

Visingsö – Pearl of Lake Vättern  
Presentation of a project at the Jönköping County Museum

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Summary

The island of Visingsö, on Sweden's second largest lake, is located in between the two major parts of medieval Gothia (Götaland) – the provinces of Västergötland and Östergötland – with Småland, literally 'the small lands', to the south-east.

Recent archaeological excavations have revealed new facts, and about a year ago I had the opportunity to excerpt all the 16th-century documents concerning the island, comprising tax rolls relating to real estate and tithes.

One problem for Visingsö is the impact of the waves of Lake Vättern, which have reduced the size of the island. Older maps reveal a broader island, and farmers have complained to the authorities about the loss of arable land.

Visingsö played a major role in Swedish medieval history, with the ruins of the oldest known royal castle situated on its southern shore; recent investigations show that it may have been established as early as the 1130s. Four medieval kings died on the island between 1167 and 1290, one of them murdered by his successor.

Seventeen documents were issued on Visingsö by royalty and bishops, of which fourteen have Visingsö alone as the place of issue. The castle is rarely mentioned, but it is referred to in four other documents. Later scholars have assumed that the documents were issued at the castle. However, on both shores of the strait between Visingsö and the mainland there was a village by the name of *Husaby*, which referred to a royal estate.

The settlement names of the island reveal that it was almost fully exploited as early as the Middle Ages, and in the four parishes of the district of Vista *härad* there are an unusual number of prehistoric settlement name types for the province of Småland. However, only two names on Visingsö have attracted the attention of onomasticians: *Rökinge* and *Grönstad*.

Medieval Visingsö consisted of two parishes: Ströja and Kumlaby. In the tax collection rolls, farms in villages are accounted for individually. One puzzling factor, however, is that the earliest rolls (1540–1) list farms in three villages which are missing from the subsequent rolls: two in Erstad, five in Kumlaby and one in Säby. What does this reveal – a last glimpse of late medieval desolation? That five farms in Kumlaby should have disappeared is extraordinary.

There are also quite a few leys and meadows on Visingsö – named ones as well as ones that are anonymous, but managed by a named farmer. This has attracted the attention of human geographers, who suggest that the island was subject to a medieval relocation of farms.

On the coronation of King Erik in 1561, three counties were established in the realm in accordance with European tradition, one of them with Visingsö as its centre. Here Count Per Brahe the Elder located his manor of Visingsborg, the ruins of which can be seen at the harbour. This house, however, has a prior history: from 1550, the area seems to have been the site of one of King Gustav Vasa's cattle-rearing manors, as reflected in the disappearance of the villages of Ströja and Husaby from the tax rolls after 1550.

The existence of a county also implied that the count himself administered taxation, and after 1572 tax rolls were no longer kept by the royal treasury. From the period 1540–72 there are 35 rolls, compared with only four from the subsequent period (1573–1605).

Among new settlement names appearing after 1570, *Hospitalen* has prompted speculation about a medieval hospital (for lepers) on Visingsö. My study, however, clearly shows that this farm was established by Count Per in the 1580s, but not for what purpose this was done. The 1585 roll refers to *Ostad hoßpitall*, and the 1588 and 1589 rolls state at the end: 'Total for Visingsö, except one farm which Count Per is using as a hospital'. This farm was thus established on land belonging to the village of Ostad at the northern tip of Visingsö.

Finally, it would have been interesting to compare the situation on Visingsö with the other three parishes of Vista *härad*. Is Visingsö unique, or would a similar development be revealed for the mainland parishes of Vista? Hopefully this essay and our full report will provide a basis for further applications for funding to continue the investigation.

*Ortnamnssällskapets i Uppsala årsskrift (Yearbook of the Place-Name Society of Uppsala) 2007, ISSN 0473-4351, pp. 5–20.*