

CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES  
AND INTERIOR LAYOUTS OF SWEDISH FOLK HOUSES

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Kinds of Sources

Inquiry into building and living customs of the rural population has had a prominent place in Swedish folklife research. Since the end of the nineteenth century the outdoor museum at Skansen and the Nordiska museum in Stockholm, model creations of Artur Hazelius, have directed interest to the buildings and interior furnishings exhibited there from different parts of the country, indeed from the entire research area. In connection with the collection of material for these museums some fieldwork was pursued, including photographs and notes whose results are now especially valuable, since the fieldwork occurred prior to industrialization and the modern period which has completely transformed the Swedish landscape. These early inquiries have counterparts elsewhere--Mandlegren's and Mejborg's records of the living customs of southern Sweden can be cited--although only since 1910 has the effort been systematic. Under the directorship of Sigurd Erixon the Nordiska Museum began methodical investigation of vernacular settlement patterns for the entire country, while Sigurd Wallin, Erixon's colleague, simultaneously set out to make a corresponding inventory of the building techniques and folk-

ways of the upper classes. Since then these projects have been carried further by many of their co-workers and students. Other institutions, above all the Folklife Archive in Lund, as well as the larger museums of the country, have undertaken similar research in their districts. In addition to the material collected by these direct means, photographs, records, and appropriate drawings, we should mention the extensive contributions of replies to questionnaires which have been assembled from the entire country. The Nordiska Museum and its affiliated Institute of Folklore, as well as the Archive of Folklife and Dialect Studies in Lund, Goteborg, and Uppsala, have a wealth of material to offer the scientific researcher.

The work is still far from its conclusion and needs many supplements before Sweden's vernacular construction techniques can be said to be fully documented, but even so there is a body of material in the archives which probably few other countries have to offer. This remains the most essential source for the study of these areas, so far as the last hundred years is concerned, supplemented by historic relics which have been preserved in the possession of museums, national societies, and private individuals. This kind of historic building is also well-documented for the period under discussion, and the approximately 1,000 national museums (hembygsgårdar) which our country possesses offer an especially rich assortment of older vernacular buildings and furniture.

For the somewhat earlier period of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century the number of examples is smaller and they are seldom preserved in their original form, but even for this period all kinds of structures are preserved. The picture

is also enhanced by archival documents of a different kind. The estate inventory, which by law had to be made for each death and which for individual peasants has produced a rather complete series since the first half of the eighteenth century, constitutes an inexhaustible source of information about furniture and moveable interior furnishings. In the same way, albeit in fewer instances, construction techniques have been discerned in documents and have been sketched out using the settlements of fire insurance companies which arose at the end of the eighteenth century and later. Records of building inspections are principally concerned with court tenants as well as military and church dwellings. Indeed these latter documents, which were partial models for vernacular architecture as to type of construction and material, and which partially adhered to architectural traditions, can be utilized in certain instances as a valuable source. Land surveys and legal documents as well as other official documents can furnish all kinds of information on this theme. Of course, contemporary topographic works and travel diaries can function in a similar manner. In this area Carl von Linné has left behind a wealth of material in reports and descriptions, even though he is known outside of Scandinavia only as a great botanist. Indeed, during his travels and entirely in keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment, he scientifically and with a lively interest studied everything which had to do with farming and housekeeping, combining, for example, living relationships and building methods and the like.

Regarding even earlier times, the seventeenth century and beyond, there are fewer lucky accidents preserved in our area of Sweden. Only a few historic buildings of the simple folk are preserved, archival evidence is accidental and sketchy, and the number of

literary documents such as travel accounts and the like is fewer and they are less informative. For the Middle Ages and pre-historic period there have been several finds in the last decades which have yielded some information, but in a country where the wooden house is completely dominant, it is natural that only fragmentary traces are to be expected. Taken altogether, however, this material in many cases still forms a sufficient basis for fairly valid reconstruction and hypotheses regarding newer forms.

### Treatment of Materials

The extensive materials about construction techniques and interior house layouts of the rural Swedish population which have been placed at our disposal have already undergone intensive examination. To begin with, Sigurd Erixon and his students should be mentioned; but architectural historians like Gerda Boëthius, Erik Lundberg, Manne Hofrén, Gunnar Svahnström, and others have also rendered important services, not least of all where this evidence permits comparisons to be drawn with the historical background and with relationships to the rest of the social classes. As is clear from the bibliography of the literature, the results are found scattered in a multitude of books and essays and have to be viewed in the catalogs of hundreds of contributions in different annuals and local publications. For a foreign researcher who wishes to become oriented in this area there are several summaries which can be described as standard works, but which unfortunately are written only in Swedish. There are in the reading list the well-received Svensk Byggnadskultur (Swedish Folk Architecture) and Folklig Möbelkonst i Svenska Bygder (Popular Furniture in Sweden), both by Sigurd Erixon. On the other hand, there is almost a complete lack of the

of the counterpart to the large sourcebooks of a monographic character, that is, reports for a certain area and a certain period, as for instance are customary in archaeology.

The cultural-geographic method was helpful in early architectural research, being applied to farm types and settlement patterns and to many other areas of Nordic ethnology. As the evidence gradually covered the different parts of the country quite evenly, regular mapping became possible. Such maps include types of floorplans and houses, as well as details of construction techniques and furniture, among other things. One summary of collections which achieves results with these methods is entitled Atlas över Svensk Folkkultur (Atlas of Swedish Folk Culture), the first part of which has recently appeared. The study was completed on the basis of fairly sparse evidence, arranged in the usual typological and chronological manner, providing information on the early centuries and the prehistoric periods. It takes as a basis for the study the object's age, derivation, and diffusion within the country in comparison to neighboring countries and to the surrounding continent. The routes of diffusion become clear in many cases, on the other hand, the development of cultural diffusion is seldom dealt with. Sigfrid Svensson and his students have addressed themselves to this theme, but the results of their works are still wanting in the area of architectural research.

#### Examples of Problems and Theories

It is obviously impossible in a brief essay for this festschrift either to present this material comprehensively or to offer a summary of the research results. The following is meant to represent examples of the problems discussed and the theories produced. It tries

to give the foreign reader an indication of what he can find in the Swedish material to compare with that of his own country.

As an example of the study of layout and function of the dwelling of the simple rural population we could choose the question of the origin of an unusual kitchen which is separate from the living room. The traditional house-types in recent times in Sweden, with the exception of the old Danish provinces of Schonen, Halland, and Blekinge, were the one-room house (enkelstuga) and the double house (parstuga), both of which have medieval antecedents. The former, shown in figure 3, has three rooms--the living room, an anteroom, and a small room behind it. The latter, shown in figure 4, has a second room, originally a shed, which is built behind the anteroom in the parstuga. In both cases, the living room originally was a general room for inside work, meals, preparation of food, sleep, and relaxation for the entire family. The living room also served as the kitchen. Into this layout a change gradually entered, one in which the storeroom developed into a special kitchen under the influence of continental models. In a similar fashion, a separate kitchen, on the basis of a somewhat different plan, through separation from the living room by means of a partition, originated in the houses of the southwestern provinces. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this difference spread to the dwellings of the north, yet the spread was halted by a boundary line which progresses roughly from southern Värmland across the middle of Sweden to Südösdermanland. In northern Sweden on the other hand, the stuga has maintained its character as a general room for all cultural functions. The significance of this previously mentioned borderline, which is one of many cultural borders crossing central Sweden, has been commented on more thoroughly in other articles in this festschrift (see fig. 1).

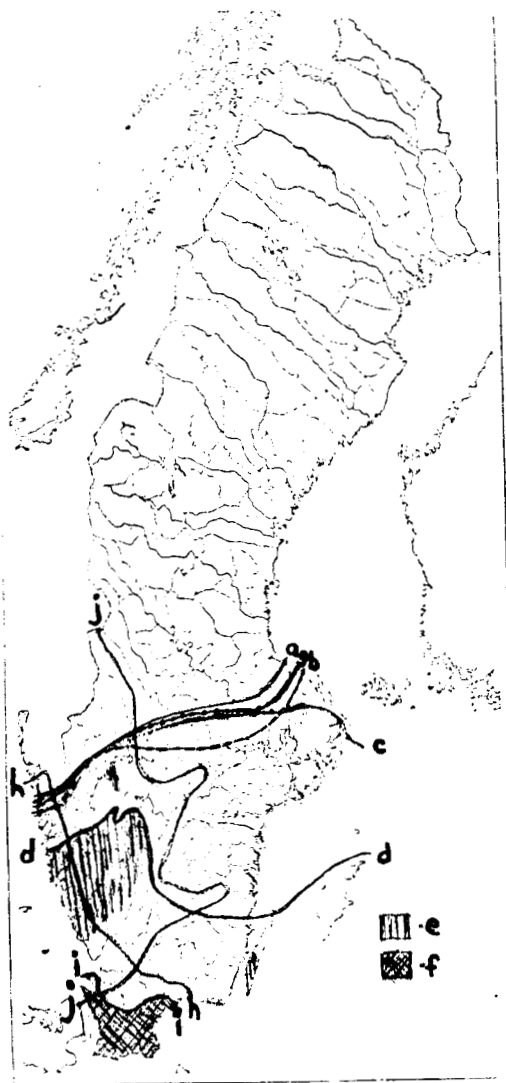


Figure 1 (facing). The cultural boundary between the north and south of Sweden (a, g, b, c) and the diffusion of several southwestern Swedish cultural forms. After Erixon 1945.

a = southern boundary of the Alpine dairy.  
 b = southern boundary of raised granary.  
 c = northern boundary of the sparse frequency of vertical plank construction. d = northern boundary of the strong frequency of vertical plank construction. e = occurrence of Mesula construction. f = occurrence of half-timber.  
 g = southern boundary of the tree trunk chair /baumsessel/. h = eastern boundary of fireside ovens. i = northern boundary of half-timber. j = eastern boundary of Easter-fire.

The aforementioned floorplans with or without separate kitchens and with or without any inner division are taken as the basis for the predominant number of dwellings of the Swedish peasantry. These exist as log houses with one--or primarily since the beginning of the nineteenth century--two stories. External details such as roofing material, panelling, fenestration, and paint, of course, are found in many variations, just as the inner rooms are greatly varied, but the principal form is a closed and regular building. Other types, such as the so-called högloftsstuga or Südgötischen house, are a special form with local distribution and their origins are contested. The högloftsstuga is an archaic type in which the buildings stand in a row, essentially a low log house with a two-story storehouse towering over it at one or both gables (fig. 5). The living part, or stuga, was frequently open to the rafters and had dormers and fixed benches along the base of



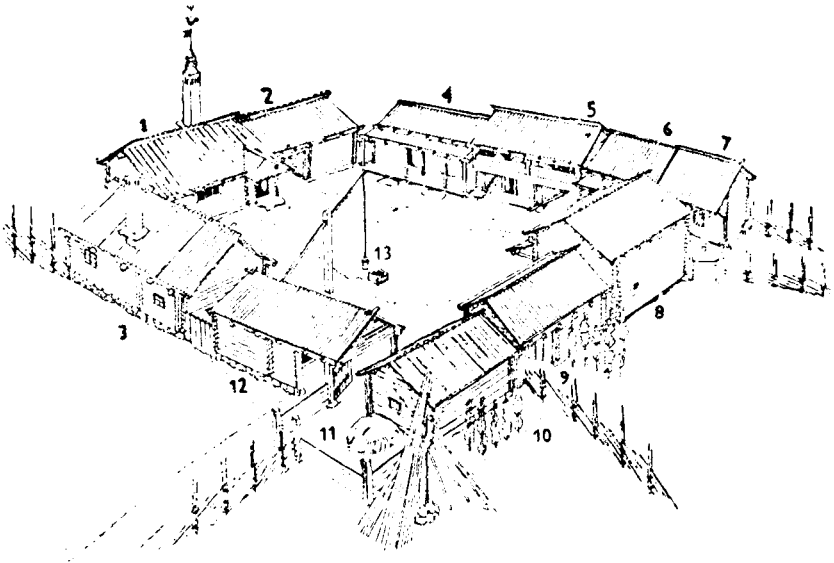


Figure 2. In this farm outside Mora in Dalarna the dwelling /1/ is an einzelhaus, a type which is the customary dwelling on smaller farms over the greater part of the country. The plan changes in particular cases and the houses are built sometimes one, sometimes two stories high, however, the chief characteristics are unchanged. /2/: horse stall, ca. 1600; /3/: older enkelstuga, also used as a dwelling; /4/: sleeping room from the Middle Ages; /5/: granary with loft dated 1574; /6, 7/: raised granaries, ca. 1583-1595; /8/: threshing floor, ca. 1595; /9/: hay barn, ca. 1800; /11/: manure pile; /12/: storehouse with cellar, ca. 1600; /13/: well. Farm in Mora, Dalarna, in Skansen.

the walls. Perhaps originally the fireplace hearth stood in the middle of the floor, although surviving specimens usually show a

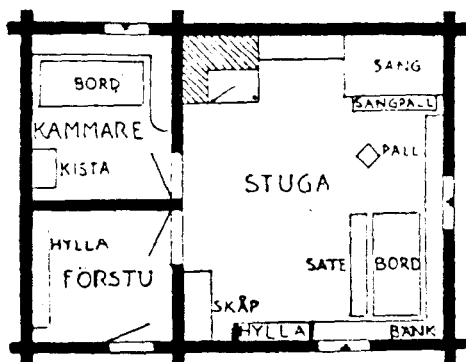


Figure 3. Einzelhaus, arranged according to the diagonal furnishing schema--the large dining table in the corner diagonally opposite the hearth, the bed on the back wall. This plan was prominent in large portions of the country. Alpine cowherd's hut from Djura, Dalarna. After Erixon, 1938.

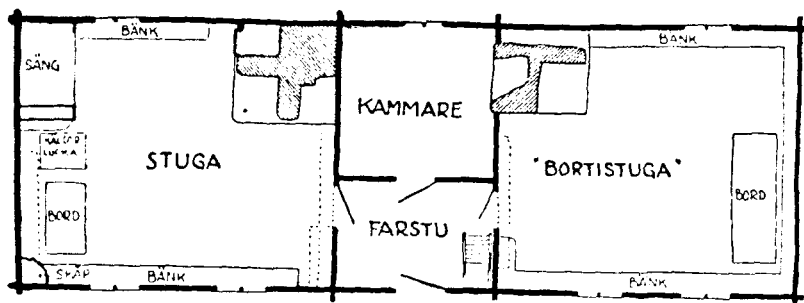


Figure 4. On the larger farms the dwelling is often a double house, parstuga, with a room to each side of the anteroom which commonly has a small room or kitchen beside the anteroom. Layout for a double house from Älvros, Härjedalen. After Erixon, 1938.

hearth in the corner. The storehouses (there were often two), generally termed shelters (hårbärke), served for the storage of food and household goods. Occasionally beds, trunks, and clothing were found on the lower level, while grain was stored above. Its distribution is confined to a relatively small area of the region from Göteborg to Halland, the southwest of Västergötland and Småland as far as Blekinge to Öland.

This region is a partially relict area in other ways. In previous times the högloftsstuga had a somewhat wider distribution, and similar types are encountered in Norway. Evidence of the housetype is found in medieval legal texts and in other documents in towns as well as in the country. For an explanation of its particular form, Lundberg, with an impassioned defense, has called attention to parallels in the continental hall house, while Erixon is inclined to see a variant of northern European, especially German, merchants' houses in this house in which the dwelling was united in a similar way with the granary. The form had in this case been conveyed by the trade routes to the southern Swedish--at that time Danish--coastal cities, which in the early Middle Ages experienced a florescence, and was preserved in the outlands of this coastal area. There is general agreement that it has influenced another housetype which enjoyed a wider distribution than the core area of the högloftsstuga, namely the framkammarsstuga, where a further storeroom has been added to the gable end of an enkelstuga or a building with a corresponding floor-plan.

The fireplace and bake oven belong to details of fixed internal arrangement which have long been the topics of study. Concerning

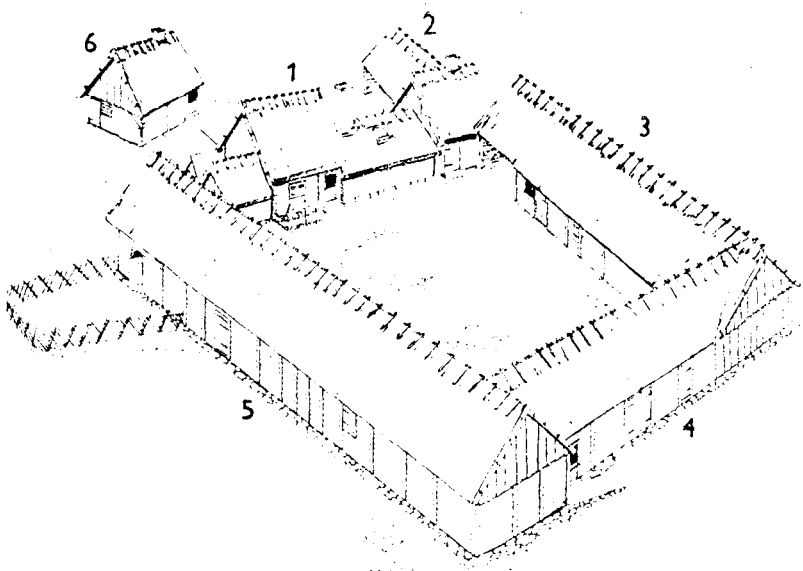


Figure 5. This farm from Oktorp in southern Halland gives a good picture of the archaic högloftsstuga. The dwelling /1/ here is a low building with two stories on either side. The type has a limited distribution in southwestern Sweden. /2/: storehouse (härbarge) with entry; /3,5/: threshing floors; /4/: cow and horse stalls; /6/: distillery and brewhouse. After Skansen Hus och Gårdar, 1953.

the latter, the traditional domed oven with a circular floor which is found on the continent is found in Sweden only in the former Danish provinces of the southwest up to the base of Gotland. In the remaining provinces there were for a long time either unusual bake ovens (in northern Sweden) or different combinations of hearth and bake oven in a special room (central Sweden). It is interesting to observe that the western European smokehouse

is found not only in the Finnish settlement areas of central Sweden, but also was previously distributed in the south, and it was generally common in western Norway as well. Thus it was still observed by von Linné in the eighteenth century in Schonen, which it presumably reached in the Middle Ages from the Slavic areas of northern Germany.

Living accommodations, furniture relationships, and furniture types, as we have said, were drawn in detail in Sigurd Erixon's Folklig Möbelkultur. In connection with this work certain customs were also studied. The diagonal furnishing relationship predominated in Sweden in past times even as it did in large areas of Europe, that is, the dining table had its place in the room in a corner diagonally opposite the hearth, bed or beds on the back wall of the room, and the potshelf on the front wall near the entry way (fig. 3). An exception to this form developed in part of western Sweden, where two beds are symmetrically placed in the corners of the back wall with the large table generally standing between them under the gable window. A further exception is seen in a more archaic system which is found in western Sweden and Norway, where a bed is set up in the entry in place of the potshelf.

Not infrequently beds are arranged on the second floor, but this practice is confined to northern Sweden. The connection between this type and the different kinds of bedshelf has been examined by Manne Eriksson. Also found in the north is a piece of furniture like the tree trunk chair (baumsessel) which is, however, a relict occurrence that is found earlier in other parts of the country and was also traditional in different variants, especially in western Europe. The trunk was also dealt with as

archaic furniture, and Sigfrid Svenssen among others drew attention to several medieval decorated examples which carried on the tradition of the Vikings.

The arrangement of houses also shows various connections to folk art, an expressly practical art which shaped the different elements of household utensils. Limited space prohibits a comprehensive survey dealing with the Swedish material of carpentry, ceramics, blacksmithing, and textiles. Here attention will be called to only one of Sweden's characteristic genres of folk art, namely the painted wall hanging or tapestry made from cloth or paper, which decorated the rooms of the rural population in many localities of the country in the past. They have been described primarily by Sigurd Erixon, Nils Strömbom, and Svante Svärdström, while shorter articles by different authors are found in a number of local publications. Research has in view both a monographic description of the textiles with differentiation of the particular schools, as well as the particular ambiguity of folk art. As an early, yet fairly solid summary, there are Sigfrid Svensson's articles in Acta Ethnologica, 1936, which were written in German.

During the florescence of this painting style, at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, two high points can be recognized in which a considerable independent development took place and through which an abundant output of examples has been preserved for us, occurring in the region around the Siljansee in Dalarna as well as southwest Småland and including the bordering districts. The former was comprehensively described in Svärdström's 1949 dissertation, which primarily emphasized the contents of the pictures and what significance the possession

of older printed Bibles and such had as examples for the folk artist, whose name and personal records are for the most part well known. In those areas where accumulations of this kind of art are found we also encounter quantities of painted furniture. In the southern Swedish area, Strömböm has bestowed special interest principally on painted wall hangings, which were only temporarily suspended in the house during the Christmas season, and through such use the form was changed to a certain extent and the range of motifs was limited. Alongside this customary type of formal analysis Strömböm examined the influence of the work of guild-trained professional painters on true folk painting and pointed out that the latter in many cases can be explained by the former, and indeed not only in terms of mediocre style, but as a carrying over by particular individuals. In his opinion, the origin of several of the large schools of southern Swedish painting at the end of the eighteenth century can be explained by reference to two house painters in particular. These two found that by anchoring their students within their own social class, which pursued painting as a sideline, they thus changed hand painting in folk art, with all the simplification in decorative motifs and frequently standardized symbolism which belong to it. Parallels to this situation are not infrequent, as when research into individual style is applied to shed light on the background of all kinds of local village handcrafts and the growth of regions with particularly artistic handcrafts.

Farm buildings have been studied in the same way that dwellings were examined and traced in the past. Drying houses like drying kilns (rior, kölnor) and bathhouses (hastur) were described in detail in Ilmar Talve's long dissertation. In Sweden the first type, ria, is primarily connected with the Finnish peasant stock in the middle and northern parts

of the country. The kölna for drying malt, the malt kiln, is found across the entire country, built of stone in the Danish provinces, but otherwise of log, with the oven in the middle or in the corner close to the door. The log type came from the west in prehistoric times, while the idea of building bathhouses in stone appears to be considerably more recent.

The elevated granary (fig. 6) has a distribution from northern Sweden down to the area around the Vanersee and Malarsee, a distribution which resembles that described by Norden. The granary serves as an example of a general form with prehistoric antecedents for the foundation and details of arrangement which appear in a number of variants. Elevated granaries were earlier found in the entire country, so that their present distribution, in precisely the same way as the baumsessel, can be described as a regression. Indeed, this form of granary is found in other parts of the world. By comparison the distribution of the loftbod (a granary with an overshot and a prominent open second story gallery or arcade) is more limited, occurring primarily in western and central Sweden (fig. 2, /5/). As a rule there are two rooms on the second floor. The bottom floor is used for storage of food and utensils, among other things, while the second story is used for clothing and as a sleeping place for the farm servants and maids. According to Erixon this type shows the influence of middle class urban and manor house architecture which spread in the latter part of the Middle Ages.

Besides these examples of the investigation of dwelling forms and house types, corresponding study of the technical details should be pointed out. Details of construction were recorded and analyzed in a similar manner, and the investigator can find a good



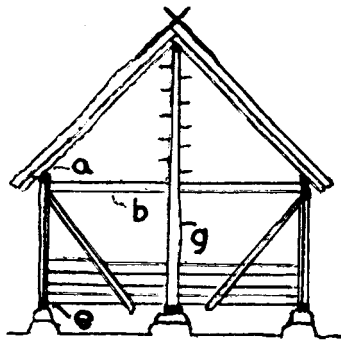


Figure 6. Example of the so-called mesula construction, in which the ridge pole was supported by standing posts. a = plate (väggband); b = main beam, girt; e = sill; g = center post (mesula). Erixon, 1957.

overview of such research in Sigurd Erixon's 1957 work published in German.

Of the four most important wall construction techniques used in previous times--log, horizontal plank mortised to corner posts, half-timber, and vertical plank--the first predominates, as has been said, over the entire country with the exception of the southernmost portion. Its age in Scandinavia is uncertain, although early archaeological proof exists in smaller constructions. Following Erixon it has been assumed that log house construction first came to Sweden from the west during the Viking period and was most likely imported through bathhouses and similar storage buildings, although Talve has doubts about this assertion. Later development appears to have progressed more quickly, and from the early Middle Ages there are examples of a rather advanced technological refinement. For

the dating of log houses the form of the corner notch and corner construction are of particular importance (fig. 7). The wooden architecture of Dalarna was studied in particular detail by Erixon and Boëthius, among others.

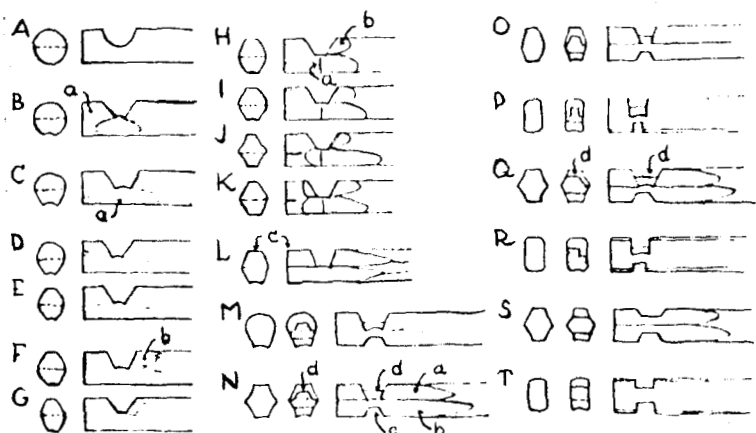


Figure 7. Examples of particular older types of corner construction. After Erixon, 1957.

Of the remaining walling techniques, vertical planks have played a smaller role in the buildings of the rural population in historic times. However, this technique was connected with a number of churches from the first half of the Middle Ages. While it is true that one encounters vertical planks in Sweden, particular elements of this technique are found only in western Sweden, and it experienced its flowering in Norway. More important were half-timber and horizontal plank construction, the former confined to Schonen and southern Halland at the present

time, the latter occurring up to the region around the Vännersee and Vättersee with offshoots extending to Uppland (fig. 1). Both are southern phenomena with prehistoric origins, although certain Swedish evidence for larger houses only exists for the Middle Ages. Horizontal plank construction is also calculated to have been a western influence which led to a special combination of these techniques with log construction.

Roofing techniques and material have also been recorded cartographically. While the customary Swedish style of roof consists of a ridge pole and purlins, which need to be supported by a center wall in log buildings, special attention is paid to an archaic construction with inner support posts or columns, since it is a clear parallel to prehistoric hall house construction (fig. 6). This style of construction occurs in historic times in barn buildings in the area of the Vännersee, and in Öland and Gotland, but it is only a relic (fig. 1).

With regard to roofing material, thick thatch is considered to belong to middle and southern Sweden and occurs in a variant in southwest and northwest Norrland with parallels in Finland, while shingled roofs are used exclusively in Norrland. In both cases examples with differing details are found within these historically and geographically bounded areas. In addition to these two materials, turf, tile, and shingles play an important role. Often the dwelling has a sod roof while the farm buildings are covered with other materials. Older documents in the archives give unusually ample explanation of these details.

The examples which are cited here are in part selected arbitrarily as already suggested, and are results of a union of typological-chronological research with functional studies and cultural-geographic methods. In individual cases the different social classes of the rural population were kept in mind, yet that assumption has scarcely given cause for more intensive analysis. As a rule it has been sufficient to maintain that larger and richer dwellings and interior layouts have been restricted to the socially and economically upper classes within the rural population, while the simpler forms have predominated among the peasant farmers and farm laborers. Further, the latter social group assumed the role of guardians of relict phenomena in reference to certain details of arrangement and residence up to the present day.

The last statement leads to the question of how cultural forms distribute themselves within a settlement area and to what changes they are subject. As was remarked above, these problems frequently come up for discussion, but the statement demands a thorough examination if the problem is one of specific knowledge of the social and economic structure. Indeed, in certain examples particular individuals should address these matters. Therefore, it cannot yet be treated on a larger scale, neither in the scope of these articles, nor in general. The work of Sigfrid Svensson which applied this method, Bygd och Yttervärld, nonetheless embodied a study of the distribution of a particular architectural novelty in one parish in Hälsingland around 1850, in which the author analyzed the different factors which had influenced its development. Sven B. Ek investigated the architecture of Ångermanlands from a different perspective. Nils Ström-bom undertook detailed investigations of folk art according to these guiding principles.

In these cases it was investigation of past epochs; the present, on the other hand, has been primarily the domain of sociologically-oriented authors. Sigurd Erixon, in his study of the older settlement in the Stockholm area, seems to speak of it to a certain extent. The work of Eva Hamrin offers a comprehensive survey of modern dwelling and arrangement practices in the country, a survey in which the cultural-geographic region in the historic present is defined as the starting point for the compilation and treatment of the evidence.

Finally, we should mention the material, mostly collected in recent times, that refers to fixed social classes outside the old peasant class, above all the urban and rural working classes. This material exists principally in the Nordiska museum in Stockholm and has already served as a basis for a summary of living accommodations in a compilation of the history of the Swedish working class. Since then, additional materials have been systematically collected from a great number of day laborers and people of various professions, and consequently accommodations can be illuminated. The further development of these materials and the study of the changes which have taken place principally in the last century are still in their infancy, yet such studies have been attacked by a number of researchers within various disciplines. It is also expected that a more consistent examination of the rich materials pertaining to earlier centuries which are in public archives will be able to supplement and correct previous accomplishments in this field.

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