

# Why Finland? The Baltic Finns led the way to the East

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Why Finland as a research area for Swedish archaeologists? It may seem incomprehensible that the question can be posed at all, but there has been a decline in awareness of the importance of close contacts between our neighbouring countries. This applies in large measure to Finland. Do people today understand Sweden's geopolitical location, and what this meant in late prehistoric and early historical times? It is specifically the important transition in the period from 700 to 1200 that interests us. If we look at the map, it is clear that we can expect interesting questions as long as we become seriously involved and acquire some basic knowledge, because that is certainly needed.

In the past, Sweden turned its face to the east, not the west. However, on the Swedish side, few researchers have made the effort to penetrate into the results of archaeological research and relevant finds on the other side of the Baltic Sea. Those who venture on this mission will find works by scholars from the Archaeological department at the University of Helsinki indispensable. Christian Carpelan (1980; 2006), Torsten Edgren (1992; 2008), Matti Huurre (1992), Anna-Liisa Hirviluoto (1986), Ella Kivikoski (1939; 1964; 1973), Pirko-Liisa Lehtosalo-Hilander (1982a-c; 2000), Carl Fredrik Meinander (1947; 1977), Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen (1990), Tuukka Talvio (2002) and Pirjo Uino (1997) are just some of the archaeologists whose solid publications on the Late Iron Age and early medieval period have had a great impact also outside Finland. Through them, finds and research from Finland have been made available to a large public.

Today there is a new generation of scholars in Helsinki dedicated to the period. For example, results from metal detecting have changed the view on settlement history in mainland Finland. A much higher population density in formerly 're-

mote' parts of the country are now emerging. Researchers from the University of Helsinki archaeology department have greatly contributed to this successful project.

The Baltic as a dividing line is highly significant because the dominant Scandinavian culture of Åland is often perceived as a bridge between Sweden and Finland. This is despite the presence of pottery from south-western Finland on the islands, besides which there are some graves with distinct Finnish artefacts in the eastern parts. The role of Åland during the transition period in the Viking Age is different. The population then played an essential role in fur hunting and the fur trade all the way to Yaroslavl in Russia. The archaeological sources in Åland dry up after the year 1000 and it is only 150 years later, at the earliest, that there is once again material for researchers. Historiography on the Swedish side usually begins with the conflicts during the era of the crusades. Taking this as a starting point means that processes are forgotten and concealed during earlier periods of profound coexistence.

An important reason why archaeologists interested in northern Europe's coniferous forest zone should study Finland during this period is the significantly better prospects of obtaining answers to questions concerning economics and lifeways. Finnish archaeology contributes to an awareness of a circumpolar cultural landscape that is often forgotten in Sweden. In Finland, there are clearer traces of the economy and culture that linked these northern regions to the rest of medieval Europe. Exchange and trade in high-quality furs from the north was the engine that powered the economic system. Archaeologists in Sweden have not managed to find many traces of these important activities, but their Finnish counterparts have had more success. The finds consist

of equipment for long journeys, both winter and summer, such as skis, sleighs and light canoes. Another contributing factor is that the wilderness economy in much of northern Europe was based on a Finnish material culture and that it was developed in a Finnish cultural environment. Individuals and groups with a Scandinavian background were also involved in this right from the Vendel Period.

In the tenth century this economic and social process took on a political aspect. Both the Rus' hegemony that developed in the east and the Swedish-Scandinavian pressure in the west are important elements. However, the essence of the initial process, from about the eighth to the tenth century, is what happened in the specifically Baltic Finnish sphere, from the Baltic Sea itself to far beyond lakes Ladoga and Onega. The centre of gravity of the fur hunt shifted here from west to east. This process started around the year 700 in present-day Finland. Three hundred years later the forests to the east and north of Ladoga were the main producers of furs.

Staraya Ladoga, on the Volkhov River near Lake Ladoga, developed in the eighth century into a base camp for fur hunting in the north and east. The settlement also became a reloading point for further transports along the Russian rivers. It is likely that the Svear in the Mälaren area, through the Finns, acquired a knowledge not only of areas leading towards Staraya Ladoga, but also of how best to travel in these areas of lakes and forests.

There are a number of stages in the development of trading relations between the Svear and the Finns. Around the year 700, social exchange between individuals and groups in Finland, Åland and the Mälaren valley played a crucial role. The hunting itself, which may have mainly been linked to a Sami environment, is also hard to capture in the archaeological material in Finland from this time. We can catch glimpses of the next stage in the exchange system in the form of valuable gifts such as jewellery and weapons on the Finnish side. On the other hand, furs from Finland are not attested in Sweden, which is not surprising since organic materials seldom survive. An important category of material on the Swedish and Åland side, however, is Finnish

pottery. Both imported and locally manufactured Baltic Finnish pots have been found at a large number of settlements in rural areas as well as in urban environments in the Mälaren valley, from about the year 700 until the middle of the eleventh century. Locally made vessels of fine earthenware reflect the personal presence of Finnish-speaking women in households. It was probably in this early exchange between Finns and Svear that much of the material culture of the northern fur trade developed.

The intense and personal relations between Svear and Finns during the Vendel Period and the Viking Age seem to have changed character by the middle of the eleventh century. Finnish jewellery and pottery then fell out of use in the Mälaren valley. The absence is particularly noticeable in the town of Sigtuna, where contacts were otherwise maintained with both west and east. People from Finland nevertheless lived in the area during this century. Men called 'Tavast' are named as having raised two runic stones in Uppland (U 467, U 722), which shows their integration into the landowning elite of society. Another fate is recorded on a runic stone from Gästrikland that mentions Egil, who fell in Tavastland in the mid-eleventh century (Gs 13). After a long hiatus, we meet a Finnish guest on a runic bone with the inscription 'NN let Tafast carve the runes.' It was found in Sigtuna and is dated to 1200–1230.

At the same time as the old ties were severed, two processes can be observed. First of all, both Finns and Svear were drawn to Novgorod and other burgeoning urban environments for exchange. Secondly, people from south-western Finland, Tavastland, and Karelia along with the Vepsians, a Baltic Finnish people around Ladoga and Onega, became major players in the fur trade further north. The forest routes through the landscape had their clearest trajectory from several areas in southern Finland and the Ladoga area towards the north-west through Kainuu, the Oulujärvi and Oulujoki rivers to the Bothnian Sea. The name Kvenland is associated with Finnish-speaking groups in the interior of the gulf, on today's Finnish and Swedish sides of the Torne river. A clear increase in contacts with Sami people from this area is clearly visible in hoard finds and votive finds all the way into northern Norway.

No major Viking Age trading site has been found in western Finland, which has probably contributed to the unfortunate exclusion of the area from discussions about the nordic region during the Viking Age. However, the rich graves from the inhumation cemeteries of Kjulo and Luistari show that south-western Finland also engaged in long-distance trade and exchange. The publications in English on Luistari, the ancient hillforts of Finland, and ancient Karelia offer an entrance into both the material culture and the development of the region in the Late Iron Age and the Early Middle Ages. In recent years, an increasing number of archaeological publications and dissertations have been issued in English by the University of Helsinki, giving us a greater knowledge of Finland's prehistory and contributing to the growing inclusion of Finland in international research. We look forward to continuing the close dialogue.

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