

## A sixteenth-century Swedish cottager's inventory

In 1555, a cottager named Mats Olsson passed away on the small island of Muskö, located in the Baltic Sea southwest of Stockholm. While the names of most poor people in premodern Sweden were never recorded in writing, the memory of Mats lives on due to the fact that he died without leaving any known heirs in the area. According to the medieval law, his possessions therefore passed on to the Swedish king. In the local accounts of 1555, we therefore find a note on what objects Mats owned on the eve of his death. The short inventory reads as follows:

- Seven animals: a cow, two calves, three sheep, and a foal.
- Five fishing nets (two for fishing seal, two old ones for fishing herring, and one that was half-worn).
- A scythe.
- Three iron tools (an old carving axe, an iron wedge, and a drill).
- Kitchen utensils (three old pots, and one brewing-through).
- His bedding (consisting of a half-worn sheet and a half-worn pillow).

The inventory is probably not complete, missing at least Mats' clothes, and probably also wooden objects (such as plates or drinking vessels) of little value. Yet, the little document is still a most valuable source for studying how a cottager such as Mats made a living. In sixteenth-century Sweden, there was no official regulation on how cottages were to be rented. (From later centuries we know that the rent could be in the form of corvée labour, money payments, or various forms of in-kind payments.) Additionally, there was very little regulation on how cottagers could make a living. Although a couple of sixteenth-century statutes say that cottagers need to keep their wages low when working as day labourers for landed peasants, they do not mention what forms of work that would have involved. When I study the labour of cottagers, I consequently have to look for clues hidden in various forms of sources, such as in the inventory of Mats Olsson.

Let us start with his fishing nets, which obviously point to the fact that for a cottager living on a small island, fish would have been a staple diet. The nets further tell us that Mats had access to fishing water, again not that surprising, given that fishing in the Baltic Sea would have been open to anyone regardless of social standing. However, Mats does not seem to have owned a boat (which certainly would have been valuable enough to be included in the inventory), so it remains unknown if he fished together with other cottagers or with his wealthier, landed neighbours (and, if so, how he repaid them for the use of the vessel).

Moving on to the seven animals, which may seem like a substantial herd for a sixteenth-century cottager (although it was significantly less than what an ordinary landed peasant would have owned). Why did Mats keep these animals? The milk from the cow would have been an important source of energy, while the two calves may have been an investment for the future. (If Mats had had his cow impregnated by a village bull, he must have made some sort of payment for this, while if he bought them, he most certainly did so.) Perhaps the

three sheep were also kept for their milk, or perhaps Mats spun their wool to yarn and sold it on. The foal must also have been an investment for the future, made by a man who was too poor to afford a grown horse. It indicates that Mats needed a means of transportation, as he would not have use of any traction animals for working his field. (In the part of Sweden where Mats lived, oxen were used as traction animals up until the late nineteenth century, and further evidence is that the inventory does not contain an ard).

The animals imply that Mats must have had access to land not only for grazing, but also for haymaking (a fact which is confirmed by his scythe). Due to the cold winters, animals in Sweden would have to be kept indoors for a large part of the year, and the amount of fodder needed to feed the seven animals would have been substantial. The size or number of buildings that made up Mats' home thus probably exceeded what would perhaps commonly be assumed by the word 'cottage'.

We already found that there is no evidence that Mats practiced arable farming: he owned no ard or not even a spade to sow a small field. (Although he *might* have owned a wooden spade without an iron rim, as that could have been left out of the inventory. As such a spade would break often, it would however have made it incredibly laborious to dig anything larger than a small garden plot.) Yet, Mats must have had access to corn, not only as that would have been the main caloric intake of any premodern Sweden, but also because he evidently owned a beer-brewing through. So, what did he do in order to acquire corn?

One possibility would be to sell surplus fish, or other things that Mats could produce on his own (such as possibly fishing nets). However, some of his belongings also indicate that he performed day or week labour. The scythe could have been used not only for making hay for his own animals, but also when Mats worked for his landed neighbours during the peak harvest season. Further, his three iron tools were all made for some form of wood or timber construction, although we cannot know if it was mainly for building houses or boats (or both). By selling produce and working as a day labourer in agriculture and in building, he would have been able to earn money wages that he could then use to buy corn, iron tools, his bedding, and some of his animals, as well as possibly gathering money for tax payments. (Cottagers in other parts of Sweden regularly paid money taxes during the 1550s, but we do not know if that was the case also on the island where Mats lived.)

To sum up: When renting his cottage, Mats secured rights to grazing, fishing, and haymaking, although we do not know at what cost this came. We further know that he engaged in paid labour, probably in building and harvest work, although we do not know where (on the mainland or in the hamlets on the island) or on what conditions. Through the short inventory list that documented Mats' possessions, we can thus find out a lot about how a cottager in sixteenth-century Sweden made a living. Yet, many important questions will forever remain unanswered.

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