

REVIEW

Per Vikstrand

*Bebyggelsenamnen i Mörbylånga kommun: Sveriges
ortnamn, Ortnamnen i Kalmar län 7*

Skrifter utgivna av Institutet för språk och
folkminnen Namnavdelningen Serie A: Sveriges
ortnamn. Institute för språk och folkminnen,
Uppsala, 2007; pp.239

ISBN 978-91-7229-048-8

THE names of places, we are told by the Swedish *Institut för språk och folkminnen*, or SOFI (the Institute for Language and Folklore), can be seen as short, tightly composed texts, preserving concrete, situational narratives on the landscape and the people who have lived and worked there. Where years of changing pronunciation and spelling have rendered these names lexically and semantically opaque, their contextualised analysis can nevertheless add greatly to our understanding of local settlement history. In the Nordic countries, the value of place-name research in consolidating and preserving national cultural heritage has long been recognised by the establishment. In contrast to the situation in Scotland, it has also been funded to the extent that our northern neighbours now lead the world in this field. The example *par excellence* of this enlightened approach is the place-name section of SOFI. This powerhouse of onomastic research boasts the world's largest collection of place-name material, much of which is already available online, and a permanent staff of two dozen researchers and archivists based at offices in Lund, Gothenburg, Uppsala and Umeå.¹ Between them, they are responsible for providing a range of bureaucratic and academic services, including the dissemination of archived material in the form of talks, articles, dictionaries

1 <http://www.sofi.se/1641>

and other reference works. Principal amongst these is their monumental, open-ended series on *Sveriges ortnamn* (The Place-Names of Sweden) currently running to seventy-six meticulously presented volumes. Per Vikstrand's *Bebyggelsenamnen i Mörbylånga kommun* is the latest addition to this series.

Like its predecessors, *Bebyggelsenamnen i Mörbylånga kommun* (Settlement-Names in Mörbylånga District) is a model of measured professionalism. In this volume, nominally number seven in the sub-series on Kalmar län, the onomastic spotlight has been turned on the seven *härad* (obs. 'county') and eighteen *socken* (obs. 'parish') in the southern half of the Baltic island of Öland, which together comprise the modern local authority of *Mörbylånga*. There are four main parts to the book: an introduction of forty-four pages, followed by the survey itself (c.170 pages), a bibliography (nineteen pages), and an alphabetically organised place-name register (six pages). The approach throughout is worthy of attention in its own right, being systematic and thorough, with fluent and accessible prose supported by ample references and a wealth of relevant historical maps and full colour photographs.

As indicated, the bulk of the volume is given over to a systematic presentation of around 560 settlement names down to the level of individual village. While nearby farms with independent names are also included, constituent parts of either are not – a sensible choice given the fairly standardised size of these volumes. Individual entries are listed alphabetically by parish, with headwords provided by the current, official forms of the names as approved by Lantmäteriet, the Swedish equivalent of the Ordnance Survey. As might be expected from SOFI's preferred historical-philological approach to etymology, each entry also comprises local pronunciation, early forms, and a presentation of other relevant contextualising information. For those unacquainted with this series, there will be a couple of surprises. The phonetic system used here is not the IPA but *landsmålsalfabetet* (The Swedish Dialect Alphabet). As the latter was specifically devised to render Swedish dialect, this makes perfect sense – in a Swedish context. A full guide to the symbols used is provided on p.233, but unless the reader is already familiar with standard Swedish pronunciation, this will be difficult to follow. On first impression, the list of early forms may seem limited. In reality, however, these are so abundant from the seventeenth century onwards, that the presentation of anything more than a representative sample would have been overkill. As for the etymologies themselves, these are considered, yet restrained and easy to follow.

The three other sections of the book will also prove useful, both in practical terms and as exemplars. Of these, the introduction is particularly impressive, presenting a concise but thorough outline of the settlement-

historical background. This covers the environmental and topographical contexts, a broad-ranging survey of settlement development from the Iron Age to the present day, and a consideration of the distribution and diachronic significance of nine (technically eight) place-name generics (-by, -inge, -lunda, -lösa, -löv, -rum, -stad, -städer, -torp) of obvious value in comparative studies. Given the confident competence of the volume, however, it is also reassuring to see that the Swedish approach is not yet perfectly standardised (!). On page eleven, for example, Vikstrand debates the merits of the terms *reciprokerande leder* and *särskiljande leder* to describe what scholars 1200 km to the west might term ‘contrasting modifiers’.

In conclusion, this book has much to recommend it, and not just to those with a specific interest in the settlement names of Öland. Anyone planning a systematic study of place-names in any part of the world could do a lot worse than follow Vikstrand’s example. It is a shame that there is unlikely to be much call for it here in Scotland, unless, of course the would-be researchers can secure the encouragement and funding to do so. Compared to Scandinavia, our own place-name heritage is philologically complex. But despite the challenges and opportunities presented by a contorted layer-cake of material, be it Pictish, Gaelic, Brythonic, Norse and English – Old, Modern and Scots – or otherwise, there is currently only one permanent position in Scotland’s university system dedicated to name-research, and as yet no national body devoted to the preservation and analysis of our own rich place-name heritage.

For those still wondering, by the way, the name Öland is not a reflex of early brewing activity. This is no *Öl-land*, or ‘land of beer’. As Vikstrand explains on pages 23–4, the name is a simple cognate of West Norse *Eyland* (n) and modern English ‘island’, describing exactly what it represented for the population of coastal Småland: the area’s most important island!

Dr Alan Macniven
University of Edinburgh