

EUROPEANS OR NOT?



LOCAL LEVEL STRATEGIES ON THE
BALTIC RIM 1100-1400 AD

CCC papers:1

Gotland University College
Centre for Baltic Studies

Kalmar County
Administration Board

Harbours and Farms on Gotland

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Fig. 1. Viking Age harbours on Gotland. Larger dots showing places of importance in connection with trading and manufacturing. Minor dots, mostly fishing harbours.

Introduction

The starting point for the following discussion is the discovery in recent years of a very large number of harbours from the early Iron Age along Gotland's coast¹. At present there are traces of about 50 sites, lying outspread with about one in each coastal parish, though certain gaps do exist (fig.1).

The harbours are definitely of varying size and in many cases represent different kinds of activities even though there is a striking similarity in the function of the places as far as we can judge at present. To simplify the situation one can say that there are both large and small harbours and there is a certain pattern from small, farm-connected harbours to large community harbours. One can distinguish a difference in activities in that most of the sites discov-

ered have been in the form of fishing harbours connected to certain farms or groups of farms and that parallel to these there have been a lesser number of larger harbours and trading places with, for instance, trading, craft and shipbuilding functions, and perhaps even a judicial role.

It is, however, very difficult to clarify the function of each individual place given only compilation of different sources combined with general field analyses such as phosphate mapping. In cases such as this, the usual procedure is to test the hypothesis by means of archaeological excavations, which are both time-consuming and costly. This raises the question of whether there is an alternative

¹ Carlsson D 1991

to digging which can be used to determine the function of a site with respect to how the different harbour sites during the Viking and Early Medieval period functioned with regards to ownership, activity and space.

With this article I wish to attempt to illustrate the possibility of analysing the harbour sites by examining the oldest maps and other written source material and I will, in this respect, deal mainly with the relation between farm (primary unit) and harbour.

Hypothesis

As a starting point for continued discussion it may be appropriate to present a hypothesis aimed at explaining and illustrating the case in question. My main hypothesis is the following: Conditions during the Viking and Early Medieval period with regards to the role of harbours, fishing hamlets as well as larger trading places, differ to no great extent from conditions during the 17th century (i.e. from the time when we have considerable written sources) with regards the administrative and ownership conditions. Or, to express it in another way, a fishing hamlet during the Viking Age does not differ decisively from a fishing hamlet during the 17th century.

I base this hypothesis upon, for instance, the fact that the agrarian countryside on Gotland with farms - primary units, displays a particularly stable picture from the Late Iron Age until the 17th century, regarding spatial land division, ownership patterns and function. The hypothesis has as its starting point the premise that the conditions reflected in the oldest written sources to a large extent concur with the situation during the Viking and Early Medieval period. This approach implies that changes in Gotlandic society such as changes in religion, the Hanseatic advances, growing dominance in Visby, etc. did not decisively change conditions in the Gotlandic countryside. My opinion is that the basic land division of the primary units and their functions, etc. shows this to be the case. In different contexts I have shown that there is a strong spatial congruence between the Late Iron Age farm and the countryside displayed on the 17th century maps².

This idea that the differences between the two periods of time are marginal implies that it should be possible to use the conditions during the 17th

century to create a picture of how the situation might have been during early times.

The Gotlandic fishing hamlet

If the hypothesis that quite similar conditions existed at the two points in time is correct it should mean that the coastal activities can be compared to a large extent. In other words, the 17th century fishing hamlets, their role, legal status etc. should have existed already during the Viking and Early Medieval period.

What then were the conditions during the 17th century for coastal activities? One can mention two extremes in this respect. One is represented by the fishing hamlets connected with the farms and the other by the town of Visby.

Fishing hamlets on Gotland differ in certain important respects from fishing hamlets on the Swedish mainland. On the mainland a fishing hamlet consists of an area where the fisherman lives, lands his boats and hangs his nets, while the Gotlandic hamlets are only landing places for the boats and places for drying and storing fishing equipment³. This is because the Gotlandic fishing of long ago was carried out by farmers in addition to their agricultural activities. On Gotland there have been no permanently inhabited coastal villages based upon fishing such as exist on the mainland⁴. Fishing was a sideline, people lived in the fishing hamlets only for a few weeks every spring and autumn⁵. During these periods of seasonal fishing these fishing places were really a camp. Fishing was free and the Crown's taxation interest during the Danish reign concerned only the herring catch. People came from all over Gotland, from towns and countryside, but even from the mainland and outside the country to fish at some of the hamlets which were teeming with fish⁶. They either built their own fishing huts or rented lodgings with others with payment in kind⁷.

² Carlsson D 1979

³ Westermark 1931 p 8

⁴ Westholm 1989 p 79

⁵ Jonsson - Lindström 1987 p 33

⁶ Eskeröd 1963 p 50

⁷ Säve 1979 p 89

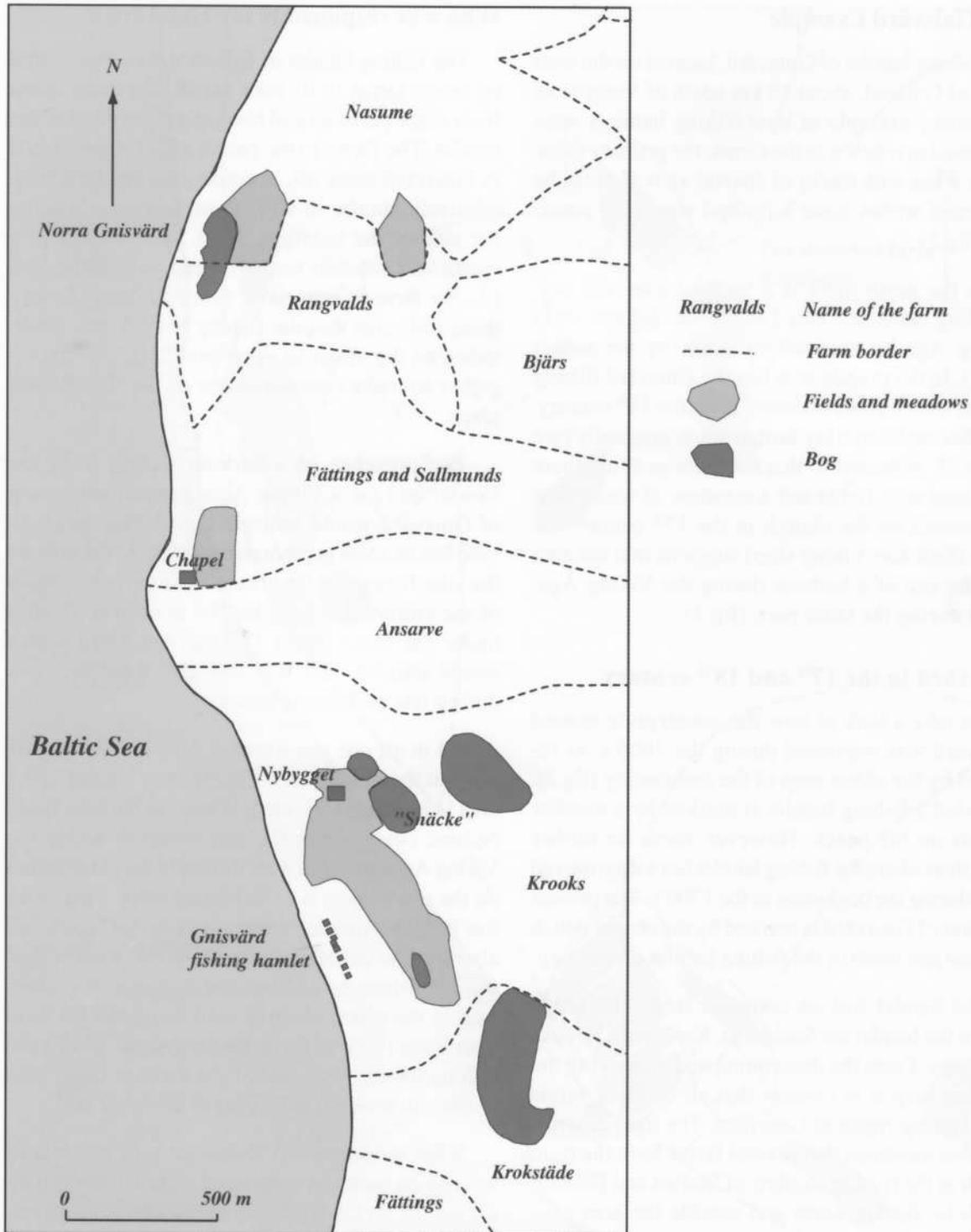


Fig. 2. The coastal area of Tofta parish in the 17th century. The land along the coast belonged to different farms in close proximity to the coast. Three areas are of specific interest concerning coastal activity. In the north, there is a site (Norra Gnismvård) with a harbour dated to 8th - 10th century, adjoining 3 prehistoric cemeteries. A little further south, there is a chapel, connected

to the fishing hamlet Gnismvård, where it was situated from the early 18th century and onwards. Further south, and along the shoreline, is the older location for the fishing hamlet of Gnismvård, and nearby, a place called "Snäcke", meaning Viking Age ship, probably indicating a late Viking Age harbour.

The Gnisvård Example

The fishing hamlet of Gnisvård, located on the west coast of Gotland, about 20 km south of Visby is an illustrative example of how fishing hamlets were organised in relation to the farms, the primary units. Three areas with traces of coastal activities can be discerned within quite a limited stretch of coastline (fig.2).

To the north there is a harbour site with surrounding cemetery, dated to the Vendel and early Viking Age by excavations made by the author (fig.3). In the middle area lies the Gnisvård fishing hamlet with its chapel dating from the 18th century. This fishing hamlet lay further south originally (see figure 2). Adjacent to this southern position there is an area with fields and a meadow of which part was owned by the church in the 17th century. Its name (Snäcka= Viking ship) suggests that the area was the site of a harbour during the Viking Age, likely during the latter part. (fig.4).

Gnisvård in the 17th and 18th century

Let us take a look at how the countryside around Gnisvård was organised during the 1600's, as reflected by the oldest map of the community (fig.2). Gnisvård's fishing hamlet is marked by a number of huts on the beach. However, these lie further south than where the fishing hamlet lies today, moved there during the beginning of the 1700's. The present location of Gnisvård is marked by the chapel which is found just north of the fishing hamlet on the map.

The hamlet lies on common land. The farms closest the hamlet are Smågårda, Krokståde, Krooks and Bjärs. From the description accompanying the taxation map it is evident that all of these farms have fishing rights at Gnisvård. The map description also mentions that several farms have the right to fish at the fishing hamlets of Stafwa and Blåhäll, which lie further north and outside the area covered by the map, figure 2.

Nearly all the farms in the parish of Tofta fished at Gnisvård. Even farms from the surrounding parishes took part in fishing here, as related in the *Jordebok* of 1653, an early comprehensive inventory of Gotland describing property for taxation purposes. Here it is noted that both Stora and Lilla Mafriids in the parish of Västergarn fished at Gnisvård "for their household needs as well as for sale."

Who was responsible for Gnisvård?

The fishing hamlet of Gnisvård was thus shared by many farms in its own parish, but even farms from other parishes and townspeople shared in the hamlet. The farms in the parish of Tofta that fished in Gnisvård were all, according to the *Jordebok*, relatively similar in size if you take into account the size of the holdings, from Sallmunds with 6 *markelej*, Gotlandic taxation units, to Nasume with 13. No farm is especially small or large. Everything indicates that the fishing hamlet was established on the initiative of several farms joining together to make communal use of the fine fishing place.

The presence of a harbour dating from the Vendel and early Viking Ages immediately north of Gnisvård would indicate that fishing in Gnisvård has its roots in prehistoric times. At the present the significance of the area in Spangmyr just south of the Gnisvård fishing hamlet is unclear. It goes under the name Snäck (Viking Age ship) which would indicate that this was also a harbour site during late prehistoric times.

All in all one can imagine development implying that the oldest place for a fishing hamlet in the area is in North Gnisvård. When the harbour basin became cut off from the sea, probably during the Viking Age, activities were moved to the place which on the older maps is called Snäckemyr. This place lies beside a smaller water way (fig.4). When this also became cut off because of the elevation of land etc. the fishing hamlet was moved out to the coast. This is the place which is marked on the taxation map from 1695. In the beginning of the 1700's the fishing hamlet was moved yet another time, now to the site where it is located to this very day.

What we see here is the example of continuous activity on the coast in the form of an extensive fishing hamlet for the farms of the area which, for physical geographic reasons, was forced to move a number of times. The existing material yields no evidence that it played a role as a trading place.

With regards land ownership it can be noted that the fishing hamlet has always been located on one or some of the farms' private land. It was first as a result of the legal redistribution of land in the 1800's that the land became common property for the farms of the parish. At the same time it can be noted that

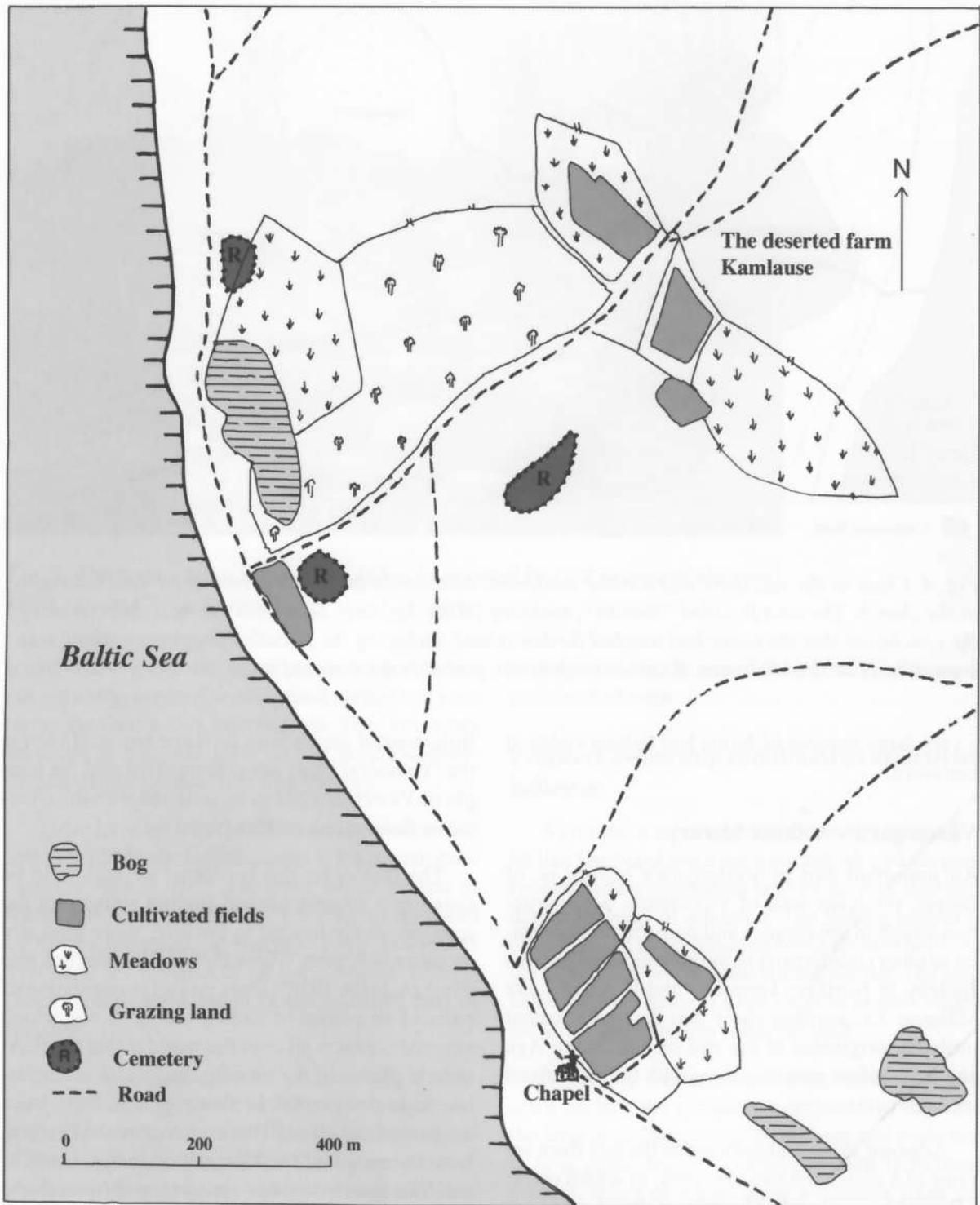


Fig. 3. The landscape around "Norra Gnisvård", seen on the 17th century map. Around a bog, which earlier must have been a strait connected to the sea, there are 3 cemeteries from late Iron Age. In the southern part of the bog, archaeologi-

cal investigation provides evidence of a settlement from late 8th century. Just east of the harbour, lies a deserted medieval farm called Kamlause, which probably has had something to do with the harbour.

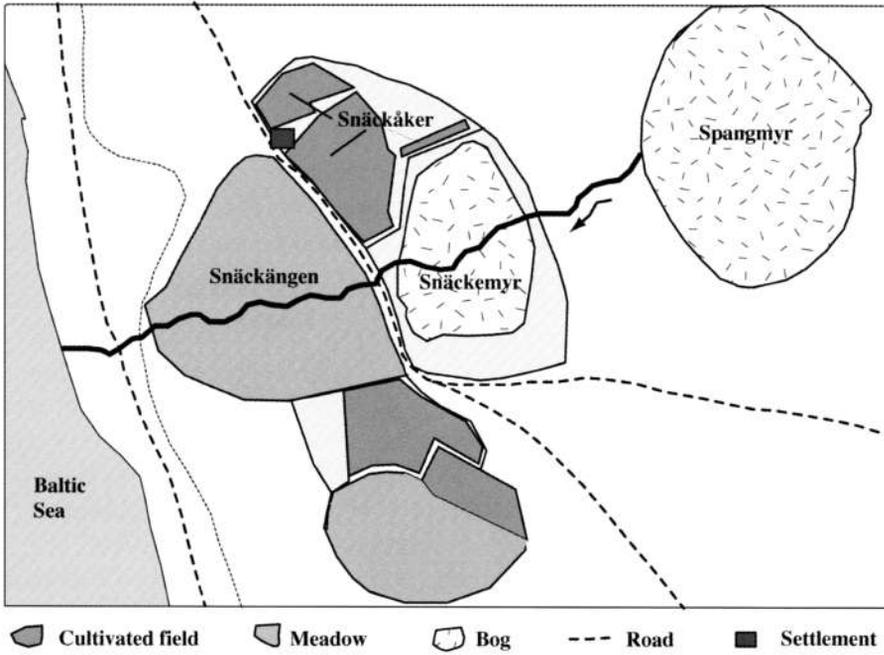


Fig. 4. Close to the sea, there was a minor settlement established in the 17th century, on land belonging to the church. The area is called “Snäcka”, meaning Viking Age ship. Seen from the map, one can draw the conclusion that the water had reached further inland, including the so called Snäckemyr; which was a good harbour in older times. What we see here are probably the traces of a late Viking Age harbour.

a very large number of farms had fishing rights at Gnisvärd.

Västergarn - A short history

An important part of Västergarn’s history is, of course, the town wall of Västergarn; a construction which in appearance and construction is similar to other counterparts in the known Viking towns Hedeby in Northern Germany and Birka in Lake Mälaren. Excavations show that the embankment probably originated at the end of the Viking Age and is therefore contemporary with the mentioned embankments.

Adjacent to the embankment to the east there are ruins of a castal and two churches, of which one is a Romanesque church. The present church was built about 1200. The remarkable thing about it is that it is only the chancel of the planned church which, if it had been completed, would have been one of the largest on Gotland, nearly as big as the cathedral in Visby.

Considering the insignificant size of the parish this is particularly remarkable and reveals the astonishing economic strength of the inhabitants of this

little coastal parish with its three farms. However the “cathedral” was never completed and the people of Västergarn had to be satisfied with the chancel as their parish church (fig. 5).

The reason for this economic strength is to be found in a longestablished trading activity in the area, originally located in Paviken, more precisely on its eastern shore where the Idån stream runs into Paviken. In the 1970’s there was an investigation of parts of an extensive trading and craft site which enjoyed contacts all over the world at that time⁸. At several places in the vicinity, large-scale cemeteries, more or less visible above ground, have been uncovered and all in all the eastern shore of Paviken, from the mouth of the Idån around to the mouth of the Västergarn stream, contains widespread and important traces of harbour and trading activities from the Vendel and Viking Ages.

Moreover new discoveries in recent years have revealed the existence of extensive structures in the Västergarn stream in the form of very wellpreserved

⁸ Lundström 1981



Fig. 5. The town wall of Västergarn. It has been dated by C14 to around the year 1000 AD, or a little earlier. Photo Dan Carlsson.

jetties and a stockade which extended across the stream and prevented unauthorised parties from entering Paviken without permission. The jetties can be dated to the year 1008 AD by dendrochronological dating (annual tree ring dating).

There have been finds of extensive wooden construction like jetties and stockades in the ancient strait between Kronholmen (the inner island closest to Västergarn) and the mainland. These have been dated by dendochronology to the year 1041 AD. A few years ago the remains of an Early Medieval kogg (sailing ship) were found in the southern part of the strait (fig.6).

All in all the latest years' archaeological studies in the Västergarn area have revealed very widespread activity in the entire Västergarn area especially during the late Viking Age, and it is easy to conclude that Västergarn has had a very long and complex development as a harbour and trading place.

The history of Västergarn can not be understood other than that "the society" of Västergarn, established upon the harbour and trading activities with roots in the Vendel Age (550-800 AD) was, or rather was meant to become, an important town society. However, the settlement stagnated, in all likelihood already during the 1200's and in the long run came

to languish away as one of the island's many small country harbours.

Property ownership conditions as an activity indicator

A comparison between a traditional fishing hamlet like Gnisvård and a town society like Västergarn reveals certain interesting land ownership relations that are worthy of attention. The fishing hamlet is characterised by the land not being divided between the individuals who use the fishing hamlet. The land nearly always belongs to an individual farm which owns the immediately adjacent land.

Regarding Västergarn, as a representative of a town society, the situation is different. In this case the land in and adjoining the harbour and trade site is to a great degree divided between individual owners, many of whom lived a distance from the place itself (fig. 7). From this observation one can set up a model which implies that;

- A seasonal activity, intended mainly to supply the individual farm, i.e. a fishing hamlet, did not have a marked influence on the land ownership connected to the fishing hamlet. Even if the land belonged to an individual farm, other farms both from within the parish and from other parishes, and even

est part of the Bronze Age at Gannarve would indicate an early use of the area.

Despite the fact that only a few farms are found along the coast, the church is located in this area; as good a sign as any that there must have been some coastal activity which prompted the church's establishment there. It was otherwise customary that the church be situated in the centre of the agricultural community.

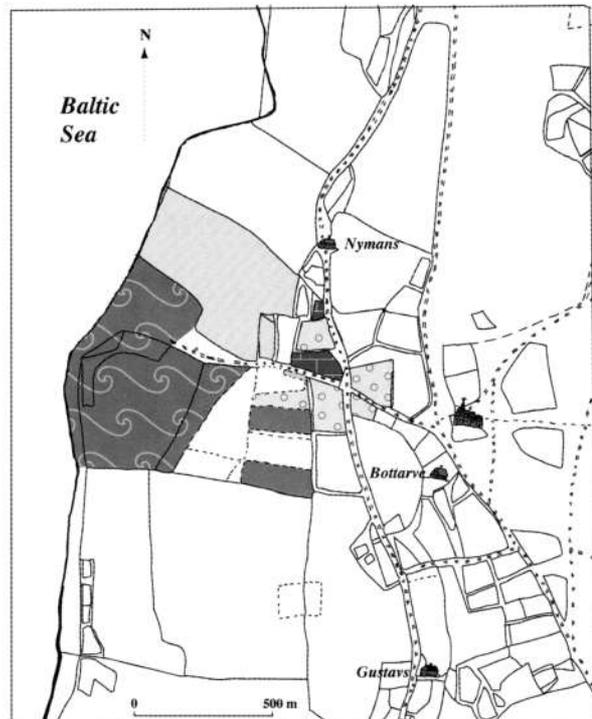
The land ownership situation during the 17th century, as reflected by the taxation map of 1700, provides the information that the area was divided mainly between the existing farms in the area, i.e. Gustavs, Bottarve and Nymans. The church also owned a lot of property in the area. Even allowing for several exceptions, one can imagine the countryside divided between these three farms.

There is, however, one area which differs drastically from the established structure of ownership in the area. This is an area of land west of the church and directly adjacent to the coast. The area is divided between several farms, in many cases as very small, narrow strips of land. These pieces of land are owned by several farms located further inside the parish. Some of them also belong to farms in the parish of Eksta, the neighbouring parish to the south. The *Jordeboken* from 1653 also furnishes the information that several of the properties changed hands during the 1600's. For example Bottarve purchased land from Bjärge in Eksta (fig. 8).

A comparison of the ownership map with the known investigations of the Viking harbour in the area, reveals a nearly complete spatial congruence (fig. 9). In other words, the deviant ownership pattern constitutes the Viking harbour and trading place. This situation is in this way similar to the conditions in both Visby and Västergarn, with a number of small plots of land divided amongst several owners. One can, in other words, assume that Fröjel was developing into an town society similar to Visby, but that development faltered for reasons which I will not discuss here. That can await future discussion.

Conclusion

The conclusion which can be made from what I have said here is that there is a connection between a coastal place's function and land ownership patterns, as they are shown on the oldest maps. The



Fröjel parish the year 1700

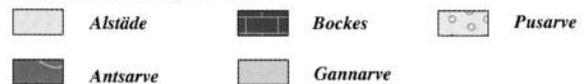


Fig. 8. Land ownership in the coastal area of Fröjel parish. Along the coast there are three farms and the church, which own most of the land in the area. But, between the church and the coast, there is a unified area with several smaller properties belonging to different farms situated far from the coast, and also from other parishes.

places which have functioned as fishing hamlets show a picture implying that property was not divided between several owners. In other words, the map says nothing about how many and who used the fishing hamlet. Without other sources we are unable to determine if there was widespread fishing for a large part of Gotland, or if only the farms on whose property the fishing hamlet was situated used the hamlet.

On the other hand, it seems evident that the coastal areas which functioned more expressly as trading and craft places have developed a completely different ownership pattern, in that people from different places have owned certain plots of land for their activities. These plots of land could be bought and exchanged freely.

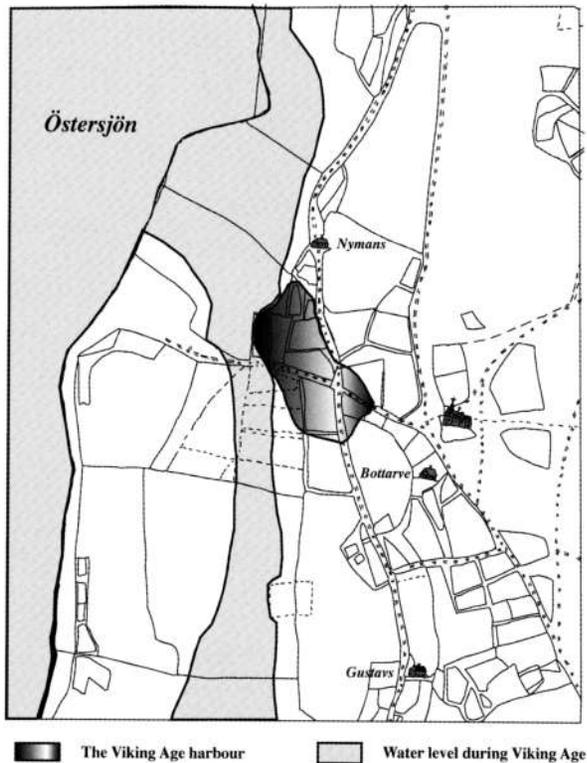


Fig. 9. A comparison between land properties belonging to farms outside the coastal area and the extent of the Viking Age harbour of Fröjel gives a clear indication of a correlation between the harbour and land ownership.

It is important, however, to remember that this is the case pertaining to Gotland. One can not automatically apply this interpretation to other areas around the Baltic, in the assumption that development has been similar. It is necessary to keep in mind that the spatial, agrarian situation on Gotland differs radically from other areas, like those regarding local power and government.

What one can do, on the other hand, is to use the results from Gotland as a hypothetical model for other areas in order to illustrate the likelihood of a similar development. What I would like to emphasise in concluding is that the 17th century map material has a great deal to say about conditions during the period in question, i.e. 1100-1400 AD, but also to conditions during the Viking era.

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