The history of the Forest Finns

The finnmarker in Norway and Sweden were settled early in the 17th century when Finnish-speaking immigrants cleared and built farms in the forest areas of Mid Scandinavia. They built their log houses in the same way as in the areas they left behind in East Finland, Savolax and Rautalampi. Characteristic buildings were rökstugor (stone-oven cottages with chimneyless stone ovens), rior (drying sheds for sheaves of rye), and saunas. In addition they practiced huuhta (large-scale slash-and-burn cultivation) in preferably mature but untouched spruce forests. Accordingly the Finns in the finnmarker were called Slash-and-Burn Finns but are most often known today as Forest Finns, based on their 17th-century living habitat.

The Forest Finns settled in marginal areas well suited for their kind of slash-and-burn cultivation, that is huuhta, which stood in contrast to the traditional inland–outland cultivation of their Norwegian and Swedish neighbors in more central areas. The good browsing areas in the forest, not least on the burn-beaten land meant that the Forest Finns could keep more cattle, sheep and goats than the adjacent Norwegian and Swedish farms.

Conclusions

The Finns who moved to the Scandinavian Peninsula around 1600–1640 and became Forest Finns in finnmarker followed a different lifestyle in a different kind of settlements, creating an environment different from the Swedish-speaking inhabitants living in the immigration parishes. The four excavated farms presented permit a tentative idea of a changing Forest
Finnish materiality in relation to their Swedish neighbors – somewhat how materiality was active in their integration with the neighbors, in the ‘we-and-they’ relation according to the constructivist ethnicity concept.

Taking into consideration the break-down processes in the archaeological material, and without projecting knowledge backwards about the Forest Finns from 18th and 19th century sources, four main points can be formulated based on the excavations of the farms and the written documents of those times:

1. The Forest Finn households built and used houses that were in part different from the Swedish neighbors’ houses. The Forest Finns had röstkugor, rior and saunas with stone-pile ovens. These log cabins with their stone-ovens created a different type of communal living within the households, with different heat and light conditions in the room, that was not the same as that in the Swedish farmers’ cottages with fireplaces. The roles of the household members based on sex and age might have varied.

2. The huuhta required work teams, which demanded a different type of social group in the households than existed for the Swedish farmers. A large labor force was required at some times, less at other times.

3. The Forest Finnish households were incorporated into the monetary and market economy of the times. They acquired and used status and prestigious items such as elegant pottery pieces and window glass. They strived to reach a material image the equal of, and in part similar to, the neighbors’.

4. The youngest röktuga on the excavated farms was built in the 1680s. In the east Swedish provinces, the stone ovens were in use until the middle of the 18th century. In the Värmeland province finnmarker, stone-ovens were still being built in the 19th century. Some were still being used into the 20th century. The lifestyle connected with these ovens lived on in part until relatively late.

Large-scale slash-and-burn cultivation disappeared in the majority of the finnmarker at the latest in the decades about 1700 due to the State’s restrictions or simply because the attractive spruce forests were decimated. Work teams made up of clans or other constellations no longer
had a function. Family farms with cereal-cropping in the infields and grazing cattle on the outlying land, something which of course existed previously, became totally dominant. The lifestyle of these families around the stone ovens in their log cabins continued however in many of the finnmarker, in some places into, and even through, the 19th century.

Thus parts of a traditional social pattern, deviating from that in the surrounding Swedish farms and settlements, could exist for 100–300 years. This could be noticed when someone from ‘the others’ crossed the threshold of a traditional Forest Finnish rökstuga and felt that it was different from home. At the same time, the Forest Finns wanted to show off material things from the common marketplaces, which indicates that the households were well aware of and participated in the social exhibition of status. If these objects and phenomena had not been recognizable to ‘the other’, they would not have had any meaning.

The Forest Finns’ material world contained both a changeable exhibition of phenomena, which belonged to and were understood by the Swedes living around them, and things, which with the conservatism inherent in their materiality counteracted lifestyles becoming more Swedish.
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Fig. 1. Archaeologically excavated Forest Finn farms in Sweden.

Fig. 2. The cadastral map of the Råsjö farm from 1639.

Fig. 3. The excavation plan of the dwelling at the Grannäs farm built about 1610. Sten = stones; bränt virke = charred wood; grop = cellar; tegel = bricks; lera = clay. Heights above a local zero-point.

Fig. 4. The layout of the Avundsåsen farm during the second half of the 17th century. Grey = the excavated house; cross = houses with fire-places; clearance-cairns, lynchets (redrawn from Bladh et al. 1992).

Fig. 5. The stone-foundation of the dwelling at the Svartviken farm built in the 1690s.

Fig. 6. A generalized – and simplified – model of the process of Forest Finn settlement in the Scandinavian Peninsula in the 17th century.

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(1) = historical-archaeological datings of the excavated sites