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Gotland and the Genealogist: What is Common and What is Different?

Kerstin Jonmyren*

Gotland is Scandinavia's largest island. Its location was once very strategic, but with time the island became more and more isolated and ended up on the fringes of Sweden so to speak.

This change naturally affected the people who lived on the island. From the big income potential during the Viking era from trading journeys, Viking raids, and mainly the excellent location for commerce to an era in the modern age when people knew that, with water surrounding them on all sides, they had to survive on what was available on the island.

As a researcher, one sees a strictly stereotyped world, with its own traditions with regard to names and families, and a farming society with mostly family farms. Church records are available from the 1600s and 1700s on Gotland, just as in other parts of Sweden. Since I have worked with Gotland's church records for a long time and also researched old manners and customs on the island, some new genealogists researching Gotland sometimes ask me about other conditions on the island.

The main purpose for this article is to initiate a discussion about old traditions encountered by researchers in different parts of our country. Gotland has been special in its own way; other parts of the country have had their own characteristics.

A Quick Tour Through History

The 1600s were a very difficult time for Gotland. Strict and arbitrary county governors or the equivalent, first from Denmark and after 1645 from Sweden, squeezed as many taxes as they could from the people. The capital cities were far away, too far to travel to and complain. Besides, the plague ravaged in the middle of the century and the island, as well as the rest of Scandinavia, suffered a devastating famine during the last few years of the century due to failed crops.

The 1700s began with big difficulties and many farms, mainly in the coastal parishes, were deserted. It was not until the peacetime following the long wars during Karl XII's reign that the population began to increase and the deserted farms were occupied again. The island saw a big growth in population, bigger than in the rest of Sweden. The farms soon had to be partitioned in order to

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support more families and in the beginning of the 1800s almost all farms had been divided into as many parts as was possible and still be economically sound.

The One-child System

Compared to Sweden as a whole, with its accelerating population increase, the quick increase in population was actually slowed on Gotland during the 1800s. This was especially true for the farming population, and they were in the majority. They realized that only one child could inherit the home farm; other siblings would be without. Therefore, the one-child system became common in the 1800s. Everything was put on one card so to speak. With luck it worked out perfectly (no future supply problems); but, when the child died young, which of course happened, everything was lost. On my own family farm in Öja Parish, only one child was born in each of the three generations during the 1800s—and they were fortunate.

This slowed the population increase to some degree, but the numbers still increased. Toward the end of the 1800s, numerous bogs were drained, providing more tillable land, which helped some. Also, during this time the emigration from the island to America began, mainly from the coastal parishes where the soil was poor.

Working Men

Still, there was not enough land. Typical for Gotland was the development of the occupational group called working men (*arbetskarlar*). A younger son on a farm, who neither inherited the farm nor acquired one through marriage, received a small piece of land on which to build a house and a small barn. Then he could marry and support himself by working for the farmers in the area. Each group of farms had one or several working men.

The social standing of these workers was not as poor as it may seem, at least not for the first generations, which had their farm origin in the background. Their economic standing on the other hand was poor. Also, a son or daughter of a working man seldom married up again into a farm.

I wrote area, not villages, because the usual assembly of villages common in most parts of the mainland did not exist on Gotland. This often confuses new researchers on Gotland. The farms were scattered here and there. In the beginning they were single farms, from the 1700s several together as partners, and after the land partitioning in the late 1800s they were again scattered to some degree.

Villages existed, but they usually composed bigger parts of a parish and seldom appeared as official names in the church records. The parish concept on the other hand was and still is very much alive.

It is important to point out that, for a long time, Gotland was mainly a farming island with farms of almost equal size. Big estate-like farms, with large numbers of hired hands or *statare*, did not develop until around the turn of the century in connection with the drainage of bogs in the middle of the island.

Marriage Customs

It was mainly the parents' duty to decide whom their children were to marry. The marriage could be characterized as a financial agreement between equally strong families. Only a widow or widower could choose freely. This meant that truly "new blood" from a parish five to six miles away rarely was introduced on a farm. The parents would naturally first look for a suitable spouse in the area where they had connections and knew the people.

A son or daughter who would take over the farm married a carefully selected person of about the same age from a farm of equal size. The typical age for marriage was about twenty-five, if the farm was not too poor. If a widow or widower who owned a farm remarried, she or he often found a partner ten to fifteen years younger. This was also true for a widow who remarried, regardless of whether she already had a number of children or not. If one finds a couple with this big a difference in age, one can be fairly certain this is a second marriage. Youth was, therefore, always marketable. It seems that the young person marrying into a family would have been from a poor family, taking the chance to become a member of a farm, but this was not very common. Usually, it was just a younger child from a farm of equal size. It seems there was always a surplus of willing candidates for marriage into farms.

One rarely finds a bride in the farming population who was pregnant and this has a very simple explanation. Sometimes the couple had hardly even met before marriage was decided upon; and, if they already knew each other, it was usually only as brief acquaintances. The young, farmers' daughters were surely also very well guarded.

Sibling Exchanges and Those Provided For

So called *sibling exchanges*—when two siblings married two siblings—were common. Exchanging the children of two farms was economically advantageous. Farmers also assisted each other in finding spouses for their children. I have found several examples of mothers who married widowers and whose daughters shortly thereafter married the sons and vice versa. It also happened that two brothers married into a farm family, the older brother married a widow and the younger one shortly thereafter married the widow's daughter. Second marriages were common. The average life expectancy was short in the old days, but I have never found more than three marriages for the same farmer. It appears that those who lost their spouses three times were worn out.

On the other hand, it is very clear that children were married off when finances allowed it. I have seen several examples of this. If, let us say, the oldest married daughter dies relatively young, the next daughter on the farm is married off to start a family. If she also dies, a middle-aged remaining daughter is married off. Willing candidates for marriage were always available when a farm was involved.

Many generations of family farms are common; sales of farms are rare. It was best to hold on to what one had. It is when the genealogist first reaches the

1600s that succession may become unclear. During this time, farms changed owners more frequently. Farms were deserted and disappeared and some farmers simply switched farms with each other, probably for variation in their lives, not very unusual actually.

Encountering ancestral loss while researching old generations on Gotland is not as common as one may think. The farmers tried to avoid marriages between closely related relatives.

It surely must have been a big sorrow on a farm if no children were born or if those who were born died young, but the farm had to continue on. The farm owners had to be taken care of by a younger generation, as they grew old. The solution was to “take someone in” as it was called. The person *taken in* was often a child from a poor family, and sometimes from a related family with many children. As a rule, the person was taken in as a child, but sometimes also as an adult. He or she then married and took over the farm as compensation for taking care of the previous owners until they died.

The Constrained Naming Custom

Naming the first child on a farm did not present a big problem. A son was given his father’s father’s or mother’s father’s name, nothing else; the next son was given the other ancestor’s name. The third son generally was given the father’s name, i.e., Olof Olofsson or Lars Larsson. With the fourth son, the parents had more of a choice. However, he was most often named after someone of yet another generation back. Exactly the same system was practiced for the daughters. I have not found this constrained naming system to be followed as strictly anywhere on the mainland as on Gotland. It was followed almost 100 percent, if not 100 percent, of the time.

A new child often inherited an older deceased sibling’s name. For example, sometimes three Jacobs or Marias were born in the same generation, but I have never seen more than three siblings with the same name. On Gotland, the most common names for boys were *Jacob*, *Olof*, and *Lars*; for girls, *Anna*, *Maria*, and *Catharina*. Other common names specific for Gotland were *Thomas*, *Rasmus*, and *Båtel* (from Botulf) as well as *Gertrud*, *Barbara*, and *Butvi* (from Botvida).

The Farm Names

I have received a few questions regarding names and have noticed some confusion among the genealogists.

Each child was given a first name (after about 1800, often two names). Everybody also had a patronymic name, but this was not used in daily communication. Individuals in the farming population were identified by *farm names*, which were added directly after the first name as, for example, *Anna Strands* or *Jacob Smissarve*. A common way to address a person or to talk about that person was to say, for example, “father Smissarve” or “young mother Botreifs” or just *Botraivar* or *Strandsen*. The person was one with the farm, so to speak. This naming custom still lives on in some parishes. Since the clergy

sometimes called the parishioners according to the area's naming custom also in the church records, this can cause confusion. Less experienced researchers sometimes assume that the farm names are the same as the traditional surnames.

Also, when adding a child's name in the baptismal records, the clergy generally used an official name, which later was used only in special circumstances, documents, and the like. The pastor wrote Magdalena in the baptismal record, but the family might have called the girl Lena, Lenen, Malena, or Lona. The pastor wrote Barthold, Bertil, or Botulf, but he was never called anything other than Bâtel. On the other hand, these informal names were often used in the household examination rolls.

Surnames

Surnames like Bergström and Lindberg were adopted by carpenters and working men but, as a rule, not by farmers. On the contrary, if someone from the carpenters' class managed to marry into a farm, he often took back his patronymic name. When the military recruitment began on Gotland in the early 1800s and the farmers' sons were enlisted as officers, they were expected to take a specific surname of that type. Their names obviously carried status because they were kept and inherited even after the officers returned home and became farmers. Visby's middle class had their own inherited surnames all along, many dating far back and many of German origin.

The 1850s—a Breaking Point

In the mid-1800s, the old naming custom was broken up quickly and completely. The people of Gotland seem to have started to compete in finding the most unusual names for their children, from Vardagsella and Maximiliana to Thorinius, Randolph, and Ernfrid. Family surnames began to take hold. People emigrated. Farms were bought and sold more frequently. Along with railroads and swamp drainage systems, people arrived from the mainland, especially from Småland and Blekinge. It was not unusual that these newly-arrived people married into the old family farms. The number of illegitimate children increased. The old parental power apparently weakened in all areas.

Summary

In the 1600s: hard times, plague, famine, and deserted farms. In the 1700s: big families, division of farms, and traditional farming. In the 1800s: somewhat smaller families, working men, overpopulation, swamp drainage systems, emigration, the constrained naming system disappears, and farms are purchased and sold more often.

Every corner of the country surely has its own special characteristics. I look forward to receiving descriptions of the specifics in other parts of Sweden!