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NILS STORÅ

## Commerce and Carnival: The Fish Fair as a Meeting-Place

In 1997, a total of 47 fish fairs were organised in Finland. In Åbo not only was the usual autumn fish fair held, but a fair was also arranged in the spring, too early (because of the ice) for people from the archipelago to be able come into town by means of their own boats. The times and places of the fish fairs over the year are given in the Fish Fair Calendar which is published by *Fiskeritidskrift för Finland* (Finnish Fishing Journal) (2/1997). Seven of the 47 fairs are called herring fairs, and among these is the autumn fair in Åbo, which is the one I will particularly focus on in this article.

Fish fairs are held both in towns and in the countryside, mostly on the coast, but also inland, where five fairs focus on the freshwater whitefish, or vendace. The fairs naturally mostly take place in market squares and harbours, or, as in Åbo, traditionally along the banks of the river, where goods can be sold directly from boats. Today, the fairs are organised by various organisations, in many cases fishing associations and fish businesses in cooperation with municipal bodies, but also by Lions Clubs and other non-profit making organisations. The fish fairs offer much more than fish in various forms and other foodstuffs. The organisers often aim at increasing the visitors' knowledge about fish as food, about the handling, breeding and cooking of fish. In addition, there is music, dancing, lotteries,

wheels of fortune and other entertainments. Various kinds of food are served as well as drinks and these are sold in, for example, beer tents. The archipelago fair in Eastern Nyland, held on the Lökören boat pier in the Broby village of Pyttis parish at the end of August 1997, is described in the calendar as "an event smelling of fish and tar", with "things going on from morning until late night". The fish fair in Kuopio is said to be "nationally important" and one of "the large fish fairs", which in 1996 attracted about 25,000 visitors. In comparison to this, it may be mentioned that the autumn fish fair in Åbo in the same year attracted approximately 170,000 visitors over four days. The prevailing weather conditions, understandably, have an influence on the number of visitors a particular fair will attract.

There is obviously a great interest in fish fairs today. What attracts people to them? Who are the visitors? What is the significance of the fish fairs today? In order to illuminate these questions a review of the fair as a concept is needed.

Ethnologists who have explored issues connected with local fairs include Matti Räsänen, who has studied the fair in Kuopio (1970), and Jouko Heinonen, who has dealt particularly with the fair in Rovaniemi, "*Rovaniemen markkinat*" (1974 and 1979), which has been the theme of both a film

and a popular song. More recent ethnological interests are represented by Birgitta Skarin Frykman's historically focussed studies (1993 and 1995) of the St Laurentius Day fair (*Larsmässemarknaden*) in Göteborg, in which she puts special emphasis on social groups, and by Anna-Maria Åström's article (1995), inspired by Bourdieu, on the fish fair in Helsingfors during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a Finland-Swedish identity marker.

The concept of the fair is characterised by the fact that the time and place for trading are officially determined and advertised in advance in the calendar. As a form of trade the fair is annually reoccurring, short and subject to the control of the local authorities. Definitions depend upon which aspects of the fair concept are emphasized in each case, be they the financial or the social, commercial or carnival elements. As an expression of old trade policy that favoured towns and limited and regulated trade in the countryside, fairs have, despite the focus on trading, traditionally presented themselves as annual gatherings of people associated with church festivities or masses, political meetings, court sessions and tax collection (Staf 1935). Studying fairs as meeting-places for different groups of people is a given. Social anthropologist Börje Hanssen, who explored the social significance of fairs, regarded them as "focal points for the inter-regional contacts between strangers" (Hanssen 1952, 270f). The various groups that met at the fairs were drawn there by different elements within the multilayered fair complex. The fairs constituted meeting-places not only for producers and consumers. At fairs both in town and the countryside, the dominating category of visitors were country people. Free fairs were attended by a considerably wider circle of people than the local, separate fairs, and according to a royal charter of 1788, all fairs were to be free fairs

(Lindequist 1928, 463).

Fish fairs in earlier times can be regarded primarily as a place where archipelago dwellers traded their fish for grain and other necessities. Barter still took place to a certain extent at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly at the autumn fair in Uskela, or Salo, where predominantly Swedish-speaking people from the archipelago traded with mainly Finnish-speaking people from inland. There, unlike in Åbo, bartering could be carried out without the interference of the third party consisting of town merchants. On the other hand, the circle of paying customers formed by townspeople was missing at the country fair. Gradually, the number of Swedish-speaking townspeople and merchants decreased. Åström's point of departure is the strong Finland-Swedish element at the fish fair in Helsingfors, and thus the visibility of Swedish in an official context, as she emphasizes the symbolic meaning of the fair (Åström 1995, 135ff). However, fishermen from remote Finnish-speaking areas in the archipelago have also regularly attended the fish fairs both in Åbo and Helsingfors.

### **Fairs and fair traditions in Åbo**

The two most important fairs in Åbo have been the two annual St Henry fairs (*Henriksmässmarknaden*), that is to say the winter fair that started on 19 January and the summer fair, the "birch-bark fair" on 18 June. During the Middle Ages, these were the largest and most frequented fairs in the country. The autumn fish fair dates back to the free fair which was established in 1636 and started at "Mother mass", the St Mary mass (*Mariamässa*) celebrated on 8 September. Originally this fair was allowed to continue for three weeks. When it was introduced, both inhabitants of Finland and foreigners were given the right to "sell their produce from ships and boats", but it had to be done according to organised



*The herring fair at the eastern river bank in Åbo in 1987. Photo: Annika Jokiranta. Department of Ethnology at Åbo Akademi University (40776).*

forms (Bonsdorff 1894, 499f; Qvist 1909, 8). Later a fourth fair was established, in the form of a movable Lent fair in February, when people from the archipelago would usually come into town by horse over the ice.

In one of his newspaper columns, Ernst Lindberg provides a lively description of the events of the St Henry fair on 15 January in Åbo during the 1870's (Lindberg 1921, 73ff). Local merchants and craftsmen had prepared well in advance for the arrival of people from various parts of the country. "On the spot where the Hotel Phoenix stands today", he wrote in 1921, the merry-go-round constantly turned while music was playing and bells were chiming; in the tent next to it "the handless woman" and "the lifeless violin player" were on display, while a panorama of the Franco-German war created a sombre atmosphere. In the pleasure ground between the Market Hall and Kristinegatan, a waxworks cabinet invited viewers in to see Napoleon and Garibaldi, or "the beautiful Galathea with her rocking bosom", and "the dying soldier"

with a bleeding breast. The crowds amused themselves by throwing rings or games of shooting. Alcohol flowed, according to Lindberg, so that the whole town was like one big open public house. Already by the end of the 1600's, the town's authorities expressed concern about the harmful influence of the fairs on young people (Lindequist 1928, 466).

Alcohol was one of the products sold by distilleries in and outside the town, and the purveyance of spirits was traditionally connected with trade, as an important round of bargaining was often concluded by a confirmatory toast. This was a widespread custom, which could easily get out of hand, since the toasting was not limited only to the buyer and seller.

The fairs attracted large crowds of idle people and trips to the fair were included in the rights of servants. Maids and farmhands could find new employment at the autumn fairs. Skarin Frykman (1995, 27ff) points to the similarities with so-called hiring fairs in England. For young people, their first trip to a fair, like their first trip to

town, could mean a significant step towards entering the world of adults (see Talve 1960 and 1978), an event they impatiently waited for. Here young people could meet and form couples. Lindberg describes the fairs in Åbo in the 1870's, during which farmers' sons and their girls gather at the stalls of the goldsmiths Lundgren and Willgren to try out rings or finger brooches and earrings (Lindberg 1921, 75).

If the town's merchants and fish-buying bourgeoisie had a positive attitude towards the crowds that the fairs attracted, it must, however, be assumed that there were other townspeople who disliked the tumult, with all the shouting and shrieking that the fair days often brought about. A considerable portion of the visitors had not come for the commerce, but for the entertainments that were on offer.

### **Fairs and interest in the fairs**

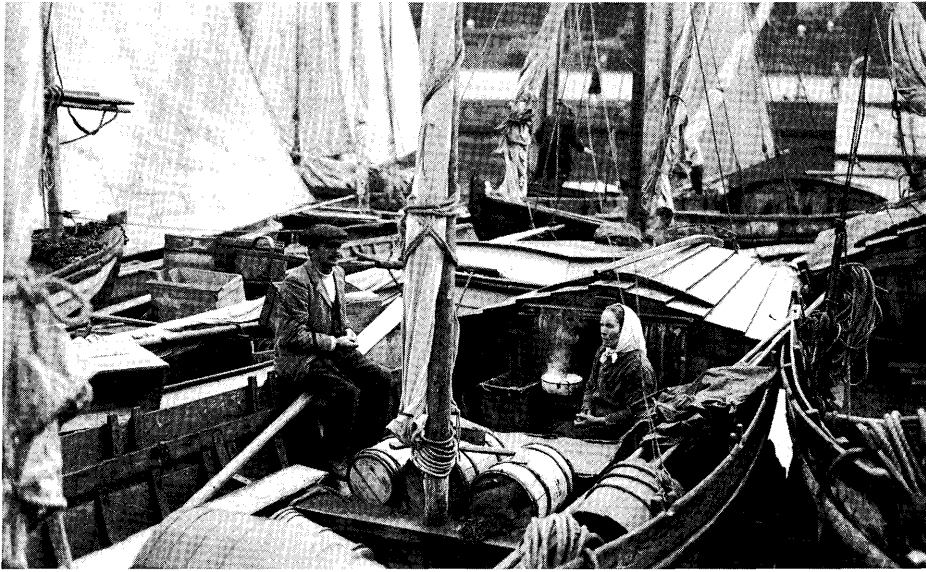
During the long period of existence of fairs, their nature has varied. It is usually emphasized that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were still largely an important and integrated portion of trade, but that they later gradually lost their financial significance.

As can be seen from the calendars published at the time, the number of fairs decreased significantly in Finland during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Already by the beginning of the century, many fairs were abolished both on the coast and in towns and the number of days a fair would run was decreased. In 1821, there were only nine fairs left in the countryside, while the number of town fairs amounted to about 60. In 1867, there were only 20 fairs left (Lindequist 1928, 466ff; Heinonen 1979, 43ff). On the other hand, some new fairs were established, and the fact that a fair was abolished did not necessarily mean that people stopped gathering at the fair ground at the traditional time of the fair. During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when

country trade was freed from regulation and transport gradually improved, the financial significance of the fairs diminished and instead the entertainments and drinking came to dominate. The variety of amusements was expanded; for example, dancing was introduced. This contributed to the feeling of carnival that came to be associated with fairs. The selection of goods became more variable, as all kinds of knick-knacks started to appear. The fairs now functioned more as annual festivities for the people, organised at the same place and officially announced in the almanac.

It has been claimed that the fairs had lost their actual significance by the beginning of the 1880's. It is, however, clear that they had such varied offerings that they could survive in some places and still attract large crowds. Not even the extensive years of war could completely break the enduring fair tradition. Some fairs were over time substituted by separate market-days, which were attended only by local people. Other fairs were maintained as specialising in certain goods, such as cattle and also fish. The best known fish fairs during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were those in Åbo, Salo and Helsingfors, all three of which mainly sold salted herring. Barter - exchanging goods for goods - still existed to a certain extent at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Spot checks in almanacs show that the number of fairs was just over 30 at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while they amounted to around 20 from 1910–1960. In the 1970's, the interest in fairs increased again as the result of a wave of nostalgia that, for example, revived old folk festive customs (Heinonen 1979, 45). In 1980, the number of fairs had grown to 58 and in 1990 the almanac includes more than 150 fairs, which, however, are probably of greatly varying kinds. This number, which has increased immensely since 1970, thus also includes the fish fairs, which, as already



*Cuddy boats and longboats at the fish fair in Åbo, autumn 1922. Photo: Birger Lundsten. The Åbo Akademi Maritime Institute (I 373).*

mentioned, amounted to 47 in 1997.

### **Fish fairs and herring fishing**

The old winter fair held in January in Åbo was of little significance as a fish fair, since people from the archipelago were usually unable to come into town at that time of year because of the ice situation. The second St Henry fair, known as the “birch-bark fair”, held in June shortly before Midsummer, was more important in this respect. Here, the archipelago dwellers could obtain birch bark which was an important roofing material and usually unavailable on the islands. In 1850, more than 700 boats of various sizes arrived at this fair, which was the largest in Åbo at that time (Nikula 1973, 275). Most of the herring available during that season was fished with a seine-net and was not of the same quality as herring fished in the autumn. Nevertheless, the seine herring was salted and found a market particularly in Russia through Tallinn and other Baltic ports. The herring fished with drift nets during late summer and autumn was the best (Storå 1979, 141ff). This was the fish that was to give the archipelago dwellers

their main livelihood. Therefore the autumn fair was the actual fish fair. The fact that it was a free fair widened its circle of customers. However, considering the herring trade, the autumn fair in Åbo was held somewhat too early, while the important drift net fishing was still going on. From the perspective of herring fishing, the country fair in Salo and the town fair in Helsingfors were more convenient for many, since they were held later in the autumn.

At the autumn fish fairs the archipelago dwellers could sell most of the year's herring haul as salted fish. The buyers were partly townspeople, partly farmers from inland who could give grain and other goods in exchange for the fish. At the country fairs there were also purchasers who sold the herring on inland. At the market, the town dwellers bought fish and other food for a few days' supply, while at the fish fair they bought all the fish they needed for the whole winter. The trade at the fish fair obviously often depended on the return of the same customers year after year. In a newspaper advertisement for the fish fair in Helsingfors in the autumn 1895,

*Motor and sailing boats at the fish fair in Åbo 15 September 1931, some with the sail tent raised.*

*Barrels of various sizes with salted herring are still a visible element.*

*Photo: Birger Lundsten. The Åbo Akademi Maritime Institute (I 375).*



it is said that most of the archipelago dwellers have old customers that they have supplied with fish for many years. “Everywhere one can witness reunions, greetings and invitations”. The advertisement also mentioned goods apart from herring sold on a ship from Kökar in the Åland Islands: whitefish, butter, cheese, eggs, seal fat, smoked meat, down, feathers, black bread, nuts, decoys, empty gulls’ and other birds’ eggs. The most important merchandise, salted herring, was sold in tubs of various sizes, down to a sixteenth of a barrel. The fact that these small-size tubs were now mentioned reveals that the townspeople’s interest in this product had decreased. There was no longer a need to store food for a whole year and with an improving standard of living, salted herring was no longer such a favoured food. (Hbl 2 October 1895).

### **Salted herring: producers and consumers**

When discussing the goods sold at the fish fair, it is reasonable to assume that the staple produce at the fair in Åbo was salted

herring, even if herring in earlier times was also conserved in other ways, such as drying and souring (for details see Storå 1986 and 1988). Fermented herring existed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it did not survive in Finland as it did in Norrland in Sweden. Grilled and salted “coal herring” is also mentioned in the Åbo region as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Smoking did not become common until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at least not warm smoked herring. A publication on the conservation of fish (Reuter 1898, 3f) claims that smoking of fish (herring and whitefish) is done in Finland only in the Helsingfors region, where “the odd archipelago dweller” will warm-smoke fish to sell in town – using the same method as in the herring smokeries of Kiel and Lübeck. In the winter, it was possible to freeze herring when fishing with a winter seine-net.

In 1877, the autumn fair in Åbo was held on 19 September, and the salted herring sold so well that by noon very little remained of the total of more than 1,500 barrels brought to the fair by the archipelago dwellers. Over 200 of the 600 boats attending the fair had



**The fish fair in 1931 (see picture 3). Photo: Birger Lundsten. The Åbo Akademi Maritime Institute (1 374).**

been loaded with herring. About three quarters of the barrels are said to be measured, while one quarter were unmeasured barrels, where the fish was thrown in and not neatly layered. The newspaper article I quote complains about the fact the archipelago dwellers still (1877) did not realise the advantage of packing their fish in a “customarily measured vessel”, which would sell much better (Folkvännen 3 October 1877).

During the times when salted herring also formed a substantial part of the winter food of town dwellers, large amounts of salted herring were brought to the autumn fairs. To the fair in Helsingfors alone, between 15,000 and 20,000 barrels were brought every autumn at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Reuter 1898, 9). Usually, for one barrel of herring, one third of a barrel of salt was used, but the amount varied according to the kind of salt used.

There are many ways of preparing salted herring. The Ålanders, who also sold fish in Stockholm, had learned a good method from Gotland, and Finska Hushållningssällskapet (the Finnish Agricultural Society) spread

another method through the expertise of Ossian Reuter. *Method* meant that the herring was *layered* in the barrels. The old way was to *toss* the herring into tubs and barrels, which took much less time. At fish fairs in the 1890’s some ships from Åland advertised their herring by signs saying “We have herring salted according to method” (Hbl 2 October 1895).

Already during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, salted herring started to lose its earlier status. There are many reasons for this. The fishermen who sold salted herring traditionally made their own barrels. The making of barrels and tubs was a skill required of all who sold salted herring. It was a craft that sons learnt from their fathers, an example of the tacit knowledge which attracts great interest today pertaining to the learning of cultural knowledge, both within ethnological and anthropological research. A young boy had to learn to handle more than just axe and knife. Tools needed for making tubs, usually of pine, were, among other things, various kinds of planes, the cross axe, various kinds of knife and files. For the hoops, which were made at a special

**Selling fish products at the herring fair in Åbo in 1986, at the eastern river bank. Photo: John Hackman. Department of Ethnology at Åbo Akademi University (39345).**



knife-bench, hoop knives and hoop hooks were needed.

To manage the many phases of making barrels was regarded as something of a test of manhood by the people in the archipelago. One had to make evenly planed staves, perfectly round bottoms, and split and cut hoops that tied together the staves with well cut joints, in order for the brine not to leak, and kept the bottoms in place in the notch on the inside of the upper and lower parts of the staves. Sworn crowners travelled around with their marking-irons and cans and tested out that the barrels corresponded to their measures: a half-barrel 24 cans (60 litres), a quarter-barrel 12 and an eighth-barrel 6 cans. There were models for each size, since the tubs were to have a slightly rounded form and the edges the correct angle so that the tubs could be pressed closely together.

Making barrels was hard work that was carried out periodically from autumn to spring. It took a long time and good wood was required, which was often hard to find in the outer archipelago.

The wood issue contributed to the decreasing demand for salted herring. As steam sawmills were established, sawn boards could be bought, but these were not watertight. The old way of making staves for the barrels were to split the pine wood so that the sap rings, where the brine easily leaked through, did not run across the staves. The fact that the timber was rafted to the sawmills additionally impaired the

quality of the stave boards. During the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the barrels became an increasing problem. In the 1890's an industrial company, *Brändö-Lemsjöholms fiskkärleksfabrik*, was founded and they sold ready-made barrels of good wood during a few years. However, the cost of these was too high for the fishermen in the archipelago.

The townspeople became choosier about their food. Their standard of living improved and their diet became more varied. Many people preferred fresh herring to salted. When times got harder, the interest in salted herring increased again, as can be seen during the First World War, the years of financial depression in the early 1930's and the latest wars. During the years of food shortage the demand for salted herring was so great that even all badly salted and prepared herring was sold. Bad produce contributed to the aversion against salted herring as soon as the shortage of food was over. Salted herring was increasingly regarded as poor people's food, as "shoemaker's salmon" and its role at the fish fairs diminished (Storå 1986).

### **The fish fair as a meeting-place today**

One of the big changes that have taken place from the perspective of the archipelago dwellers is that salted herring, which earlier totally dominated the trade at the fairs, gradually lost its significance. Today's concept of the herring fair no longer includes the tubs of salted herring which, loaded onto boats and piled on deck, constituted a distinct feature of the herring fairs in earlier times. The small plastic buckets of salted herring sold today are of no great significance. As long as salted herring was the most important merchandise, the working year of the herring fishermen was largely focused on the autumn fair. The whole year's income was basically dependent on the fish fair.



Interviews with archipelago dwellers today indicate that the income from the fish fairs still is of great financial importance for many. Another important function of the fairs is the encounter with other, sometimes previously unknown, fishermen and fish entrepreneurs, people with shared attitudes who have the courage to choose fishing as their livelihood. Many emphasize the feeling of community that the assembled archipelago dwellers and fish sellers experience today at the fish fair, regardless of their language. Here, the fishermen's identity is strengthened. Most of the Swedish-speaking archipelago dwellers today feel that they know Finnish well enough to sell fish. The fish is on display and "speaks for itself". Finnish-speaking town dwellers, for their part, understand that a relatively large section of the fish sellers are Swedish-speaking. The informal situation and the "fair atmosphere" make it easier to cross the language barrier.

It is also obvious that it is not only the increased interest in fish as food that has contributed to the townspeople's increased interest in the fish fairs. Even if the elements of old fair entertainment have disappeared, there is still space for amusements and knick-knacks, alongside a varied supply of fish for all tastes. There are even fish products that have more or less eliminated the taste of fish, such as sauna smoked herring ham, for those who do not like fish. Herring flavoured with garlic, dill, carrot, pepper and mustard compete with perch balls, pike burgers and salmon pies. At the 1997 herring fair in Åbo a competition for the best "delicacy herring" was organised. The awarded products included salted herring tartar and marinated, smoked herring rolls (ÅU 24 October 1997). Thus also salted herring, usually sold as shoemaker's salmon, is one of the products that have been developed further. There is tough competition from farmed fish. Despite the occasional debates on mercury



*Salted herring in plastic vessels and small wooden tubs are sold together with other fish products at the herring fair in 1986 (see picture 5). Photo: John Hackman, Department of Ethnology at Åbo Akademi University (39346).*

and polluted fishing waters, fish is today regarded as an attractive, healthy food. Advertisements claim that "Clever people eat fish".

Town dwellers used to impersonal supermarkets get into direct contact with producers at the fish fair. The concentrated supply of goods is another contrast to the situation in supermarkets. The interest in fish fairs can perhaps thus be seen as somewhat of a reaction against the negative aspects of today's consumerist society.

However, the most important function of fish fairs is perhaps still that of a meeting-place. A distinct feature of today's autumn fish fair in Åbo is "maritimely" dressed summer visitors and leisure sailors who after a few weeks in town re-encounter archipelago dwellers that they know or at least have had prior contact with. For them, the autumn fair marks the end of the summer season.

It is also clear that today's otherwise somewhat introverted town dwellers meet not only already established friends and acquaintances, but also make new acquaintances from amongst their fellow townspeople at the fish fair.

In the crowds along the river banks people move much more closely to each other than is customary, which contributes to the creation of a specific "fair atmosphere". It is impossible to keep the normal physical distance from other people. Bodily contact, so to say, is more permissible. There is no

need to show the total indifference to strange people that the contemporary person usually displays in, for example, lifts, where one is temporarily forced into a proximity which in a normal situation would feel uncomfortably intimate. The American anthropologist Edward Hall as early as 1959 (according to Crapo 1990, 188f) showed that the distance we place between ourselves and others can be interpreted as a message in non-verbal communication. He distinguishes between four distances of different lengths, where *intimate* is the shortest and reserved for situations where cuddling and touching are acceptable. The intimate distance is followed by the *personal*, after that comes the *social* distance and furthest away is the zone for the *public* distance.

Using this interpretation, the crowd at the fair is a situation where crossing the border between the personal and intimate distance is accepted behaviour, marked by a festive context of an informal character.

The external scene of the fair is today quite different from the times when wooden cuddy boats, longboats and the occasional *skötbåt* lay close to each other, creating a forest of masts, sometimes with the sails hung out to dry, fluttering in the wind. The number of boats, mostly plastic ones, is markedly smaller than before and the fish trade has moved up onto the river banks. The inland farmers have disappeared from the market scene, as have the barrels of salted herring. Despite the changes, the diverse fair tradition represented by the fish fairs still contains attractive elements.

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