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IN HONOUR OF MÄRTA STRÖMBERG

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Medieval Fishing Settlement in Southern Scandinavia - an Archaeological Perspective

Lars Ersgård

Abstract

Research into medieval fishing in southern Scandinavia has hitherto been dominated by the mercantile perspective. This paper examines medieval fishing primarily from a social and cultural angle. Archaeological source material is used, offering the possibility of shedding light on the subject over a long period. There is a survey of the development of fishing sites in southern Scandinavia from the end of the Late Iron Age to the start of the 16th century. Various geographical regions are compared with each other, and different types of fishing sites are defined. A theoretical point of departure is that the development of medieval fishing took place in special social and cultural conditions. In the paper I try to characterize this social and cultural context in different parts of southern Scandinavia.

The fishing that was pursued along the coasts of southern Scandinavia in the Middle Ages is best known because of its great mercantile importance. Conserved herring from southern Scandinavia - highly nutritious food which could be preserved in large quantities by salting - became one of the most important and sought-after trading commodities in northern Europe. Fishing and the trade in fish came to be associated to a great degree with an urban economy, and these activities led to the development of an advanced and differentiated organization at a number of places along the coasts of southern Scandinavia. Research into medieval fishing has hitherto been dominated by this mercantile view (e.g. Lundberg 1905; Bunte 1977; Blomkvist 1982). Otherwise the phenomenon has been dealt with from more limited points of view, studied for its organization, technology, or ecology.

Less attention has been devoted to the people who actually did the fishing. It has long been known, however, that medieval fishing was largely a seasonal activity, which never developed into a professional occupation. We know from written sources that both farmers and townspeople took part in the fishing. The same sources also tell us something of the fees that were demanded of these people at the fishing places, about the regulations they had to follow, and also a little about equipment and fishing methods. All this evidence, however, is from late in the Middle Ages.

Research into medieval fishing has always had a more or less outspoken element of natural determinism: where fish were plentiful, people fished; where people did not fish, there were no fish. In this uncomplicated ecological perspective it is not hard to explain why people in the Middle Ages fished in certain coastal areas but not in others. There is reason to believe, however, that the whole matter was not as simple as this. We can take inspiration here from ethnological findings, especially the illuminating example of Iceland. As Kirsten Hastrup (1983) has shown, the population of Iceland from the Middle Ages right up to the nineteenth century displayed a vigorous resistance to the development of organized fishing. Despite periods with poor harvests and famine, people did not exploit the rich resources of the sea much more than usual. The reason for this was that fishing was never integrated in the social organization. It was viewed as hunting, and culturally defined as something outside the social system. This system was instead based on agriculture, the livelihood through which it could be reproduced.

This example shows clearly that ecology cannot be defined as an independent "objec-

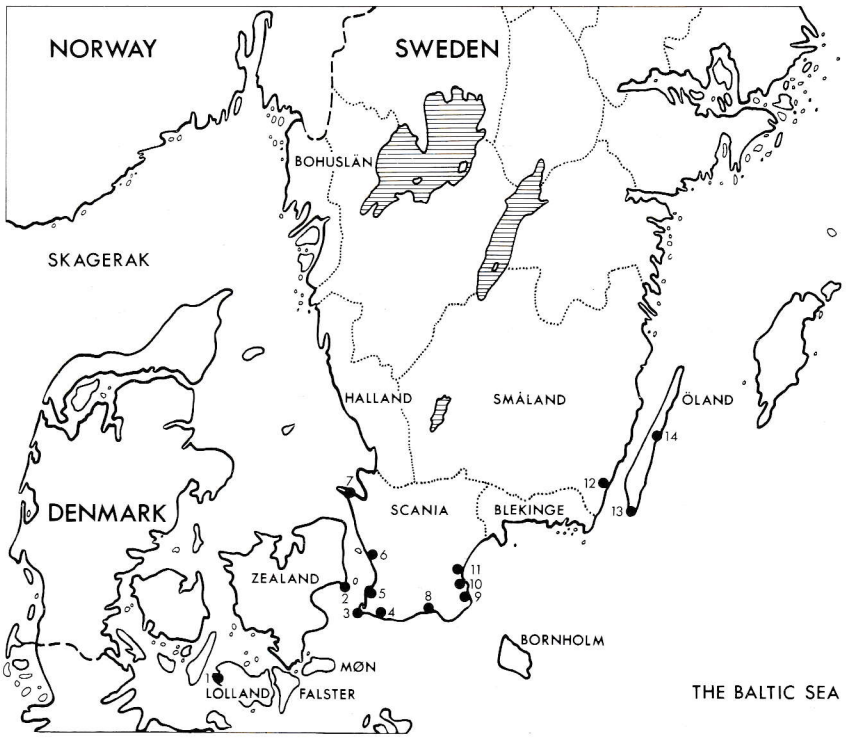

Fig. 1. Southern Scandinavia, with the places and regions that are mentioned in the text.
1. Albuen, 2. Dragør, 3. Skanör and Falsterbo, 4. Trelleborg, 5. Malmö, 6. Landskrona, 7. Arild, 8. Ystad, 9. Simrishamn, 10. Kivik, 11. Vitemölla, 12. Kalmar, 13. Kyrkhamn, 14. Sikavarp.

tive" variable. On the contrary, it has been possible to define natural resources in different ways in different historical contexts. This approach therefore justifies the study of medieval fishing, not as an isolated economic pursuit, but as an activity that was socially and culturally integrated in the society around it.

In this paper I shall consider medieval fishing in southern Scandinavia from an archaeological angle, via a study of the remains of settlement in medieval fishing sites (Fig. 1). Up to now, archaeology has been used only sporadically to shed light on the subject, but the fact is that archaeological evidence is better able than the extant written sources to give us a view of medieval fishing over a long period. There is no room here to give more than a brief summary, with no claim to completeness - not every fishing site can be mentioned. I want mainly to examine some important tendencies in the development of this type of settlement. Also, as I have said above, my intention is not to give the traditional mercantile view of medieval fishing, but instead to try to discuss the social and cultural aspects of the phenomenon.

The Early Middle Ages

As an introduction to a survey of medieval fishing sites, there is reason to say something about coastal settlement in the preceding phase, the Late Iron Age.

Osteological indications in habitation site material from the coasts are often taken as evidence that fishing was carried on. From the Late Iron Age, for example, we have several coastal sites in Scania with settlement in sunken-floor huts, where the material includes fish

bones. This often displays a great wealth of variation, suggesting a differentiated economy with agrarian elements - mostly animal husbandry but also cereal cultivation - and other pursuits like metalwork, weaving, and comb-making (Strömberg 1978; 1980). We may assume that fishing was part of the livelihood of these coastal communities, but nothing more. We have no real evidence of any specialization in fishing. On the other hand, the Late Iron Age settlement gives a general impression of having been in contact with the sea and maritime communications. Evidence for this is of course the topographical location, as well as finds of boat rivets and imports from distant places - steatite pots, glass, beads, and metals.

As regards the chronology, it appears as if this coastal settlement, according to datings from a representative habitation site in the Tankbåten district just west of Ystad, covered the time from the Migration Period (6th century AD) to the start of the 11th century (Strömberg 1978: 82 ff.). We can thus observe that at the start of the medieval phase which I intend to concentrate on here, there appears to have been a change in settlement. The permanent sites with sunken-floor huts disappear, replaced by settlement of a completely different character.

At Skanör on the Falsterbo peninsula in the south-west corner of Scania, the oldest settlement is represented by thin occupation layers, characterized by their limited extent, their lack of true structures apart from hearths, and their scarcity of finds. The latter consist chiefly of odd potsherds and iron objects. These patches of occupation layers, which are rather modest from the archaeological point of view, have been dated to the 11th and 12th centuries on the basis of the pottery (Selling type AII) and C14 analysis (Ersgård 1988: 37 ff.).

The character of the remains, indicating several small settlement areas, and the general topographical context on the sandbanks along the western side of the unfertile Falsterbo peninsula, makes it difficult to suggest any other function for this settlement than small camp sites for fishermen. The absence of house structures and the small number of finds indicates that it is not a question of permanent activity but rather periodical, short-term use. This settlement preceded the large markets that were held in Skanör later in the Middle Ages. There is no sign at all of any mercantile activity in this early settlement.

The finds at Skanör have parallels elsewhere in the region. On the east coast of Scania, between the present-day fishing villages of Kivik and Vitemölla, remains of habitation sites have been found which are comparable in dating and function to the earliest settlement in Skanör (Magnusson (Strömberg) 1948).

We face a more complex task when we try to describe the broader social and topographical pattern of which these early medieval settlements were part. In this respect the finds offer no other indications than that the categories of artefact which are found are the same as those from contemporary inland sites. As Märta Strömberg has pointed out, however, there is a significant difference between the coast and the inland as regards the quantity of finds and their general composition (Magnusson (Strömberg) 1948: 189 f.). The permanent inland habitation sites have a much larger amount of finds and a greater variety of find types. We may thus assume that it was the population in the region who used the coast in the Early Middle Ages for seasonal fishing, living there in temporary camp sites for brief periods.

The great colonization of the coasts took place in the 12th and 13th centuries, contemporary with one of the most dynamic phases in medieval urbanization. What now emerged was the coastal town with mercantile functions. Fishing was an important element in this. The first details in written sources about herring fishing on a large scale in the Öresund area date from the latter part of the 12th century. And there is no doubt that fishing now acquired importance in international trade.

Archaeologists who have studied the fishermen's activities and settlement in this phase have chiefly directed their interest towards a special type of structure - the clay-lined pit,

generally a shallow, round-to-oval pit lined with a thin layer of clay and with no other constructional elements. These pits are found, often in large quantities, in many of the coastal sites that emerged in southern Scandinavia in the 12th and 13th centuries, from Zealand in the west to Öland in the east (Ersgård 1988: 153 ff.). The discussion of these pits, which is now fairly extensive, is dominated by rational explanations in technical and economic terms. Scholars have sought to associate them with various stages in the fish-handling process - gutting fish, extracting fish oil, and so on (Stenholm 1981). I have previously criticized explanations of this kind. One of the main points of my criticism is that, if one looks for some purely economic rationale behind the clay-lined pits, in their general context they paradoxically become extremely irrational (Ersgård 1988: 41 ff.). In my view, we must look for quite different explanations for these remarkable structures. We may therefore reject all far-fetched speculations based on finds of fish bones in some pits; these have often been allowed to play a decisive role in previous discussions, but the occurrence of fish bones is far from being a general phenomenon. Instead, we should concentrate on what really is characteristic of these structures in their archaeological context, namely, that they uniformly dominate the places where they occur. Skanör is an illustrative example. During the time when clay-lined pits were dug there - the later 12th century and the 13th century, this site is known from the written sources as a market place, visited by people from various geographical and cultural regions of northern Europe who wished to trade and fish there. There is thus a contrast between the multifarious place described in the written sources and the monotonous site uncovered by excavation - the entire market area is covered with the same kind of structure, the highly uniform clay-lined pits.

Following this line of thought, I have argued that the pits should be seen as the sites of "booths" used by the people taking part in the market, as well as physical manifestations of a more symbolic and social kind. It was a question of the relation between the market visitor and the person who, by virtue of his princely status, was able to guarantee the safety of the former while the market was in progress. In my interpretation, then, the clay-lined pit would have symbolized a social affiliation with the place where it was dug, an affiliation which was necessary for all those who visited the market, whether fishermen or merchants. I shall not go into this discussion in greater depth here, but merely underline one consequence of this interpretation which is important for the problem being considered in this paper. We can clearly see, for example by finds of fish bones, that fishing was pursued in the coastal settlements of the 12th and 13th centuries. On the other hand, it is scarcely possible for us to distinguish fishing as a separate activity or the fishermen as a distinct group in this settlement.

The Late Middle Ages

When the settlement represented by the clay-lined pits ceased, this appears to have been roughly simultaneously at all the places where it has been discovered, around 1300. What does this change mean? Does it give us new possibilities to see clearer signs of fishing in the coastal settlement? To answer these questions I shall again take my examples from Skanör.

Just west of the true urban settlement of Skanör is the long, narrow sandbank called Hovbacken, once completely surrounded by water, now only slightly visible in the beach meadows. At this spot, which is mentioned in documents from the 14th and 15th centuries, lay the late medieval fishing site of Skanör (Ersgård 1988: 95 ff.). Numerous traces of this settlement are still visible in the surface of the land in the form of round-oval pits (Fig. 2). Excavations conducted in this area since 1986 have made it possible to ascertain that the medieval settlement was established here in the first half of the 14th century at the earliest. The archaeological traces of this settlement are not very distinct. The evidence consists of struc-

Fig. 2. Aerial photograph of the remains of the late medieval fishing hamlet at Hovbacken in Skanör. Esse Ericssons` archives for aerial photo. Institutet för Kulturforskning.

tures which at best are shallow pits of uncertain extent, along with post-holes and hearths which give a vague idea of the means of construction. In contrast, the finds, especially categories like pottery and coins, prove to be very rich.

No clay-lined pits have been found in the area, and there is reason to assume that the earliest 14th-century settlement represents the phase immediately after the disappearance of the clay-lined pits in Skanör. It is probably the emergence of the late medieval fishing site which we can see in this first establishment of settlement on the sandbank. The 14th century was generally a time of radical restructuring of settlement in Skanör, which meant that the primary activities - trade and fishing - were concentrated in special areas with a clear spatial demarcation (Ersgård 1988: 148 f.). In this connection I may add that it is during the first half of the 14th century that the term *fiskeläge* (fishing site) first appears in written sources (Schäfer 1927: CXXIV f.).

There are thus good reasons for drawing the following conclusion: the change of settlement at the start of the 14th century seems to mean that it was then that fishing was first treated as a separate economic activity. This is manifested in the creation of fishing sites, a kind of settlement which was used only seasonally but which was specially and permanently organized for fishing.

If we stay at Hovbacken in Skanör, it gives us a good opportunity to study the development of the fishing site in the rest of the Middle Ages. The fishing settlement here appears to have been concentrated mainly on the northern

part of the sandbank in the Late Middle Ages. It is also here that the remains of the fishermen's huts are most clearly visible on the surface. These structures appear to have been oriented in long rows, probably according to a uniform system of plots. At least three such rows with remains of huts can be observed, running the length of the sandbank from north to south. Five separate structures have hitherto been excavated in whole or part. The late medieval fishing hut appears to have been a rectangular building, measuring about 3 x 5 metres, oriented east-west at right angles to the shoreline. The building technique varied. Some of the excavated structures proved to have walls built of sods, another of wattle-and-daub, and the rest of wooden constructions which are hard to identify. The finds, which are not as ample as those from the early 14th-century settlement, consist of potsherds and various iron objects, especially nails, and occasional coins. The only finds showing a direct connection with fishing were numerous flints with a characteristic long, narrow shape, specially selected for use as net sinkers. The settlement of the fishing site in this regulated form can be dated by coins to a phase from the mid 15th century until the latter half of the 16th century. After that the area appears to have been completely abandoned.

A written source, the detailed customs accounts recording the revenue of the Danish crown from the markets in Skanör and Falsterbo in 1494, gives us yet more information on the fishing site at Hovbacken (Schäfer 1927: 119 f.). According to this source, 168 people that year paid tax to the Danish king for the ownership of a fishing hut at the site. One can assume that each hut represents a boat and a crew of 4-7 men (Lundberg 1905: 34). This means, then, that a total of anything between 670 and 1170 fishermen can have visited the fishing site at Skanör in 1494.

Hovbacken was undoubtedly one of the larger fishing sites in southern Scandinavia in the Late Middle Ages. There was an even bigger fishing site in nearby Falsterbo; according to the 1494 customs accounts, there were no less than 433 fishing huts here. The remains of this settlement are now covered with sand and probably also partly eroded away by the sea, which explains why the fishing site at Falsterbo is not accessible to archaeological study to the same extent as Hovbacken in Skanör.

Skanör and Falsterbo are both examples of seasonal medieval fishing sites located near permanent towns and functioning in conjunction with them. Fishing sites like these obviously occurred near other towns. A written source from 1537 uses the names of several towns in Scania to refer to fishing sites, such as Landskrona, Malmö, Simrishamn, Trelleborg, and Ystad (Schäfer 1927: 128 f.). Archaeologically, however, we still know nothing about these fishing sites.

The late medieval fishing sites, however, were often topographically and functionally free-standing places. Some of these also became extensive settlements like Hovbacken in Skanör. One of the most significant places in this category is Dragør on the island of Amager just south of Copenhagen. The extent of the medieval settlement has still not been established archaeologically, but it is clear that the settlement which developed here had the same character as in Skanör (Liebgott 1979). An initial settlement phase with clay-lined pits was succeeded around 1300 by settlement in huts, which took on an increasingly permanent constructional character in the course of the Late Middle Ages. The only institutional buildings were some chapels.

Other large fishing sites in the Late Middle Ages in southern Scandinavia were Albuen, at the southern tip of the island of Lolland, and Kyrkhamn at the very south of the island of Öland. At both these places there are remains of a chapel and visible traces on the ground of a large number of huts - a structure which appears to parallel Dragør. The chapel in Kyrkhamn has been excavated and dated by finds of coins to the 14th-15th centuries. Under the foundation of the chapel there was an early medieval occupation layer which appears to

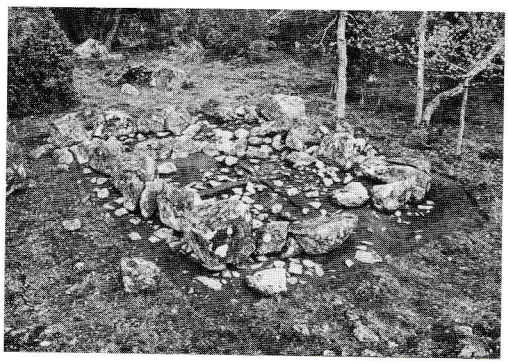

Fig. 3. Square stone foundation, *hustomtning*, at Pilkaholmen, Ronneby, in the Blekinge archipelago. Photo: K-A Björquist, Blekinge Läns Museum.

have been left by secular settlement. According to written sources, the number of fishermen at this site was almost nine hundred in the latter part of the Middle Ages (Hagberg 1975: 64 ff.; Blomkvist 1979: 83 ff.; 1982: 47 f.).

Most of the medieval fishing sites in southern Scandinavia, however, were probably much more restricted in scope than the ones mentioned above. For most of these smaller sites we often have no more information than a single mention in a written source. As regards archaeology we know even less, since very few of these sites have been excavated. Judging by the excavations that have been conducted, they appear to differ greatly from each other as regards the individual development of settlement. At Sikavarp on the east coast of Öland, which still functioned as a fishing site and harbour as late as the 16th century, the earliest settlement, in the form of occupation layers and clay-lined pits, has been dated to the 12th century (Fernholm 1986). A large chapel of granite was also built here, probably some time in the 14th century. At other fishing sites, like Arild by the bay of Skälderviken in north-west Scania, recent excavations have shown that the earliest settlement cannot have been established before the end of the 15th century. At the same time a chapel (still preserved) was built on the site, something which we find at a number of other small fishing sites. Most of these chapels, however, were demolished long ago and have not been studied in detail (Anglert 1986).

A final example of a variant of medieval coastal settlement is characterized by remains which are not concentrated in any particular named place, but instead scattered along larger sections of coast. Examples of this settlement can be found in the Blekinge archipelago (Atterman 1977; Stenholm 1986: 96 ff.). Admittedly there were several medieval coastal chapels here, but they were not located in demarcated fishing sites; they were rather central points in larger settlement areas. Remains of the actual settlement consist chiefly of what are called *hustomtningar*, generally square stone foundations still visible on the ground, and paved places for pulling boats up out of the water (Fig. 3). Remains of the same type of coastal settlement can be found in several other parts of southern Scandinavia, for example, along the east coast, in northern Halland, and northwards along the coast of Bohuslän (Pettersson 1953; Danielsson 1985; Norman 1988; Svedberg 1990). The dating of this settlement is uncertain and disputed. Some scholars have claimed that these stone foundations were used over a long time, from the Viking Age until modern times. This has been argued, for instance, for the coastal settlement of Blekinge (Stenholm 1986: 101 ff.). In other areas, like Bohuslän, it seems to be hard to take the same kind of settlement further back than the 16th century. As regards function, these settlements are usually interpreted as seasonal fishing sites, but it has also been argued that they were used

for other coastal activities besides fishing, such as trade (Stenholm 1986: 104).

A final example of scattered coastal settlement is the island of Bornholm. Along the northern and eastern coasts of the island in particular there are several areas with "hut plots" and also occasional sites with chapels (Vensild 1980; Ersgård 1988: 159 ff.). The source from 1537 mentioned above, which names a number of fishing sites in eastern Denmark, significantly refers to Bornholm as a single fishing site, whereas for Scania it lists several small, named places along the coast.

Conclusions

This survey has given a picture of medieval fishing settlement that varies greatly as regards both character and chronology. In some respects the picture is highly uncertain, especially as regards questions of dating. It is nevertheless possible to discern some general tendencies.

Throughout the area studied here, fishing places generally appear to have been periodic, non-permanent settlements. In this respect the Middle Ages, at least in some areas, represent a phase which can be contrasted on the one hand with the Late Iron Age with its permanent and functionally differentiated coastal settlements, and on the other hand with the late 16th century, when the new type of permanently used fishing sites emerged. The latter change, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is a phenomenon which can be observed in many places in southern Scandinavia.

A phenomenon which seems to occur all over southern Scandinavia is the characteristic clay-lined pit. Another general feature is the disappearance of this structure around 1300 and the subsequent emergence of a more palpable hut settlement. In contrast, it is more difficult to know where to place the chronologically diffuse stone foundations in relation to the clay-lined pits and the change at the start of the 14th century. Are the stone foundations to be regarded as a variant of late medieval hut settlement or do they represent something else? No clay-lined pits have as yet been found at any of the excavated sites with stone foundations, but it should be admitted that the existing archaeological source material is highly limited. In any case, their typical form, that is, scattered settlement of stone foundations, they appear to be associated with certain areas, like the Blekinge archipelago, along the east coast, and in Bohuslän.

Right from the Iron Age, fishing appears to have been an integrated activity in the central agricultural areas of southern Scandinavia, judging by evidence like the indications in the Scanian coastal settlements. The first seasonal fishing places from the start of the Middle Ages could therefore be interpreted as a sign that changes of a profound nature were taking place in these areas. The localization of fishing in special places at special times of the year is probably connected to a new organization of time and place in early medieval society and its new social and economic conditions. That fishing was associated with new social contexts can also be seen in a very concrete way in the coming of the clay-lined pits in the 12th century. In the interpretation which I have given of these structures, they have a social and symbolic meaning concerning the relationship between the fishermen and their political overlords, even though we cannot discern fishing as a special activity in the settlement represented by the clay-lined pits. In the regulated fishing site of the Late Middle Ages we also see an expression of the same relationship, but now with a more economic content.

It has long been well known that fishing on its largest scale in the Middle Ages was pursued in the Öresund region, and as we have seen above, it is here that we find most of the biggest fishing sites. It is perhaps easy to seize on the natural, ecological conditions as an explanation, but the fact is that there were other causal factors. We learn from written sources from the end of the Middle Ages, such as the customs accounts from 1494, that the fishermen who visited the markets in Skanör and Falsterbo to a large extent were linked to a particu-

lar region in medieval Denmark, a region with certain distinctive features. They came from the southern parts of Zealand and other south Danish islands like Lolland, Møn, and Falster (Stoklund 1959: 107). These fishermen included both townspeople and farmers. Their fishing sites in Falsterbo are called after the towns they came from, for example *Stege leje* and *Stubbekøbing leje*, or after the areas they farmed, for example *Falsters Bondeleje*. In this part of Denmark it has been possible to demonstrate an unusually distinct integration of fishing and shipping in early times, in both town and country. The region has been held up as an example of a special type of peasant society in which agriculture did not play a wholly dominant role (Stoklund 1976). Other supplementary activities like trading and fishing were also significant for this society, not just economically but also socially and culturally. People from this region of Denmark thus dominated the fishing at the markets in Skanör and Falsterbo, at least at the end of the Middle Ages, whereas fishermen from Scania, for example, were conspicuous by their absence. The fishing that was carried on in Scania apart from that at Skanör and Falsterbo was probably associated to a large extent with other towns in the province. In addition there were a number of smaller fishing sites. A certain concentration of these small sites can be found in north-west Scania; they are relatively scarce along the coast in the central agrarian areas in the west and south.

It is likely that the coastal settlements in Blekinge and eastern Småland reflect a more widespread farming-fishing combination in this part of southern Scandinavia. The region is characterized by forests with limited possibilities for agriculture but with ample opportunities for other economic activities. The medieval urbanization in the area can be described as relatively weak, and the towns that did exist were small, with the exception of Kalmar. Fishing on a really large scale occurred at only one place, Kyrkhamn in Öland. We find instead a number of other places - chapel sites, harbours, areas with house foundations - which are more or less tangible. In many of these places it has been possible to see activities like fishing and trading. Here we may have yet another example of fishing being integrated in peasant society, but where the diverse settlement picture might suggest less developed control and regulation of activity by a political authority.

Almost everything, however, about the earliest fishing site settlement in southern Scandinavia remains obscure. Apart from solving the fundamental archaeological questions about chronology and function, we still have to explain why some coastal areas - parts of the coast of Småland and southern Halland - completely lack early fishing sites. We must explain why we have so few traces of seasonal coastal settlement before the 16th century in Bohuslän, when this type of settlement was obviously established in many other places during that century. In this perspective, the continued study of early settlement in coastal areas is an urgent task.

Translated by Alan Crozier

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