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Studying the late-medieval crisis - reflections on research perspectives

Ersgård, Lars

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Front cover: Wall painting from 1437 in Tensta Church, Sweden.
(Photo: Per Lagerås)

Back cover: Traditional agricultural landscape at Åsens by, in the South-Swedish Uplands.
(Photo: Per Lagerås)

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8.

Studying the late-medieval crisis – reflections on research perspectives

Lars Ersgård

In studying the late-medieval crisis, it may be simplest to look upon the phenomenon as decline, as just a matter of negative impact on society in a limited period. However, it is also possible to look upon the crisis from a broader perspective, following its consequences in a considerably larger context than exclusively the medieval. The purpose of the following is to cast some reflections on the archaeological results, presented in previous chapters, from such a perspective, primarily on the basis of the question of how the late-medieval crisis can be comprehended as a part of the development towards modern society.

Originally, Swedish research on the late-medieval crisis was focused on the question of whether this crisis had hit society at all and, if so, to what extent it had affected primarily the agrarian settlement in terms of desertion. Today no one denies the fact that the crisis was extensive, also in Sweden, with severe demographic consequences. In an explicit way it is analysed as a part of a dynamic, societal development. Janken Myrdal's model, referred to in the previous chapters, is the most pronounced example of such a perspective.¹ Based on historical materialism a dialectic focus on class struggles is the theoretical starting point of this model. The actions of the nobility in the initial phase of the crisis became an incentive to extensive class conflicts in the later part of the fourteenth century/beginning of the fifteenth, resulting in a more positive development at the end of the Middle Ages and finally in a new historical "synthesis" in the shape of the nation state of the sixteenth century.

Myrdal's perspective is the one of an economic historian, incorporating the crisis in a greater narrative of the Middle Ages as a socio-economic course of upturns and declines. Claiming the validity of all geographical contexts, grand narratives of this kind have become subject to criticism. For example, archaeologists working with late-medieval contexts of marginal woodlands in northern Sweden have claimed that the grand narrative of the late-medieval crisis is less representative of development in these areas.²

The purpose of the archaeological investigation presented in this book has not been to look upon the crisis from the perspective of central versus marginal area, neither to present a brand new narrative of the crisis. All grand narratives are characterised by a certain degree of simplification, probably necessary when explaining profound societal processes. However, here the aim has been to emphasise the complexity of the crisis, rather than telling a new overall story of the phenomenon. Using the potential of archaeology, this chapter endeavours

to reveal new aspects of societal changes, focusing on the strategies people were forced to develop, dealing with their everyday lives during this harsh times, and the results of these choices in the longer term as well as the shorter.

Before the meaning and the consequences of this perspective are developed a brief European reference to Swedish development is presented. Hence a closer look is taken at late-medieval England, a country where the source materials concerning the crisis, the written as well as the archaeological, are abundant. However, the perspectives in English research have been somewhat different compared to Scandinavia.

The population in England, according to results of modern research, was probably reduced by at least 50% in the period 1350–1450, a decrease on par with the situation in Sweden in the corresponding period.³ In many respects the development of the two countries shows several similarities. However, the picture of late-medieval England tends to appear as less dramatic compared with Sweden.

Facing major problems from 1348–50, caused by the great decrease of the population, the inhabitants of the English society “with remarkable resilience ... returned to work, and the whole system held together.”⁴ Some activities, like house construction and mining, stopped momentarily and were resumed later in the fourteenth century. Rebellions against increased tax burdens occurred but when they had settled, society seems to have adjusted to the new conditions engendered by a greatly reduced population.

The peasants gaining a major control of production was an important consequence of the demographic changes of fourteenth century.⁵ It enabled increased freedom of action for the peasants, who were no longer just an anonymous group of “producers”. Increasingly they could act more independently than before, enlarging their holdings in the countryside or acting as entrepreneurs in a market.

Archaeological study of late-medieval England has for a long time had its focus on agrarian settlement and its changes. Deserted villages and farmsteads in particular have been a dynamic field of research since the 1940s, archaeologists and historians having worked in close cooperation.⁶ However, using deserted settlement as a primary source for studies of economy and society in the English countryside has been a matter of debate.⁷ After all the deserted villages represent only a minority of all existing villages in the late Middle Ages.

Desertion has occurred to a greater or lesser degree during all periods and deserted villages have not, in the same way as in Sweden, become synonymous with the ravages of the late-medieval crisis. However, a major part originating from the time span 1350–1700, this phase has played a significant role in the discussion on the causes of desertion.⁸

Recent research has shown that only a minor part of desertion can be linked to the plagues of the mid-fourteenth century. Thus, there is no simple connection between the decrease of population and desertion. Rather, the causalities being complex, desertion appears as a gradual process.⁹

The late-medieval crisis in England stands out as a rather complex history, including major decrease of population and societal decline as well as elements of emancipation, new initiatives and expanding markets.¹⁰ Will archaeology also help us to reveal a similar complexity in Sweden?

In the grand narrative of the late-medieval crisis in Sweden, the survival strategies of the nobility in the initial phase have been a decisive factor, directing social development and affecting society’s ability of recovery in a negative way.¹¹ The peasants, being mostly

an anonymous group of taxpayers in this early phase of the crisis, did not stand out as independent actors until the rebellions of the 1430s. However, using archaeology it will be possible to nuance this picture.

Through archaeology we can, in another way than with the written record alone, write a history “from below”, reaching the single household and the strategies of everyday life. In a previous chapter of this book such histories have been told, concerning farmsteads in different parts of the country, their inhabitants facing new challenges after the plagues at the middle of the fourteenth century.

Responses to decline in the middle of the fourteenth century, as they have been observed in the archaeological record, were discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to the phasing out of the manorial system of the High Middle Ages. Being in dissolution around 1350, this system received its final death blow in the plagues.¹² Probably the consequences were the same as in England. The landowners leaving the direct control of production, the peasants at once gained a primary responsibility in the management of their holdings. Hence the later part of the fourteenth century must have meant, despite an immense diminishing of population and increasing tax burdens, a new freedom of action for the peasants, making it possible for them to develop their own strategies of survival and create new ways of cooperation. This freedom opened the way for specialisation of activities in the agrarian society, which had previously been organised within, and restricted by, a manorial system.

The development of the mining districts north of the Lake Mälaren stands out as an elucidative example. The advanced blast furnace technique had been well-established in these areas since the end of the twelfth century. However, it was not until it began to be organised as a collective enterprise of freeholders after 1350, that this mining activity could be developed and specialised, then becoming one of the economic mainstays of the new nation state in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries (Fig. 58). A full understanding of the transition from subordinated tenants to self-owning peasant miners is still lacking but probably it occurred in the later part of the fourteenth century. The peasant miners taking part in the rebellion of the 1430s, are no tormented losers in the wake of the big crisis but a well-organised group with a new social identity.

Specialisation and division of labour were central elements of west European societies in early modern times, the economy of the households increasingly being oriented towards a market.¹³ By all accounts we see a beginning of this already in the late Middle Ages. Despite the loss of at least half of the population, people were able to turn the negative trend, increasing the productivity of households through specialisation. So, the decline at the middle of the fourteenth century included the downfall of a social system as well the start of a new one.

However, there is still another aspect of the crisis to reflect on – the cultural one. So far, a cultural perspective has been practically invisible in the research of the crisis, mostly being studied from a socio-economic point of view. In Chapter 5 significant regional differences of late-medieval Sweden were emphasised, differences hardly being comprehensible from other than a cultural perspective. Primarily, these differences have been about various approaches to the landscape, to the single farm and the towns. Essentially, the focus here has been directed towards the eastern and western parts of southern Sweden respectively.

The differences mentioned above were the result of cultural divergence being discernable at the earliest in the thirteenth century. This phenomenon was a decisive, continued movement



Fig. 58. Ruin of a blast furnace from the eighteenth century by the factory of Silvhytteå in the municipality of Hedemora, province of Dalarna (photo: Bengt A. Lundberg, Swedish National Heritage Board)

in society, which did not come to an end because of the late-medieval crisis. On the contrary, the latter strengthened the cultural differences, thus making it reasonable to discuss them in a wider historical context.

The previous discussion on the regional differences has primarily revolved around the following phenomena: mobility versus continuity of the settlement structure, the interaction between town and countryside as well as the relation between social forms of cooperation and proto-industrial activities. In the opinion of this author, the agrarian society of the west, as in the province of Halland, showed great spatial flexibility, adjusting settlement to a new orientation of production in the late Middle Ages. In the east people seem to have acted within a spatial structure, staying fixed since the High Middle Ages and further on in the time of the crisis.

In the eastern parts of Sweden a strong interaction between towns and countryside was a significant part of the survival strategies in the time of the crisis. However, in the west the late-medieval towns were of little importance for their surrounding countryside. On the contrary, the peasants of this region seem to have developed a trade of their own, independent of the towns.

In the east activities of a proto-industrial character were developed in the late Middle Ages, above all in the iron producing districts north of the Lake Mälaren, taking the form of villages of peasant miners. In the west no such activities were developed except for the southern part of Halland where proto-industrial iron making was established in the late Middle

Ages.¹⁴ Specialised activities were developed in the west in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however being restricted to the context of the single farmstead.

How is it possible to comprehend these regional contrasts in a wider perspective? In recent years Swedish historian Christer Winberg has presented the most profound study on Swedish regional characteristics, focusing mainly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Making some references towards earlier periods, he emphasises “three formative phases” as particularly decisive in the regional development of the western and eastern parts of Sweden respectively.¹⁶

The first formative phase includes the thirteenth century, when political power was moved towards the eastern part of Sweden. Parallel to this change, extensive urbanisation took place in this part of the country, especially in the Mälaren valley area. The latter phenomenon did not affect the western parts to any significant extent.

The second phase started at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Stockholm became the formal capital of the country and the administration of the realm together with all associated bureaucracy becoming concentrated in this town. The nobility also concentrated their interests in the eastern parts of Sweden, paving the way for a “de-feudalisation” of western Sweden and the emergence of a social class of freeholders in this region.

The third of the phases started at the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, when a class of freeholders was well-established in western Sweden. In the east the nobility strengthened its position through an intensification and rationalisation of the management of their estates. During this period, secularisation began in the east, whereas religious life in the west was characterised by the emergence of revivalist movements.

The remaining regional differences in the era of modernity stand out as an important conclusion.¹⁷ Despite better communications between the regions and increased administrative and political centralisation, the differences became strengthened and deepened. Thus, an essential pattern becomes discernible, covering the time span from at least the thirteenth century to present times – a *longue durée*, to use the terminology of the French *Annales* school.

This is not the place for discussing the origins of the regional differences in the early Middle Ages. However, there is reason to reflect on the impact of the late-medieval crisis on the actual, cultural pattern. Contributing to a strengthening of the latter, did the crisis also contribute to the formation of modern Sweden?

When the peasants of western Sweden developed their strategies for survival in the era of the crisis, they acted within a context rather different from that of the eastern parts. Having never developed any closer dependence on nearby towns and their settlement never having been subject to any regulation, people were living in another cultural world than their counterparts in the east. A crucial element of this world was the single farmstead with its household, playing the role as the primary actor in the landscape. By all accounts the village played the corresponding role in the eastern parts.¹⁸ No doubt this fact has been of very great importance for the development of an individual independence among the peasants of western Sweden, concerning not only of their acting in the landscape but also of their relation to kingdom and nobility.¹⁹

As clearest evidence, this was expressed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when a group of freeholders became the dominant social stratum. A strong individual mentality, emanating from the single farmstead, supported this stratum. This mentality included a

specific spirit of the small business owner, providing the basis for peasant trade as well as rural crafts, independent of the towns of the region. The later activity was developed to an extensive cottage industry, especially weaving, becoming characteristic of several parts of western Sweden in modern times. The first signs of such activities may already be discernible in the late Middle Ages.

In conclusion, there are reasons to understand the time of the late-medieval crisis as a highly formative phase towards modern society. This chapter has emphasised important elements of emancipation in the development of the crisis. However, it has been about an emancipation following different cultural pathways.

Through archaeology it has been possible to grasp different aspects of human actions in the later part of the fourteenth and in the fifteenth centuries. An utterly severe societal situation did not – despite the unimaginable loss of human lives – result only in feudal suppression but also in innovations. Taking new initiatives in their everyday lives, peasants and townsmen could form a basis for a new society. However, their acting must be considered in the light of varying cultural contexts, directing the development in different ways.

Thus, the picture of the late-medieval crisis will be a complex one, Sweden in this respect reminding us much of England. Probably the two countries reflect a common, West European development. The situation in Eastern Europe was partly another one. For example in Russia, there was no emancipation of the peasants, rather an increasingly fierce serfdom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁰

This book has focused on the late-medieval crisis largely from the “small” perspective, i.e. the perspective of the single household and the single farmstead. At the same time it has discussed the late-medieval farmstead in a wider historical context, hopefully elucidating the links between past and present, between Middle Ages and modern times.

Notes

- 1 Myrdal 2012a, 234ff
- 2 Svensson *et al.* 2013
- 3 Dyer 2002, 235, 272; Palm 2001, 24f
- 4 Dyer 2002, 272
- 5 Dyer 2002, 265
- 6 Taylor 2010
- 7 Jones 2010, 8f; Lewis 2007, 134
- 8 Dyer 2010, 29
- 9 Dyer 2010, 44
- 10 Dyer 2010, 44
- 11 Myrdal 2012a, 234f
- 12 Cf. Ericsson 2012, 40
- 13 De Vries 2008, 71f; cf. Larsson 2009, 390f
- 14 Strömberg 2008
- 15 Winberg 2000
- 16 Winberg 2000, 118f
- 17 Winberg 2000, 120
- 18 Winberg 2000, 113
- 19 Winberg 2000, 84
- 20 Martin 2012, 293f