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Torp and Torpare - An Analysis

Confusing words for many researchers

BY NILS WILLIAM OLSSON (†)

Anyone using Swedish parish records for the purpose of researching his or her family will at one time or another come upon the words *torp* and *torpare*. These terms are ubiquitous in all Swedish genealogical literature and have from time to time caused minor headaches for students unfamiliar with the Swedish language or the history of the Swedish social system. How should the words be translated? There are of course standard translations and by consulting dictionaries we find that *torp* is usually translated as croft or cottage and the resident of a *torp* thus becomes a *torpare*, much as the resident of a croft or cottage becomes a crofter. It seems simple enough. But we are here dealing with words that go far back into Swedish history, words

which across the span of years have changed meaning. It is not an easy task to unravel the history of the word *torp*. In Swedish dictionaries a *torp* is usually given as “a small farm, usually on encumbered land,” meaning land which does not belong to the resident of the *torp*. English dictionaries equate a croft with “a small field or pasture near a house” or “a small farm, especially a tenant farm.” This explanation should suffice for the average student who merely wishes to translate into English the rough equivalents of the words *torp* and *torpare*.

But there are those students of genealogy who wish to plow deeper into the etymology of the Swedish word, to dissect, if possible, the word itself, in order to better understand

its role as a part of the Swedish social fabric.

The history of the word

Without wishing to appear magisterial, let me go back into Swedish history to see where the term began. It is of course cognate of the German word *dorf*, which signifies a village or small town.

In Swedish the term has become much more restrictive, and its origin began as the word for a single farm located on the outskirts of a village, usually on the village common. In Old English the word for a small hamlet was called a *thorp*, now obsolete, except as it has remained a part of place names, as well as surnames.

We recognize names like Jim Thorpe, the famous American Indian athlete in the Stockholm Olympics 1912. We see it in the name of James Edward Oglethorpe, the British philanthropist and army officer (1697-1785), who settled in what was to become our state of Georgia in 1733. Lately the word has surfaced in the name of Robert Mapplethorpe, whose photographs have been widely discussed in the nation's news media.

In Denmark the form became *t(e)rup* or *-rup* as in the placename of Kastrup, the international airport in Copenhagen. But back to Sweden. As time went on the isolated farm on the outskirts of the more settled areas called a *torp* attracted the

This is the
2nd issue of the
30th
volume, and this is
one of the
old gems



A torp in Flistad parish, Östergötland. Ca 1900.

settlers and the place name was transferred to the community or the parish and even the town.

Thus in historical terms, the word was equated with a farm without any pejorative connotation. This was then the original use of the word. In Skåne the word became a part of a number of castles, parishes, and towns, as in the castles Knutstorp, Björnstorp, Vrams Gunnarstorp, and Krapperup, the latter with the Danish suffix -rup and in parishes like Klagstorp, Tullstorp, and Gudmuntorp, and in cities like Åstorp, Staffanstorp, and Teckomatorp.

There are three parishes in Sweden named Torp and no less than six are named Torpa. The *torp* which thus in Skåne as well as in Denmark was located on the outskirts of the village was therefore equal in social acceptance to the farms in the village.

Only the Skåne, and the Västgöta provincial laws recognized this fact. Other provincial laws in Sweden saw it differently. Hence the small farms located on the periphery of the village in other parts of Sweden were also called *torp*, but had a sociologically inferior position vis-à-vis the farms in the village.

It is this latter concept which has won wider acceptance, even in Skåne, and Västergötland, where so long as the *torp* had the superior meaning, the smaller and more insignificant farms were called *tomter* in Västergötland, *gatehus* in Skåne and *målar* in Blekinge.

The importance of the *torp*

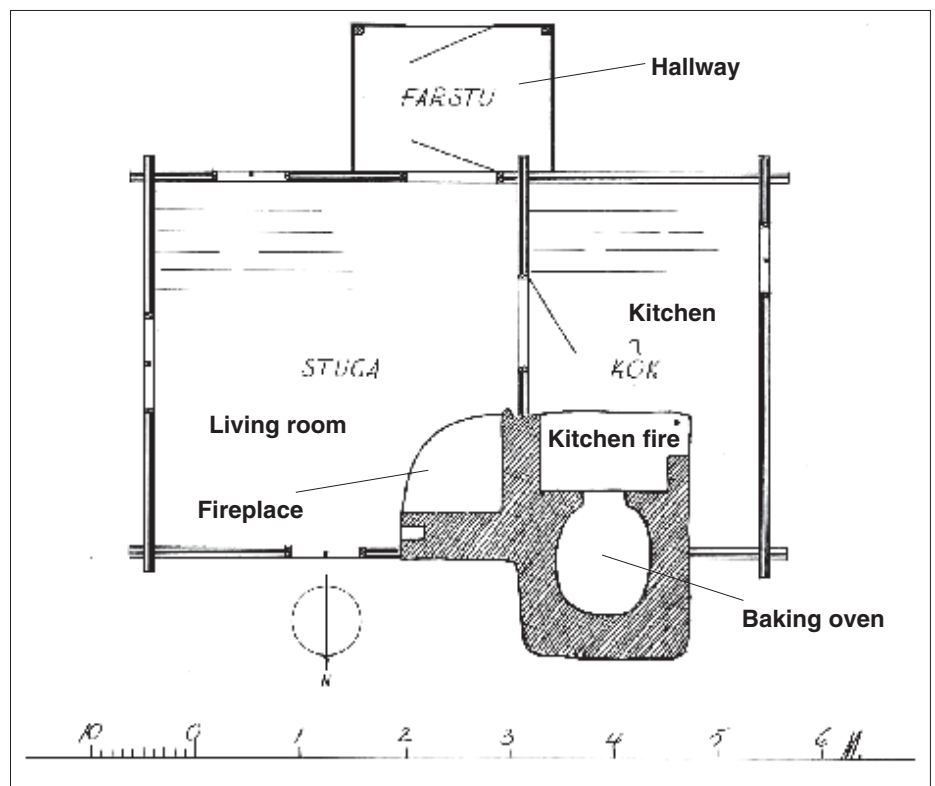
Let us now focus on the history of the secondary meaning of the word *torp*. In the 19th century the Swedish population grew explosively, due in part to the introduction of the cowpox vaccine, which drastically reduced infant mortality, and – where a family had experienced that only one or two children survived infancy – now with the introduction of the vaccine, the parents could view their families of seven, eight, nine, and even ten children growing up to adulthood. As the families grew, the farms, which had



A soldier's torp in Ransäter, Värmland.

been in the same family, perhaps for centuries, suddenly were no longer able to feed the many additional mouths. Add to this the fact that the nation's laws precluded that, at the death of the farm owner, the farm could be carved up for the heirs. Usually the farm was therefore inherited by the eldest son. The remaining children had to make their own way, either by hiring out as farm hands and maid servants to a neighboring farmer, joining the army, or

taking up a village trade such as that of a cobbler, a tailor, or a carpenter. For those who wished to remain on the land and at the same time to stay at least semi-independent, there was one other choice, that of establishing one's own existence on land which belonged to a farm owner. This land, usually the most unproductive, was quite often located on the outskirts of the village near the edge of the forest. This was of course encumbered land, and the settler who worked it



A floor plan from a torp in Blekinge. Scale in meters.



A miner's torp in Värmland.

was obligated to provide the owner with a certain number of free work days during the year. In return the *torpare* worked his plot of ground, seldom larger than a couple of acres, where he could plant potatoes, grow vegetables and a bit of hay for the lone cow, a couple of pigs, and a few chickens. Occasionally the land area was large enough also to support a horse.

But there were problems, inasmuch as the farm owner wanted his *torpare* to work during the busiest seasons, the time of planting, harvesting, slaughtering, fence mending, and the repairing of roads. The crofter had to adjust his own schedule to the demands of the owner, thereby finding himself scrambling at odd hours accomplishing his own tasks.

The social conditions

The social conditions under which the *torpare* worked varied greatly from farm to farm, from village to village. Where the farm owner and his crofter worked together harmoniously, life was tolerable at least. Where the owner and his farm laborer could not agree, or where the farm owner made unreasonable demands which the crofter could scarcely meet, life could be frustrating, humiliating and miserable. This state of affairs has been amply illustrated in Vilhelm Moberg's *The Emigrants*.

These conditions were of course one of the prime motivating factors for Swedes to immigrate to America.

The farm owner and his crofter usually signed a contract which stipulated what each was to furnish the other. If the crofter became ill or incapacitated and thus could not fulfill his number of working days, he had to provide a substitute whom he was obligated to reimburse. If this were not possible, the crofter's wife had to step in and carry on her husband's duties, though she had a houseful of children which had to be raised, fed, and clothed. As a last resort it might become necessary for a

half-grown son to shoulder his father's responsibilities.

The *torp* itself often left much to be desired. Consisting of one or two rooms, having most of the time nothing but a dirt floor, it was an unhealthy environment in which to raise a family. The crofter could, if asked by the farm owner, work extra days for a stipulated amount in cash, usually less than the going labor rates. But by doing so, he sacrificed his own time, which was necessary to keep his cottage in repair, to plant, to reap and to busy himself with countless other chores.

How many torps were there?

The proliferation in Sweden of *torp* and *torpare* during the 19th century was no less than astounding. It is estimated that by the year 1860 there were no less than 100,000 Swedish *torpare* who with their families accounted for 457,000 persons. By the year 1900 that number had dropped to 70,000 *torpare* embracing 357,000 persons. The gradual lessening of the *torparproletariat* and its eventual demise can to a large extent be credited to the ongoing industrialization of Sweden, which siphoned off thousands and thousands of men and



A torp from Skåne.

women from the farms; the expanding immigration to the United States and the emergence of the Swedish labor movements, which through governmental action were able to improve living conditions of the farm workers and thus eventually eliminate the *torpare* class.

The *torp* today

In today's Sweden the *torp* has regained some of its romantic aspect. Modern Swedes want to go back to their roots, and thousands of city dwellers have returned to their parishes of origin, there to purchase the old family *torp*, if it still was in existence. If this was not possible, any other *torp* would do, so long as it was a *torp*.

These *sommartorp* (summer *torp*) have become a retreat and haven for the harried citizen from the city. Here he has showered tender care on a dilapidated cottage, refurbished it, modernized and improved it. Here he can dream himself back to an era when his ancestors resided there, often oblivious of the fact that they lived here under conditions incomprehensible to modern man. If he cannot find his ancestor's *torp* because it has been razed or moved, he can still visit the spot where the only visible remains may be a house foundation, a chimney, or perhaps a half over-grown well. Whatever it is, it represents something tangible to connect him to his heritage.

Note

Much of the material for this article has been taken from the entry *torp* in the Swedish encyclopedia, *Nordisk Familjebok*, second edition I-XXXVIII (Stockholm 1904-1936), Y-XIX, cols. 418-422.

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This is what is left in 2010 of a soldier's *torp* in northern Skåne.

Addendum

During the 1700s there were not that many *torp*, but the population explosion during the early 1800s caused the number to grow. Many more poor landless youngsters survived and wanted a place to live and start a family. They could then ask some nearby landowner to allow them to build a little house in some remote area of his farm and start to try to cultivate some fields. The fields belonged to the farmer and he got some of his land cultivated for free.

In 1907 and 1909 new laws stated that the *torpare* could pay his rent in money, and day labor was no longer allowed. Many *torpare* bought their *torp* at that time and those became their own separate property.

There were several categories of *torp*:

a) *Dagsverkstorp*. A *torp* where the land is owned by a farmer or somebody else (a nobleman etc.), and where the *torpare* were allowed to live there and pay rent to the landlord, either in kind or money, or by doing a certain number of days, working on the main farm. The house of the *torp* could belong to either the landlord or the *torpare*.

b) *Kronotorp*, see *Skogstorp*.

c) *Kolartorp*. In the middle Sweden area, called Bergslagen, there were *torp* which were inhabited by charcoal burners (*kolare*). They paid their rent by making a certain amount of charcoal and also a specific number of days' labor at a nearby blast furnace (*masugn*) or iron works.

d) *Skogstorp*. *Torp* built in the six northern counties from 1901, where the land belonged to the Crown, which wanted this area to be settled and farmed.

e) *Militärtorp*. The use of a *torp* with a little patch for potatoes and other vegetables, and pasture for a cow, was one of the things that made up the salary for an allotment soldier (*indelt soldat*). Depending on the soldier's branch of service those *torp* were called *soldattorp* (infantry), *ryttartorp* (cavalry), and *båtsmanstorp* (navy).

Elisabeth Thorsell