

Forest Finns vs. Swedish Commons

Maud Wedin,
Karlstad University

Background

- The Savolax expansion 1400-1500
- Svidden cultivation as a general
- Svidden cultivation made by forest Finns; spruce forest, slash- and burn, forest rye
- Svidden "culture": Access to land more important than ownership, using large areas
- Extended expansion to Scandinavia, first Sweden, later Norway and even the colony New Sweden. Also migration east and southwards (religion)
- Reasons for migration (push-): Civil war, war against Russia, deterioration of climate, overpopulation, taxation (noble people who were granted land as reward for instance Ruovesi and Rautalampi) (and pull) the search for new svidden areas. Two choices: change the way to support themselves or migrate. The state asked for new settlements, gave about six years of freedom from taxation. (The Swedish colonization policy)

Commons in Mellannorrland

- The Swedish farmers lived in the sediment areas along the rivers and the coast, where land was easy to cultivate
- The farmers were owners of "hemman" (roughly farms) and paid taxes according to amount of land and incomes. The land of each farm was delimited and marked by legal boundary sets, but normally the forest areas were included.
- To each village there was a certain amount of land that belonged to all farms together, "commons". The villagers had the right to use these commons within certain rules, for instance to gather firewood and timber, berry picking, fishing and hunting.
- The forests close to the farms were used as summer grazing areas, often young women stayed for the whole summer with the cattle (sw. fäbodlar)
- The forests more distant were used for extensive hunting, fishing and during iron age for low technique iron making

Who owned those forests between the farming areas? The farmers claimed that they were the owners due to "time immemorial" and therefore that was a "common law" (sedvanerätt). The King Gustav Vasa claimed that the commons belonged to the state. In 1542 he wrote a letter addressed to all inhabitants of Gästrikland, Hälsingland, Medelpad och Ångermanland:

".../ (the farmers) claim ownership of forests more than 40 to 50 km (away from the farms), even though they have neither right nor reason to, because all land that is not inhabited belongs to God, Us and the Swedish crown (state) and nobody else."

Gustav Vasa skriver ett brev 20/4 1542 till bönderna som anser sig vara ägare till skogsmarken i sina socknar. Brevet är riktat till menige man i Gästrikland, Hälsingland, Medelpad och Ångermanland:

".../ (bönderna) förmena sig vara ägande uti skogarna, de där ville ägna under sig fyra eller fem mil, eller till äventyrs mera in på skogarna, där de dock varken rätt eller skäl till hava, förty att sådana ägor, som obbyggda ligga, hörer Gud, Oss och Sveriges krona till och ingen annan."

Det anses att Gustav Vasa stödde detta påstående på det s.k Helgeandsholmsbeslutet från 1280²⁴. Riksdagen ska då ha erkänt kronans rätt till all mark som inte var uppodlad. Styffe²⁵ hävdar att beslutet är en förfalskning från 1500-talet. Även andra har betvivlat äktheten, men ändå har man använt det för att befästa kronans rätt till ödemarkerna. Begreppet kronoallmänningar myntades av Gustav Vasa.

1580-1640 Getting access to land - colonization

- getting a letter of permission (sw. torpebrev), with certain regulations
- buying forest land from farmers (not always allowed)
- buying “hemman” in the Swedish village to get access to common forest land (for instance in Jämtland)
- settling abandoned farms (even administrative/fiscal abandoned due to unpaid taxes)
- offering summer grazing “service” (sw. vallvaktare)
- marriage into a Swedish peasant family with a “hemman” (seldom)
- a grant for certain services to the state, for instance establishing inns along routes or becoming royal hunters

1640-1700 Bans against swidden cultivation

- 1647 there was a general ban against all slash- and burn. Still some “legal” colonization and swidden cultivation was allowed in vacant areas (far from mines)
- 1664 the bans became more severe and even threats about death penalties was proclaimed from authorities. Illegal settlement buildings should be burnt and the harvest was confiscated

Consequences:

- Migration to New Sweden.
- Forest Finns in Bergslagen moved to Värmland and Norway.
- Big differences between different Forest Finn areas (the more distant from authorities the less obedient to the laws)

1700-1800 Switching from swidden cultivation to agriculture farming

- a kind of consolidation, taxpaying “hemman”
- a law 1789 (Gustaf III’s revolution) finally gave the right to all farmers to be the “owner” of a “hemman” (concerned both ownership and usufruct (“nyttjanderätt”) access to hunting and fishing)
- the praxis of “rekognitionsskogar” (demarcation of state owned forest) concerning mining companies (started already 1683)
- mining companies and industry owners trying to get access to “hemman” in forest Finn areas or at least trying to get the right to taxation of the Finns (and thereby forcing them to make charcoal).
- a switch from slash- and burn to agriculture farming
- assimilation into Swedish society began

1800-1900 Overpopulation, poverty and changes

References

...

²⁴ Stenman 1983, s.25ff, might be 1282?

²⁵ Styffe 1864