



Cursing in the church

A discussion on the uselessness of the term 'utmark' as a basis for ethnic studies

The 'utmark' is a Scandinavian term and may best be translated to the English 'outfield'. It does not, however, cover the full meaning of the Scandinavian term. Webster's online dictionary has the following definition of the term 'outfield': *The part of a baseball field beyond the infield and between the foul lines.* Not much help there. It demonstrates that the concept as we use it in Scandinavian history and prehistory is not universal. As a test, I looked up 'infield' as well. It has two meanings: *(1): a field near a farmhouse, (2): the area of a baseball field enclosed by the three bases and home plate* The understanding of the infield as a field near the farmhouse shows that this part of the infield/outfield dichotomy has reached beyond Scandinavia.

Instead of trying to give a full description of the term, I will try to focus on the limitations of the concept. The outfield gives no meaning without reference to the term infield. The dichotomy infield/outfield is a structuring principle, a way of organising the world: *out there* in the outfield, *in here* in the infield.

The dichotomy, as used in the invitation to the conference, is a contextual concept, derived from the typical Scandinavian farming communities' way of structuring their surroundings. It is a way of understanding the world, and it should, in my opinion, not be used as an analytic tool. The critique, therefore, is as contextual as the concept itself.

In the following, I will try to explain why I think we should abandon the term when it comes to questions of ethnicity. It can be argued that the term may be used descriptively, as a way of dividing the landscape into different categories. This can, of course, be done, but it may have some unfortunate consequences.

The outfield is 'out there'. To many, it represents what is left of the world when we take away the infield and the urban areas. According to the programme, the themes for this outfield conference relate to:

- Resources
- Relations of power and ownership
- Monuments with beliefs and traditions attached
- Ethnicity and land conflicts

Under the first theme, the seminar focuses on the resources. The point of view seems to be that pre-industrial communities gather as much surplus as possible from the outfield. The outfield is an important part of the economic basis for the reproduction and growth of society.

This is a relevant standpoint and will not be argued here. The assumption is, of course, that the outfield is seen from the farmer's perspective. But is this a relevant perspective when we look at for instance the trapping pits in Norway?

The second theme concerns relations of power and ownership: who has access to the resources? It is also an interesting area of study that may give new insight as to how the urban or farming communities gradually took control over increasingly larger areas. But again, the perspective is the same. The outfield is seen from the infield or the centre.: 'In European folklore, the 'utmark has been looked upon as hostile environments – the wilderness.' The safe place is the infield – the domesticated, controlled environment, in contrast to the wild, unsafe outfield. This is only correct for those who live in the infield and are familiar with this way of thinking. People who spend all their lives in the mountains or the forests will, of course, not see them as hostile. To them, the infield may be seen as a dangerous place.

And finally, we have the last topic, ethnicity. Again, I will quote the programme: 'It is possible that the 'utmark' was considered as the land of 'the others'. This view is in my opinion very ethnocentric. For 'the others' out there, the infield must have been an unfamiliar and strange place, where 'the others' lived.

In the following, I will try to give some reasons for why I think we must abandon the concept of the outfield/'utmark' in ethnic studies. Modern studies of ethnicity stress that the term is not a tool for categorisation; it is a process, a social mechanism that is activated when two societies engage in closer contact. These processes take place in both societies in the contact zone between the two groups.

A study of ethnicity within the framework of the infield/outfield dichotomy is: The infield is the safe, controlled environment where *we* live. The outfield is the dangerous wild area where *the others* live. In such a perspective, ethnicity is reduced to a mechanism of categorisation. It does not focus on the process of ethnicity in the contact between the groups. It does not give attention to the mechanisms of change, because it only focuses on one side. 'The others' belong out there in the outfield. They are being connected to the dangerous and undefined.

The infield/outfield dichotomy is contextual. It belongs in the farming communities and not among hunter-gatherers or other mobile groups. If we, as an example, look at the traditional Saami reindeer pastoralists, we see that they have no such concept. They have no infield. Do they then have an outfield? No, of course not. Does the contact between Norse and Sámi groups then take place in the outfield? From a Norse farmer's point of view, some of it does. For the Sámi it does not. In order to study or attempt to understand the ethnic processes, we need to free ourselves from these limiting concepts.

This broader view of the concept will not only lead to a more respectful treatment of the Sámi or other minority groups. It is also necessary if we want to understand the changes that took place in both societies. There has been a tendency to see the Norse society as culturally superior to the neighbouring Sámi people (Schanche and Olsen 1983). Hunter-gatherer societies are most often seen as static compared to the dynamic and innovative agriculturalists (Olsen 1991). The studies have most often focused on the cultural traits and material culture that move *from* farmers *to* hunter-gatherers, and in a lesser degree that which the farmers adopt from the hunting groups. These ideas are remaining fragments of uni-linear evolutionism that was outdated more than 50 years ago. This line of thinking has led Scandinavian archaeologists to neglect the study of which new impulses may have come into the Norse society in the Iron Age (Price 2000).

I wonder if this 'one-sidedness' is connected to our use of the 'utmark'/outfield term when we study the remains of human behaviour in the forest and mountain regions. The outfield perspective has been dominant in both Norwegian and Swedish archaeology for the past hundred years. Is this part of the reason why the trapping of moose and reindeer in pits are most often seen as activities inherently connected with the Norse farmers?

In the following, I will use my own study in Østerdalen in Eastern Norway as an example, examining the material from the Iron Age and the Middle Ages (from around 500 BC to 1500 AD) from the perspective of ethnicity. Were there two different ethnic groups in the area in the Iron Age as some think, or are the obvious differences in the material only a reflection of different adaptations to the environment?

Over the years, there have been a number of excavations in the region. The material may be grouped into two different sets. In the bottom of the valleys, on the best farming land, we see that regular 'Scandinavian farms' were established from around 500 AD (Brøgger 1942, Sørensen 1979, Bergstøl 1997, Narmo 2000). At Hedemarken, the agrarian landscape further west, traces of agrarian settlements date back to the Neolithic (Amundsen 2003). There are numerous sites dating back to the Stone Age and Bronze Age in the Østerdal region as well, but they are all related to a hunter-gatherer economy (*ibid.*). The late Iron Age farms can be recognised by burial mounds near present-day farms, stray finds, and by dating of the place-names.

In the forest region, a different picture appears. From the early Iron Age there are a large number of trapping pits for moose and reindeer. The trapping pits lie in

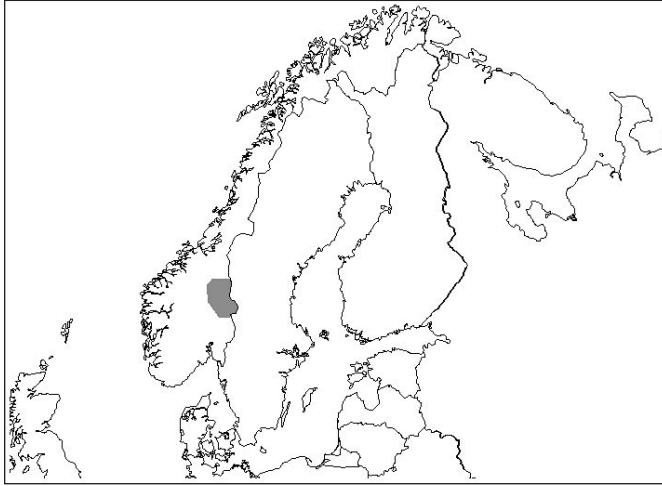


Figure 1. The study area

rows of 3–4, up to the largest systems with hundreds of pits (Barth 1996, Bergstøl 1997). In the lower regions, the trapping of moose in these pits terminates about the same time as the first farms appear (Narmo 2000, Østmo 2000). In the mountains and higher forest areas, the trapping in pits continued up to the Middle Ages, and in some places even into the sixteenth century (Barth 1996). During the Merovingian and Viking periods, an intensive iron production started, which ultimately forced the trapping into higher and more remote areas. Excavations have demonstrated that several of the trapping pits in the lowlands were reused for producing charcoal for the iron extraction ovens (Bergstøl 1997, Narmo 2000, Amundsen *et al.* 2003).

A certain type of burial has been central to the discussion about the southern border of the Sámi people in prehistoric and historic times. In Norway, these have been denoted as mountain graves, in Sweden, lake graves or forest graves. The German archaeologist Martin Gollwitzer has demonstrated that they represent the same tradition on both sides of the border, and that the different terminology is a result of the different topography and research traditions in the two countries. He therefore introduces the term ‘hunting ground graves’ (Gollwitzer 2001:183–184). These burials are essential for the understanding of the ethnic processes in the region.

From the Bronze Age and early Iron Age, there are only a few burials, all located in the mountains, from 700–1100 m.a.s.l. All of these fall into the category of ‘hunting ground graves’. On the Swedish side of the border, a few larger burial fields from this period are located in the forest regions and along lakeshores (Ambrosiani *et al.* 1984, Zachrisson 1997). An important feature to be noted is that there are no traces of farms established within tens of kilometres from these graves. In some cases, it may be close to hundred kilometres to the nearest known farming community. The burials, therefore, must originate from a grouping of hunter-gatherers.

In the late Iron Age the number of burials increased, both in the mountain region and in the valleys. The hunting ground graves are low cairns, many with a shallow ditch around the base.

As a contrast to these burials, the typical burial mounds among the Norse farmers are higher and built of soil and sand. None of the burials in the valleys or near the farms can be dated before 500 AD (Bergstøl, in press).

Several researchers have discussed the ethnic identity of the occupants of the hunting ground graves. Some claim that they were Norse farmers living in marginal areas (Hougen 1947), others that they were Norse hunters and gatherers (Odner 1973, Skjølsvold 1980, Baudou 2002). Some assume that they belonged to a third, now extinct group (Selinge 1979), and finally some consider them of Sámi origin (Zachrisson 1997, Narmo 2000). The farming hypothesis and the theory of a third group are now more or less abandoned.

There is a clear connection between trapping pits and these 'hunting ground graves'. In the lowland areas in the municipalities of Elverum and Åmot, there are trapping pits which have been used from the Bronze Age, but went out of use when the Norse settlers established their farms in the sixth century (Bergstøl, in press). To me, it seems obvious that the trapping should be linked to a hunter-gatherer population without any infield. As a consequence, I conclude that it is wrong to regard the trapping as an activity of the outfield. Evert Baudou states in a recent article, with reference to Eva Svensson, that the trapping in the Neolithic in Norrland represents a form of neolithisation of the forest areas, a way of controlling and domesticating the outfield (Svensson 1998:167, Baudou 2002:19–20). My response is that there is no archaeological evidence of any farming settlements within a hundred kilometres of the central parts of my study area from the Early Iron Age. To regard the huge number of trapping pits as connected to a farming community so far away, is therefore out of the question.

So what is the 'utmark'/outfield?

In my view, the 'utmark' is the part of the forests and mountains that the farmers use or have an active relationship to, where they produce charcoal and iron, collect firewood, pasture their livestock, hunt and collect forage for the cattle, fish and hunt.

There has been a tendency to consider the outfield as *all* the terrain outside of the infield. Instead, I will suggest more neutral terms, like forest archaeology or mountain archaeology, offering a more neutral starting point for the studies of ethnic processes. Here in Scandinavia, several notions are implicit in the concept 'utmark'. In my view, we need to rid ourselves of these to enable an understanding of the complexity of the ethnic processes.

Studies that do not concern the outfield within the specific context of the Norse farming communities, should, in my opinion, avoid using the term at all.

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