



# Maritime culture in an inland lake?

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## Abstract

The definition of maritime culture will be discussed in this paper. The noun *mare*, and its adjective derivatives *marinus* or *maritimus* in Latin indeed refer only to the sea. To the author, however, this is only formalist semantics. The only reasonable starting point for a humanistic approach would be the cultural contents of the definition. In this case the salient question would be whether the conditions of the Swedish lake Vänern do resemble the conditions of the salt water coasts and archipelagoes so much that they can be compared with them, or not. The scale of lakes in general would be important. A definite answer to the question is not sought, rather a discussion. The perspective is the Braudelian *longue durée*.

The source material of the analysis will be multidisciplinary, place names, folklore, wrecks and other remnants, the social background of fishing by way of small-scale farmer shipping to a possible ownership and management of larger vessels, maintenance of lighthouses, sea marks etc. The similarities are as important as the peculiarities. Similarities are supposed to introduce the influences of general maritime culture. Peculiarities may show the richness of the local heritage. The mixture of these two gives the balance. Some emphasis will be put on the ritual landscape with its mansided evidence since this is one of the latest research areas of the author.

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore whether the maritime aspects of the large Swedish inland lake Vänern, the third largest of Europe, would be enough to characterize them as a maritime culture in their own right.

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In a way the answer could be meaningless, if it did not include the more important discussion on the spirit of maritime culture. And indeed, by definition, Latin *mare* means sea, and its adjective derivatives *maritimus* and *marinus* refer only to the sea, of course not to a lake. The question thus challenges us to ask whether we are formalists stuck in the original meanings of words or if we are as dynamic as culture or language itself, accordingly if we realize that the only important thing is *the evaluation of the actual contents of culture*.

The question above dissolves in this paper into three principal themes. None of them is supposed to constitute a definite answer. The first is an effort at a definition of the concept *maritime culture*. The second is the specific aspects of Lake Vänern. The third then will be a brief link to the main theme of this conference, on the maritime heritage.

## 2 A definition of maritime culture

The definition of culture is not only difficult, it is in fact doubtful. Among other 'criticisms' (critical points?) is the very serious one that no culture is homogenous or 'clean', however you may define it. Of course the same goes for its maritime variant. Nevertheless, an effort at a definition will be tried here, cf Prins 1965, introduction [1].

If an identity, such as ethnicity or group identity, is to be defined today, a reasonable way is simply to ask the people implied to what group they feel themselves to belong. It is indeed a criterion which could be applied also to maritime culture. Of course that very designation would never be used. But the way of distinguishing between 'them' and 'us' in this case is very illustrative. Maritime people, especially sailors, are very conscious of belonging to that group, but they define themselves usually in opposition to these 'others', i.e. what they normally call *land-lubbers*. As we will see below this opposition without other distinctions is characteristic for the essence of maritime culture

If another illustrative term is supposed to be used, I think the concepts of Swed. *sjöbrukare*, 'sea users' and *sjöbruk*, 'sea exploiters', is a good choice in most languages. The prominent Swedish maritime ethnologist Olof Hasslöf introduced these terms in the 1950's, e.g. Hasslöf et al 1972 [2]. Hasslöf meant that the role of maritime culture and its users was underestimated by and met with little sympathy among the dominant circles of society in the past, who normally were disciplined owners of landed property and who detested the free forms of living at the coast.

But it should at once be said that neither sea exploitation or land exploitation are clear-cut categories or life forms. There are always transitions between them. And many people belonged and still belong to both groups or cultures.

Professional fishermen in the countryside who did not have any kind of agricultural subsidiary occupation did almost not exist before the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Scandinavian countries. Conditions in the coastal cities may have been different. And we know that the permanent residents of most coastal port cities during the Middle Ages may have been based on fishing as their subsistence occupation.



What is the gender perspective, the relationship between man and woman, in maritime culture? Normally the sailor's world is purely male. Maritime occupations usually distinguish clearly between the world of the females which is on land and that of the males which is at sea. But the kind of maritime culture that we study is an everyday type with doubtful professionalism. The role of the woman is as active as that of the man..

The concept maritime culture seems to be most profitably applied as a comprehensive name for all those modes of thinking, customs, artefacts, and patterns of acting directly connected with a life at the sea and dependant on the sea and its resources in a wide meaning. But it is better thought of generally as a *life mode*, to borrow a concept from my once colleague, the ethnologist Thomas Höjrup at the University of Copenhagen. This *life mode* means the exploitation of a number of niches in society and in nature. These parallel niches or subsidiary occupations are the rule. There might not even be a primary occupation, maritime or not. Instead the whole register is used, fishing, maritime hunting, of sea fowl or seals, the collection of eggs and down, all kinds of sea transport etc.

On the other hand, we find at the border to illegality within maritime culture the infamous phenomena of wreck-plundering and smuggling. It is obvious also in other cases that the coast has been hard to control by the authorities. All possibilities were exploited to hide not only fishing sites but also the extent of catches, the sizes of the hull or the hold of cargo ships or the details of commercial ventures at sea in order to evade taxing.

There was always, not only in the very distant past, a certain amount of mutual mistrust between maritime people and the authorities, and with good reason from both sides. Ambitious kings may have been dependent on coastal people to man his ships, but when peace returned the sailors and their world were forgotten and often left in the lurch.

This culture or life mode is tough, resilient but strong. If any of the subsidiary or complementary occupations is threatened the principal weight of the economy could be placed somewhere else along the niches and the *life mode* as such can survive. Its cultural pattern forms a kind of natural and very characteristic hierarchy during several generations, with fishing as the basis. The junctures of economy decide the stress.

Maritime culture also is one of the most important *reserves* of land-based societies. Fish is undoubtedly the most important subsistence reserve in days of famine but maritime culture also gives the potential of rapid overseas transportation and replenishment. Another function is its ability to work as a *security valve* in society. It contrasts the stable agrarian identity with a free migratory style of life. It reminds us of its origins in the original societies of hunters and fishermen. To the coasts and to its possibilities of subsistence have persecuted, expelled or more or less criminal people always had recourse.

A common trait is the personal maritime practice in a boat and the experience of whatever could be possible to meet in or with a boat at a coastal stretch. It is imperative to know your position by way of transit lines, the direction of the seabirds' flight, the pits in the bottom, the foreboding of a change in the weather,



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the knowledge of the shallows where perch is breeding, both for profitable fishing and for the dangers in approaching them.

This feeds the social practice, the *habitus* if you like, which could be rather an elusive thing to study. This is especially valid if your ambition extends to the past. In the past there is a ritual landscape at sea producing a coherent system of faith. This has interested me in particular during later years. The ritual rules include the following principle:

*What is visible or what could be taken or named in a certain way in land or from land, shall not be visible, be taken or named in the same way onboard or at sea.*

This rule can be demonstrated by the *noa* names, so prolifically found in the place names of the maritime cultural landscape. Of course they can be found on land as well, but much more sparsely. They substitute for the land names which are *taboo* at sea, for this part Westerdahl 2002 with refs [3]. In Shetland such words were labelled *lucky-words* or *haf-words* (sea words). This contrast almost created another language, a sea dialect.

This is in fact a 'mental' or 'cognitive' illustration of the same mechanism that Robert McGhee found in archaeological material in the maritime Arctic, implements made of the sea-produced ivory never being used inland and others of the moose antler never at sea, McGhee 1977 [4].

But women or people from certain inland groups, such as the Finns or the Saamis, were supposed to be the best wizards and sorcerers at sea, for good or for worse. You could combine gender and ethnicity. The strongest magician at sea would thus be a Finnish woman.

It is also important not to challenge your good fortune. Thus you can always point out that this place is good or bad, but in a reverse relationship to reality.

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I have myself minted the terms *traditional transport zones* and *maritime enclaves*. I have seen them as a hallmark of an active maritime culture. The significance lies in the fact that special vessel types adapted to the cargoes and sailing conditions of each zone have had time to develop. The further development and maintenance of shipping and shipbuilding have been managed by the maritime enclaves along the coast, where the proportion of people engaged in maritime occupations is notably higher than in other parts of the countryside or the towns.

It is not isolation that characterizes maritime culture. On the contrary: 'Communication between the different coastal settlements have often been livelier than between the coastal settlement on one hand and inland settlements on the other'. The coast has been 'a world in itself'. This means that we would

find much of past maritime connections in their results, such as the signs of contact and turnover. It would be e.g. place names, folklore and material culture. If possible the mental heritage also ought to be taken into consideration. A sound balance between what seems to be peculiar traits of an area and possible or potential innovations in it would be the essence of a local or regional maritime culture. But what is actually 'a sound balance?'

### 3 Conditions in Lake Vänern

The lake spans over 500 kms of coastline, with 5000 islands, islets and skerries. Maximum depth is 110 m. Huge promontories jut out into the lake, separating it in two distinct halves. The largest half is the smallest water reservoir in the world displaying the characteristic water flow of *geotrophic circulation*. This current flows in the opposite direction to the so-called *coriolis effect*. The lake was before its regulation at the electric power dams at Trollhättan in 1938 known for its periodic inundations and dry periods. The effects of these periods have been minimized by large embankments in certain areas. Forests of reeds formerly taxed by cattle now largely impede views from roads or settlements of the huge water horizons of the lake. The former high production of fish in these shallow areas has been stopped or minimized by the reeds. The land rise since the Ice Age is stronger in the north than in the south. Accordingly the land upheaval produces a slow but steady turning-out effect of the water, making for even more temporary reed growth in this area.

The permanent connection with the outside world is established in 1800. The sluices of Trollhättan can then take ships up to a length of c. 30 ms. Nowadays they take vessels of 85 ms. In the formal sense, this is the first period which makes it possible to talk about a *maritime* culture in the lake. Even before that, however, parts of the river is accessible to shipping by way of sluices and canal works, but unloading and reloading on river boats is still necessary. Later the great port city of Gothenburg which is founded at the outlet of the Göta älv river would give impetus in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to a huge expansion of its large hinterland. Its hinterland mainly consisted at that time, and still consists, of the Vänern basin.

But in shipping alone, some relevant reflections could already be made on conditions in the lake long before that. In about 1550 a list is made by one of the secretaries of the Swedish king Gustavus Vasa of 22 important harbours in the lake. In 1773, i.e. 27 years before the canal was completed, 110 harbours are registered by the cartographer Nils Marelius. My own survey from later years comprises at least 250 harbours of different kinds. This, however, does not necessarily mean a steady progression since the older lists could be suspected, for various reasons, to make a selection.

The sites of shipbuilding, however, are not documented in any way before my own survey which lists at least 150 shipyards and shipbuilding sites. Altogether the great number of registered sites and ship names must mean that between three or four thousand vessels of various categories were built during the latest

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centuries at the shores and water systems of the lake, including the Göta älv river and Lake Vättern to the east.

The medieval diocese of Skara comprises all the lands of the basin, the present-day provinces of Värmland, Dalsland and Västergötland. Already in c. AD 1200 more than 600 churches exist in the area, 518 only in Västergötland, the largest concentration in Scandinavia. Most connections with the peripheries are made by boat. Goods produced by extensive church and monasterial properties, the principles of church architecture, its building materials, church sculpture, baptismal fonts and parchment leather are disseminated across the lake within the diocese.

The two sides of the lake are an almost perfect example of complementarity. On the northern side the forests, iron ore deposits and the outland use of huge hunting territories make for production of related goods, such as timber, worked wood, birch bark and slate for roofs, furs, hides and iron. Agriculture in this area only mean small-scale husbandry. But grain is scarce. It is found on the other side, which lacks the forests and mineral resources.

Oral traditions attest the existence of farmer shipping already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, since they are clearly contemporary with the last period of missionary activity of the Catholic church. This period ends in about AD 1250. The lack of medieval towns except Lidköping on the southern side, which is established in AD 1446, could be a sign of commercial activities by countryside farmers and magnates in our maritime enclaves during the following centuries. Coastal towns in Scandinavia are normally founded by the king or possibly the church. The intention is mainly to control and manage interregional commerce and its resultant shipping. But the local landowners are by nature less interested in markets and towns controlled by the king. In this area the power of the crown is very restricted in comparison with the Mälaren area in the northeast. The local and regional aristocracy may want freely to import and export their own goods without the intercession of either king or church.

The intercoastal farmer sailing activities are better documented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and up to 1900. They are so strong that they lead to legal claims (in vain) by the town of Lidköping, in which area farmer shipping tended to such keen competition that it outdoes the traffic of the town itself.

The traditional farmer shipping is however to be found not only on the marked maritime enclave of Kållandsö close to Lidköping. It goes on between all parts of the lake. At least two other areas can be characterized as particularly active, the archipelago of Torsö in the southeast and the great promontory of Näs (Värmlandsnäs) in the north. They can also be characterized as maritime enclaves.

But when the state takes a stronger grip and historical sources flow more exhaustively on economic matters one area seems to cast off from this old type of connections between the coasts of the lake. It is roughly the coastal area between the new towns of Karlstad and Kristinehamn. The impetus is given by the mining district of Bergslagen, controlled by the state with its capital at Stockholm. The products of Bergslagen go by ship directly to the portage at Göta älv river and further down to Gothenburg. Maritime activities in this area are

conforming to this one-direction flow. The development of iron production and migration to the new inland settlements is so strong that it leads to an striking increase of population on the northern side which has no counterpart in the mainly agricultural south. During the following centuries it appears that even the agricultural production in the Vänern basin is reorganized to sustain the new settlements which cannot support themselves with the necessaries of life, Jansson 1998 [5].

We could start looking for contrary indications to the signs of traditional maritime contact in the area. They are not hard to find. My catalogues of elements in the maritime cultural landscape of the Vänern basin show that in precisely this area there are much fewer harbours, and they are specialized, if you like in a 'modern' way. There are neither any signs of the dispersed shipyards and shipbuilding sites, which are so typical of the shores and inlets of the remainder of the lake. And above all, there are no traditions extant of farmer shipping, nor of its successor in countryside shipowning and ship management. Everything in this sphere seems to be concentrated to the towns and some very few loading-places for cooperation in shipping between several iron mills.

The ship types of the lake include a type peculiar to the lake, called *blockskuta*, 'timber ship'. Since it is clearly impossible to tow or to float timber across such large expanses of water for the risk of dispersal by winds the unworked timber has to be taken by ships all the way down to their destination. This destination is almost exclusively the Göta älv river, where a large number of sawmills work up the crude wood. The large-scale export of oak or pine timber by way of Göta älv starts in the 15<sup>th</sup> century concomitant to the impending impoverishment of the Norwegian coastal forests. The recipients are mainly English, Scottish or Dutch. It is very likely that this particular type of ship is introduced during this period. The *blockskuta* is clinker-built in the traditional Nordic fashion but with unusually large scantlings. It carries single square sails on two masts. In later centuries it is often furnished with three or four masts with mainly fore-and-aft rigging and can load up to 800 tons. The largest *blockskutor* can never enter the sluices at Trollhättan and accordingly stay in the lake. There are many ships of this kind even after the establishment of the sluices. But after the sluices are completed in 1800 some specialized timber ships for use in lake Vänern are also built outside of the area, e.g. on the Norrland coast of the Baltic. Thus, they are still considered as rational and 'modern' cargo machines at that time.

Other traditional clinker ship types for other purposes than timber transport are certainly found in the lake. We do not now much on their details. But a new distinct ship type is introduced from the outside in the beginnings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is intended to transport iron and to some extent composite goods. The Dutch *bojort* is originally built according to the rules of the Zuiderzee, flat-bottomed with carvel or flush planking of a comparatively 'modern' kind. It has two masts with fore-and-aft rigging and a sword at the side. It appears, however, that it is adapted fairly rapidly to the conditions at the lake. The *bojort* is later, according to tradition, tree-nailed in clinker fashion and rigged with a square sail on one single mast. It also seems to get a more marked profile in the bottom and

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the keel, when used on Vänern. Thereby it obviously loses the sword since it has no function in the new design intended for the waters of the lake. This seems to illustrate the adaptation even of invented overseas design to local and regional use in a distinct transport zone. It is significant that it loses its old designation *bojort* in everyday parlance. There are neither any place names in the lake reminding us of its once existence, contrary to other ship types.

During the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century its successors rapidly give way to new ship types designed by the great ship architect Fredrik Henrik af Chapman. They are supposed to be carvel-built, to carry fore-and-aft sails and to be adapted directly to the sizes of the new sluices. This appears as another adaptation, in this case to the transport zones of the river valley and the canals. Normally the two-master is called *vänergaleas* ('Väner ketch') and the ship type with a single mast is called *vänerslup* ('Väner sloop'). Their types of permanent high rigging is known as *lake rig* all over the world, a general adaptation in great lakes, such as those of the U.S.A..

However, the traditional sailing ship types in clinker fashion linger on in the lake up to the final take-over of steam. Farmers still use their fishing and cargo types *vänersnipa*, *storbåt* or *laxbåt* across the waters to trade in towns and markets on the other side. The distinct river boats or barges, *älvbåtar*, *pesar* and *flatlusar*, ply their respective transport zones with their single square sails inherited from the time before the sluices. They are still found on Göta älv river up to the 1920's, as well as on the lower reaches and in the delta of Klarälven river in the north. Several other ships of outlandish design, such as the Dutch *koff*, enter the waters of the lake by way of the canals but never catches on in the local ship yards.

The development of ship types can indeed be illustrated in detail. The lake contains at least 600 neatly localized and to some extent documented wrecks. Since there are no ship worms in the freshwater of the lake nor in its tributary river systems the potential for ship archaeology is obvious. But so far, no detailed documentation or actual excavations have taken place.

Among the peculiarities of the lake are some characteristic place name types. The category denoting harbour or anchoring places is typical. Other categories of the place flora in the lake give you an impression of all-Scandinavian maritime names with a distinct West Nordic accent.

Fishing is exceedingly important to the church and the great landowners already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This refers especially to salmon, and in this case mostly to the rivers or their estuaries. But this is only as far the historical source material goes. It is scarce even later. The history of local fishing could almost be called *subhistorical*.

Local fishing in lake Vänern is important enough to produce a particular form of net, the *storryssja*. The sea-booth *krake*, in essence without actual walls, just a pointed roof of reeds placed directly on the ground has got a long ancestry, probably in all parts of the lake. There may have been at least 1000 more or less professional fishermen who are mainly producing for sale and perhaps 5.000 people only fishing for their own subsistence during the decades before 1900.

Details of folklore would appear to have had a local origin, such as *koffa*, a supernatural being in the water.

The main cultural barrier separating the forested area in the North with the shieling (*fäbod*) 'culture' and its related 'outland uses' by way of e.g. everyday inland hunting and fishing runs north of the lake across Scandinavia. The province of Värmland is entirely north of it, except the huge promontory of Näs (Värmlandsnäs), one of our maritime enclaves. The same goes for the dialects, which are heavily influenced from the south, i.e. Västergötland, as well from the west. Another element common to both enclaves is agrarian, the small *västgöta* wind mill, the *holkkvarn*.

The ritual rules referred to above could be demonstrated in Lake Vänern already during the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and are probably at least medieval. They are moreover among the earliest documented of their kind in Scandinavia. The name of the most important sighting point, the small mountain *Kinnekulle*, is at sea only referred to as *Kinna-Bonde* or *Kulla-Bonden*, 'the Kinna Farmer'. Its counterpart on the other side of the water is also called *Bonden*, 'the Farmer'. In this case it is mostly called *Eds-Bonden*, thus specified according to the parish name. This is part of the general but perhaps strange logic, that you actually name at sea according to an opposite principle to in land, in this case something that would be imagined as the most landbound of all, a farmer.

I have not made any systematic comparisons with other large lakes. Maybe it could be illuminating also to compare with large islands as an 'inverted' picture of a large lake? My impression is that lakes must have a minimal size somewhere along the scale to fit in. This indefinite size must obviously be a prerequisite for what could reasonably be called a maritime culture. But physical size is not the only precondition. The number of inhabitants, the economic needs of the area and the long time perspective, *la longue durée*, of a Braudelian kind are just as important.

In the case of Vänern I feel confident that the prerequisites of the basic kind exist already from the Iron Age, but a sizeable growth of maritime activities is discernible first during the later part of the Middle Ages, mainly the fifteenth century. In shipping, timber is the most important cargo. The growing importance of iron production and transportation makes for a leap during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but we have to wait for the final upsurge in shipping until the completion of the canal at Trollhättan in 1800.

#### 4 Conclusion: the maritime heritage of Vänern

I would like to say a final word on the *maritime heritage* of Lake Vänern. It has connected the provinces on both sides together for many hundreds of years. But nowadays all the regular communications are on land. The maritime connections clearly belong to the past. Leisure sailing is not a sufficient replacement. Of course it is important to preserve the physical remains, what is left of the connections, and their vehicles or their vessels. On the other hand it is perhaps even more important to mediate to people of today the memories of a time when the waters of the lake was a transport resource in itself and not a hindrance. It is

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also important to imagine those far-off times, to give an alternative picture of life in the past. But it is still clearly impossible to revive it. Most of the immaterial memories is still hidden in the oral traditions of people. These memories cannot be protected by way of a cultural heritage stamp wielded by a museum curator. They have to be rediscovered. It all boils down to the *maritime cultural landscape*, its adaptive *life mode*, caught in *life histories*, and the foremost symbol of maritime culture, *the ship*.

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