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The Protection of Archaeological Monuments from the 19th and 20th Centuries in Sweden

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When the Swedish Historic Environment Act was amended in 2014, it became possible to safeguard specific sites of archaeological interest from the 19th and 20th centuries. However, since 2014, few younger sites have received protection. The most likely reason for this is related to a scarcity of resources at the county administrative boards.

1. Introduction

When the Swedish Historic Environment Act was amended in 2014, it became possible to protect selected archaeological monuments from the 19th and 20th centuries. This article presents some of the issues connected to the protection of younger monuments that emerged with the amendment. A robust set of regulations for safeguarding younger monuments was created. However, the new regulations have turned out to be quite difficult to apply.

2. The organisation of heritage management

Before discussing how the Historic Environment Act was developed in 2014, it is necessary to first note how heritage management is organised in Sweden. The [Swedish National Heritage Board](#) and twenty one regional county administrative boards share joint responsibility for heritage management in the country. The obligation to protect ancient monuments by enforcing heritage legislation was delegated from The Swedish National Heritage Board in Stockholm to the county administrative boards in 1976. The regional boards are themselves government authorities, with their own archaeologists who oversee just about everything associated with the daily business of safeguarding valuable archaeological sites in their counties. The role of the National Heritage Board is, among other things, to support archaeologists at the county administrative boards in different ways, for



example, by delivering financial support for taking care of the cultural environment or by providing various kinds of judicial guidance.

3. The protection of monuments before 2014

The protection of archaeological monuments has a long history in Sweden. The first legislation, 'His Royal Majesty's Placat and Decree regarding Old Monuments and Antiquities', dates from 1666. Notably, the law from 1666 contained a list of categories of ancient monuments, thereby creating a formal terminology for describing different kinds of remains that subsequently began to be used nationally. Examples include rune stones, burial sites, tombs, standing stones and fortresses (Jensen [2006](#)). Importantly, many of the categories originally defined in 1666 are still in use today and are listed in the current Historic Environment Act.

Before the 2014 amendment, it was necessary for ancient monuments to meet three specific requirements to qualify for legal protection. They had to be from *ancient times*, to have been created by *practices of time past*, and *permanently abandoned*. Added to that, they also had to belong to one of the categories listed in the Act itself. The three requirements in combination with the various listed categories meant that numerous younger remains from the 19th and 20th centuries met every requirement stated by the law and were therefore legally protected.

When interpreting the requirements, the notion 'ancient times' wasn't understood as a specific period, but as a flexible chronological concept based on the category of monument under consideration. Ancient times for burials would, for example, be those that pre-date the introduction of Christianity when a new way of burying the dead was introduced, which in Sweden happened during the 10th century. Ancient times when assessing remains of industrial activities would, however, be a much later point in time, probably during the 19th or 20th centuries depending on the kind of industrialisation considered. The second requirement in the law, practices of time past, referred specifically to methods or techniques that were used when the structure being judged was created and need to be older processes no longer used. The third requirement, permanently abandoned, simply meant that the monument in question is no longer in use.

Even though many younger monuments were protected because they fulfilled the three requirements and belonged to one of the categories listed in the Historic Environment Act, archaeologists at many county boards didn't consider them as very important. Therefore, it was often the case that the law wasn't applied when younger monuments were in the way of development. Specifically, monuments connected to different kinds of industrialisation were deemed to be mass materials, available in abundance, and therefore not valuable enough to be selected for archaeological excavation.



4. Protecting monuments after 2014

Even though archaeologists at the county boards hardly enforced the Historic Environment Act when dealing with younger monuments, powerful interest groups connected to forestry and landowners were unhappy with the situation. They argued that the law regulating what was or wasn't a protected monument was unclear (Kulturmiljöutredningen [2012](#)). The interest groups managed to persuade the government that the Act had to be changed, which parliament did in several ways when amending the Act in 2014.

The first detail that changed was that the year 1850 was added to the Act. Subsequently, an ancient monument needed to meet the three requirements, belong to one of the categories listed in the law and be older than 1850. The government argued that the date 1850 broadly reflects a point in time when Sweden's industrialisation was truly established, when an older, more agricultural, way of life was abandoned with large parts of the population moving into towns and cities to work in factories.

A consequence of the new 1850 threshold was that many younger ancient remains lost their automatic protection. However, what the government and interest groups didn't account for was that clarifying the year 1850 led archaeologists at numerous county boards to reconsider monuments older than 1850 that they previously didn't believe were very important e.g. ruins of cottages in the countryside that previously weren't routinely excavated archaeologically when threatened by development. After 2014, they began to be excavated on a more regular basis. The clarification of the law with the introduction of the year 1850 has therefore, in many cases, led to a stricter application of it and more archaeology, not less.

5. Monuments younger than 1850

A second way the law changed in 2014 was with the addition of paragraphs aimed at safeguarding some of the younger monuments that lost their automatically protected status when the 1850 limit was introduced. The new paragraphs gave archaeologists at the county boards the power to protect selected monuments younger than 1850 through a process of declaring them to be safeguarded ancient monuments. A key factor for a declaration is that the county board must claim that the monument being considered has a significant cultural or historical value. Making a case for protection therefore usually involves the production of a written report arguing the monument's importance. Since 2014 several monuments that reflect a range of activities in the recent past have been awarded such protection. The monuments include various examples of military activities as well as different kinds of industrialisation.

Särna Skans in the county of Dalarna is a mostly untouched military fortification close to Sweden's western border. It was built during the second world war as protection from an invasion from occupied Norway (Figure 1). The facility is the largest of its kind in the country, covering an area of about 36 hectares. It was



permanently abandoned in 1976 and declared to be an ancient monument in 2022 (Björklund [2022](#)).



Figure 1: Military installations at Särna Skans. © Hans Antonson/Norconsult

The seaplane *Arado Ar-196-3* was captured during the second world war and accidentally wrecked in the sea in 1947 during a military exercise off the coast of the southern county of Blekinge (McWilliams [2018](#)). It was awarded protection as an ancient relic by the county board in 2018. The county archaeologist argued that the plane fulfilled the criteria of being created through practices of times past because it was made using materials and in a fashion that are no longer used when building aeroplanes. The county board also claimed that the rapid technological development within the aeroplane industry meant that the requirement of being from ancient times was fulfilled. It was ancient from a technological point of view.

There are vast forests in Sweden and wood is an important industrial product. The transportation of timber from forests in the interior to the coast by log driving was carried out at an industrial scale from the middle of the 16th century until 1997, when the last logging route was closed. There are physical remains of log driving in nearly every river in the country. In 2021, the counties of Norrbotten and Västerbotten in northern Sweden jointly chose to protect a great number of constructions in the River Laisälven that were built specifically to facilitate the transportation of timber along the river (Figure 2). Among the protected structures are examples of wooden or stone arms built in areas with rapid water to help guide logs down river (Törnlund [2007](#)). One of the reasons the county boards chose to safeguard remains of log driving is that they are currently threatened by the implementation of the European Union's Water Framework Directive and its ambition to restore rivers to a pristine state for ecological reasons.



Figure 2: Constructions in Laisälven built for log driving. Photo: Jan Norrman (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License)

The industrial remains of the iron works at Borgvik in the county of Värmland represent another example of the recent past that has been safeguarded. The industrial production of iron was once, and still is, a fundamental part of Sweden's economy. In its heyday, the production site at Borgvik was the most important plant in the county. Borgvik is an example of an archaeologically important site that lost its automatic protection when the Historic Environment Act was altered in 2014, but where the county board has chosen to reinstate it as a protected monument.

6. Problems applying the new regulations

Only 22 declarations have been processed since it became possible for the county boards to protect selected ancient remains younger than 1850. It is clearly a problem that the opportunity to protect such remains hasn't been used very often.

Why the possibility to protect younger monuments hasn't been applied at a higher rate is a topic that has been studied in a thesis published by the University of Gothenburg (Björklund [2022](#)). Samuel Björklund sent a questionnaire to archaeologists at every county board asking why the changes to the law haven't had a significant impact. The answers he received are perhaps not surprising, but nonetheless important as they provide an insight into the kind of issues that have surfaced when the county boards have tried to implement the new regulations.

It appears that notions of 'difficult heritage' or ideas that there could be past events or periods in history that Swedish society would prefer to forget isn't an issue. Instead, problems connected to protecting younger monuments seem to be purely



mundane. Björklund concluded that one of the most important reasons for not protecting a greater number of monuments is the considerable workload for archaeologists at the county boards. Another problem is simply that protecting younger monuments isn't a priority. The resources necessary to argue that a selected monument has an important cultural or historical significance is a discouraging factor. A final reason Björklund identified is a lack of knowledge at the county boards level about how to handle and process cases of awarding younger monuments a protected status.

The lesson learned from the Swedish example regarding the protection of younger monuments is that it's not always enough to have legislation in place. You also need to create a situation where the rules can be applied.

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