

# LANDSCAPE AS A MUSEUM?

## Preserving Valuable Farming Landscapes with Political Measures

---

Kristiina Hellström

### Introduction

The traditional farming landscape is threatened by change everywhere in Europe. One of the most important reasons for landscape change is the ongoing rationalisation in agriculture – towards more intensive land use and farming practices in regions with good preconditions for farming; and towards the abandonment of farms and land in the so-called marginal or less favoured regions. Another significant factor is urbanisation, including the "flight from the countryside," the spreading of urban settlements into previously agricultural areas and the urbanisation of people's lifestyle in rural areas. Authorities that deal with the protection of nature and cultural heritage, backed up by different grass-roots movements, have reacted against the changes. Legislation, planning instruments and landscape management payments are now used to save pieces of the traditional farming landscape. Landscape has become an object of state policy.

This article focuses on the values of farming landscape. What kind of farming landscape deserves protection and how can it be protected? These are questions that ought to get more attention in Estonia, where only the first steps have been taken in that field. The article presents examples of landscape planning from Sweden and Estonia, derived from the author's professional experience and research in those two countries.

The first part of the article tells the story of a successful case of landscape planning in a traditional farming area in Sweden. As such it could be regarded as a possible future vision for similar areas of Estonia, holding in mind that Sweden already has more than 15 years of experience of landscape management payments. The facts and figures in the Swedish example are based on interviews with local farmers and other key persons if not stated otherwise.

The second part of the article discusses some possible definitions of valuable farming landscape in the Estonian context, exemplified with cases from Viljandi County.

## **PART ONE: The story of Bråbygden.**

### **How Cinderella turned into a Princess**

Once upon a time there were ten small villages situated close together in the forest-dominated region of south-eastern Sweden (Fig. 1). As the fields and grasslands of the villages lay adjacent to each other, these villages were perceived as an entity and called Bråbygden. The people of Bråbygden were farmers and craftsmen and earned their living mostly from the land, transforming the landscape to suit their needs. As the land was not too generous with its gifts, the farmers seldom managed to produce more than what they needed for the family's upkeep. And even if there was some surplus, it was difficult to get to a market place, as Bråbygden lay rather isolated in the rough terrain, surrounded by rocky hills, bogs and forests.

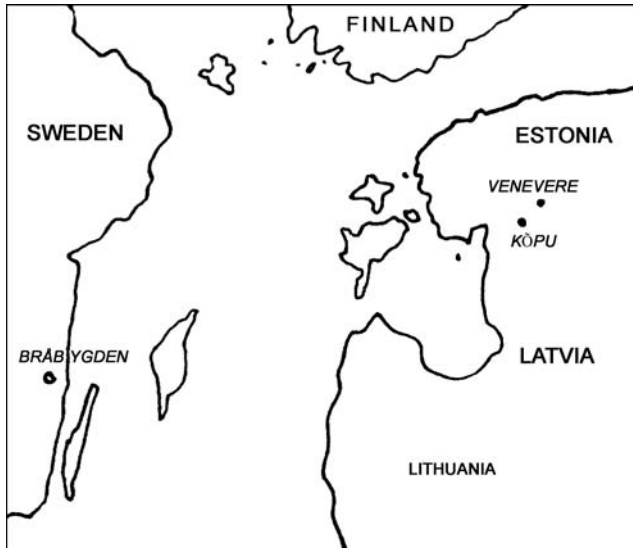


Figure 1. Location of the discussed areas: Bråbygden in Sweden; Venevere and Kõpu in Estonia.

During the 1960s, Bråbygden became a typical example of an agricultural area with apparently no future. The current agricultural policy was encouraging rationalisation. This meant: more land and more cows per farm, so production could be mechanised; larger fields to suit the machines, etc. Impediments and grasslands were ploughed up and obstacles like ditches and stone fences were removed in the name of higher productivity. The instruments of the policy were subsidies, favourable state credits and massive propaganda through the network of agricultural consultants. But nature had set its severe limits upon farming in Bråbygden. All land possible to cultivate – including smaller bogs – was already in use. The fields were small due to the abundance of boulders, rocks and stones in the area. During earlier centuries, innumerable stones had been picked from the fields and built into high stone fences and stone mounds. Now all this became a serious obstacle for mechanisation. Despite the fact that some progressive young farmers managed to get rid of some fences and mounds, the whole picture did not change much. To farm in Bråbygden was next to hopeless, – hard work for small pay. Indeed better jobs awaited in the towns nearby. Young people and families were leaving Bråbygden and the number of farms was decreasing rapidly.

In the meantime, while the 1960s were turning into the 70s, the concept of cultural landscapes and its certain values made its modest entrance to the political arena in Sweden. As industrial development was conquering new areas and more and more city dwellers could afford a car and a summer cottage in the countryside, the government recognised the need to exercise some physical planning on the national scale. A number of areas, valuable due to their scientific or recreational interest, were to be picked out by local nature protection officials at the county level. The central nature protection authorities then chose the best and named these as "areas of national importance" (*riksintressen* in Swedish). In these areas, careful planning at the commune level should take place before any exploitation would be permitted. The first choice included many nature reserves, but also many attractive and unprotected coastal areas, as well as conflict zones where industrial development and recreational interests collided. In this planning document (SOU 1971: 75) a very small chapter also treated valuable cultural landscapes, which could only be preserved by continued farming in the traditional way. And among examples of these types of areas, Bråbygden was mentioned, a place that previously no one had heard about outside its home-parish.

In the local newspapers, this naturally became a big issue and aroused quite a lot of amazement among the people living in Bråbygden. But local planning outside urban areas was very new then and no practical consequences followed from the fact that Bråbygden was now an area of national importance due to its rare landscape qualities. At the local level it was considered though, whether Bråbygden should gain the status of a nature protection area. However, there was no actual threat hanging over the area; for example no one wanted to build an airport there. As for the dying agriculture – it would not have helped much to declare it a nature reserve.



Figure 2. A view of Bråbygden in 1995 (photo by author).

So a decade or more passed before any actual measures were taken. In the meantime, the situation of farmers in the less favoured areas had improved a little due to better times for Swedish agriculture in general. In 1978, a new road was built to connect Bråbygden with the centre of the local government and the nearest industrial town, Oskarshamn. This made it possible for many villagers to maintain their homes here while working elsewhere. Some families even moved back from town to their old farmsteads. So Bråbygden was still not quite dead and its landscapes, although in decay, had still maintained a lot of their charms in the

beginning of the 1980s (Fig. 2). It looked like the scenery of the children's books of Astrid Lindgren, in other words – very old-fashioned. The small fields were surrounded with wooden and stone fences (Fig. 3). The pastures with birch, juniper and occasional broad-leaved trees displayed a multitude of wild flowers. The village roads wended up and down in the terrain and bent around the small hills, leading to the typical Swedish farmsteads and cottages painted red and yellow. Sheep and calves fed on the grass of large fruit gardens.

### **Introducing landscape payments**

In the early 1980s, the Swedish agricultural policy was liberalised for the first time, meaning a cut in price subsidies for agriculture. To alleviate the policy's expected negative effects on the traditional farming landscape, new support was introduced. It was available for farmers maintaining the most valuable pieces of natural pastures and hay meadows (SNV 1991: 5). The total support sum amounted at first to 5 million SEK annually, and was raised to 40 million later (SNV 1995: 4456). In Bråbygden every other farmer received this support for managing natural grasslands: on average about 4000 SEK per year (Kalmar lst. 1986–97). Regarding the size of the support, it did not really compensate for the loss of price subsidies, but nevertheless had some positive psychological effect. At last, society had recognised the values that farmers produced besides food.

In 1990, it was time for the next liberal reform in agriculture. All subsidies related to conventional agricultural production were abolished; instead, alternative ways of using surplus land were encouraged. Among other measures, a new system of landscape management payments was worked out (distributing at first 100 and later 250 million SEK of the taxpayers' money annually). The payments aimed at preserving larger entities of farming landscapes that were small-scaled, varied, including natural grasslands, traditional cultivated land and well-preserved buildings (SNV 1991: 5). A new market stood open for farmers that were willing to provide landscape management services for payment. Areas of national importance were prioritised. This support was as good as tailor-made for Bråbygden. In 1991–95, nearly all farmers here were contracted for landscape management, receiving an average sum of over 20 000 SEK annually. The payments covered 577 ha of fields and grasslands or nearly all the agricultural land in Bråbygden. At that time the "area of national importance" of Bråbygden ex-

tended to 1170 ha, also including deciduous forest (SNV 1991: 4037; Kalmar lst. 1986–97).



Figure 3. Traditional stone fence in Bråbygden in 1997 (photo by author).

In 1993, something else happened. As a reaction to the local government's plans to shut down the local school, a village movement came alive in Bråbygden. The school could not be saved then, but the movement soon proved its strength. Its aims were not only revitalising the social life of the villages and arguing with the local government for better services, but to enhance the physical environment as well. The landscape management payments together with the county's information campaigns had also increased the value of Bråbygden's landscapes in the eyes of the villagers. So they started to look for ways to make it even better. The list of the movement's achievements during the following years is very long, thanks to its strong leaders and active members, but also thanks to the open-minded and helpful officials. The most spectacular achievement is more than 50 km of restored traditional wooden fences. It was a veritable cooperation project: the fences were built by unemployed (paid by the government), of material provided by landowners, in places approved by county officials. Other landscape related projects have been: coppicing trees in the traditional way and restoring old natural pastures and hay

meadows. Sensitive restoration of old buildings has become a rule, not only among permanent dwellers but also among summerhouse owners. For the visitors from outside nature trails have been created and a village museum has been opened – with traditional landscapes as its main theme.

### **Marrying the European Union**

In 1995, Sweden became a member of the EU. Along with the introduction of CAP (the Common Agricultural Policy) Swedish agriculture was regulated again. The system of landscape payments was redesigned according to CAP's rules on environmental support. The annual budget now exceeded a billion SEK, half of it coming from the EU and half from the Swedish taxpayers (JBV 1998: 7). But as the sums increased, so did the requirements from the officials upon the results of landscape management. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, the Central Board of National Antiquities and the Board of Agriculture have elaborated a system of very intricate rules. This is to ensure that the money goes to the right farmer for the right purpose and is not wasted. The "right" and "wrong" ways of managing the landscape are specified in the rules and are checked in field by special officials with special education. During the 1980s, the farmer got paid for doing what he had always done, taking care of his farm according to local customs and traditions, his own know-how and economic possibilities. Now he is increasingly being steered by the strict instructions that follow from the landscape management contract.

The EU landscape support system in Sweden consists of three parts. The first type of support aims at keeping the agricultural land in use in the less favoured areas – like northern Sweden, the islands and the southern forest regions. These are the areas where agricultural land is threatened by abandonment because of the economic difficulties of farmers. The second type of support is meant for the preservation of the remaining valuable natural pastures and meadows. The third type of support goes to farmers that are willing to maintain certain valuable landscape elements in and adjacent to their cultivated land. The elements must have a history that at least dates back to the 1940s. Examples of such elements are traditional stone and wooden fences, stone mounds, ditches, alleys, coppiced trees, solitary trees, old hay barns, etc. The maintenance means keeping the artefacts in good condition and holding back excessive vegetation

around all elements – mowing grass, cutting down bushes, etc., so they are kept visible (JBV 1997).

The farmers of Bråbygden are not too happy with the new and very complicated system of landscape management support, but it certainly means higher payments. The landscapes here, being rich in valuable elements, also meet the requirements of this new support. The average sums paid per farmer have been more than doubled compared to 1995 (Kalmar lst. 1986–97). Only one farmer out of 14 can say now that the landscape support forms only a minor part of his total income. All the rest are more or less dependent on the support. There is also a lot of visible proof that the payments – and a certain amount of neighbourly competition – have brought along better management of the traditional landscape.

In 1997, a national plan for preserving the farming landscape was published in Sweden (SNV 1997: 4815), where Bråbygden was proclaimed once again as a national priority to preserve. The same year there was a baby-boom in Bråbygden: eleven children were born here. Coincidence? Maybe.

To conclude: the farms stay alive, thanks to landscape payments. The beautiful traditional-looking landscape is preserved, thanks to the farmers and other active villagers. And last but not least – people want to live in Bråbygden again, because it is an attractive environment where things happen. But the sunshine story also has a few clouds. As most of the farmers are dependent on the landscape management support, they also have to accept the state landscape standards. The rules and administrators of the support system are creating landscapes of their own.

## **PART TWO: The valuable farming landscapes of Viljandi County. Does a traditional farming landscape exist in Estonia?**

In Estonia, the protection and planning of cultural landscapes have been discussed earlier mostly in connection to large scale land improvement and its ecological consequences (Ajutine juhend... 1971). A concept similar to the Swedish *areas of national importance*, called *national landscapes* was discussed by Eilart in 1994. National parks, nature and landscape reserves that were established in Estonia during the Soviet period included some areas of traditional rural land-



scapes. Official protection could save some bits and pieces from land improvement campaigns, but could generally not prevent their deterioration due to ceased management. Today, when agricultural land is being abandoned *en masse*, both in and outside protected areas, only the first steps have been taken to counterbalance it. The National Environmental Strategy of Estonia, which was approved by the parliament in 1997, states that it is "important to preserve agricultural landscapes as part of the cultural heritage" (National... 1997: 93), but it does not say how. Some aspects of *how* are presented by the Ministry of Agriculture in the draft for the Agri-Environmental Scheme for Estonia (Mikk, Redman 1999). Land use planning at the county and commune level is another way of approaching the issue.

In 1999, the Viljandi County government initiated a pilot project, called "Valuable landscapes." The project was a part of the county planning process, but was also meant to set an example for other counties. Firstly, the project group was to define valuable landscapes in the Estonian context, concentrating mainly on cultural landscapes. Secondly, the most valuable landscapes of Viljandi County were to be found and described. At the end of 2000 these tasks were more or less completed and certain experiences can be shared.

The project group defined cultural-historic, aesthetic, natural (biological diversity), recreational and identity values of the cultural landscape (Palang *et al.* 2000). In this article, only the cultural-historic values will be discussed, drawing some parallels to the Swedish case.

The areas valuable from the cultural-historic aspect as defined in the Viljandi project (Hellström 2000; Palang *et al.* 2000) are of three types:

- areas where the traditional landscape and settlement pattern has been preserved better than elsewhere;
- areas which display a multitude of well-preserved elements and structures from different historical epochs;
- historic and other sites with symbolic meaning.

What would a traditional landscape and settlement pattern mean in Estonia? One interpretation would be that it is mainly a product of traditional farming, just like in Bråbygden. Grey log houses with thatched roofs surrounded by small fields, well-kept grasslands and groves would probably be the picture that many Estonians would imagine if the term *traditional farming landscape* were men-

tioned. This type of village landscape represents the short period of independence between the World Wars, a kind of Golden Age for Estonians. The manors and parks of the Baltic German aristocracy are, too, traditional elements in the Estonian cultural landscape, but with a more ambiguous meaning. On one hand they stand as symbols of European cultural heritage, on the other – the seven hundred years of serfdom of the Estonian peasants.

If villages and manors form a rather self-evident part of the traditional landscape, the collective farms definitely do not. Firstly, they represent the Soviet regime, hated by most Estonians. Secondly, the most profound landscape changes in Estonia of the last 200 years were triggered by collectivisation and the following industrialisation of agriculture. It means that we could draw the line around 1950 and say that the landscape and settlement pattern that had evolved until then – is traditional. (Which is pretty close to the Swedish understanding of the term.) But as we cannot expect to see perfectly preserved landscapes of the 1950s (let alone of the 1920s) anywhere, we have to settle for something close enough.

The Viljandi project showed that what we can still expect to find is *traditional-looking* landscapes and settlement. That is: farming landscapes with a field pattern more or less the same as in the 1930–50s; with most of the farmsteads still in their original places and mostly in good condition; with well-preserved networks of roads and paths. Traditional farming landscapes also used to include wooded or open meadows and pastures, but these have generally been replaced by forest. The value of the area increases if it includes natural grasslands still in use, traditional types of buildings and landscape elements, archaeological, historical or architectural monuments. Whether an area is traditional-looking or not can be found out by comparison of modern and historic maps and by field studies.

### **The valuable landscapes of Venevere and Kõpu**

Let us look at one of the valuable areas of Viljandi County, which could be characterised as a traditional farming landscape – the village of Venevere (Fig. 1; 4). The area is somewhat larger than Bråbygden (1866 ha). The village fields, situated on a round hill and overlooking the Navesti river valley, have the same shape as in the beginning of the 20th century. The same goes for the flood plain meadows by the river. The farmsteads are standing more or less in the same places as four hundred years ago. Traces of ancient settlements have been found

here. Everything would be perfect – except the village looks almost deserted. Most fields lay fallow, the meadows have not been mown for years and the houses look worn down (Hellström 2000). The place has almost died and the forest is already taking over. Venevere is not alone in its misfortune – such is the fate of many other traditional-looking landscapes as well. They are often found in peripheral areas with less favourable conditions for farming – which made them uninteresting for collective farming and thus saved them from land improvement. Unfortunately, for the very same reasons these places are also uninteresting for today's farmers, who are forced to rationalise their production in order to survive.



Figure 4. View of the fields of Venevere in 2000 (photo by author).

What could save the landscapes of Venevere? Only the local farmers: sowing and harvesting the fields, pasturing cows and sheep on the grasslands, mowing the hay of the floodplain meadows and taking good care of the old log-houses. We can hardly expect them to do this (with or without the help of a village movement) if it is not economically possible. If the Estonian society wishes to preserve this type of traditional-looking landscapes, the taxpayers must pay for this, like in Sweden and in many other European countries. Do we want to pay?

Why should these kinds of landscapes be maintained anyway? For maintaining biodiversity? For tourists? For local people to feel at home? For the same reasons that we keep museums and churches? For not losing contact with the culture of our ancestors? The Swedes have answered "yes" to these questions, but they can obviously afford the consequences.

But do *we* really need these traditional landscapes, poor as we are? Maybe we are just being nostalgic. After all, Estonian history is characterised more by disruption than by continuity. Let us take another example of a valuable area selected in the Viljandi project, different from both Venevere and Bräbygden. The area of Kõpu (Fig. 1), situated in north-western part of Viljandi County is slightly smaller than Venevere (1733 ha). It is a large plateau of mostly cultivated land, sloping down to a deep river valley in the east and extensive wetlands in the west. The heart of this area is the estate centre of Suure-Kõpu, consisting of a well-preserved main building from the 1840s (Fig. 5), a landscape park, an oak alley and quite a number of outbuildings. The surrounding fields and grasslands belonged to the estate once, but were parcelled out to new-settlers in the 1920s. As a result – the village of Supsi emerged (Fig. 6). The manor was taken into use as a school building and the park has been maintained.

North of the manor lays the settlement of Kõpu, which started growing at the beginning of the 20th century. Originally it was a church village and a centre of the parish. During Estonian independence it developed into a service centre for the farmers of the parish. Besides a church, a cemetery, a parsonage and an inn, the village also had a dairy, three shops, an apothecary's shop and a fire station – and all of these buildings are also in good condition today. During the Soviet period Kõpu became the centre of a collective farm (Fig. 7). Several housing areas were built for the farm workers, typical for that time, but still with a human touch (only 1–2 story houses, a pond dammed up on a stream, etc.). The Kõpu collective farm buildings are also typical in their scale and brutal outlook, but they do not stand deserted as in many other places in Estonia. A large agricultural enterprise has replaced the collective farm and is using the fields and grasslands to feed the cow herds. The landscapes of Kõpu are alive – as opposed to Venevere. They do not look traditional, but include many of the typical elements and structures of recent Estonian history. Even the modern times are present, symbolised by the mobile telephone mast, overlooking the river valley together with the old church.



Figure 5. View of the manor of Suure-Kõpu in 2000 (photo by author).



Figure 6. A farmstead in Supsi village in 2000 (photo by author).



Figure 7. View of Kõpu settlement in 2000 (photo by author).

The landscapes of Kõpu have been registered as a valuable area, not as a traditional-looking farming landscape, but as a "concentrate of history" (Hellström 2000). But how can one *preserve* it? The answer is, of course, it should not be preserved as a museum, but allowed to develop, like has been done before. However, in order to preserve *the values*, new elements and structures should be added in a way that leaves the older historic layers visible and preferably in good condition. Agriculture should definitely be kept alive, as it is the essence of this area.

### **The last questions**

The examples of Venevere and Kõpu are contrasting. One represents our traditions, the other – our complicated history. Is one more valuable than the other? Or do both types of landscapes deserve to be protected? And does protection mean preservation of the old – or creating something new? Or both, like in Bräbygdén?

The purpose of this article was not to answer all questions posed here, once and for all. The aim was rather to reflect over the concept of farming landscape as an object of protection and planning. Sweden has already worked out the rules and the wheels are rolling. The farmers are producing landscapes and getting

paid for it, just as they get paid for producing milk or wheat. And, naturally, those who pay for the violins, also order the tunes. In Estonia we still have some time to think before we decide. The face of our rural landscapes needs lifting, there is no doubt about that. But the only people who are able to do it are the farmers and other people dwelling in rural areas. *If* society wants them to do it.

## References

### Estonian sources (in Estonian if not stated otherwise)

- A j u t i n e j u h e n d... 1971 = *Ajutine jubend maastiku kujundamiseks ja kaitseks Eesti NSV-s*. Eesti NSV Metsamajanduse ja looduskaitse ministeerium
- E i l a r t, Jaan 1994. Rahvusmaastikke uurima. – *Eesti Sõnumid*, 29 July
- H e l l s t r ö m, Kristiina (Ed.) 2000. *Viljandimaa väärtuslikud maastikud: inventeerimine 2000 ja väärtuslike maastike register*. Manuscript/file available at Viljandi County Government
- M i k k, Merit; R e d m a n, Mark (Eds.) 1999. *Eesti põllumajanduse keskkonnaprogrammi väljaarendamine: lõpparuande kokkuvõte* (Development of Agri-Environmental Scheme in Estonia). Manuscript available at Estonian Agricultural Ministry
- National Environmental Strategy, Estonia 1997*. Estonian Environmental Information Centre (in English)
- P a l a n g *et al.* 2000 = Hannes Palang, Kalev Sepp, Kristiina Hellström, Helen Alumäe, Anneli Palo, Valter Lang. *Viljandimaa väärtuslike maastike määratlemine*. Manuscript/file available at Viljandi County Government

### Swedish sources (all in Swedish)

- JBV 1997 = *Miljöstöd 1997*. EU-information från Jordbruksverket, Jönköping
- JBV 1998: 7 = *Utveckling inom jordbruket 1997 – svenskt jordbruk i diagram och tabeller*. Rapport 1998: 7, Jordbruksverket, Jönköping
- Kalmar lst. 1986–97 = Statistic files from Agricultural department of Kalmar county government, 1986–97
- SNV 1991: 5 = *Medel för bevarande av odlingslandskap. Landskapsvård. NOLA*. 1991. Allmänna råd 91: 5, Naturvårdsverket, Stockholm
- SNV 1991: 4037 = *Områden av riksintresse för naturvård och friluftsliv*. 1992. Rapport 4037, Naturvårdsverket, Stockholm
- SNV 1995: 4456 = *Utvärdering av den nya livsmedelspolitikens miljöeffekter*. 1995. Rapport 4456, Naturvårdsverket, Stockholm
- SNV 1997: 4815 = *Sveriges finaste landskap: Naturvårdsverkets nationella bevarandeplan för odlingslandskapet, etapp 1*. 1997. Naturvårdsverket, Stockholm
- SOU 1971: 75 = *Hushållning med mark och vatten*. Rapport 1971: 75, SOU, Stockholm