

Emma Bentz

*I stadens skugga. Den medeltida landsbygden som arkeologiskt forskningsfält*

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Review by Martin Hansson

Emma Bentz's doctoral thesis in historical archaeology is a study in how an archaeological field emerged during the 20th century. The thesis has two major aims: firstly, to investigate the emergence and establishment of medieval rural archaeology as an archaeological field, from the 1930s until today; and secondly, based on the results of the study, to discuss in general how new fields of research are incorporated and maintained within the humanities. The starting point of the thesis is the situation in Sweden, and together with examples from Germany, Denmark and Great Britain the continually changing practices and approaches within the field of medieval rural archaeology are discussed and analyzed. The reason for using other European examples alongside the Swedish ones is based on two important observations. Firstly, in Sweden the more continuous archaeological excavations of medieval rural sites are a rather late phenomenon compared to many other countries. Secondly, the emergence of a new archaeological field is not something that occurs within the borders of a single nation. Even if many factors are dependent on the national context there is communication and exchange of information between researchers from different countries, and this development is important for the overall understanding of the emergence of a new scientific field.

The thesis consists of nine chapters. After an introduction in chapter one, chapter two discusses different approaches to the writing of subject history. In chapter three theoretical observations concerning how medieval rural archaeology was established is in focus. According to Bentz, this was a process where technical, disciplinary and ideological conditions were significant. While technical conditions mainly relate to the excavation techniques applied to rural settlements, and how these practices have changed over time, the disciplinary conditions concern the internal relationships within an academic field that must exist before a new research field can be said to have emerged. Conditions of disciplinary type concern different networks, such as the existence of regular conferences and specific journals. Ideological conditions focus on the interaction between archaeology and society.

Chapters 4 to 7 present the empirical parts of the thesis, where publications and excavation reports have been studied together with archives. In chapter 4 the study of the medieval village of Hohenrode in Germany is presented. Hohenrode, excavated by Paul Grimm 1935–37, is often seen as the starting point for the archaeological study of the medieval landscape. Chapter 5 presents the work of the Danish ethnologist Axel Steensberg, primarily his excavation of Store Valby. Steensberg introduced new techniques, such as open area excavation, and began collaboration with British archaeologists. While his ideas and influence were rather limited in Denmark, they had great impact in Britain, where John Hurst introduced open area excavations in Wharram Percy, a project which is discussed in chapter 6. The Wharram Percy excavations are significant in many aspects, not least because their duration for almost 40 years meant that a large number of archaeologists interested in the medieval landscape came to take part in the fieldwork.

Chapter 7 discusses the development of medieval rural archaeology in Sweden, which in a European perspective was rather late. Most examples discussed come from Scania in southern Sweden, where excavations of medieval villages started in the 1970s and became a regular activity from the 1980s onwards. The reasons for the late Swedish development are discussed and found to be twofold. Firstly, medieval villages had an ambiguous legal status. Secondly, there were also internal, disciplinary conditions that had a constraining influence. Intense urban redevelopment in the 1970s and 80s led to a focus on urban archaeology, overshadowing the rural sites. The difficulties in excavating rural

sites with their thin layers and fragmentary remains led to uncertainty about the archaeological potential of rural sites. In chapter 8, the widening scope of the last two decades of medieval rural archaeology is discussed, primarily with Swedish examples. Some current trends are distinguished, such as the relation between town and countryside, studies of the microcosm – the household level including studies of spatial organization and gender – and finally studies of previously “virgin” landscapes, for example forested outland regions of Sweden.

Finally, chapter 9 tries to summarize the development of medieval rural archaeology during the period 1930–2005. One important factor over the decades is the idea that the study of medieval rural settlements has been seen as the same as the study of ‘common’ man. By this, rural studies become opposed to studies of castles, churches and towns, which represent more manifest material culture and are regarded as being connected to the upper strata of society. But at the same time this argument has had a constraining effect on the research, since the seemingly unspectacular nature of the rural remains has led to ambivalence about their archaeological potential. Something else that is striking is the medieval village as a boundary object for researchers from many disciplines. Another theme is the connection between medieval rural life and the national project in some countries.

Emma Bentz’s thesis is an enjoyable read in many ways. There are other theses in Sweden that focus on the history of archaeology, but Bentz’s thesis is perhaps the first to follow the history up to the present. Unlike many of the other theses, it has its starting point in a field of practice and a specific type of remains. However, when reading the text some questions arise. Even if the wide international comparison in the thesis is one of its strengths, it is also a problem. German studies of medieval rural sites are more or less absent in the text after the example of Hohenrode from the 1930s, and the latest examples of rural studies discussed come almost exclusively from Sweden. It would have been interesting to also include some more recent examples of German, British and Danish studies in the discussion. This would have strengthened the analysis further, even if it probably would have meant a considerable number of more pages. It is a pity that the thesis is written in Swedish, since it also has interest for an international audience. In conclusion, this is a book that can be recommended for those interested in the history of archaeology, and for those interested in the medieval rural life.