 2007 which took place as part of an infrastructure project revealed the remains of a medieval farm (Schmidt Sabo 2008).

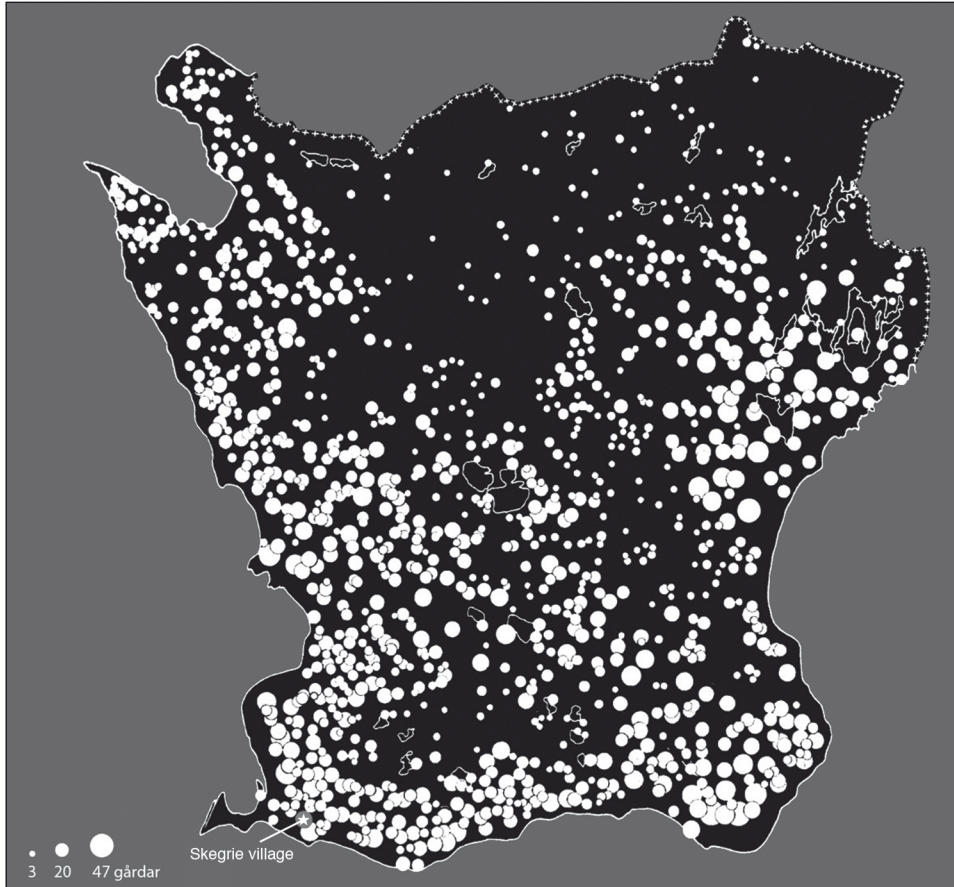
There are no maps to indicate how Skegrie village may have looked like during the Middle Ages. But from the 16th century we have written sources that tell us that the village by that time had no less than 23 farms of which 19 belonged to the Danish crown, two were owned by the

Church and two belonged to the nobility. Freeholders were absent.

Excavations at farmstead No. 12 showed that the area contained archaeological remains of several houses, kilns, fireplaces, wells, and pits. Buildings occurred from about 1100 up to the 17th century. It was not possible identify with certainty a building that had been a dwelling, but such a house was probably situated north of the excavation area. However, it did prove possible to excavate other types of farm buildings.

The most interesting building was dated to the first half of the 14th century and contained a smoke-house. The smoke-house, approximately 4m x 4m in size, was built in the western part of the building. It had an open fireplace in one corner (Fig. 2). We assume that the food preparation for the villagers was an important role of the smoke-house, since a dozen coins were found in several of the dark and fatty floor layers. We have interpreted the coins as offerings to ensure a successful processing of the food. A series of building offerings were also discovered under its walls of the smoke-house, consisting of everyday objects including whetstones and spindle whorls, mixed with items that may have had a magical meaning such as a prehistoric flint scraper and a fossil (Falk 2008).

It is believed that the villagers mostly used the smoke-house to process fish, as many herring and cod bones were found amongst the floor layers dense with fat, bark, charcoal, and soot. This assumption was strengthened when some tiny tax stamps were also found close to the



*Figure 1 Map of Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden, showing the high density of villages in the 17th century (after Dahl 1942). Most of these villages were established already in the 10th or 11th century when Scania belonged to the Danish Kingdom. Star marks Skegrie village. 'Gårdar' means the number of farmsteads. Illustration: Staffan Hyll.*



house (Fig. 3). These apparently insignificant plates of lead were issued by the king's bailiff in the nearby coastal towns Skanör and Falsterbo, as proof of tax paid for activities such as fishing from bridges or conducting any business during the famous medieval fish market known as *Skånemarknaden*.

The eastern part of the house contained an oven and paved stone surfaces. From the floor extracted grains, seeds and straw from grass plants were extracted. The finds included iron knives, whetstones and fragments of pottery vessels. This part of the house had been used as a scullery to prepare all sorts of food and for brewing beverages. Among other things, it was observed that several grains had small sprouts, i.e. they had started to germinate in the manner required for malt brewing.

In the second half of the 14th century the villagers raised a new building on the site. This house was also provided with offerings, such as animal jaws, bits of old grindstones and knives that were hidden in the house

foundations. In the main room, a large oven which formerly had a clay dome was identified. The oven had been used for drying flax and/or for bread baking on a large scale.

Around 1400 the building burned down, though the cause of the fire remains uncertain. Many objects were identified in the burnt layers. One unusual find was a seal stamp, an object usually carried on a chain around the neck or hanging from the belt for security. The Skegrie seal bears an inscription testifying that it once belonged to an ARNERI HAMINGUS, a tradesman who was probably working in Lund at the time. He may have traded with the Skegrie farmers, or perhaps even lived in the village.

Although Skegrie was established on Scania's best arable land, the peasants of the village seem to have been engaged in more than just farming activities. Coins and various kinds of imports show that they managed to have lively contacts with the surrounding towns. The closest town was Trelleborg, which was established during the



*Figure 2 The site in Skegrie showing the smoke-house under excavation. In the left side of the photo is the open fireplace, the source for the smoke. Note the accumulated dark floor layers. Photo: Katalin Schmidt Sabo.*



*Figure 3 These small plates of lead were found near the medieval smoke-house. They were issued by the king's bailiff in Skanör or Falsterbo as proof of tax paid. The largest measures 12mm x12mm. Photo: Bengt Almgren.*

12th century, and lay only 3km from the village. Nearby Skanör and Falsterbo were the centres of the *Skånemarknaden* mentioned earlier with its large-scale herring fishery and trading. The market attracted thousands of fishermen as well as foreign and domestic traders annually. Falsterbo also acted as a sort of farmers' market, where farm produce and goods from the local villages in the region could be exchanged for all sorts of products from the northern European Hanseatic towns (Ersgård 1988).

Although the 14th century was a turbulent period in medieval Denmark, due to climate changes, failure of the crops, civil war, and the collapse of the Danish kingdom, the villagers in Skegrie seem to have managed to secure their livelihoods. Their enterprising spirit, trade contacts and local businesses could have served as a cushion in difficult times.

### Herresta – a farmstead in social decline?

By Kenneth Svensson

Over the past five years several excavations of medieval settlements have been carried out in the Mälardalen area, central Sweden. Most of them are still under study, but they are all in progress and will be published by the excavators in a near future.

One of these excavations took place 16km north-west of Stockholm at a site called Herresta in Järfälla parish, Uppland (Lindblom *et al.* 2008). Herresta is known in written records from the 1490s as *Horssestom* and the place-name clearly derives from the 'Old Swedish' *hors*-meaning 'horse' and *-sta* meaning 'place' or 'damp meadow'. Most of the place names ending with the suffix *-sta* dates from the 5th–11th centuries AD. So the site was probably referred to as 'the farm with the horses by the damp meadow' during its early history. An interesting fact is that a large amount of horse equipment was found on the site i.e. horseshoes, shedding blades and bites.

On cadastral maps from the 17th century pasture land or meadows are still visible a couple of hundred meters south-east of the farm, though by then they are described as dry rather than damp.

Horses and riding gear are quite often interpreted as symbols of rank in early medieval Scandinavian society. It would not be provocative to interpret the settlement as a farm owned by a leading member of the local society. Other indicators of rank are a ringed pin and Borre-type brooch that were found close to the dwelling house (Fig. 4). The owner of the farm was probably not a top-rank chieftain but rather somebody that held his position in lease as a representative of a magnate. A clear sign for this is that the farm was not inherited during the Middle Ages or in Early Modern times, but held by different tenants. It is possible that what we are witnessing at Herresta is a farmstead in social decline, from being a place named for all its horses in the Late Iron Age to a minor farm in a subordinate position with different households in tenantry through the Middle Ages.

So what did the farm look like in the Viking Age and the Early Medieval period? It was concluded that from its very beginning the settlement was organized into two different zones (Fig. 5). The first zone contained a dwelling house, a kitchen and several store houses for food, i.e. this was a domestic zone.

The dwelling house (11a) had a hearth in a central position. Along the northern (and maybe also southern) wall there was a bench and at the western gable the floor was covered with stone slabs made of reused quernstones. The quernstones were originally imported and were not produced in the local area. The walls were constructed with posts and planking and the roof covered with reeds; the site has provided the first botanical evidence for a reed roof on a Viking Age building. In the kitchen house (13) the remains of an oven were found and outside there was an occupation layer with domestic debris containing food remains and pottery.

The second zone included the byre, the stable and the barn, i.e. this could be described as the farm's economic zone. This means that the traditional idea of a farm - based on the three aisled longhouse where the different activities and functions of the farm were kept under one roof - was abandoned in the Viking Age. The farmers separated themselves from the animals, and we find new types of buildings where every house has its own specific function. This new layout of a farmstead is the one we later meet in the Medieval provincial laws.

The layout of the farm could also be described in topographical terms. The domestic area is located on the upper parts of the hillslope and the dwelling house overlooks not only the rest of the farm but also the neighbouring farmsteads. On a lower topographical level were the area of economic importance, i.e. the byre and the barn.

At Herresta a third zone was also localized, situated away from the dwelling house and topographically below zone 2 with its animals. Here, at the bottom of the slope, a structure (12) that appears to have been another domestic building (Fig. 6). It had a fireplace in the corner and an occupation layer containing food remains, pottery and artefacts. This building has now been interpreted as a serf's dwelling. The interpretation is based on the fact that the structure is located so far away from the rest of the domestic activities. If this explanation can be proved then it would be the first time that such a building has been found on a farm in Sweden. It is interesting that while zones 1 and 2 seem to have been structurally stable over time until the farm was abandoned 1681, zone 3 ceases to be used quite early, around 1200 AD. Serfdom in Sweden gradually became obsolete from the beginning of the 13th century so it is possible that the disappearance of zone 3 resulted from the development of new social structures.

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Figure 4 To the left a part of a ringed pin and to the right the remains of a Borre-type brooch. Scale 2:1. Photo: Toralf Fors, Arkeologikonsult.

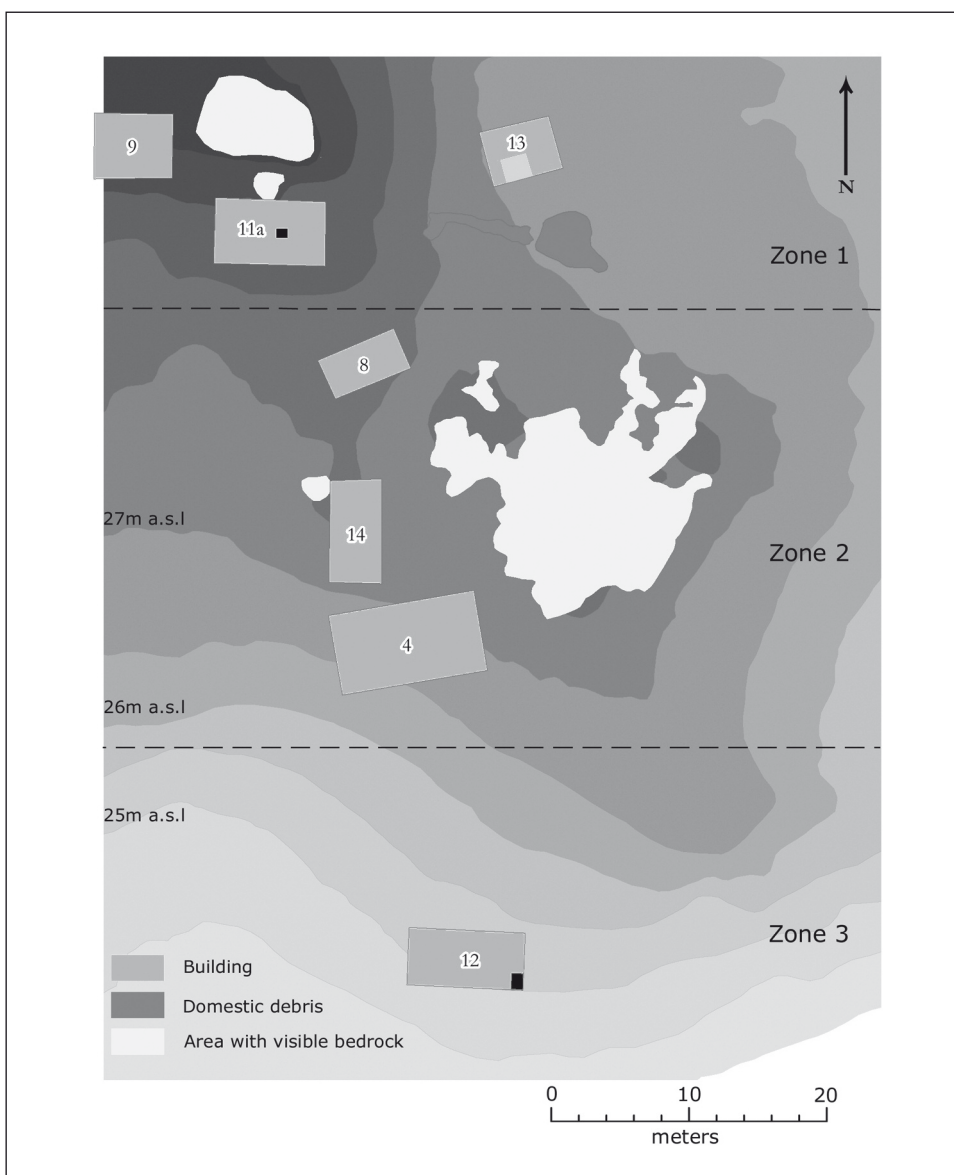


Figure 5 Site plan over Herresta illustrating the farm's layout around 1000 AD. Illustration: Kenneth Svensson, Arkeologikonsult.



Figure 6 The thrall's dwelling during excavation. Photo: Kenneth Svensson. Arkeologikonsult.

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