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The extent of farm desertion in central Sweden during the late medieval agrarian crisis: landscape as a source

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Abstract

The effects of medieval agrarian crisis on settlement and population were considered in a major interdisciplinary research project in Scandinavia during the 1960s and 1970s. Within this project, there were significant differences in methods used to calculate the extent of farm desertion between historians in the participating countries. The reliance on written source material within the Swedish team reflected the dominant approach amongst historians who made less use of map and landscape evidence than others. In this renewed investigation of the magnitude of farm desertion in the Late Middle Ages, focussing on the province of Jämtland in central Sweden, field survey of the physical landscape and some three thousand historical maps are used as evidence, alongside conventional written sources, such as official letters and taxation documents. The results indicate that the extent of farm desertion in medieval Sweden has been underestimated because Swedish scholars generally eschewed the use of the retrogressive method, which their Norwegian counterparts had been using since the 1940s. There is therefore good reason to reassess the desertion rates of medieval farms in other parts of Sweden as well, using traditional geographical source materials together with the documentary sources usually favoured by historians. This may also hold for other parts of Europe as well. The rate of desertion is discussed in a wider context of settlement contraction and expansion in central and peripheral areas of Sweden, including the long drawn-out process of reclamation of the deserted farms (*ödesbölen*).

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Keywords: Landscape; Historical maps; Farm desertion; Retrogressive method; Jämtland; Ödesböle; Black Death

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The late medieval agrarian crisis has long been a key research problem for European historians.¹ The idea of such a crisis was developed in the interwar period when many scholars identified significant and lasting changes in the size of agrarian populations, farm prices and the number of deserted farms during the period between 1300 and 1450.² In a recent review of research on the medieval period, Schofield points out that the discussion of evidence for population change in the period ‘remains a significant theme’.³ The twin themes to which Western European historians of the agrarian crisis have devoted most of their efforts are, firstly, the driving forces of the crisis, including the Black Death,⁴ climate change,⁵ war,⁶ changes in trade,⁷ soil depletion,⁸ and feudal exploitation;⁹ and, secondly, its effects on the size of settlement, population and everyday life. Considerable research effort has been devoted to variations on these two themes, often by considering hitherto unexamined regions or by utilising new methods and sources.

This paper considers the magnitude of late medieval farm desertion and changes in population size in the Province of Jämtland in central Sweden (Figs 1 and 2), using landscape as a source. Rather than simply adding another region to the map of European research, this paper seeks to deploy new landscape evidence in the estimation of the extent of farm desertion. In recent decades, historical study of medieval population change has been strongly influenced by English scholarship, based mainly upon analysis of various kinds of contemporary written source material. However, such sources are not distributed equally across all parts of Europe. The availability of written source material is strongly dependent on geographical location: rich central regions suitable for cereal production naturally contained more manors, monasteries and towns than do more marginal areas. These institutions were more likely to have formal administrative structures and systematically catalogued written communications, increasing the likelihood that their records would be preserved. On the other hand, in the more marginal regions there is a greater

¹ The paper is based partly (50%) on my doctoral dissertation, *Landskap och ödesbölen: Jämtland före, under och efter den medeltida agrarkrisen* (Landscape and Ödesbölen: The Province of Jämtland, Sweden, before during and after the Medieval Agrarian Crisis). The dissertation is written in Swedish (with an English summary) and was publicly defended on 14 May 2004 at the Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University.

² For instance, W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur in Mitteleuropa vom 13. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1935; W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*, Hamburg, Berlin, 1966. The latter work was later rewritten as *Agricultural Fluctuations in Europe: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, London, 1980.

³ P.R. Schofield, Review of periodical literature published in 2006: (ii) 1100–1500, *Economic History Review*, 61 (2008), 186–194.

⁴ P. Ziegler, *The Black Death*, Harmondsworth [1969] 1984, 106–107; L.R. Poos, The rural population of Essex in the later Middle Ages, *Economic History Review*, 38 (1985), 515–530.

⁵ M. Parry, *Climatic Change, Agriculture and Settlement*. Folkestone, Kent, 1978, 85.

⁶ B.H. Slicher van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe A.D. 500–1850*, London, 1963, 206–207; H.D. Clout, Retreat of rural settlement, in: H.D. Clout (Ed.) *Themes in the Historical Geography of France*, London, 1977, 107–128; W. Abel, *Agricultural Fluctuations in Europe* (note 2), 83.

⁷ J. Schreiner, *Pest og prisfall i senmiddelalderen. Et problem i norsk historie*. Oslo, 1948, section IV:III.

⁸ M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle Ages*, London [1972] 1993, 26–28, 63–79; M.M. Postan and J. Hatcher, Population and class relations in feudal society, in: T.H. Aston & C.H.E. Philpin (Eds), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe*, Cambridge, 1985, 75–76.

⁹ R. Brenner, Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe, in: T.H. Aston & C.H.E. Philpin (Eds), *The Brenner Debate* (note 8), 10–63.

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