

# The crofters during the Middle Ages

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*During the medieval period, the agrarian society underwent great changes. One of them were the formalisation of tenant farms and the established system of crofts and crofters at the noble estates. The knowledge of how the crofter lived and organised life during this time is virtually unknown. In this article, three aspects of how to characterise medieval crofts and crofters are examined. The material contexts, the spatial contexts and the social contexts are investigated in order to highlight and increase the knowledge of this social group in society, mostly forgotten in archaeology. The article stresses the fact that essential for studying the crofters are a greater awareness of the remains of their material culture in the landscape, which leads to the question of how to locate the site of the crofters. Other important aspects concern consciousness of their historical setting in a specific local society. The crofter's life and living environments varied accordingly.*

It is no exaggeration to say that crofters and crofts in the Middle Ages are a forgotten area in the field of archaeological research. In recent decades, the crofters, and the tenants in early modern and modern periods have attracted attention in research and contract archaeology, yet crofters and tenant farmers of the Middle Ages have hardly been afforded any attention (Berg 2003; Lind *et. al* 2001, 9ff; Andersson 2007, 9ff; Nilsson *et al.* 2020).

This article aims to highlight the unexplored – the crofters of the medieval period. They have not been very prominent in written sources from the Middle Ages but have had an important function in the development of the agrarian society (Rahmqvist 1996,

18). The Swedish project” *De obesuttnas arkeologi: människor, metoder och möjligheter*” has shown that there has been a high degree of invisibility in the written source material regarding the period 1700–1900s (Nilsson *et al.* 2020). The same cannot be said for earlier periods since the written sources are overall not common and the information scarce. It is clear though that research has not been interested in this social group to the same degree as other population categories, but crofters have been touched upon in various dissertations (Rahmqvist 1996, Ericsson 2012). An exception is Valter Elgeskog's ”*Svensk torpbebyggelse från 1500-talet till laga skifte. En agrarhistorisk studie*” (1945), a classic

work that is relevant on a fundamental level. However, the starting point in this study is the 16<sup>th</sup> century, thus previous periods are not dealt with. The challenges we face in studying the landless and the poor in the Middle Ages are many times greater in terms of source material and representativeness than from more recent time periods. Although methodological inputs can be gained from studies of more recent historical periods, archaeological methods are essential (Nilsson *et al.* 2020, 10).

A challenge in archaeological contexts is to determine which social category generated an excavated archaeological material. For the manors of Late Iron Age and the Middle Ages, there are well-established criteria, but these are lacking for other groups (Hållans Stenholm 2012, 91 and literature cited there; Lingström 2017, 400ff).

In the following text, three aspects that can be used to characterize medieval crofts and crofters are examined. Initially, the *material contexts* are highlighted. The physical remains discovered by archaeological methods are interpreted based on buildings. These are related to the *spatial contexts*, here mainly the surrounding landscape according to older maps, topography and so on. Finally, the relationship with the landowner and the *social contexts* that the crofter may have been part of are presented.

## The landless of the Middle Ages

In recent years, the archaeological material has, to a greater extent than before, been interpreted in terms of social aspects (Schmidt Sabo 2005, 21 ff; Hållans Stenholm 2014, 9 f; Seiler & Beronius Jörpeland 2020). It has also been noted that for the elite in the society demesne farming was common. During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, land was separated and allotted to newly established

tenant farms which meant that a system of subordinate land estates was established (Berg 2003, Ericsson 2012, 43 ff; Widgren 2014). Elements important to this context was also the clearing of new land for agrarian purposes, which led to crofts being established in outland areas, leading to the colonization of new lands (Brunius 1980; Hansson 2007; Beronius Jörpeland & Larsson 2021). In the wake of this development, new population groups followed within agrarian society, those who did not themselves have supremacy over the land, the landless, for example the tenant farmers and the crofters.

### *The landbo system*

Even though different forms of subordinate relations between manors and underlying farms existed earlier, the landbo system of the Middle Ages was formalized during the 13<sup>th</sup> century with its fixed-term tenancies (Myrdal 1999, 98). Thomas Lindkvist defines a tenant (Swedish: *landbo*) as the peasants who cultivated land that they themselves did not own, land that often belonged to an ecclesiastical institution or a worldly noble family (Lindkvist 1979, 10). In the Mälaren area, a relatively large number of tenant farms have been archaeologically excavated. We now have fairly good knowledge when it comes to the farm buildings and artefacts for this social category, as well as their setting in the landscape (Beronius Jörpeland 2017).

### *The medieval institution of crofters*

The term “croft” is ambiguous in a historical perspective, as crofters were a heterogeneous group in society. The Swedish term *torp* usually means a small, non-taxed farm which was not owned by the person who farmed it. The crofter was normally a dayworker at the estate the landowner. The term could also refer to a homestead that has not yet achieved tax power, for example in newly colonized areas (Beronius Jörpeland & Hållans Stenholm

2009, 9; Ericsson 2012, 168f). The medieval crofters were established as a social and economic group in a specific social context. Their function was clearly tied to the medieval noble estates and the emergence of manorial estates in the Middle Ages.

Historian Sigurd Rahmqvist has in his thesis, called this phenomenon “*Den medeltida torpinstitutionen*” (Rahmqvist 1996, 18). He pointed out that previous researchers have consistently underestimated the role of the demesne farming in early medieval society. On good grounds, it can be said that this also applied in archaeology, which only in the last decades have discovered that the agrarian society was multifaceted, and that excavated material culture reflect different social groups. This suggests that the one-dimensional concept of “peasants” should be questioned. This was especially apparent when farms were discovered “outside” the vicinity of the village settlement and the core of the arable land (Beronius Jörpeland 2010; Seiler & Beronius Jörpeland 2020).

Crofts are characterized by and defined as small dependent tenant holdings established on demesne territory (Rahmqvist 1996, 22). They thus constituted secondary farming units to a parent unit. During the Middle Ages, they were a very common occurrence, both in the Svea landscapes and in the Göta landscapes (Rahmqvist 1996, 8). Initially they formed means for the landowners to keep the agricultural labour necessary for running the home farm. In this way – says Rahmqvist – the medieval crofters at manor houses and home farm (Swedish: *huvudgård*) are no different from the dayworkers at the manors of the 1700s and 1800s. In return for a certain number of days’ work on the manor, and the payment of a small, annual monetary fee, the crofter was given the right to settle on the land. Additionally, small-scale arable farming allowed the crofter to support himself and his family. Sigurd Rahmqvist shows in

his thesis that the medieval crofts appear in the latter half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and are well represented in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Crofts continued to be established on the outskirts of the medieval estates throughout the Middle Ages (Rahmqvist 1996, 33, 35).

When it comes to archaeological investigations of medieval crofting sites, the picture looks completely different compared to the settlement sites of the tenant farms and manorial sites. Excavated settlements interpreted as crofters farms are few. In the antiquarian process and in contract archaeology, it is apparent that these sites were encountered/discovered more by chance than as a result of scientific investigation methods prior to excavations. The same was stated over 10 years ago in the case of medieval farms in general. In a study of medieval rural remains in Stockholm County, I found that subordinate farms belonging to a medieval main farm or estate are particularly difficult to identify in an antiquarian process or solely in analysis of cadastral maps. The reason for this is the fact that the sites of the crofts may have been dispersed within the infields and outfields with no spatial relation to site of the manor house or the village according to older maps (Beronius Jörpeland 2010, 32). Supported by several archaeological examples, I was able to show that this was the case. Farms that had only been in use during the medieval period and disappeared before leaving their mark in written sources and maps, were particularly difficult to identify. In cases where they came to be excavated, it was often because other types of remains were the primary subject of the archaeological project, such as Iron Age graves or Stone Age settlements. Furthermore, I noted at the time that one social category that was particularly elusive was the medieval crofter. Thus, there are still relatively few investigated crofts, which is probably due to the fact that the remains are spatially and chronologically limited, which commonly results in shallow

stratigraphy. Often the remains are not visible above ground and are found in unexpected locations. Another aggravating circumstance is that not all crofts belonging to a manor were named (Rahmqvist 1996, 11). At least not everyone had a name that was listed in written sources. Thus, one cannot rely on them being listed in land records or accounted for by name in land transactions.

## Material contexts

The physical remains that have been archaeologically examined serve as a starting point for highlighting the site of the croft. These examples have been chosen on the basis that they have either been interpreted as crofting buildings in the archaeological report, or the site itself reveals that it may have been a crofter's plot based on the geographical setting, in a distance from the village or the

manor. Furthermore, the material remains from the site was sparse. In this article, the focus lies on crofters' buildings. To fully understand the function of the crofters in their contemporary society, the artefacts are of course vital. However, to include artefacts in this text would have been too extensive.

The examples chosen here reflects the material diversity connected to this social group. The variation between individual crofts naturally had to do with a number of different factors where the conditions for livelihood were perhaps the most important. The fact that crofters were multi-taskers has often been highlighted when it comes to the period 1600–1900 (Nilsson *et al.* 2020, 27). This probably also applies to the medieval crofters. Talent for different crafts was doubtlessly an important characteristic which also had an impact on the economic situation.

Unsurprisingly, the farms analysed and interpreted as a croft were small with one or

Table I. Investigated buildings that have been interpreted as belonging to crofting environments. The house numbering refers to the respective archaeological report. The table is arranged chronologically.

Place	House construction	Area m <sup>2</sup>	Length	Width	Room	Dating	Function
Isättra Hus II	Post house	50	11	4,5	1	1100–1300	multi
Åsta 104	Hybrid	44	8,3	5,3	1	1150–1250	dwelling
Åsta 45	Four-post house	25	5,2	5	1	1150–1250	economics
Gammelsta	Post house	50	10	5	1	1160–1310	multi
Helsingbodha	Wooden sill	24	6	4	2	1250–1400	dwelling
Isättra House I	Stone-sill	14	4,5	3,1	1	1300–1400	dwelling
Åsta 42	Post house	56	14	4	3	1300–1400	multi
Visättra	Hybrid	13,5	4,5	3	1	1300–1500	dwelling
Kärsta 117	Hybrid	29,5	8	3,7	1	1400–1500	dwelling
Kärsta 59	Post house	60	10	6	1	1400–1500	dwelling
Kärsta 118	hybrids	5,5	2,5	2,2	1	1400–1500	economics
Kärsta 69	Four-post house	8,5	3,5	2,4	1	1400–1500	economics
Åsta 43	Post house	40,5	9	4,5	1	1500–1600	dwelling
Åsta 44	Four-post house	15	4	3,7	1	1500–1600	economics
Kärsta 56	Hybrid	36	7,5	4,8	1	1550–1650	dwelling
Kärsta 53	Hybrid	50	9,3	5,3	1	1550–1650	dwelling
Kärsta 54	Hybrid	53	12	4,4	3	1550–1650	multi

two constituent buildings (Table I). The table shows 17 buildings that probably belonged to medieval crofts. From Närke, there are examples of investigated sites with two or three buildings, one of which was probably a dwelling house and an outbuilding. There also existed farms with only a dwelling house. In *Kärsta and Åsta* in Lillkyrka parish, Närke, four farm sites have been excavated (Beronius

Jörpeland & Larsson 2021). Six farms divided into four phases have been identified during the period 1150–1650 A.D. Initially, the courtyards consisted of two buildings at an angle to each other (fig. 1). In the following phases, from the 1500s–1600s, the farm was supplemented with at least one or more buildings, suggesting that the household and livestock became larger. All phases show

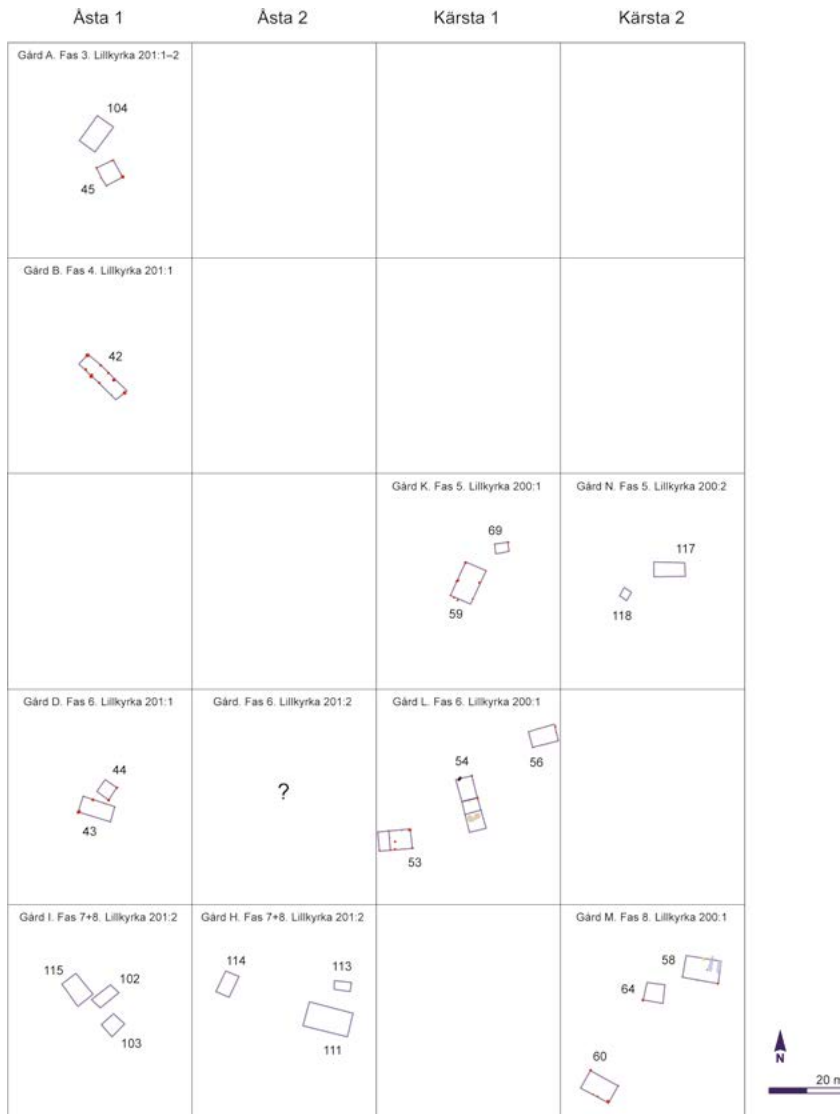


Fig. 1. The interpretation of the farm buildings in Kärsta and Åsta, Lillkyrka, Närke. Two sites of crofters were excavated in each village. Phase 3=1150–1250 A.D. Phase 4=1250–1400 A.D. Phase 5=1400–1500 A.D. Phase 6 1500–1650 A.D (Beronius Jörpeland & Larsson 2021, 110).

Table II. The total built area for excavated crofting sites with several included buildings. The house numbering refers to the respective archaeological report. The table is arranged chronologically.

The site of the croft	Total area	Dating
Åsta 45+104	70	1150–1250
Åsta 42	56	1300–1400
Kärsta 117+118	35	1400–1500
Kärsta 59+69	68,5	1400–1500
Åsta 43+44	55,5	1500–1600
Kärsta 53+54+56	139	1550–1650

the older farm pattern, including a larger building, interpreted as a dwelling house, and a smaller rectangular or square auxiliary building for cattle or storage. The dimensions between the houses in these two features varies. The residential buildings were between 4.5–10 metres long, the area varied between 13.5 and 60 m<sup>2</sup>. The economy buildings were between 2.5–5.2 metres long and varied in area between 5 and 25 m<sup>2</sup>.

The total built area in cases where several buildings were included, varied between 35 and 70 m<sup>2</sup> (Table II). The youngest farm from the period 1550–1650 consisted of three buildings, which means that the built area here was a total of 139 m<sup>2</sup>. In this case it could be argued that the farm in this phase already had become one of the tenant farms from the written sources. Martin Hansson has used the total built area to discuss the social function of the farm in society (Hansson 2014, 169). In general, many farms during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages seem to consist of 200–400 m<sup>2</sup> built area. Large manorial farms, on the other hand, could have areas above 500 and up to 1000 m<sup>2</sup>. From this perspective, the crofts appear to be extremely small.

The examples from the parish of Lillkyrka also revealed an area outside the buildings which can be interpreted as a courtyard. Here was ovens and hearths constructed outdoors, and also different forms of production pits. Some were used to produce potash (Beronius

Jörpeland & Larsson 2021, 39 ff).

The building condition represented in the examples from Närke was post and lintel buildings. In some regions, the post houses were replaced by timbered structures on stone sills in the Middle Ages. However, post-borne buildings were used the entire medieval period (Beronius Jörpeland 2017). A special category of solitary post houses is those found in woodlands at a relatively large distance from the manor house or the village. Common features are that they have been found within areas of Stone Age settlements in upland forest-rich terrain. Here, an example from eastern Södermanland can be highlighted. On a ledge on a relatively steep slope, a post hole concentration was excavated, which is likely to be traces of a post and lintel building. The house was dated with <sup>14</sup>C-samples to the period 1300–1500 (Larsson et al. 2002, 50). An interesting element was that relatively extensive shard stone layers to the east of the building. Shard stone layers in connection with medieval remains have been found on several occasions (Beronius Jörpeland & Hamilton 2010, 35, Schmidt Wikborg 2006, 31). They should probably be seen as part of waste/activity remains from the settlement. The house was situated in the woodland southwest of Flemingsberg's manor, which in the Middle Ages was called Andersta (Janzon & Rahmqvist 2002, 151 ff). About 600 metres east of the excavated building

was a croft with arable land during the 1600s with the toponym Visättra. The name suggests seasonally used summer farms. Several similar examples of post-borne buildings in the woodland can be found from the Mälaren area (Grundberg 1993; Nordin 2005; Werthwein 2005). It is possible that these belong to a category that can be designated as a forester belonging to a manor. These remains can also be interpreted as have had a seasonal function for example for hunters or as shielings.

Finally, two examples should be highlighted, both bear similarities with the cottages of younger historical periods. Both had built-up fireplaces and were probably of timbered structures. Helsingabodha in central Uppland consisted of a two-room cottage, with a fireplace in the larger room (Dutra Leivas & Hennius 2006). The house was about 6×4 metres in size and on the yard, there was a small area with hearths. One of these showed a contemporary dating. A paved cellar pit about 20 metres from the cottage that shows that the yard was used for various purposes. The house was in use from the late 1200s into the 1300s and have been interpreted as a subordinate croft to the Sandbro family's main manor *Sandbro* in Björklinge parish (Dutra Leivas & Rahmqvist 2005).

On the grounds of the village of Isättra in Österåkers parish in Uppland, a small, rectangular house 4.5 x 3.1 metres in size, were excavated. The house had a stone and clay floor and a fireplace in the northeast corner. Seven out of eight analyzed <sup>14</sup>C samples dated to the period 1100–1300s (Vinberg & Wahl 1996). Isättra belonged the estate Margretelund, during the Middle Ages called Smedby. The site, close to arable land and some distance from the village according to older maps suggests that this probably was a dwelling house for a crofter or a tenant.

All in all, it can be concluded that the farm buildings for a crofter in the Mälaren region consisted of one or two smaller buildings.

Construction conditions varied, both post and lintel houses and houses on stone sills/wood sill occurred. The built area was relatively small in relation to other medieval farms, below a total area of 100 m<sup>2</sup> in the examples cited. In several places there was an activity area around the houses that can be interpreted as courtyards. Here, there were contemporaneous hearths, production pits and, in one case, a basement pit.

## Spatial context

The spatial context can be considered from a micro and a macro perspective. The former includes the croft's place in the surrounding landscape, the immediate local environment. The latter is about the physical location of the croft within a demesne. Based on Sigurd Rahmqvist's view that there was a functional relationship between croft and the manor, it is clear that one cannot be studied separately from the other. The affinity between the main farm and the croft means that the spatial location of the croft must be sought within the domain of the landowner. More specifically, on the outfield alongside the arable land and adjacent to natural meadows. Rahmqvist states: "thus to the places in the outfield where there is arable soil and wetlands" (Rahmqvist 1996, 9). Therefore, it is possible to hypothetically circle the places that could be potential crofting locations. The excavated croft examples in this article show that the distance between the manor house and the sites of the crofts varies according to the specific history of the manor and its specific setting in the landscape. And of course, how vast the land belonging to the manor extended. In the example of Lillkyrka, the crofts were built east of the land belonging to the medieval manor Ekeberg. The distance as the crow flies to the main building at Ekeberg was 3 kilometres, which shows that





there could be considerable distances between the manor house and the individual crofts. One of the estates that appears in Sigurd Rahmqvist's thesis is the Sandbro family estate in Björklinge, Uppland. The oldest known map from 1680 shows, in addition to the manor house, also Nynäs manor and crofts listed on the outskirts of the estate (fig. 2). The investigated croft Helsingabodha may also serve as an example here. This croft was established on the edge of the arable land between the wetland meadows close to the road leading past Sandbro manor. The site thus had a good communicative location, between sought-after natural resources; the farmland and the coastal meadows to Långsjön. The house was located at 500 metres distance from the main building. The most remote crofts belonging to the estate were located at about 2 kilometres away. The croft was thus situated at a convenient distance for the day's work. They could all easily be reached in less than an hour's walk.

The site of the croft also had an ideological meaning. Through the location of the croft, the landowner's prosperity could be visualized and emphasized. Furthermore, as in the case of Bergkvara in Småland, allowing a free zone closest to the manor house allowing the aristocracy to distance themselves from other groups in society (Hansson 2005, 38).

Crofts' topographical locations alongside old arable land suggests that they were not agricultural units. Their main production resource in Uppland was the meadowland. It is obvious that the croft had some arable land, but it has not been larger than what was required for the maintenance of the crofter household (Rahmqvist 1996, 36). In the archaeological examples, the proximity to the roads can be highlighted, as well as the fact that the proximity to the arable land was not obvious (see also Rosén 1999, 104). An important and interesting aspect of the crofts' settlement sites is whether they were

determined by the landowner, or whether the crofter himself, of course within certain restrictions, could determine the location of the house himself. The latter are assumed to be quite obvious since each had to build their own house and decide where cultivation plots and pastures would be suitable. The location of the site is assumed, at least for crofts in early modern and modern times, to be directly or indirectly determined by the person or persons who owned the land (Rosén 1999, 100). However, the crofters were able to use the landscape to express themselves as a social collective (Nilsson *et al.* 2020, 12 and literature cited therein). In Lillkyrka parish, the excavated sites were located in an area that was the village common according to older maps. The medieval crofts were situated partly in the same area (Beronius Jörpeland & Larsson 2021). It is likely that the settlement site and the farm location were determined when the land was taken up for new cultivation or use. Each croft must have had a selected spatial area which included available natural resources. How they were regulated in relation to the other crofters on the estate is not known. From later historical periods there are preserved contracts specifying the responsibilities of both the crofter and the landowner.

Excavated medieval crofts have usually not had physical boundaries for the site of the dwelling house such as fences or stone walls. One reason the yard was not demarcated was probably that the site of the croft was not stationary, but mobile. The houses seem to have been in use for quite a short period, perhaps only one or two generations. It means that land use in connection with the buildings was to some extent flexible, between grazing, fields, and site for the houses (Beronius Jörpeland & Larsson 2021, 98 and literature cited therein). In the field map of Kärsta and Åsta from 1689, the crofts had fenced courtyards, which suggests that, at the time



Fig. 3. Detail from the field map of Kärsta in Lillkyrka, in 1689, a specially fenced farmhouse is marked for each croft. Lantmäteriet Akt 18-LIL-6

there was a need to delimit the immediate area by the cottage. Perhaps because there was a kitchen garden here (fig.3).

In summary, the croft settlements show that there are elements in the landscape that can be used to help to locate medieval crofts. The single most important element, however, is who owned or had supremacy over the land. The estate or village's ownership domain, its structuring of the land and outland, as well as knowledge of the older road network, land types and topography are the elements of the landscape that have guided the establishment of the medieval crofts.

## Social contexts

The social context is thus an important aspect for understanding of where and why crofts were established. For medieval conditions, the noble estates are a significant entry point.

However, crofts were probably also taken up on larger tax farms and within village communities. The purpose of highlighting and problematizing the social contexts is to make it clear that even the landless had a local community to live in and relate to. Ultimately, however, it is about the people who belonged to society's most vulnerable underclass. However, they did not constitute a unified class, but represented a heterogeneous group in its quest for livelihoods, identities, and positions in a specific social context (Beronius Jörpeland & Hållans Stenholm 2009, 9; Nilsson *et al* 2020, 9 f). Although the tenant farmers were landless, they were peasants, and thus part of the village community and the local society.

In the early stages of crofting establishments, from the second half of the 1200s and 1300s, it is reasonable that the crofter had a relatively close relationship with the landowner and the family who let the land to lease. Rahmqvist supposes that the crofting institution was a way for the landowners to offer the labour force on large farms permanent residence with their own responsibility for livelihood. In this way, the landowner could tie the labour force to the manor. It was probably freed thralls who obtained a piece of land for cultivation and maintenance and the monetary fee imposed on the crofter probably had the character of "reconnaissance fee". That is, the fee had more meaning of recognition of the landowner's ownership of the land than that it was compensation for the value of the right of use (Rahmqvist 1996, 35). Thus, there was an interdependent relationship between landowners and farmers, a loyalty that was not shared by freehold-farmers.

Another aspect of social contexts is the geographical mobility of the older society. Historians Jan Mispelære and Jonas Lindström have investigated geographical mobility and social position in two villages in Västmanland during the last decade of the 1600s. Their

thesis is that the older society was very mobile and heterogeneous, and that geographical mobility varied with social position (Mispelære & Lindström 2015, 72 f). The groups studied included peasants, servants, crofters and housed people. For this article, the group of the landless is most interesting. The authors found that less than one in four landless people (in the villages surveyed) were born in the village where he or she later lived. They were also able to establish that there were no differences between the sexes within this group and that the housed people were the least attached to their birth village. The study is interesting both methodological and what source materials are used, but also because the late 1600s reasonably reflect an older social structure in agrarian society before the modernity and social changes of the 1800s. Another important aspect highlighted by the authors is the importance of geographical mobility for the local community. They found that anyone who “lacked a place to live, in a physical sense, also did not have an obvious place in the local community” (Mispelære & Lindström 2015, 91).

The study shows that there was a large measure of geographical mobility among all groups in society, but that it was also about social position as well as at what stage in life you moved. The ones that moved the least were the male freeholder. The question is whether this can be applied to the medieval period. It is likely that greater mobility existed in the late Middle Ages than in the early Middle Ages. This is linked to the medieval agrarian crisis, which meant a shortage of labour, which in turn meant that the tenant farmers had a relatively strong position. (Rahmqvist 1996, 298). The medieval charters concerning the tenant farmers reflect a gradual development of the late Middle Ages agrarian crisis; “*It allowed the working population in rural areas to choose between jobs – it made the common people more mobile and more self-aware than*

*before*” (Lönnroth 1968, 40). During the latter half of the 1400s, the trend reversed, and the supply of labour improved significantly. There was no longer a need to force the country dwellers to remain on the farms because they stayed voluntarily when they could no longer choose between different job opportunities (Lönnroth 1968, 41).

The settlement in Kärsta, Lillkyrka parish can be used to shed light on the social conditions. The archaeological material, dates and pollen analysis show that the land belonging to the village (according to the map from 1682), was claimed during the 1200s (Beronius Jörpeland & Larsson 2021, 84ff). A hypothetical scenario set out in the archaeological report was that the landowner on the adjoining estate Ekeberg allow freed thralls or servants to establish crofts on the outfield. During the last years of the 1400s, Abraham Kristiernsson (Leijonhufvud) exchanges Ekeberg from Jöns Jönsson. This Jöns Jönsson (Liljeörn) had had Ekeberg as a manor between the years 1486–1492. When Jöns Jönsson received Ekeberg, a land exchange letter was drawn up where it is explicitly stated that Jöns Jönsson *«erhåller huvudgården Ekeberg, Älterud, en gård i Sticksjö and två gårdar i Tåsta in Glanshammars sn»* and (3 farms in) Kärsta in Lillkyrka parish (Eriksson 1995). Thus, Ekeberg appears in the sources as an estate whose owner belonged to the highest stratum of society. The estate appears to lack a landed settlement within its border as it appears in older maps. Kärsta village borders Ekeberg and was a relatively large village with six (or seven) tenant farms, half of which were owned by Ekeberg and half of which were owned by Göksholm by the end of the 1400s. One possible scenario is that the tenant farms originate from crofting establishments on the outskirts east of Ekeberg during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These crofts were probably converted into tenant farms later in the Middle Ages or in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

as the cultivated land increased. It is likely that several crofts were established during the same period, which means that these crofters formed a social group that jointly cleared the forest and built houses.

In Lillkyrka, the estate Ekeberg appears to be synonymous with the parish's social life during and immediately after the Middle Ages as both the church and probably also a watermill were built by the landowners at Ekeberg. In this way, the possibilities for livelihood and social life in the parish were entirely dependent on one single landowner. Thus, Ekeberg appears as a centre in the medieval parish of Lillkyrka. During parts of the 1500s, the entire parish was owned by the manor (Klingnéus 2011, 84). In the 1570s, as many as 31 ¼ farms formed the estate's property.

In summary, the crofters were part of the social context of the manor, both as subordinate but also as labour and neighbours in the local community. Whether the crofters of the Middle Ages were regarded in the same way as in the society of modern times is unclear. During parts of the Middle Ages, they were an important economic force for the landowner and thus may have held a better position.

## New opportunities

To increase the knowledge of medieval crofting sites and crofters, a number of aspects can be particularly taken into account. Fundamental is how and where these sites occur in the landscape, but also what source material can be used to locate these sites. After all, it is only when we find the site that it can be investigated and analysed.

- Who were *the landowners*, was there a *connection to a medieval manor*? Is it possible to reconstruct medieval ownership and supremacy over the land?

- What were the *natural topographical conditions like*? Can they provide clues as to where in the landscape crofting sites can be found?
- Are there *registered ancient monuments* that can “hide” medieval farm sites, house foundations or cairns? For example, solitary stone-settings/graves, clearance cairns/cleared areas and stone enclosures.
- Are there *excavations of earlier settlements* that may contain medieval post houses, hearths or other types of constructions such as shard stone layers, wells, etc.?

Finally, *post-medieval crofting sites* should also be highlighted. Crofts from the 1600s–1700s are usually analysed based on the contemporaneous society. Whether these later crofts had predecessors in the medieval period is a question that cannot be answered solely from written sources. A key to finding remains of medieval crofts may thus be to seek later crofts' predecessors more actively in the surrounding landscape. The land use according to older maps can relieve earlier practices and locations, such as abandoned fields, settlement names or for example a fossil road. Thus, it is important to consider the surrounding landscape and form a hypothesis of the use of the area in a long-time perspective.

## Conclusion

In this article, several sides concerning the life and living environments of crofters have been highlighted. To locate, and thus be able to investigate crofting environments with scientific methods and questions is essential. By methodically analysing the estate and village landscape based on physical remains, written information about ownership, older maps, topography and settlement names, medieval croft sites can be located to a

greater extent than has been done until now. Interpreting the archaeological remains in terms of farm environments for crofters is important from several aspects. Above all, it is about increasing knowledge about the multifaceted population of medieval agrarian society.

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