

# Economic and Social Space at a Fenced Roman Iron Age Farm

## An Example from the South Coast of Sweden

BY KRISTIAN BRINK & THOMAS LINDEROTH

### Abstract

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In the autumn of 2011 the well-preserved remains of a Roman Iron Age farm – a long-house, an outhouse and fences – were investigated in Nybrostrand, on the south coast of Sweden. In this article the houses, the relation between houses and fences, and the use of areas inside the fence are discussed and interpreted in terms of their economic and social importance. The surrounding landscape is also brought into the interpretation. It is argued that the northern and western part of the fenced area comprised areas used for small-scale gardening and the keeping of cattle. The southern part was of special social significance, signalling status when receiving guests from far away.

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### Introduction

There is general consensus among researchers that Roman Iron Age society in southernmost Scandinavia was socially differentiated, and that this was reflected on the farms of the period. It is seen, for example, in differences in the size of houses and number of houses on a farm, as well as in the presence and character of post-built fences (Carlie 2005a; Carlie 2005b; Carlie & Artursson 2005; Björhem & Magnusson Staaf 2006; Friman 2008; Björhem & Skoglund 2009; Welinder 2009). In Scania, southernmost Sweden, farms of this period are in some cases associated with post-built fences of different character, although often badly preserved. In the Scanian material the general characteristics of the farms,

such as the size of the houses and the fenced areas, are fairly well-known, but rather little is known regarding the details of the structures. The closer relation between houses and fences and the surrounding landscape has also been given limited attention (see Pettersson 2002 for an interesting example). Fences are associated with densely settled landscapes where there was a need to regulate access and to control the movement of livestock to and from the farms (Friman 2008). They were, however, also present at solitary farms, underlining that social aspects, and not only practical use, were important (Björhem & Magnusson Staaf 2006, p. 202). Fences are in some cases also associated with a need or desire to express military abilities and ambitions (Friman 2008). They are in some cases interpreted as the re-

mains of smaller gardens close to the houses (Pettersson 2002; Andréasson 2008). Fences are thus associated with several functions and meanings of both economic and social character. As mentioned, in most cases interpretations of Scanian material rest on rather badly preserved and sporadic remains of the fences. In this article a well-preserved example will be discussed.

In the autumn of 2011 the remains of a large Roman Iron Age farm – a longhouse, an outhouse and post-built fences – were excavated as part of a developer-funded project in Nybrostrand, Stora Köpinge parish, on the south coast of Sweden (Linderoth 2012). The farm was located close to the coast and the mouth of the small river Nybroån (Fig. 1).

A few kilometres up the Nybroån river more houses have been investigated, although not as well preserved (Tesch 1992a; Tesch 1992b). About three kilometres north-east of the Nybrostrand farm, at Piledal, a burial with fragments of a wine ladle or strainer and a fragment of a gold pendant has been investigated, indicating high status and geographically wide contacts (Helgesson 2002, pp. 83 f., 86 f.; Björk 2005, pp. 204 f.). The farm at Nybrostrand was part of a densely settled landscape. Its location close to the coast made it the first farm to be reached when travelling to the area by sea. The beach near the Nybroån river mouth may have been a natural landing place when arriving by boat, as is suggested for the late Iron Age (Söderberg 2000, pp. 281 ff.).

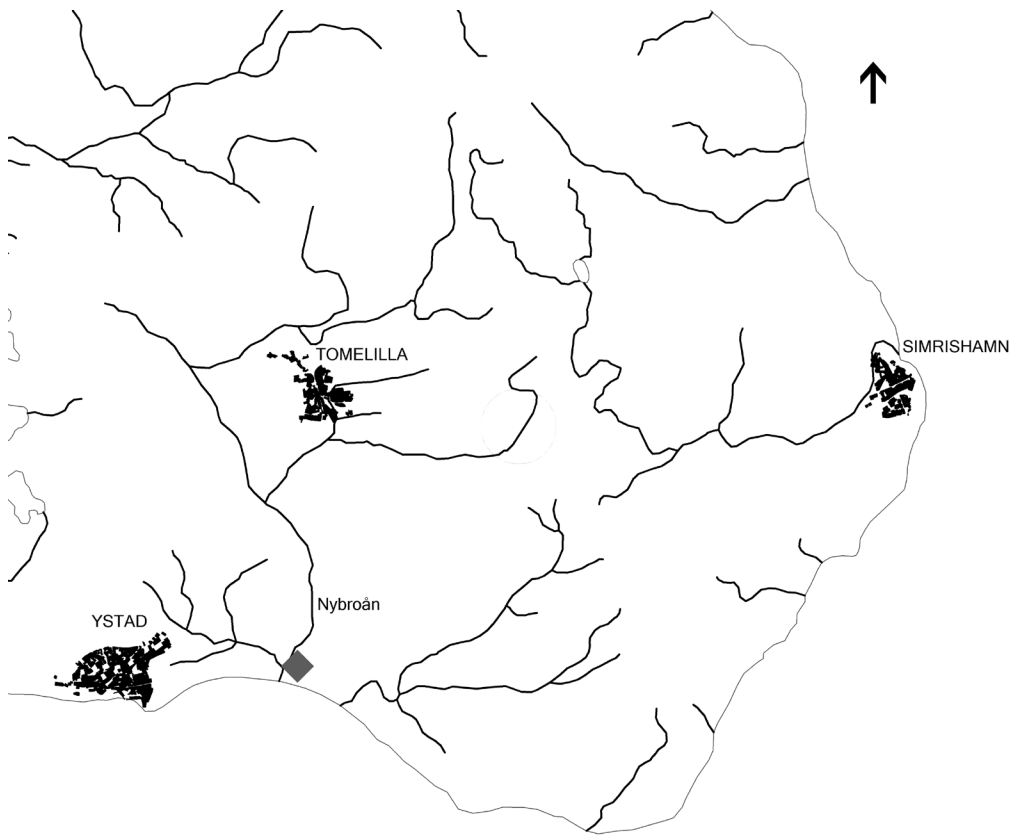


Fig. 1. South-east Scania (southernmost Sweden) with major watercourses and the location of the site indicated.

In this article the well-preserved farm will be presented, and the houses, the relation between houses and fences and the use of areas inside the fence is discussed and interpreted regarding economic and social use and importance. The surrounding landscape is also considered in the discussion. Interpretations are based on knowledge regarding these aspects drawn from Scanian material. A starting point is that architecture and the structuring of space are of social importance, not least clearly exemplified by research on Late Iron Age aristocratic halls (for example Söderberg 2005, pp. 192 ff.). The layout and position of the farm was carefully planned and selected to accommodate practical and economic needs, as well as being of social importance. Generally, the Nybrostrand example shows the importance of interpreting farms and their layout, and position in the landscape as part of economic and social relations and strategy within any given area.

## The site and excavating it

The site is located c. 900 m from the present coast line, c. 7 m above sea level, and c. 500 m to the east of the small river Nybroån. The excavated area is part of a larger settlement area (RAÄ Stora Köpinge 100) stretching c. 500 m in a largely east–west direction and c. 200 m in a north–south direction, following the stretch of a low ridge of sand and gravel. The trench, c. 9,000 m<sup>2</sup>, is located in the southern part of this area. There is a gentle slope towards the sea to the south. No settlement remains from the period have been found between the farm and the coast (Andersson & Aspeborg 2010). To the north more settlement remains from the Early Iron Age can possibly be expected close by before a rather steep slope towards a small valley.

Trial excavations revealed the remains of a Bronze Age settlement site with mainly post-

holes and pits (Andersson & Aspeborg 2010). This was largely confirmed at the subsequent excavation when several houses, smaller post-built structures, cooking pits and hearths from the late Bronze Age were found (Fig. 2). To this were added the remains of the farm dated to the Early Iron Age (Figs. 2 and 3). It should be noted that the western and northern parts of the fence is located close to the edge of the trench. It cannot be ruled out that additional fences exist outside the trench as part of, for example, fenced fields or cattle paths. In the densely settled landscape in the Köpinge area such fenced areas may have been numerous (Tesch 1992b, p. 247).

Since the farm was not known when the excavation was planned it had to be investigated within the budget calculated for the investigation of the Bronze Age remains. This meant that rather hard priorities had to be made. In the main building (house 6) postholes from the roof-supporting structure were investigated. Soil samples were taken in order to retrieve charred plant remains and to provide samples for phosphate and MS analysis. Only a few small sections of wall posts were excavated. In the small house (house 7) most postholes were investigated, as well as the central hearth, and soil samples were taken. This was considered necessary in order to understand its construction. A metal detector was used after the topsoil was removed, which means that only postholes were investigated. No metal was found in the houses. Postholes belonging to the fence were excavated at regular intervals. Excavation especially focused on entrances or where more complicated patterns emerged, mainly in the north-east part, but postholes in all parts of the fence were excavated in order to get a general grasp of its character. Soil samples were not taken in postholes belonging to the fence. Possibly, important information regarding the use of the areas on the inside was thereby not retrieved (cf. Andréasson 2008).



Fig. 2. The site with all documented features. The remains of the Roman Iron Age farm are located in the north-west part of the excavated area.

## The farm – houses and fences

The farm is dated to the Roman Iron Age. Hulled barley from a posthole in the main building was radiocarbon-dated, placing the construction in the late Early Roman Iron Age or the Late Roman Iron Age (LuS 10056,  $1785 \pm 50$  BP, 125–385 cal. AD 95.4% probability). Typologically the houses and fences fit well with material from c. 200 BC–300 AD (Björhem & Magnusson Staaf 2006, pp. 89 ff.; see also Linderoth 2012, pp. 44 f.). It is not known whether the dated material is from an early or late part of the existence of the house. If from a late part, the house may have been

built during a late part of the Early Roman Iron Age and used into the Late Roman Iron Age. The few pieces of pottery found in postholes are dated to the Roman Iron Age. One piece of pottery, a handle from a cup or smaller vessel, is however dated to the early Late Roman Iron Age (Björk 2012). Neither the small house nor the fences contained any datable finds, and no material was radiocarbon-dated. These structures are instead dated to the same period as the main building through spatial relations (Fig. 3). One detail in the postholes of both houses also clearly supports a direct chronological connection between the two. In every posthole there was a lump

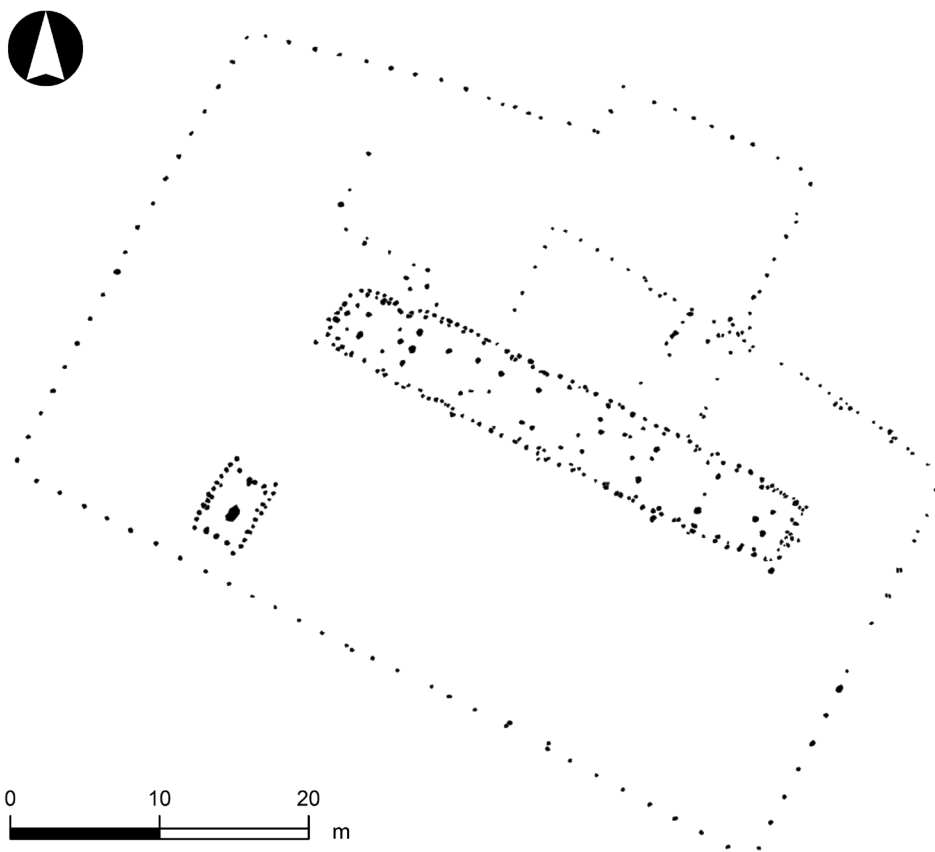


Fig. 3. The farm.

of grey clay. It was visible on the surface after the removal of the topsoil and made identification of postholes belonging to the houses very easy since it was not present in any other features in the trench. The material must have been retrieved from outside the site, perhaps by the river, since the soil in the area consisted of sand and gravel. There is no clear explanation for the function of this material. The clay was perhaps placed in the postholes as a means to better preserve the posts (is it even the remains of clay floors in the houses?). The light sandy soil would otherwise have meant rather quick decomposition of the wood. The explanation is, however, not entirely convin-

cing and its function remains to be sorted out.

The area of the two buildings measured a total of c. 175 m<sup>2</sup>. This places the farm within a category of large–middle-sized farms according to an analysis conducted on Scanian material (Carlie & Artursson 2005, pp. 182 ff., 204 ff.). The main building was a two-aisled longhouse, c. 34 m long. It is thereby one of the largest houses documented in the Köpinge area (see houses from the Köpinge area in Tesch 1992b, pp. 316 ff. and Artursson 2005). It was located in a northwest–southeast direction following the stretch of the low ridge on which it was built. The roof was supported by eight pairs of posts. The postholes

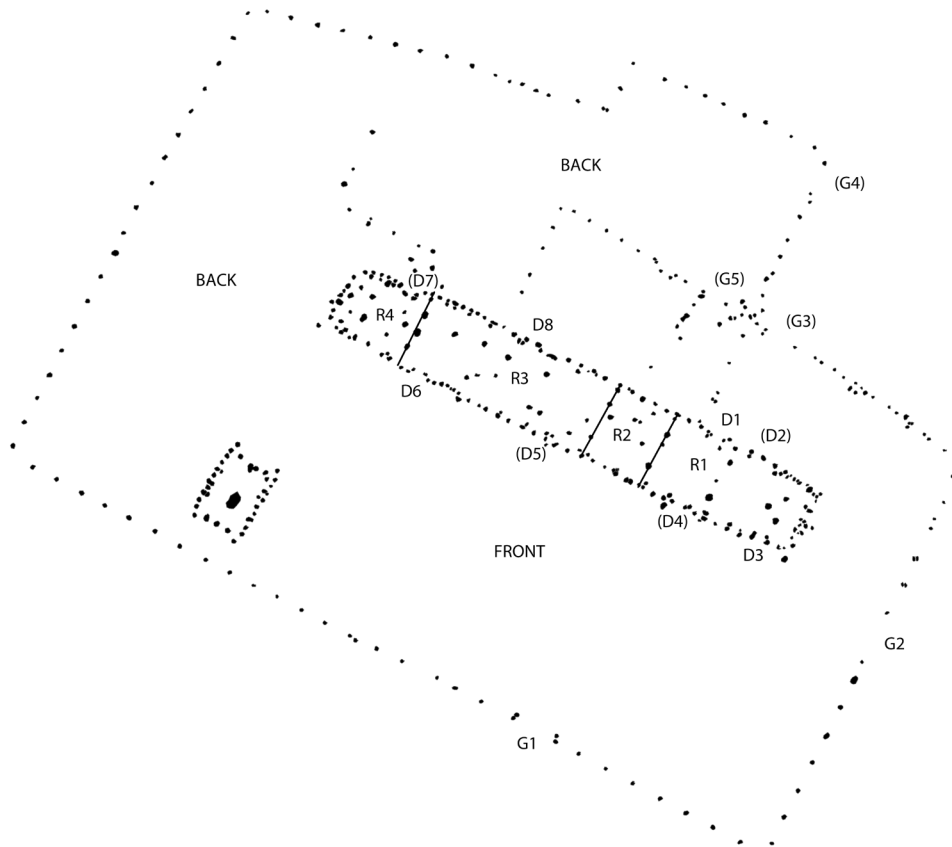


Fig. 4. The farm interpreted. D – door; G – gate; R – room. Parentheses (doors and gates) indicate uncertain interpretation. Lines in the main building indicate possible inner walls (from Linderoth 2012, p. 42).

measured between 0.34 and 0.64 m in diameter and the depth varied from 0.40 to 0.58 m. Extra posts at both ends of the house suggest that lofts may have been located here. Pottery was found in the postholes of the easternmost part of the house, perhaps indicating some sort of storage or working area (cf. Eliasson & Kishonti 2007, p. 210). The walls and gables consisted of double rows of posts; the outer row had smaller distances between the posts and the holes were also slightly deeper. There were at least four openings indicating doors, but there could have been as many as eight (Fig. 4). The excavation report suggests three inner walls and thereby four rooms which are

indicated in Fig. 4 (R1–R4) (Linderoth 2012, p. 42). Kitchen areas (R2 and R4) as well as a possible byre (R1) may have existed. The interpretation rests on analyses of archaeobotanical material and the results of phosphate and MS analysis, but the results are partly contradictory (Gustafsson 2011; Linderholm 2012). There were no preserved remains of hearths or cooking pits inside the house but possible kitchen areas are, as stated above, identified in the middle part, slightly towards the east and in the western part. The handle from the cup or small vessel mentioned above was found in a posthole belonging to the third roof-supporting pair from the east, indicating kitchen

activities in this area (Fig. 4, postholes at the easternmost wall partition). Phosphates, on the other hand, indicate a possible byre (R1/R2) in the middle–eastern part. No stalling partitions supporting this were documented. The partly overlapping interpretations of the middle–eastern middle part may be a result of a border zone between a living area and a byre area. The general impression indicates a living area (with kitchen/storage) in the western half of the house (R2–R4) and byre/storage in the eastern half of the house (R1) (cf. Tesch 1992b, p. 246; Martens 2006, p. 101; Eliasson & Kishonti 2007, p. 210).

The small house was situated c. 10 m south of the main building (Fig. 3). It measured 5.70 by 3.75 m. The interior held a single room of c. 18 m<sup>2</sup>. It consisted of 34 postholes and a hearth, and it had a slightly convex shape with concave gables. The postholes had a diameter of 0.24–0.48 m and were 0.10–0.44 deep. There were no postholes from roof posts inside the house. Instead the roof was supported by the walls and the gables. This is supported by the fact that the postholes in the corners and in the middle of the gables were the largest and deepest ones. The entrance was probably located at the northern gable, possibly to the west of the centrally placed post. In the centre of the house (slightly towards the southern gable) a hearth measuring 1.40 × 0.84 m and 0.06 m deep was placed. Postholes in the southern gable and the hearth contained almost 200 grains and hundreds of fragmented grains. Hulled barley is the only identified species apart from one seed of hop (hulled barley as well as millet were also found in the main building). There were also weeds present in the material, indicating manuring of the fields (cf. Tesch 1992b, pp. 246 f.). The house is interpreted as a cooking house. Brewing was possibly part of the activities in the house (Gustafsson 2011).

The fence enclosed an area of 1,985 m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 3). The outer fence was generally regular

in the placing of the posts, set about 1.5–2 m apart. In the north-east part posts were more closely and irregularly placed. Posts in this part were also smaller than in the other parts. The excavated postholes measured 0.14–0.44 m in diameter and were 0.06–0.38 m deep. Generally postholes indicate a sturdy fence. Towards the east and south larger gates were documented (G1–4 in Fig. 4). The southern gate was c. 2.7 m wide and had double posts on either side, while the eastern gate was c. 3.5 m wide with only single posts on either side. Possible gates were also located in the north-east part of the fence but these are more uncertain due to possibly poor preservation conditions at these spots. This is also the case with the fences leading towards the main house. Openings probably existed here but it is difficult to interpret because posts may have been affected by other features, or perhaps simply because posts were not dug deep enough to leave traces. The fence leading north-west from D7 was of a different character from the main fence (Fig. 4). It was perceived as less sturdy.

## Use of space at the farm

As part of the West Coast Line Project in western Scania, Jes Martens discussed the results from phosphate analysis which included Iron Age houses (Martens 2006). Martens saw a general trend of higher levels of phosphates outside one of the long sides in the studied houses. His general interpretation was that houses generally had a “back side” (or an “economic side”) and a presentable “front side” (Martens 2006, p. 100). This basic division is used here as a way of underlining interpretations regarding economic and social aspects of the farm. Areas to the north and west of the main building are interpreted as the back side, and the area to the south of the main building as the front side (see Fig. 4 for details discus-

sed in this section). As for the details within the fenced area, they are on a general level indicative of an area of divided use. Specific use is of course difficult to interpret, and may also partly have been multifunctional rather than specialized. The northeastern–eastern back side seems important in the everyday activities and movements indicated by the gates. This part is directed towards the densely settled areas to the north, up the Nybroån river. The southern side, the front side, is directed towards the coast where no further farms are found. In the following the keeping of cattle and small-scale gardening will be discussed, as well as the way the farm was intended to be perceived by visitors as part of a social strategy.

Cattle were owned by individual farms during the period in question (Björhem & Magnusson Staaf 2006, p. 202). Cattle were herded to and from farms and pastures. In the main house a byre is suggested in part of the eastern half of the main house (R1 except the easternmost part at D3 which was a possible storage room). Perhaps only the most valuable part of the cattle herd (for example those important for breeding), or horses were kept indoors in byres such as this (Carlie 1999, pp. 120 f.). Cattle may very well also have been kept inside the fenced area, or outside on fallow fields, grasslands or forests (Zimmermann 1999). At Hyllie, south-west Scania, for example, it is suggested that cattle were kept within part of the fenced area on one of the very large farms there (Friman 2008, pp. 81 ff.). Keeping them within the fence would still mean that manure could be collected (Zimmermann 1999, p. 304). Simple sheds may have existed within the fenced area, either leaving no archaeological traces or being hidden among the many postholes within the area (Fig. 2). A byre in the eastern half of the house indicates that animals were brought to and from pastures through doors and gates in this part (cf. Martens 2006, p. 100). Direct and easy access was possible through D1 (or D2)

and G3, perhaps also via G4 and G5. Herds may also have been brought in through G2 and D4. Keeping cattle in a byre meant a need to handle manure. Manure was probably kept close to the byre. The north-eastern part of the fenced area, outside D1/D2 and the eastern gable, is likely for this purpose. This corner of the fenced area must have been quite messy! The wide eastern gate, G2, indicates special use. This could have been the main entry point for transports on wagons. Manure, for example, could be effectively brought to the fields close to the farm in this way, and fodder for cattle of course brought in. A potential problem in keeping cattle in byres (and tending gardens as discussed below) is access to water. There were no signs of wells within the excavated area (Fig. 2). Water thus had to be brought from some distance to satisfy the needs of people, animals and plants. This could also have been brought in on wagons since quite large amounts must have been needed.

Manure was probably also used within the fenced area, in the small gardens that may have existed here. Small-scale gardening within fences close to houses has been discussed by Claes Pettersson (2002) and most thoroughly by Anna Andréasson (2008). Their studies are based on Scanian material. Direct evidence in the form of plant remains from fences is scarce (Andréasson 2008). Cabbage as well as oil-producing plants such as flax are suggested to have been grown (Pettersson 2002, p. 504; see also Carlie 2005b, p. 476). These gardens were labour-intensive, requiring more or less constant tending (Pettersson 2002, p. 504). The small fenced area outside D8 was perhaps too small to have held a garden. This area may have been intended for animals such as pigs, or used for storage of firewood needed in the everyday activities on the farm. The most suitable placement for gardens would be in the western part of the fenced area. There is no direct evidence of this in the form of



plant remains. The area was however sheltered behind the fence, which had no gates in this part, as well as by the small cooking house. The small fence leading from D7 also separated the northern part of the fenced area from the western part, perhaps offering protection from cattle being kept or brought in here. Exiting from D7 and the possible kitchen, R4, gave direct access to the garden.

Apart from practical aspects the sturdy fence probably had a special social significance in the local area (cf. Wason 1994, p. 142). The sturdy fence perhaps signalled the military position and ability of the family living there, and perhaps of the area as a whole. A focus on military aspects is seen across southernmost Scandinavia during the Roman Iron Age. This is not least reflected in burials with weapons, in south-east Scania best exemplified by the Simris cemetery just outside Simrishamn in Fig. 1 (Stjernquist 1955; Nicklasson 1997, pp. 95 f.). Living this close to the coast was probably not without risk. The fence could of course not be effectively used as a fortified defensive structure in a direct conflict situation. In a case like this the defence strategies were based on the ability to spot possible aggressors and quickly raise a large defence force from all farms of the area (Ringtved 1999, pp. 375 ff.). Farms close to the coast were important in keeping watch over coastal movement. If approaching the area with hostile intentions attackers likely chose a more isolated landing-point than the beach immediately to the south of the fenced farm (cf. Ringtved 1999, p. 375). Rather, the position and general impression of the farm is of a manifestation aimed at visitors with peaceful intentions, as an entry point to the area and the farms further up the Nybroån river. Approaching from the coast meant seeing the farm slightly from below. From a distance the fence and the main gate, G1, and at least the roofs of the houses would have been visible. Entering through G1, a visitor's eye would

have been caught by the entire length of the main house. The cooking house screened off most of the garden area to the west, underlining the impression of a main courtyard. Visitors invited into the house were led across the front area to D6/D5. During times when cattle were in the byre, visitors were perhaps even led into the house this way in order to be shown the most valuable animals on the farm. Thus the architecture of the farm and the fence, as well as its position in the landscape was planned to make an impression on visitors. Once inside the walls of the house, guests were treated with food and (brewed) drink prepared in the cooking house.

## Some final remarks

The farm interpreted in this article underlines the importance of relating individual farms to the surrounding landscape. What should also be stressed is the importance of acknowledging variation in the structuring of both houses and fences as well as details of economic and social function and strategy. The farm discussed here is but one example. We know rather little about this, especially in respect to the rich source material of hundreds of house remains from the Early Iron Age in Scania. Houses often become "isolated" in the sense that we generally have no traces of fences, or because we cannot connect individual features such as wells, storage pits etc. to specific houses (cf. Welinder 2009). Houses, often without traces of walls or doors, are easily perceived as open and accessible from all directions when one looks at site plans. This article has been an attempt to underline and contribute to the understanding of the Early Iron Age farm as carefully planned in a landscape of economic and social relations.

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