

## Women and Cows – Ownership and Work in Medieval Sweden

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### The question

In this paper, I will be looking at butter making as a woman's occupation. The general hypothesis is that, when this task gained significant economic importance in the Middle Ages and demanded increasing skill over time, it influenced attitudes towards women and their status in society. The critical aspects include not only the abundance of the work, but also its economic significance and the skills it required. In a slave system, the slaves from whom greater skill is required enjoy higher status, even though they are all subject to slavery. Here butter production as a female activity requiring skill is the subject, but other spheres of female activity can be discussed using similar research on, for instance, textile production, child birth, child rearing, etc. Some modern gender oriented research is also going in this direction of interpretation (see e.g. Svensson & Waldén 2005 on textiles in Sweden).

A scholar who has inspired me is the sinologist and agrarian historian Francesca Bray in her writings from the 1990s. She is critical of "feminists" who according to her underestimate household work, and have thus underestimated the importance of women (Bray 1997:177–178, 237). One of her examples is Chinese textile manufacturing, which was long the province of women. This was production that required knowledge and skill, and was managed inside the household walls, in the "inner quarters". As the process became increasingly industrialized between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, much of textile production was transferred to men. But women stopped weaving primarily due to customs and moral strictures that barred women from leaving the home, not because technology had changed. When most textile manufacturing was eliminated from the female sphere, women also lost social status

(Bray 1997, where the change is described in detail).

Bray's comment seems to be, at least to a certain degree, valid for recent research on women's work in the Middle Ages in Europe, which has been oriented towards gainful employment and women who worked in cities. Scholars have shown that women worked in low status, poorly paid occupations, partly because they were denied access to the formal training offered by the guilds. This is an important conclusion, but household duties tend to be underestimated as a dynamic factor.<sup>1</sup>

Even if the differences between butter production in the Nordic countries on the one hand and textile production in China on the other is substantial, Bray's contention that everyday technology must be studied in detail, and that female skill is a decisive factor, has given the guiding principles for this article. Two empirical studies have been combined. One is a more traditional study of one specific source and a well defined question: namely ownership of cattle according to wills from around 1300, mainly from Sweden but with some complementary material from Denmark. The other empirical study is more unconventional as it uses a wide range of sources, with the intention to register every medieval indication of butter production mainly from Sweden but also with evidence from the rest of Scandinavia. This method is here labelled "the source-pluralist method" (about the method, see below).

By combining these investigations, very different images emerge. The first is of the influential Northern European woman with a strong position in stock farming, a key economic sector, and the second of the oppressed and despised woman accused of witchcraft and theft (Lövkrona 1990 mentions these images, but does not note their symbiosis). My interpretation is that these images are

connected. The medieval woman's economic status was part of a historical process in which she gradually gained a stronger position in a sector that demanded progressively higher skills. In the male-dominated society, this was met with resistance and suspicion of her activities, suspiciousness that could certainly be practised by other women. There is another basis for this argument. Only certain tasks were closely connected to magical beliefs: tasks that demanded a "hidden" skill, that which is sometimes called talent. (I am not talking only about "tacit" knowledge, that which was omitted from conscious description.) This kind of skill was achieved through intensive practice, through wider dispersion of knowledge and skill in society, but also through personal aptitude. Chopping wood is chopping wood (although some skill is certainly required), but fishing requires an inner sense of where the fish are biting. The historical process that I will outline during the Middle Ages and beyond emerges in the confluence of woman as a key producer and the oppressed/slandered in a male dominated society and the requirement of certain tasks (here, the production of butter) for talent and skill, often interpreted as "magical."

This must be seen as a dialectical process with an interaction between the usefulness of skilled dairymaids on the one hand and the provocation of skilled women in a patriarchal society on the other. I will not discuss later periods, but apparently during the historical process the negative attitude to skilled women (in butter making) was at least partly broken, and in the next phase from the late nineteenth century, men took over dairying from women, but only after women had contributed to a technical change – and they did not leave because of technological change, but because of other factors.

In order to study women's social status in relation to animal husbandry, I will begin with the ownership of livestock before moving on to the particulars of milking and butter making. Finally, I examine attitudes towards this work and the skill it required. This sequence is also determined by the different sources and methods I use, and the more unconventional method used in the second half of the article needs some comment.

#### The Source-Pluralist Method

The basic principle of the source-pluralist method is the use of multiple source materials, due to scarcity of evidence. In another article I have explored the method in more detail, with herding of cattle in medieval Sweden as an example (Myrdal 2008). I will repeat some of the arguments and elaborate others, especially about the comparisons between the fragile evidence from the Middle Ages and the affluence of evidence from the nineteenth century: the ethnological and anthropological sources.

The method is adapted to issues that are difficult to research, where evidence in a single source is not enough and even the total amount of evidence is scarce. Such issues lingering in obscurity exist also in research about modern times, for instance the history of gestures. For the everyday history of earlier periods the researcher will often have to use the pluralist method. Regarding butter production, for instance, a few pieces of evidence are scattered among multiple source materials, such as proverbs, archaeology, etc.

The source-pluralist method has to be combined with the use of circumstantial evidence and clues, as the study is expanded to multiple sources with information of varying content and importance. There is an inherent risk of over interpreting in such a method. To

counteract this tendency, not only classical source-criticism can be utilized, but also source-pluralism as such. In social science the corresponding method for control is labelled “triangulation” or “multiple indicators,” but with other data than historical sources (Brynan 2001). Results from one source material can be compared with the testimony of other sources, and for earlier periods the researcher has to add dimensions of source criticism and the uncertainty included in the interpretation of historical sources.

Pluralism must be differentiated from interdisciplinarity, where research traditions meet within a broad field of research, often through the cooperation between several researchers. In the source-pluralist method one researcher instead uses multiple and different sources to answer a more specific question. A difficulty in source-pluralism is thus that the researcher has to understand the singularity of each source material, and manage a wide range of subjects from art history to archaeology, and it could be combined with an interdisciplinary approach wherein several researchers are consulted by the single researcher.

The use of a wide range of sources also implies that the answers given by these sources tend to vary, and vary in such a way that the question has to be adapted to the specific source. Thus the subject will be illuminated from different angles, even though the single researcher has a main focus. Partly the different source materials will steer the investigation, with archaeology, for instance, providing more technical details while images from medieval art also give ideological elements.

Scarce evidence also compels arduous searches in large volumes of material for a few pieces of evidence. And when these pieces, from different sources, are combined they often provide a fragile basis for conclu-

sions. If research should desist from these difficult questions, the result is that large parts of medieval cultural history are expelled from the realm of serious research. It is more constructive to try and find a way that allows the acceptance of uncertainty. A first step is to accept that true statements will be fewer than likely statements. In a second step one has to realize that the description will be a rather rough draft, and shorter time periods and many regions have to be left out. For example, it is nearly impossible to make more detailed analyses of different “peasant eco-types,” for instance separating butter making in woodlands from that in the plains, and the mountain region of Northern Sweden has left nearly no evidence at all about this subject. (On peasant ecotypes in later periods see for instance Löfgren 1976.)

Such a reconstruction is full of gaps, and the scanty information available tends to be disguised and difficult to understand. The necessary method to understand and fill out the lacunae in our knowledge is critical comparison between different time layers, especially with the well-researched and documented late nineteenth century. A huge corpus of material on everyday life, material culture and folklore was collected by ethnologists and anthropologists. Documentation and objects were collected in museums and archives from the early twentieth century, with the goal of registering and preserving the memory of a vanishing preindustrial culture. Even if one has to reject the idea of relict regions, and thus the possibility of understanding the history of preindustrial culture just by sorting out a typology of objects and habits, the rich documentation collected must be the main reference for every study on everyday life in earlier periods. The critical use of this documentation includes an open eye for the fact

that many elements of the nineteenth century material culture or folklore were rather recent innovations, or heavily remoulded variants of older implements and habits.

In the source-pluralist method the classical source-critical criteria must still be utilized: reason-based criticism; chronological criticism, tendency-based criticism; and dependency-based criticism. The main difference between this method and the traditional source-critical method is that the source-pluralist method is inclusive, in the ambition to add as much evidence as possible – meagre as it often is – about a subject difficult to research, and for earlier periods to understand this fragile reconstruction in relation to later and more fully documented periods.

#### Milking of Cattle

Milking and further processing milk was a female “competency,” belonging to the “female sphere,” in Northwestern Europe long before the Middle Ages and remained so through the early twentieth century. Deborah Simonton stated, in her overview of female labour in modern history, that, “particularly dairying was recognized as a craft and involved passing on skills and ‘mysteries’ associated with it from mother to daughter.” This connection between women and milking/dairying is also well known from the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

There is no biological determination to say that women are more suited than men to milking cows and processing dairy products. Men also milked cows in the Middle Ages (Hagen 1998:28 on how shepherds were known to milk cows in the Anglo-Saxon period, although women usually did the milking). Widening the exemplification to other cultures than Europe, the handling of milk was part of the feminine sphere in most cultures (see e.g. Forde 1963, who in a global overview presents the Masai in

Africa, p. 295, and the Evenks (Turgus) in Siberia, p. 395, where the women milked reindeer), but there are important exceptions, proving that milking of animals is not definitely tied to women. An interesting (and well-known) example can be mentioned from among the Nuer in Sudan, where even though there was a strong relationship between cows and women, young boys could also do the milking up to the age when they underwent initiation rites. Thereafter, it was unacceptable for them to milk unless there were no women around, such as during cattle raids. They were then allowed to milk the cows, a skill they had learned as young boys (Evans-Pritchard 1940:24-25). That there is no biological determination tying women to milking is also evident in the oldest pictures of milking, from Egypt and Mesopotamia circa 3,000–2,000 BCE, which show only men milking and processing milk (Benecke 1994:129, 131, 135, 271).

In a gender-based division of labour, this work was assigned to women for social and historical reasons. Once this kind of fundamental division of labour has been established, it creates bonds of tradition that are reproduced through factors such as knowledge transfer between generations or ideologies and norms that make it a “given.”

The scholarly discussion on the division of labour between the sexes in the preindustrial period is vast, mentioning factors such as men’s superior physical strength; women’s tendency to do work that can be combined with child-rearing is often emphasized, or the division of labour itself. But neither factor provides a full explanation (see e.g. Rhum 1997:217–218). Without going further into this immense field of study I will just mention an important discussion in *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, which is relevant for my interpretation, and which has influenced the Nordic discussion. Günter

Wiegelmann published a paper in 1975, and several scholars commented upon his paper. He characterized women's work as: (1) far removed from the economic centre of interest, (2) not requiring complex tools, (3) less physically demanding, and (4) often repetitive and requiring greater manual dexterity (Wiegelmann 1975:17). The Danish scholar Ole Højrup, an eminent authority on the entire spectrum of women's work, remarked, in a somewhat acerbic note to his paper in the same issue of *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, that threshing was one of the more repetitive tasks, and that looms and spinning wheels were technically complex tools (Højrup 1975:37, cf. his major opus Højrup 1967). Orvar Löfgren took up ecological aspects and elaborated this theme in several articles, but I will not dwell on this, because the medieval sources do not allow a more detailed analysis of regional differences in Scandinavia. Instead I concentrate on the general question on skill in butter production and its economic importance, in relation to the position of women.

#### Women's Ownership of Cows

Previous research on women's ownership in history has concentrated on land ownership, but here the focus will be on livestock, which was a means of production comparable to land (one historian who has emphasized this and the significance of women for dairy management is Bitel 1996:117, 123, on the Irish Middle Ages). The earliest extensive documentary evidence is found in medieval wills.

Preserved wills that include bequests of personal property are relatively common in Sweden in the century following the 1270s (see, in general, Waško 1996 and Myrdal 1985:206). They were preserved because the wills mention land bequeathed to the church; almost none specify only personal property,

which was a common practice on the continent. The documents are from Eastern Sweden (Småland, Östergötland, Uppland). The peak was reached in the 1310s to the 1360s, after which the number declines. During the studied period, about sixty people made bequests to about two hundred others (and a few institutions). Wills bequeathing personal property are uncommon in Denmark, and existed in Skåne primarily during the Swedish period of the province (second quarter of the fourteenth century). Norway was not studied for this paper, but such wills were few in number there as well (see Andersson 2006:22).

Several factors may have been involved in making this type of will common. Conflicts about testamentary law were one. The Swedish high nobility opposed gifts of land to the church, and in one or two cases the will states that the bequests of personal property should be considered compensation to relatives. Disputes were ongoing concerning the rights of clerics to bequeath property, and several priests' wills specify the heirs. A third reason was the estate structure in which stewards were in possession of some of the estate owner's livestock, and many testators thus owned animals dispersed over their estate holdings. But this does not explain the copious mentions of other personal property. One must also see this type of will as a separate phenomenon, a tradition for a time.

Just as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century probate inventories provide a peephole into the material culture, these wills give us another, which instead of telling us what things were found on a farm, tell us who gave what to whom – a *materialization of social relationships*. Costly cloth (scarlet and silk) was given to relatives and friends, while cheaper cloth (domestic woollens and linen) was given to servants and the poor (Andersson

2006:239). Swords and other weapons were as a rule bequeathed to the closest male heir (Waško 1996:133–134). These letters could be used to study the entire structure of social relationships, but I will limit the examination here to *women and men as testators or heirs of livestock*.<sup>3</sup>

I will address the heirs first, divided between women and men. Priests have not been included among the men, since these bequests may be regarded as being directed at the Church (the priest's portion). There was a special tradition by which a testator gave every church/priest a cow in the parishes where he or she had landed estates. This custom, which surely goes far back into the thirteenth century, had begun to die out by the 1320s.

As always in medieval source material, several considerations must be made, essentially document by document. I will mention only one here: "workhorses." Only in certain cases does the will explicitly state whether the bequest is of workhorses or riding horses. For that reason, I have assumed that the horses mentioned along with other livestock are workhorses, unless the document specifies otherwise. Most horses were bequeathed with no gift of other livestock, and such horses were left almost exclusively to men.

Obviously, women were more often given cows and sheep while men were bequeathed all types of livestock. The more comprehensive Swedish material also permits the relationships between testator and heir to be studied, and such relationships are stated for nearly half the legacies. Of these, about fifteen are relatives (but they are ignored in the continued analysis).

Of the women, 25 are identified as dependants, while only 15 of the men have such a position. Of the women, the deys, who were the household managers with particular responsibility for milk and dairy products, were predominant (18 of the women). Many of them were housekeepers for priests, and three inherited cows jointly with their daughters. Whether they were the priests' mistresses escapes our knowledge, but it is interesting that the cows were given specifically to the deys' daughters. In one or two cases, a landowner (not a priest) left one cow to each of the deys on his farms. The men's occupations were more diverse: carpenter; smith; fishermen; parish clerk, messenger; lawyer; cellarer at a monastery.

Seven of the testators give to the poor, often described in rather general terms, but specifically in three wills; in all three, a cow

Table 1a. Bequests of livestock in Sweden 1268–1382.

Heirs	Workhorses	Oxen	Cows	Sheep	Swine
79 Women	5	6	84	38	19
79 Men	13	40	68	29	18

Table 1b. Bequests of livestock in Denmark/Skåne 1283–1353.

Heirs	Workhorses	Oxen	Cows
15 Women	0	0	15
21 Men	5	12	14

Remark: The evidence regarding small livestock is too

limited to report in a table.

was to be given to a poor woman. In one case, the will also specifies that the cow should be given to a poor woman who did not own a cow. Married couples who inherited cows provide further clues. In four instances, the wife was given one or more cows, in two instances, the husband. (There were also a couple of instances where both spouses were left cows, and they have been counted in the tables for both women and men.)

Overall, it seems that women who had a direct relationship to cows were given them as legacies; deys, wives, and poor women who needed them.

If we look at the testators instead, we see a corresponding pattern. There are fewer pieces of evidence, and so the Swedish testators, just shy of sixty in number, have been combined with the Danish/Scanian testators, about ten. There is no tendency for any group of testators to give remarkably much to any particular group of heirs, such as women to women. Noblemen bequeathed fewer animals than did noble women and clerics. The table reports only oxen and cows, as small livestock animals were bequeathed almost exclusively by clerics.

The cows were thus property that not only working women owned (that is, were given ownership of), but over which noblewomen also had relatively extensive rights. Men also bequeathed and inherited livestock because cattle in general were an important component of wealth. (The English words *capital*, *chattel*, and *cattle* all share a common root, while the meaning of the Swedish word for wealth

also reverts to cattle.) For instance, when the monetary economy collapsed during the civil war in the latter fourteenth century, cows and oxen were used as a form of money. (Cattle as units of money were called *vårdörar* and they are often mentioned in bills of sale.) Thus, it is remarkable that women had such strong influence over dairy animals.

The medieval regional law codes, of which there were about ten in Sweden, were written down between the latter half of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century. Women's rights to personal property are addressed in connection with the distribution of a man's estate after a childless marriage. The wife was entitled to bedding, some of her garments and her jewellery, as well as one third of the property acquired by the estate during the marriage (Carlsson 1972:123). The law of Gotland contains a statute added in the early fourteenth century, which is connected to the circumstance that the wife had no definite marital rights to the estate under this law. The statute says that the widow would inherit cattle up to "the fifth band," while she was entitled to the number of horses she had brought to the estate. What is certainly meant here is that she inherited up to five head of cattle tethered (with a band/strap) in the cowshed. The idea is that she managed the cows and thus had a right to part of the herd, but not to the horses, which were managed by men. Ten cows, if she were given half (or fifteen cows if she were given a third) are thus stipulated as a sort of conceivable limit to the number of cows that a woman managed, which is consistent with other sources on the livestock herds at individual farms (Myrdal 2007a).

With regard to illegitimate children, the Gotland law also differs from the other regional laws by emphasizing the father's duty of support ("Oäkta barn" in KL). There is

Table 2. Testators of livestock.

	Oxen	Cows
13 Women	6	50
41 Clerics	46	120
15 Other men	10	29

a statute in the earliest version of the law, circa mid thirteenth century or earlier, that the father of an illegitimate daughter who had attained the age of eighteen was to be given money, a bed, and clothing, as well as “cows in proportion to his assets.” Illegitimate sons were instead allotted money, weapons, and textiles.

These statutes confirm what is shown by the legacies of personal property in wills: of agricultural production resources, there was a particular connection between cows and women.

With this comparison between the study of wills and evidence in the regional laws the article turns to the source-pluralist method. But first a general background will be given and a presentation of ethnological and historical studies about the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which here are used as reference material.

### The Cows and the Butter

Butter was one of the earliest and most important agricultural products, since butter had high value in relation to its weight (the fat from the cream) and could be transported at a profit. Butter became an accepted form of payment for trade and taxes. (Taxes were also payable in cheese, but I will for the most part not deal with cheese and cheese making here.) There is evidence of the butter tax from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when a more comprehensive survey is possible, and it probably occurred even earlier. Trade in butter can also be proven that early, and increased during the late Middle Ages. Salt was a prerequisite for large-scale preservation of butter, and more extensive trade in salt developed in the centuries after the year 1000 (“Smörskatt;” “Smörhandel;” “Salthandel” in KL; table of taxes in the Nordic countries thirteenth–

seventeenth centuries in Gissel 1981:148–149). Butter was part of the new economy with its state authority, nobility, and cities. Butter also gained an indisputable position on the banquet table, not only among the rich and powerful, but also among the peasants. (On the display of butter on festive occasions among peasants in nineteenth-century Sweden, see Nylén 1951.) In fact, much of agricultural production was eventually oriented towards maximizing butter production.

In order to understand the work process, I will first address the time from which there exist more comprehensive sources, that is, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The agrarian historian Carin Israelsson described dairy management in Sweden during that period in an important study, for which her material included ethnological sources, personal interviews, accounts, and estate inventories.<sup>4</sup> Israelsson uses the term “good eye for cows” or “good eye for animals” (literally translated from Swedish), a familiar concept among people who take care of animals. It refers to the ability to “read” the animal, to discern subtle signals and deal with them. Cows could be difficult to milk (especially if their teats were injured). The cows’ personalities make a difference, as well. They can be restless and kick, overturning the milk pail. Cows can also “hold back” the milk, especially if they don’t like the person who is milking them. A skilled dairymaid must be able to bend the cow to her will, as the skilled equestrian does with the horse. Since the work is physically arduous, and particularly wearing on the hands, it was often performed by younger women (Israelsson 2005:42, 142–145, 268). Men were mainly occupied in chores that did not involve direct proximity to the cows.

The next step was to pour the high-fat “sweet milk” into shallow vessels to let the cream



rise. The cream formed a top layer, and after sitting for at least a day, the skim milk was poured off while the layer of cream was held back. Then the cream had to be churned to collect the fat globules. The butter churn was a “plunge churn,” a tall, cylindrical tub made of wooden staves, in which the cream was agitated up and down with a wooden stave that had a plunger (a disk or cross) at one end. Churns came in various sizes and were usually filled two-thirds full. Ingrid Söderlind has carried out a careful study based on the ethnological material from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and she shows that churning was “work and an art,” as one respondent put it (Söderlind 1977:174). The cream had to reach the ideal sourness and was collected for up to a week. Temperature was critical, optimally about 15–20 degrees Celsius, and there were several methods of warming the cream. The plunger had to be lifted just above the surface of the cream to gather air before it was plunged down again (roughly as one does with a hand whisk today). The time required to churn the cream to butter varied and sometimes the effort failed entirely. Thus, churning butter was a task associated with magic. After the cream was churned, the buttermilk (the Swedish word is literally translated “churn milk”) was separated and fat globules were shaped into lumps. The butter was “paddled” to press out the remaining fluid milk, and then washed in cold water and the water worked out. Finally, salt was worked into the butter.

Hygiene was critical throughout the process. If too much bacteria grew, the taste and keeping qualities were impaired. The cows’ udders were wiped clean and the milk was usually strained to remove impurities. The straining cloth was made of hair or horsehair and was laid in a wooden strainer (a tub with

a perforated base). The churn was cleaned with hot water, and sometimes scrubbed. In his important work on folk culture in Dalarna, Lars Levander writes: “Dairy churns were cleaned far more carefully than food vessels” (Levander 1947:355).

This overview of the work process in the latter peasant culture forms only a backdrop to that which will be substantiated from the Middle Ages. Butter handling is a historical process, and each step must be substantiated in its time before any interpretation is possible.

#### Source-Pluralist Method and Icelandic Sagas

Earlier researchers on medieval dairy work have developed some empirical evidence, but none have performed a total review (“Mjölkhushållning;” “Smör;” “Ost” in KL; a comparable overview for the British Isles in Hagen 1995, Hagen 1998). All sources that shed light must be used, and I present all of the materials separately below. This is consistent with the source-pluralist method, wherein the specific contributions of multiple sources are put in relation to one another to form a distilled and complex interpretation (Myrdal 2008).

I will begin with the Icelandic sagas, continue with other medieval literature and other documentary evidence, and conclude with archaeological and pictorial material. The saga material is somewhat on the side of the main corpus of evidence, but the Icelandic sagas function as early reference material in the sense that they often give the earliest written documentation of everyday life in Scandinavia. A frequently cited source-critical problem with the Icelandic sagas is that they were written down long after the events they describe. The problem is not as germane to research

on everyday cultural history, and the sagas describe a time layer around the year 1000 in rich detail. The sagas are almost exclusively about Iceland, but to some extent also about conditions in Western Norway. Since Icelandic agriculture is unique in many respects, this also means that the sagas can be seen only as comparative material.

Milking was considered one of the particular tasks of female slaves. There are several mentions of men (unfairly) mocked for doing the milking. Beyond this male contempt for women's work, there was also social disdain, and free women of rank would sometimes refuse to milk ("Kvinnearbeid" in KL; Jochens 1995:117, 122; Myrdal 2003a: 126). Butter was a prestigious product, but seems to have been made mainly for household use. The sagas provide no details about how butter was made.

#### Nordic Laws

The work of female slaves is described in the laws in connection with statutes regarding the freeman's liability when he has seduced another man's bondswoman. According to thirteenth-century Sjælland law, grinding grain and baking were the typical tasks of simpler bondswomen, and fines for seducing such a woman were lower than for seducing one who performed more prestigious tasks in the house. The law considered the seducer liable to compensate the owner for the lost working time, if the female slave got pregnant and had a child, and the laws provided a couple of examples of her work. The twelfth-century Norwegian Gulating law states that a man who has impregnated a slave woman must assume responsibility for her until she has regained sufficient strength to carry two pails of water from the well. The early thirteenth-century law of Västergötland does not stipulate a test

of strength, but instead the most typical tasks, as it requires the man to assume responsibility for the woman until she is able to milk and grind grain again. As in Iceland, milking was a job for female slaves.

Theft of milk was a serious offence mentioned in several laws, but in the greatest detail in the laws of Svealand in Sweden, which have a large number of identical provisions and were written down roughly simultaneously, around 1300. The laws of Uppland, Södermanland, Västmanland, Hälsingland, and Magnus Eriksson's general law for the Swedish realm, enacted in the 1340s, characterize this theft as the work of a woman: "... if the woman is milking ..." and is caught redhanded with a vessel or pail. Sheep and goats could also be milked, but the fines were considerably higher for poaching cow's milk.

Further evidence of the close connection between women and domestic animals is found in the late thirteenth-century Uppland law and the early fourteenth-century Hälsingland law. These laws state that women were allowed to testify in two kinds of disputes. They were permitted to testify about events that might happen during childbirth, since men were not allowed near a woman giving birth. Women could also testify in cases involving the injury of one domestic animal by another, and the obvious basis for the law is that women were often the only people present.

The statutes in the Gotland law on women's ownership of cows have already been addressed, and I will move on to statutes that deal with the handling of animals. The laws list various flaws in relation to the purchase of cows, such as that the cow could not calve or gave no milk (was barren). Another flaw specified in the early fourteenth-century law of Dalarna was that there was something wrong with the cow's teats. The Gotland law

mentions as a serious fault that the cow used to kick, so that the animal could not be milked. Here we encounter a few of the difficulties also mentioned in the ethnological material: flaws in the teats and balky cows.

### Miracle Stories

One of the most important signs that a person had the status of a saint was miracles that occurred after death, when the deceased person executed divine mercy. To enhance the status of a saint worshipped at a certain place, miracle stories were periodically written down. The stories are about accidents or illnesses, and the broad masses appear in miracle stories more than in other medieval source material.

Such stories are also found in Scandinavia. There are about fifty in Norway dating from the late eleventh century to the twelfth century, about a hundred in Denmark, mainly from the thirteenth century, and more than six hundred in Sweden, dating from the late fourteenth century to the 1470s. Neither milking nor dairy management are mentioned in the miracle stories, but sick or accidentally killed animals are mentioned on several occasions. One story relevant to this study is about a miracle performed by the local saint Nils in Århus during the first half of the thirteenth century. In the story, a woman owned but one cow and it suddenly dropped dead. She wept because she had no other way to feed her children. But when she and her neighbours prayed to the saint, the cow rose again and was healthy (Olrik 1893–94:301). This is connected to the mentions of poor women in deeds of gift. A woman who owned a cow could survive.

### Saint Birgitta and Olaus Magnus

Most of the medieval literature consists of paraphrases of European texts, or the Bible. Although certain fragments and the termino-

logy may be interesting, the source material is of little consequence to the study of everyday life, especially the material life and work of common people. Domestic manuscripts consist mainly of chronicles about subjects that do not provide much information about daily life.

Alongside the laws, the Revelations of Saint Birgitta are the earliest texts that reveal anything about everyday life. The Revelations were delivered in Sweden starting in the 1340s and in Italy after 1350. Birgitta married as a young teenager in 1316 and was mistress of Ulvåsa Manor in Östergötland in the 1320s and 1330s, where she bore eight children. She did not take up her religious calling until the 1340s, when she was also widowed. Her imagery is rich and she often uses experiences from her earlier life.<sup>5</sup> She writes in detail about sheep and bees, but there is only one parable involving cattle, and it recurs twice. She describes how cows throw filth onto the people around them with their dirty tails. This is a problem, particularly in cowsheds where people were forced to be near the animals. The mistress of Ulvåsa certainly did not do the milking, and avoided the cowshed if possible. This provides a parallel to the view of milking as a degrading job found in the sagas and the early laws, which were mainly contemporary with Saint Birgitta.

Another parable is about cheese moulds, and Saint Birgitta's description tells us the reference is to hard cheese, which was impressed with a pattern carved into the mould. One parable talks about the importance of washing straining cloths, and warns people not to strain through an unclean cloth. In the context, this seems to refer primarily to wine, which according to Birgitta nearly always had dregs, but the requirement to clean the straining cloth is nonetheless interesting.

The next comprehensive text is Olaus Magnus's *History of the Nordic Peoples* from the mid sixteenth century, where the exiled Catholic bishop wrote about conditions as he remembered them from the early 1500s. Milk production is dealt with in volume 13, chapters 45–46. He talks about the extensive butter production, which was also exported. Inconsistencies in the quality of the butter were well known. He also wrote a long section about cheeses, including descriptions and pictures of cheese moulds and cheeses with pressed patterns.

#### Proverbs

Proverbs are a comprehensive source of material. They are spread out among various sources, but the fundamental material is Peder Låle's collection of proverbs. The book was first conceived (by the otherwise unknown Peder Låle) in the late fourteenth century in Denmark, but the earliest preserved copy is a Danish edition from the early sixteenth century. The oldest manuscripts are in Swedish and date from the early fifteenth century. The collection includes 1,000–1,200 proverbs (in various versions). Many were based on European models, but the selection is partly significant to Nordic folk culture. (A source-critical study of proverbs as a source of information about everyday life in the medieval and later periods will be published separately.) The collection was used for contemporary Latin instruction in choir schools, and each proverb is given both in Latin and in the vernacular.

A couple of proverbs address the significance of butter. One is: "I care not for the cows, so long as I get the milk" ("I will happily hoodwink the cows, so long as I get the milk.") The other reads: "He who has plenty of butter adds it to the cabbage." The milk was

the cow's most important product and butter the refined luxury product, which truly was not used in cabbage soup.

A few proverbs mention skill and the woman's role. One reads: "Better one cow than two unwilling." This may be compared to the Gotland law text about a cow that kicks so that it cannot be milked. We also have: "The cow gives no milk if only the woman will." A couple mention the skill involved in handling the milk: "The milk rarely sours for the woman who looks for sweetness," and "You should have a clean vessel for your milk."

#### Letters and Accounts

A few medicinal notes in a late fifteenth-century codex of the law of the realm (the law covers most of the manuscript, while the medical notes are on spare pages at the end of the manuscript) specify unstrained sweet milk, which shows that the milk was usually strained, especially since the notes continue with the advice to "simmer the milk and skim off the impurities" (Låke- och örteböcker 1883–1886:452; see also "Mjölkhushållning" in KL).

Inventories mention butter churns as well as a number of tubs, shallow milk troughs, or bowls (in 1314, one chum and two tubs; 1516, four milk troughs, 1525, one large butter chum and seventeen milk bowls, see Myrdal 1985:213, 230, 234). And the instructions for farm management commissioned by Hans Brask, bishop of Linköping, circa 1513–1525, included a list of the equipment the dey had in her charge. In addition to twelve cows, which she was admonished to take good care of, her equipment included: one chum, a strainer and straining cloth (straining cord); four milk pails, including two with lids; two troughs; two milk tubs; and twelve setting pans (for settling the cream). She was also instructed

to “clean her setting pans daily,” and keep accounts for them, as well as accounts for the bailiff showing how much butter was made (Arnell 1904, Appendix 1:37).

The “setting pans” refer to bowls for the strained milk. One of the earliest surviving sets of detailed farm accounts is from Stegeborg in Östergötland, where they purchased large quantities of setting pans: sixteen in 1488, fourteen in 1489, and twenty-six in 1491. The pans were consumable goods because they were washed carefully and wore out.

When the proverbs and accounts are added to other documentary sources, it becomes clear that, at least by the late Middle Ages, butter making had started to reach a level about equal to that of the nineteenth century, at least with respect to hygiene standards (but not with respect to the amount of milk per cow).

#### Archaeological Material

The archaeological material provides an understanding of the details of tools and of periods and areas otherwise not covered by the documentary material. The drawback is that whole tools are seldom preserved and there is usually only general information about the context in which the tools were used. Wooden tools have been preserved in large numbers from medieval cities.

From a global perspective, the plunge churn was an innovation compared to the earlier shake churns. Because the plunge churn is suitable for handling large quantities of cream, it was connected to the evolution of butter into a means of payment for trade and taxes. As a type, it was found in the nineteenth century throughout Eurasia from Tibet in the east to Western Europe.

The plunge churn was found in England during the Roman era, but did not become common until later. Along the North Sea coast

from Holland to southern Denmark, it appears in archaeological material (and pictures) starting in the ninth century. Plunge churns are a common find from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and afterwards in nearly all northwest European city digs. The characteristic appearance of the plunger makes the type easy to identify, which also permits comment on the lack of plunge churns in earlier archaeological finds of wooden objects (Myrdal 1986; see also Morén 2007:102 concerning pictures of Roman plunge churns in Britain).

If butter as a commodity was part of the more highly developed commercial and feudal system (see above), its tool was the plunge churn – as a more efficient tool for making large amounts of butter. The technological shift brought a number of ancillary changes: the cream had to be kept longer to fill larger churns, and the churning itself required greater skill than the former shaking (in shake churns). Salting was a novel step and hygiene standards were gradually raised.

In addition to a number of plunge churns, a wooden strainer has also been identified from fifteenth-century Vadstena: the typical tube with a hole in the middle (Swedish Museum of National Antiquities: Vadstena, Borgmästaren block, find 942), as well as an eleventh-century mould for kneading butter from Lund (Mårtensson & Wahlöö 1970:54 describe the object as a “cheese groove” for holding cheese moulds, but comparisons with pictorial material show that it is instead a tray for kneading butter).

The only extensive rural material including wooden objects is from a village in southern Dalarna, circa 1300 (in garbage thrown in a shallow pond). Short barrel staves intended for wide tubs were predominant, which I have interpreted in a published paper to mean that the most common barrel was used for settling

the cream from newly strained milk, in the aforementioned setting pans. They were found in large numbers (Myrdal 1984:30).

The archaeological material provides a picture of an emerging new technological complex surrounding butter between 1000–1300, which involved high quality production for long-distance trade and tax paying.

#### Pictorial Material

Pictures provide overall descriptions of objects and labour processes, as well as an ideological element. Two key source-critical problems concern whether the images were taken from models outside Scandinavia and whether the purpose of the picture – often religious – affected its design. These questions have been the subject of debate in Europe, which concluded that medieval imagery often contains concrete descriptions of everyday life, but that the pictures must be subjected to source-criticism in each instance (Myrdal 2007b with Swedish examples).

In most of Europe, illuminated manuscripts make up the majority of pictorial material, but Nordic illuminated manuscripts are rare. They are somewhat more common in Sweden than in the other Scandinavian countries, but unlike the European manuscripts, they are not illustrations of religious texts (which Swedes purchased abroad), but of secular law in Sweden. The advent of these costly legal manuscripts can be explained by the special status of the law during the civil wars in late medieval Sweden. The Swedish nobility (and the commoners) often referred to the Law of the Swedish Realm in their struggle with the Danish king and his followers (see Myrdal 2006). In a 1433 manuscript of Magnus Eriksson's Law of the Realm (at Uppsala University Library, call number B 68), where each code is preceded by a full-page illustration, the

illustration to the Inheritance Code shows a woman and a man struggling over (pointing at) a copper pitcher and a plunge churn between them. In a text scroll, the man says: "Give me the pitcher and you can have the churn." The woman retorts: "The pitcher is better." In this image, butter churning emerges as a distinguishing mark even of the rich and highborn woman, despite her resistance and pointing out the higher value of a copper pitcher than a wooden churn.

Other images of dairy keeping are found in fresco paintings on church walls, in a cycle of pictures. They show the woman who, aided by the devil, "steals" cream from neighbours so she can make large quantities of butter. According to the magical belief system of the time, a cow that unexpectedly went dry had been "milk robbed." There is an entire course of events in the cycle, which is not, however, found in its entirety in all churches: (1) milking or milk theft involving various magical animals, (2) churning, (3) preparation of the butter, (4) shaping of the butter into a conical pile or loaf on a special butter platter (for a banquet), and (5) the woman's punishment when she is sent to hell. The demons are all over the pictures.

Hundreds of Nordic churches have thousands of late medieval pictures, mostly with motifs from the Bible or religious legends. The motif with the milk-stealing woman is found everywhere that frescos have been preserved in Northern Europe, with concentrations in most of Denmark including Skåne, and in Sweden in the Mälaren Valley, and also in Gotland, the large island in the Baltic. It is actually one of the most common late medieval motifs with an agrarian connection. The oldest piece of evidence is from Sjælland, circa 1420. A wave of others followed from 1450 to about 1520, with sixty preserved depictions.

This coincides largely with the great wave of late medieval frescos.<sup>6</sup>

The discussion has revolved around questions such as whether the motif is based on religion or folklore, and whether there may be earlier models, if not in pictures, perhaps in medieval plays. The fresco cycle is part of the increasingly popular and burlesque ecclesiastical art of the late Middle Ages, and the aspects relevant to this paper are the descriptions of work and the ideological content in relation to work and skill.

Pictures from Gotland and Finland show how the woman milks (in other areas, magical animals suckle the cows), but she has no stool and instead squats or kneels to milk. The cows were small and milking stools were not introduced until later. The milk is poured (or regurgitated by the animals) into low, staved tubs, that is, setting pans. (Straining is not shown, which may be because the magical, milk-thieving animals (*bjäre*) were believed to regurgitate strained milk, see Wall 1977:136, with evidence from the seventeenth century.) The women make the butter in tall churns that reach above the waist, emphasizing their size and capacity to hold a great deal of cream. The devil helps with the heavy labour it takes to churn such abundant cream, and in one picture there is so much cream that it overflows the churn. The butter is churned by married women, with covered hair, which shows that this was the prestigious labour of the housewife by this time at the latest.

A few picture suites from Uppland also show the task of working the butter, in trays with high sides and a draining gutter, with the buttermilk dripping down into a low staved tub (Forsmark 2003:18–19). The last step is when the butter is shaped into a tall loaf on a turned butter platter intended for display at banquets. (This type of wooden dishes on a

cylindrical foot could still be found in much the same shape in the nineteenth century, see Nylén 1951.) When the woman is finally banished to Hell, she has a churn or butter platter with her as her attribute.

In order to understand the ideological meaning to the viewers of these motifs, one must turn to the more detailed documentary material, and so I leave the Middle Ages to use evidence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, to a certain extent, nineteenth-century folklore. This must be understood as a part of the source-pluralist method, when reference material has to be used time and again to understand the fragmentary evidence of everyday life and mentality in the Middle Ages. But again one must be aware of changes over time.

#### Folklore, Envy, and Skill

There is evidence of the popular belief in milk-thieving women as early as the ninth century in northern France, which is followed by more exhaustive evidence from twelfth- to fifteenth-century Ireland, Wales and England and from thirteenth-century Iceland. There is one mention in Sweden from the early fourteenth century. The magical destruction of cows is mentioned in a couple of places in the Västergötland law, and of cattle in the Östergötland law, but, although likely, the text does not state whether this involved “milk theft.” The Svealand laws mention only the putting to death, with “black magic,” of human beings. There is copious evidence of the popular belief about magical milk theft from the sixteenth century onwards in documentary material throughout the Nordic countries (Wall 1977; Wall 1978).

I am not primarily interested in the belief system as such, with its various magical elements, which Jan Wall has so thoroughly

studied, but rather in the socioeconomic factors behind the belief system. The entire fresco cycle is on a very wide ranging geographical level associated with the area of Europe where milk processing was the focus of stock farming, from northern France and the Netherlands and British Isles over to Scandinavia. The importance of butter was the foundation of these beliefs. Where butter was of importance, the idea of magical butter stealing was prevalent.

All Europe experienced witch hunts in the late medieval period and later, and in Sweden milk theft was one of the most common accusations directed at women suspected of witchcraft.<sup>7</sup> During the major witch trials in northern Sweden in 1668–1677, the abduction of children for the devil came to overshadow the proceedings, but milk theft was still a central element in the interrogations, and child abduction was compared with the past, when the “witches” instead took butter, cheese, and other foods (Ankarloo 1971:221, 253).

In their defence at trial, the accused give examples of using “white magic” not intended to hurt others (Ankarloo 1971:51, ox head under the threshold of the cowshed; Andersson 1998:212, on milking over a coin or a ring; see also Östman 2000:214 on the magical properties of the housewife’s wedding ring in relation to dairy work in particular). This white magic was related to the difficulty of getting cows to give milk and to the art of butter making. But in the popular belief system, white magic was closely related to black magic, the magic intended to hurt others.

The basic idea was that “milk fortune” could be stolen by another person using magic. A woman who got more milk and butter than was considered normal or reasonable was liable to be accused of stealing the neighbours’ milk, especially if their cows went barren or

began producing less. This is also expressly mentioned on several occasions when women were accused of milk theft.<sup>8</sup> Jan Wall gives a significant example. A woman and her husband in Västergötland in 1664 had only three cows and yet produced enough butter to sell, which raised suspicions. Their defence shows that their production was distinguished by skill, care and attention. The husband helped his wife churn the butter; he had a particular talent for it and was indifferent to the gender stigma. The wife and husband both earned their living in part by helping others cure bovine illnesses.

It seems that women who owned only a few animals were often accused, but women with rather many cows could also be the targets of these accusations (Wall 1977:143, 203, not always poor, Wall 1978:74 on how poor women were accused in most of Sweden, but that middle class women were also targets in the north). Thus, the poor woman’s solicitude for her few cows (or only cow) is connected to what the medieval evidence tells us, but also to what Carin Israelsson has shown with regard to the nineteenth century – the cows of the poor and their hidden significance (Israelsson 2005).

To posterity, it is obvious that the differences in yields were due to how different households cared for their cows (which is still so, as any country veterinarian or livestock advisor can testify). What happened was thus that skill raised suspicion and envy was manifested in accusations of black magic.<sup>9</sup> That the belief in “milk fortune” had grown strong and appeared on late medieval church walls and in the trial records of later times can thus be connected with the economic importance of butter production at that time, and with its demands for a high level of skill and a “good eye for animals,” which



could result in varying productivity among neighbouring farms.

However, there are many other jobs that require the same ability to read nature and use personal knowledge. Hunting and fishing are typical examples, where one hunter can go out and come back empty-handed, while another almost always catches something. These activities are also strongly associated with magical beliefs, and “hunting fortune” is a living concept in Sweden today (or “fishing fortune”). It was also generally believed that skilled hunters used magic.

In his article on peasant ecotypes in Scandinavia, Orvar Löfgren has a thorough discussion about the connection between herring fishery and magical belief, and the similarities to butter making are obvious. Some fishermen seemed to be damned by bad luck, where others got good catches most of the time. The belief in the existence of magical destruction was very strong, and it was thought that one could steal luck from another. This was connected with the belief in the limited good. Superstition and ritual ruled in this activity, and people could be enemies because of accusations of or suspicion of black magic (Löfgren 1976:110–114).

But there is a difference. Fishing and hunting luck did not lead to social demonization and condemnation from society as a whole. It could be considered likely that the man had sold his soul to the devil, or that someone had used black magic. But a not unusual reaction was admiration. No skilled hunters or fishermen were depicted on the church walls as creatures in league with the devil. They were not described by the clerics as damned. Men could be accused of witchcraft, but rarely because they were skilled hunters or fishers. Why, then, were skilled women more demonized than skilled men?

## Conclusions

Two arguments can be followed through this text. The first is that skill made the difference, and it depended on having an “eye for animals” and the ability to handle cream; this is why everyday magic was used, but there was also suspicion; the idea that fortune could be stolen has been connected to envy; the skilled woman was the victim of slander, but when compared to hunting or fishing fortune, a gender aspect entered the picture: men’s skills were socially acceptable, but not women’s.

The second argument differs somewhat: skill and economically significant work gave women genuine influence; this was manifest early in history as women’s rights to own cows; handling milk was at first disdained as slaves’ work, but became increasingly important and eventually a housewifely occupation, due to its economic significance and higher demands for skill.

These interpretations could be linked. One can presume that as women’s work became more important and gradually strengthened their status the result is precisely the opposite, a demonization of the skill she must acquire to maintain her position. (This can be compared to the situation today, when a female executive is judged by different standards than a male executive; what is condemned as hard aggression when it comes from her is admired as firm decisiveness when he dishes it out.) The medieval technological shift should thus have been followed by a long period of struggle in which women’s economic advances were followed by an ideological advance and the contempt for skill gradually died away. During the great agrarian leap of 1750–1900, women and their skill played a decisive role in the advance of stock farming. This is a history that has been described by Lena Sommestad for Sweden and Bodil Hansen for Denmark, who

show how the dairy industry emerged from this high level of skill (Sommestad 1992; Hansen 2006, cf. also Simonton 1997:123–124). I do not follow the historical thread forward here, to the period when women lost control over dairy production.

The historical process until the early industrialization can also be put into an even wider frame of reference. One may well ask whether, as Bray pointed out for China (see above), the household sector, which consumed large parts of the labour force, did not in fact play a critical role in determining the status of women. There is striking geographical agreement between the spread of Western European marriage patterns and the spread of the particular type of combined agriculture, with both field farming and stock farming, with the latter oriented towards dairy production. The positions were strongest for both in the British Isles, along the North Sea coast and in the Nordic countries.

However, a dynamic dairy sector can only be one factor in the discussion of how women, accompanied by backlash, raised their status. And the social position of women in a patriarchal society must of course be understood in a much wider context, and not only in relation to gender based division of labour and the role of skill in the female sphere.

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## Notes

- 1 On women's work in the English Middle Ages, see Goldberg 1992:99; Mate 1999:31, 50. On women's occupations in the Nordic countries in the Middle Ages, see e.g. Österberg 1980:286, 292. In general, household work and its requirements for skill is mentioned occasionally, but is not shaped into concrete analysis even when it is; see e.g. Frader 2006:27, 34. However Simonton 1997 emphasizes women's household duties, and describes them, and also has an important discussion of the meaning of skill, Simonton 1997:81–83.
- 2 Sommestad 1992:29 on this as a "competency" in modern times, cf. Sommestad 1995:195–196. Simonton 1997:30 about the skill, and Simonton 1997:30–32, 122–123 about dairying as belonging to the female sphere. On the Middle Ages see Goldberg 1992:139–140; Mate 1999:3, 14, 28. Mate 1999:31 mentions that milking was a low-wage occupation, but in the nineteenth century dairymaids were among the highest paid women workers, Simonton 1997:122.
- 3 The material will be presented more exhaustively in a forthcoming study of medieval stock farming, funded by Stiftelsen Lagerberg (The Lagerberg Foundation), which also applies to the evidence in laws, etc. in this article.
- 4 Israelsson 2005; she has been an active dairy farmer for many years, which contributes to her understanding. I also have some minor experience of hand-milking, etc., which has influenced my understanding.
- 5 I have discussed about a hundred more detailed parables from horticulture, construction, etc., in a source-critical review of the Revelations of Saint Birgitta as a source of information about everyday life in the fourteenth century; see Myrdal 2003, on cheese moulds, see also "Ost," in KL.
- 6 Medieval pictures: northernmost Germany 5, Denmark proper 17, Skåne 3, Småland 1, Västergötland 1, Gotland 9, Södermanland 1, Uppland 22, Hälsingland 1, Finland 4. In addition, isolated paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the same large region. See list in Wall 1977:56–57, with surrounding text, supplemented with *Danske kalkmalerier. Sengotik 1500–1536*, 1992:60, 106–109, and Lennart Karlsson's database "*Medeltidens bildvärld*" at the Swedish Museum of National Antiquities website. Pictorial report for Uppland in Forsmark 2003.
- 7 Milk theft among the accusations: Ankarloo 1971:99–100; Wall 1977, passim, e.g. p. 138 on a witch trial with several accused in Boteå 1634–35, which mainly involved milk theft, p. 134 on the accusation being common in the witch trials in

- Dalarna and Norrland 1669–72 but less common than in those of the same period in Bohuslän. From Norway, Alver 1971:134 on the seventeenth century. There were even priests who owned many animals that produced too little who cast such accusations, and they could even be issued from the pulpit; see Taussi Sjöberg 1996:127–128, with examples from 1620, 1636.
- 8 On women who got “too much” and were accused: Ankarloo 1971:47 general, Wall 1977:4, 117, 201 general, and with concrete examples pp. 133–134, 143, and Wall 1978:72, general on how the nineteenth-century belief was especially strong in northern Sweden. On “milk fortune” and the belief in “the limited good,” in a village, in connection with milk production see also Östman 2000:211–12.
- 9 I have previously and more briefly proposed this theory on the connection between envy and skill in dairy management, in Myrdal 1999:316–317.

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