

TRADING WITH FISH IN MEDIEVAL SWEDEN. SOME EXAMPLES FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL BONE FINDS

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ABSTRACT: This note makes a brief overview of fish trade during medieval times in Sweden by surveying a series of fish remains finds and contextualizing them with the help of historical records.

KEYWORDS: TRADE, FISH, SWEDEN, VIKING PERIOD, MEDIEVAL PERIOD, HANSEATIC LEAGUE, PROCESSING TECHNIQUES

RESUMEN: Esta nota repasa someramente el fenómeno del comercio medieval de pescado en Suecia cotejando una serie de hallazgos arqueozoológicos con la información cultural derivada de la documentación histórica de tal actividad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: COMERCIO, PESCADO, SUECIA, PERIODO VIKINGO, MEDIOEVO, LIGA HANSEATICA, TÉCNICAS DE PROCESADO

During the last 20 years there has been an increasing number of excavations in Swedish cities and towns. At those sites animal remains usually account for a far greater volume than pottery and other artifacts. Nevertheless, fishbones seem to be clearly underrepresented in the faunal assemblages.

To a great extent, such contingency is due to the difficulties of extracting the tiny bone fragments of fish from large volumes of soil. The interpretation of the importance of fish in the household or in trade remains therefore uncertain. One of the inferences which can be usually drawn nevertheless, is that fish not occurring naturally in one area represent imported items. In Sweden the fish trade started to develop during the end of the Viking Period, i.e. 900-1050 A.D. (Niitemaa 1959 column 354 and 355) and it is known, for example, that the citizens of the medieval town of Sigtuna (Figure 2) were importing Baltic herring (*Clupea harengus*) from the archipelago outside Lake Mälaren. Later, this trade expanded and Sigtuna not only imported dried cod (*Gadus morhua*) from the west coast as well as from Norway but also dried pike (*Esox lucius*) from the northern Baltic.



FIGURE 1. Selling fish in the 16th century. Illustrated by the last Swedish Catholic Archbishop, Olaus Magnus (1490-1557), in his book "Historia om de nordiska folken" (Olaus Magnus 20: 26). The dried fish is hanging in bundles and the fishwoman is holding a big eel in her hand.

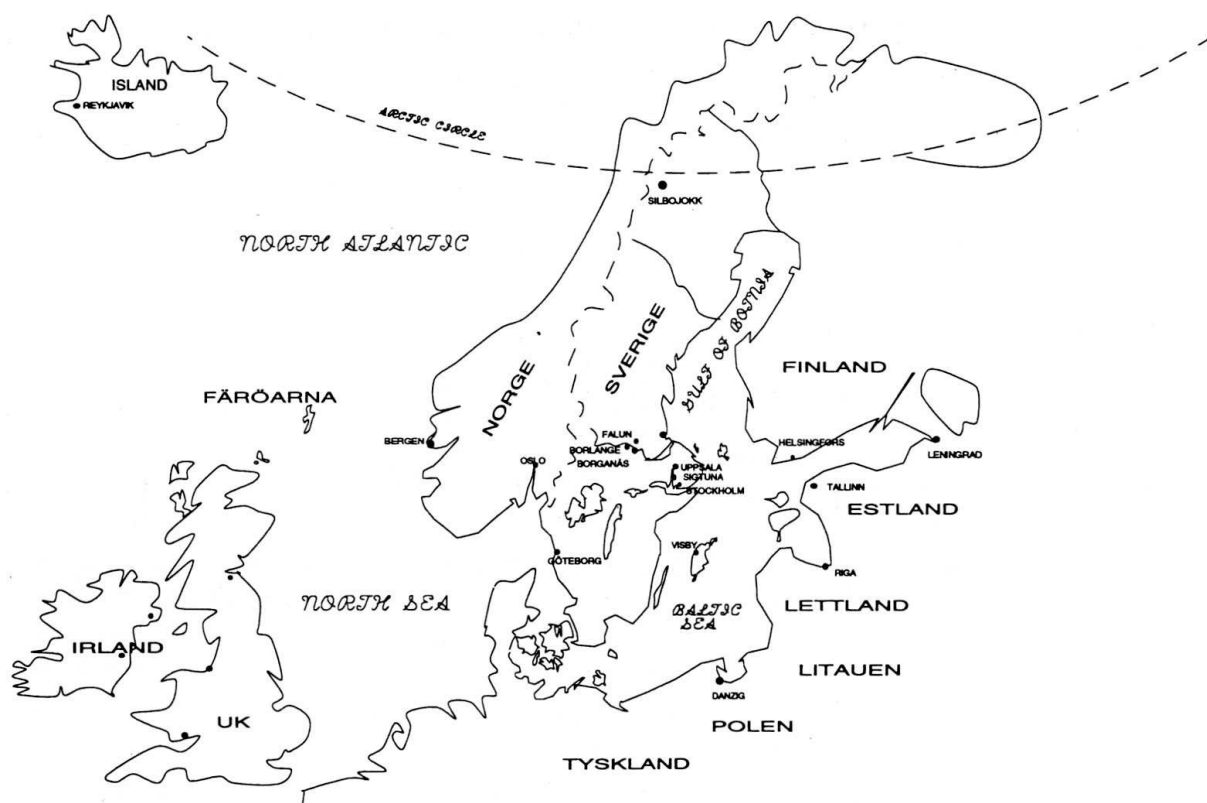


FIGURE 2. Map of Sweden. Excavations in Swedish towns where the fish bones retrieved suggest that fish was traded between the west coast and the Baltic area. (Drawing by Jon Lofthus).

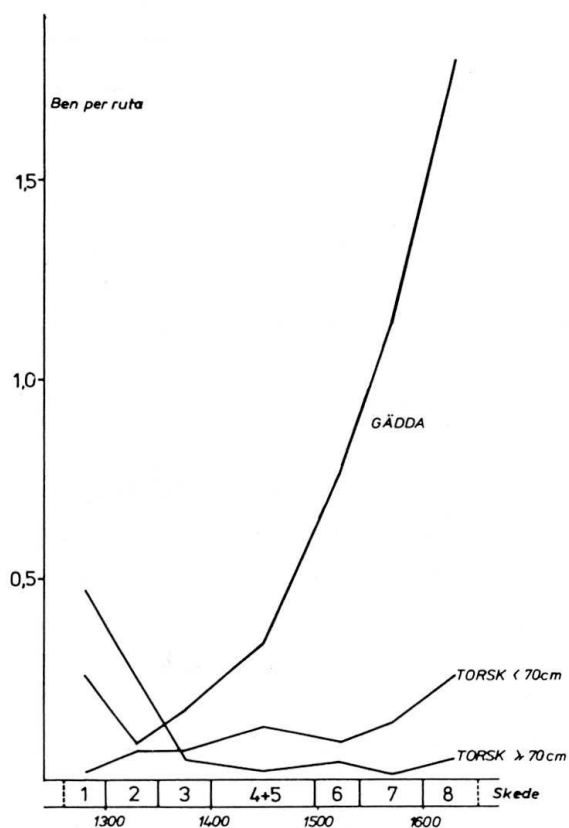


FIGURE 3. Finds of cod and pike from Uppsala levels spanning from about 1300 to 1600 A.D. The development of pike (sw. gädda) and the occurrence of cod (sw. torsk) from phase (sw. fas) 1 - 8. The average number of bones per square (sw. ben per ruta) and 10 cm layer (0,4 m³) of each fish species has been estimated for each phase (Jonsson, 1986: 135).

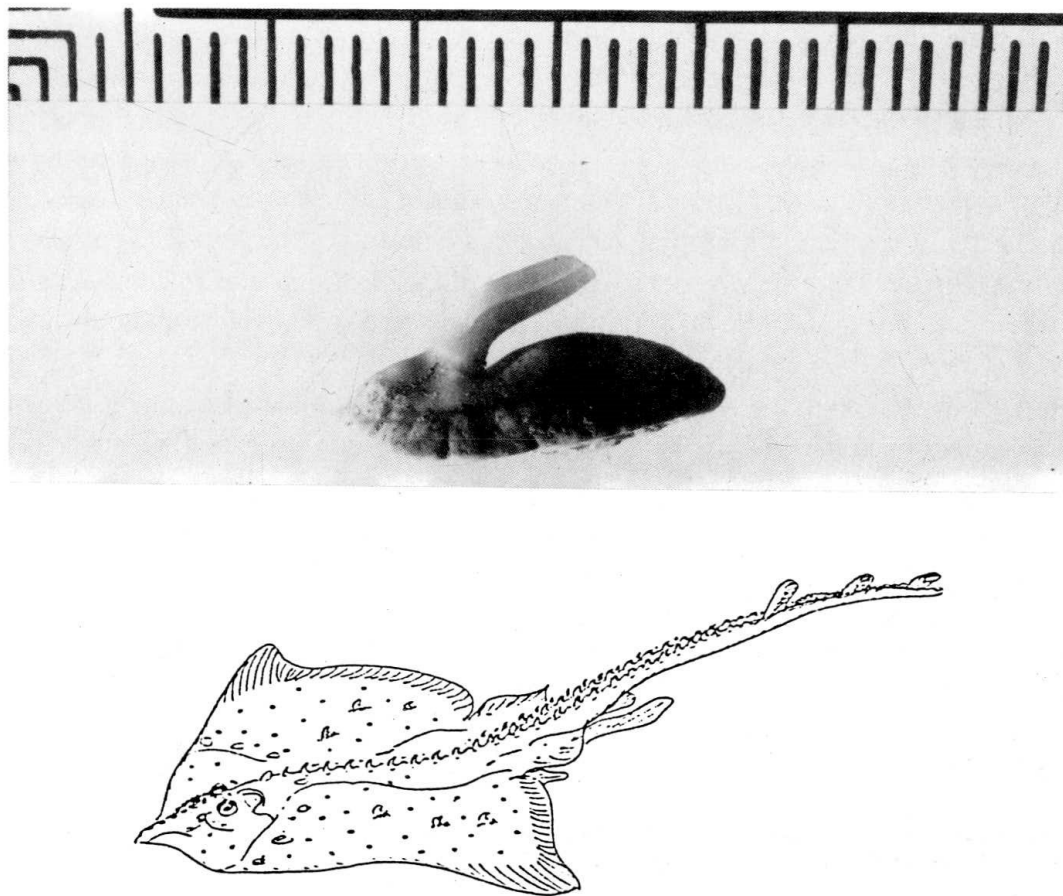


FIGURE 4. A buckler thorn from a thornback ray (*Raja clavata*) found in medieval Stockholm, shown three times its natural size. The thorns are protruding from the upper side of the body. (Photo: National Museum of Antiquities, Stockholm). (Drawing by Jon Lofthus).

Both the Hanseatic League and the church played a major role in raising the importance of fish in the diet. The League was a 13th-14th century medieval union of German tradesmen who were in control of foreign trade with different commodities such as day-to-day goods and exotic wares that were shipped from different sea ports (towns), not only around the Baltic, such as Wisby (Sweden) and Riga (Latvia) but also from Bergen (Norway). Dried fish was a very high ranking trade commodity in the Hanseatic League.

The church also contributed to the rise in the consumption of fish by proclaiming some 180 days of fasting a year during which the consumption of meat, but not fish, was forbidden (Järpe, 1985:124). Of the different methods of preserving fish, such as salting, smoking etc, drying seems to have been the cheapest and most commonly used (Magnus, 1555). Dried fish keeps well for a long time and it is light and easy to pack and transport. Being easy to carry without crumbling, dried fish proves to be ideal as provisions on journeys (Berg, 1974).

During the medieval period the most important exported product from Norway was dried cod, a major part of which was distributed through the Hanseatic League. The cod from the North Sea and the Atlantic is much larger than that from the Baltic Sea which rarely exceeds 1,2 m in length (Rosen & Molander, 1923: 63). The largest cod specimens can be often detected in archaeological assemblages. Thus, an excavation in medieval Uppsala yielded in the early layers bones from cods in excess of 70 cm (Figure 3). These large animals were probably imported from northwest Norway. An over-representation of vertebral centra at this site suggests that the fish had been dried (Jonsson,

1986: 133). During the 14th century the earlier import of large cod from the west coast ceased whereas the import of dried pike from northern Sweden and Finland went up markedly (Jonsson, 1986: 135). Uppsala is known to have had imported dried fish from northern Sweden and Finland during the 14th century (Järpe, 1985: 124). The drastic reduction in number of large cods and simultaneous increase in number of pike remains during the 14th century seems to have been caused by significant shifts in the fish trading pattern. We thus believe that large cod from layers postdating the 14th century (Figure 3) probably come from the Gulf of Bothnia and fishes below 70 cm come from the Baltic Sea (Jonsson, 1986: 135). At an excavation in medieval Stockholm a buckler thorn from a thornback ray (*Raja clavata*) was found (Vretemark, 1982: 291, Figure 4). This fish living in the Mediterranean as well as in the Atlantic is considered to be a delicacy for many gourmets since its meat resembles that of lobster. For different reasons remnants of this fish are rarely found in archaeological excavations. One of these reasons is that its skeleton is cartilaginous, and that the only part normally preserved is the buckler thorn which is a characteristic bony denticle. Another reason is that thornback ray was an exclusive dish that not everybody could enjoy. In an archaeological assemblage from Falun (Figure 2), dated to the year 1650, remnants of haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*, Figure 5) and ling (*Molva molva*) were found. Both species are believed to have been taken to the town from some place along the Atlantic coast, probably in west Norway (Sten, 1989a). The ling is consumed almost exclusively dried because of its rather coarse meat. It is still a Christmas tradition in Sweden to eat "Lutfisk", (i.e. dried ling softened in slaked lime and rinsed). Remains from the mid 17th century mining community of Silbojokk in Lapland (Figure 2) have been studied. They show that, in addition to local fish, cod from the Baltic was consumed (Sten, 1989b: 176). The same can be seen at two excavated forts, Grådö and Borganäs, in Dalarna (Figure 2) dated to 14th and 15th century respectively (Sten, 1988: 161-162).

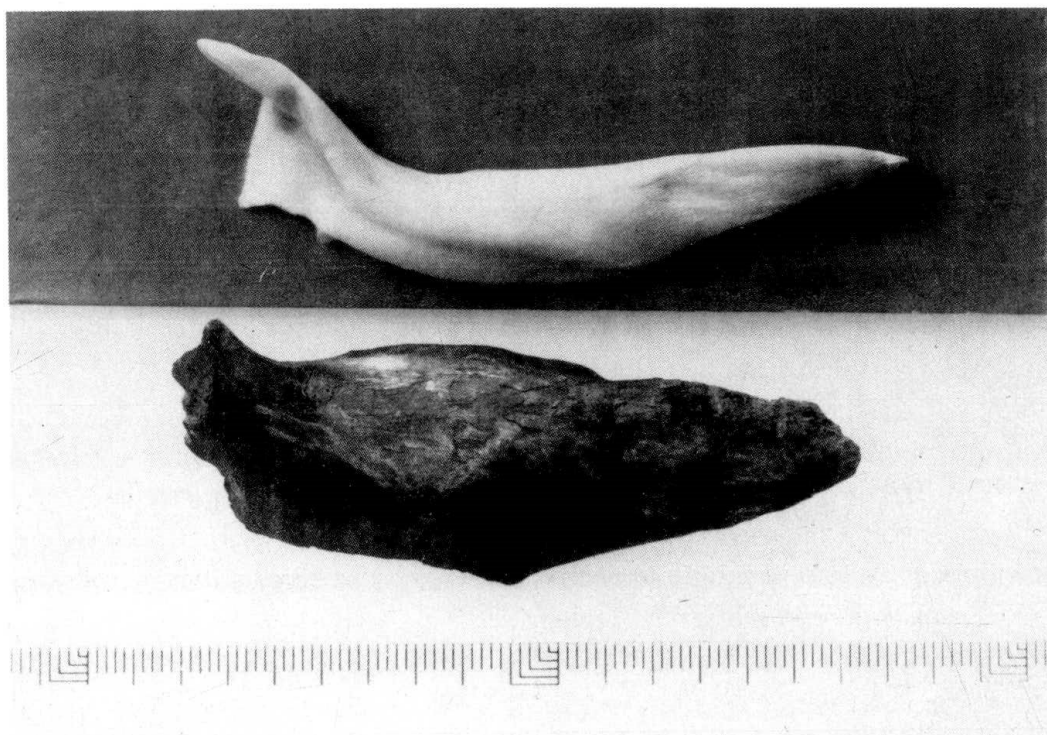


FIGURE 5. Haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*). Dried haddock, like dried cod, was used in trading. Haddock usually attains a length of 50-60 cm but this specimen from Falun was about 70-75 cm SL. Here the haddock from Falun is compared with a recent haddock specimen which was about 25 cm long. (Photo: National Museum of Antiquities, Stockholm).

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