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Farmers Arrive in Skåne

That they arrived by boat is beyond doubt. Setting off from northern Germany, they landed along the coastline of Skåne and Halland in southern Sweden, and, at the same time, on the Danish island of Fyn (Funen). We know Sweden's first farmers had boats, as they also reached the islands of Bornholm and Gotland at about the same time.

The oldest traces of agriculture in Sweden go back about 6,000 years. Within just a few generations, farming had spread all the way up to Bohuslän, the Oslo Fjord in Norway, and Uppland in eastern Sweden.

Sweden's first farmers loaded their boats with cattle, sheep, pigs, barley and several types of wheat. They used a specific kind of stone axe to fell trees, and they built longhouses of a characteristic type. They also used a particular kind of terracotta ware known as Funnel Beaker pottery (TRB), which developed out of the older Linear Ware (LBK) of central Europe.

The distinguishing feature of Funnel Beaker pottery, as the name suggests, is that vessels were often shaped like funnels, ending in brims that flared out to varying degrees. When laying their dead to rest, the Funnel Beaker people would often bury a beaker with this type of brim as grave goods. The vessel's shape meant it could be attached to a belt, like a hip flask.

It seems quite clear that Funnel Beaker vessels had a very special significance, which may have stemmed from their contents. Many archaeologists strongly suspect that the Funnel Beaker people used the barley they cultivated to brew beer, which would have been quaffed from these beakers. One clue is the numerous finds of burnt grain in their settlements. Roasting is a stage in malting barley for brewing.

The evidence would be even stronger if chemists had been able to detect traces of oxalate in Funnel Beaker vessels. This involves analyses like those conducted by archaeologists searching for traces of brewing at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. If it were proven that Sweden's first farmers drank beer at their ritual gatherings, there would be a link running all the way from the place of worship at Göbekli Tepe, which dates back 12 millennia, to the Sweden of 6,000 years ago, and to celebrations in our own time.

Archaeologists from Skåne have put forward a nice idea: the newly arrived farmers may have asked the original hunting people round for a beer, as a conciliatory and fraternal gesture. Whether there is any truth in that we shall never know. We have no idea what feelings and relationships may have existed between the hunters of earlier times and the farmers who arrived subsequently. However, what research can show clearly today is that there were two quite separate groups to begin with.

For over 30 years, the predominant view held by Swedish archaeologists was that agriculture emerged in Sweden when local hunters decided to start tilling the soil and raising livestock. However, modern DNA research has shown that this narrative cannot be correct. DNA evidence shows clearly that agriculture arrived as a result of inward migration – with people who came by boat and on foot from distant Syria, via Cyprus, Turkey, the Balkans and central Europe, to northern Europe.

The Danish archaeologists Lasse Sørensen and Sabine Karg have demonstrated the same thing, though using quite different evidence. They have made a thorough and extensive compilation of excavations in Denmark and Sweden. Their study differs from previous ones in that it covers more sites – both on the coast and inland – and in the exacting standards they applied to radiocarbon dating.

As a result, a new pattern has emerged that is quite different from the one many archaeologists believed they could discern in the 1980s. The old view was based on a smaller number of excavated sites – nearly all of them on the coast – and less

reliable dating, mostly based just on the layer from which buried objects had been retrieved.

Sørensen and Karg demolish most of the arguments that groups of hunters along the coasts of Skåne and Denmark engaged in farming early on. They show that bones claimed to have belonged to a cow may actually come from a wild ox. Grain and bones from domestic animals which, it was claimed, were over 6,000 years old and came from a group of hunters, are actually far more recent; it just so happens that they slid down to a lower level in the soil. Individual bones from domestic animals and impressions of grains in shards of pottery may have been ascribed to the correct layers. However, individual finds of this type may mean that hunters bartered goods for animals or grain from farmers further south, not that they began to farm themselves.

The overall picture that emerges if you consider all archaeological sites is that farmers began to arrive in Sweden six millennia ago, and that most of them settled in inland areas. The hunters continued to live along the coasts for many hundreds of years, during which they retained their way of life at least in part.

There would certainly have been a good deal of contact between these groups, and the boundary between them was not watertight. Some farmers also went hunting and fishing. Hunters were given domestic animals from time to time, or acquired them through barter. Sometimes farmers and hunters had children together. Little by little, the two groups merged completely.

Why, it is worth asking, did the farmers suddenly begin moving northwards into Sweden and Denmark?

One standard answer is that early agrarian cultures always had a need to expand. According to one hypothesis, farmers generally had more surviving children than groups of hunters. The farmers' young children had a major advantage: they could stay in one place. They were not obliged to move from

one hunting ground to another, which meant long treks with unreliable access to food and clean water. Since more children survived to adulthood, farming settlements grew faster. However, their limited farming techniques meant they were unable to provide for the expanding population. Consequently, there were always people who had to move and find new ground.

There is nothing wrong with that hypothesis. However, it fails to explain why the farmers of the Linear Pottery culture came to a halt for 1,300 years at the northern limit of loess soils – and why their successors, the Funnel Beaker people, suddenly moved into northern Germany and Poland, and a little later into Denmark and Sweden.

Many archaeologists mention the flint in Skåne as a major attraction. Exceptionally high-quality flint can be found in Södra Sallerup, Kvarnby and Tullstorp, outside Malmö. Thousands of pits up to seven metres (23 feet) deep show that flint was already quarried on a large scale six millennia ago. Some of the first traces of farming in Sweden are very close to these flint quarries.

There are also traces here of flint axe production on a virtually industrial scale. The farmers would certainly have needed such axes to fell trees when clearing new farmland. And it seems more than likely that the high-quality flint in the Malmö area enticed the first farmers into Skåne. However, that does not explain why agriculture continued to spread northwards into Västergötland, reaching the Oslo Fjord and Uppland within just a few generations.

Another hypothesis is based on the fact that the sea level sank at about this time, as the climate in Europe grew drier. As a result, coastal meadows and river valleys emerged that had previously been under water. Grass and plants providing ideal grazing for the farmers' sheep and cattle flourished on this fertile land. Again, this may well be part of the story, but I remain unconvinced that the new meadowland provides an adequate explanation.

More persuasive, to my mind, are the ideas put forward by Bernd Zich from Halle, who links the spread of agriculture

into northern Europe with the ox, the wheel and the wooden plough.

As far as I can see, there are two possibilities. One is that farmers started to use wooden ox-drawn ploughs over 6,000 years ago. They developed the yoke, and this technological change coincided with the upper limit of loess soils, somewhere in northern Poland, Germany or perhaps the Netherlands. Once the farmers had the necessary technology to cultivate heavier soil, they were able to continue their expansion northwards.

Alternatively, the expansion to the north may have come first, followed a few hundred years later by the new technology. When the farmers who had recently settled in northern Europe were obliged to work heavier soils, they thought of starting to use oxen as draught animals, and they developed the wheel and the wooden plough.

Whoever invented the wheel, it is clear that flint axes, oxen and cattle made their mark on the Swedish landscape. Their impact is still visible today. Dense forests of deciduous hardwood trees have given way to open landscapes – a consequence of 6,000 years of agriculture.

And at many locations in farming country you can still see formations of gigantic boulders that were dragged into position by oxen. These are particularly common on arable land in Västergötland, which I am to visit soon.