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## Reviewed Article:

# Gene Fornby - the Ancient Village of Gene

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The archaeological open-air museum Gene Fornby (The Ancient Village of Gene - author's translation) is an archaeological reconstruction completed in 1991 that is based on the excavation of a nearby ancient settlement dated mainly to the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period. For many years now, the politicians of the City Council of Örnsköldsvik have been debating on the 'use' of Gene Fornby. They have shown little or no understanding of its cultural or historical value, but instead have just discussed the economical use of the

establishment, and thereby have a political agenda to demolish the archaeological reconstructions of Gene Fornby.



It's great that Örnköldsvik has the privilege to have this kind of important ancient remains accompanied by archaeological reconstructions: a full-scale longhouse and smithy. They are also the symbols of Örnköldsvik's very early history.

I have for years, through articles, debate and political activities, been a very active part in the efforts to preserve Gene Fornby from demolition. The cause seemed long doomed to be lost, but in the end the saving-line won. Therefore the longhouse and the smithy, in my opinion the important reconstructions, will be preserved and restored. Moreover, there will also be, in line with my own arguments, updated scholarly information material that will be better connected to the actual nearby prehistoric site (RAÄ<sup>1</sup> Själevad 22:1).

My opinion is that this upcoming solution is better in a museological long-time perspective, and it is one that everybody involved can be quite satisfied with. Some further critical points of view are thought of relevance to bring forward. Among those is the fact that the archaeological dating of the prehistoric Gene-context is not fully and correctly

presented in various written material. It really also should be mentioned that the ancient settlement's timeline ends during the Vendel era. The consequences of such a deficiency are not only a question of specific analogical issues, but could also be detrimental to students and scholars due to lack of information. Most of all, it is a limiting factor in a general scientific sense, and one that also risks inhibiting otherwise possible advances in the research field for the Vendel era, not at least in a theoretical and methodological meaning.

## Background

Gene Fornby is a reconstructed settlement based on a prehistoric settlement on Genesmon in Gene (parish of Själevad), outside the city of Örnköldsvik in northern Sweden. Originating from the Roman Iron Age, the site was uncovered in an extensive excavation in 1977-1988, led by Per H. Ramqvist and Anna-Karin Lindqvist from Umeå University.

The finds consist of the remains of at least 14 house foundations and a cemetery with nine low mounds. Nearby (about 50 meters away), there are also four burial mounds. The remains have been dated primarily to the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period, and the surrounding cemetery contains graves from about 100-600 AD. The work on reconstructing the ancient settlement of Genesmon was performed in 1991, about 500 m from the excavation site.

The reconstruction of the village was, from 1991-2005, an archaeological open-air museum with the purpose of demonstrating how the village most probably appeared during the

period 400-600 AD. The reconstruction of the settlement is located in conjunction with today's beach. To achieve equality with the prehistoric situation, this location takes into consideration the land elevation that in this particular region (the so called 'High Coast') is quite extreme. The reconstructions of the buildings are made to reflect the transition from the Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period, circa 400-600 AD (however this dating terminology is not fully satisfying—see below). The first written scholarly work of the excavation was published in 1981, with much to follow (for further studies of the archaeological site RAÄ Själevad 22:1 see Ramqvist 1981, 2010; Lindqvist & Ramqvist 1993, 2009; Baudou 1992; Thunberg 2010). The experimental archaeological reconstructions were inaugurated in 1991. (For studies more directly related to Gene Fornby see Edblom 1997, 2004; Ramqvist 1994; Lindqvist 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 2007.)

### Some of the most interesting aspects of the excavations

An interesting aspect of the excavation results is that the ancient cemetery contains graves from as early as 100 AD, which indicates a very early settlement of this particular kind for this part of Sweden. The discovery of the settlement was quite sensational news, since it was contrary to the earlier archaeological assumption that there probably was no resident population in these northern parts of Sweden before the Viking Age. Of great relevance in analogical matters are the thirteen burial mounds considered to be chieftain graves (see for example Lindqvist 1983, 1989a; Lindqvist & Ramqvist 1993; Ramqvist 1981, 1983). Among the artefacts found are knives; arrowheads; bone combs; bronze moulds; pottery; clothing buckles and buttons; as well as beads of bronze, glass, bone and clay and waste from handicraft production. Particularly mentionable are bronze casting moulds for so-called embossed buckles. This is an unusual type that has only been found at about ten locations throughout the Nordic region, and Genesmon is the only known manufacturing site (Baudou 1992; Ramqvist 1999). Moreover, the archaeological results show that an iron industry seems to have been an important part of the settlement.

The settlement is now about 20 m above sea level. During the settlement period the farm was located on a promontory that jutted out into the sea, but since then the uplift has created new conditions. The original buildings have been marked at the site, so that visitors can now see such things as the placement of the houses in relation to each other, in relation to the burial mounds and so on. The settlement of Genesmon has two periods. During the first phase there was a longhouse, a corn barn and a workshop building. When those houses were worn out and demolished, they built a new longhouse, a new corn barn and also a smithy. In total, 14 houses were found in the excavation area. 13 of those buildings belong to the Iron Age settlement, and one house is from the 1200s (Lindqvist 1983, 1989a; Lindqvist & Ramqvist 1993, 2009; Ramqvist 1981, 1983, 1999).

An archaeological investigation in 2007 complemented an area near a forge by the smithy at

the settlement. That investigation revealed slag, iron objects and mould fragments. Found just northwest of the settlement was, among other things, several charred logs, nail like objects, flint flakes and an iron key with two ears. Samples of the charred wood have been C14-dated to the Migration Period, which is consistent with the dating of the mentioned key (RAÄ; dnr<sup>2</sup> 321-3992-2009). The excavation site is now very pedagogically arranged for visitors, with the remains of the buildings marked in different ways and information signs of quite good quality to guide the visitors.

## From political darkness to sudden victory

The last ten years there has been an intense political debate on the 'use' of Gene Fornby. An overwhelming political majority in the City Council of Örnsköldsvik has shown little or no understanding of its cultural or historical value, but instead just have had a quite crass economic agenda that includes erasing the archaeological reconstructions of Gene Fornby. This is despite the fact that the reconstructed ancient village has its own RAÄ-number (i.e. RAÄ Själevad 151:1) and is described by RAÄ (The Swedish National Heritage Board) in FMIS<sup>3</sup> as an experimental archaeological location and reconstruction (FMIS). The resistance from us who wanted to stop the demolition process took form in debates, articles, analyses in reports and even political propositions (see for example Thunberg 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2012; Edberg & Spång 2010). After several years of struggle, the saving discourse suddenly generated more and more followers (even among the politicians) and eventually brought home the victory in the City Council on 28 May 2012.

## A new future for Gene Fornby

The City Council of Örnsköldsvik has (through the above mentioned decision on May 28) decided that the Örnsköldsvik Municipality will take over and preserve the reconstructions of the longhouse and the smithy. Happily, they will also save the area belonging to the 'Iron Tavern', some storage buildings and the accompanying equipment for necessary maintenance. In the name of heritage, a thank you should be directed towards the present Foundation of Gene Fornby (and its chairman Liisi Hägglund), the Cultural Department of the municipality of Örnsköldsvik and its director Katarina Larsson (not least for the official proposal that was built upon the preceding debate), Carina Edblad (director of the overall administration), and Leif Lindholm (political chairman of the Cultural Committee of Örnsköldsvik), without whose final support it would have been nearly impossible to save any part of Gene Fornby.

It is thus decided that the Örnsköldsvik Municipality will buy all the buildings on Gene Fornby, and the transfer takes place formally in the spring of 2013. The idea is that the area will be made available in several ways and develop into a natural and cultural resource with learning and recreation in mind. The present Foundation of Gene Fornby will (as its last operation before its closure) restore the longhouse and the smithy with the Foundation's own

resources. The Foundation will also pay for new information material of all kinds, including digital information such as apps for mobile phones. The renovation of the reconstructions will begin during the autumn of 2012.

During the spring of 2013 the area's new information material and sign program will be ready, and about the same period the first shows will also take place. The new sign program has the purpose of ensuring that all kinds of visitors can manage a fruitful and informative visit in the area on their own. The excavation area Genesmon is also to be included in the new sign program. The sign program is to be developed in collaboration with the Cultural Department of Örnsköldsvik and the County Museum of Västernorrland. Responsibility for the excavation area is located mainly on the latter and the County Administrative Board. The Culture Department of Örnsköldsvik plans to continue to offer educational tours for children and young people to a limited extent during the construction phases, and after a while possibly also to the public in general.

## Proposals and scientific views

The final City Council decision means that the archaeological reconstructions of the longhouse and the smithy are to be preserved and restored in a more long-term perspective. These two buildings are, in my opinion, the more important of the reconstructions; the rest of the houses can be seen as parts of an idea that implies that there should be actors involved. The previous arrangement of houses signalled this in a tangible way. With only the longhouse and smithy left, it makes a totally different impression. The focus now is on harmony, credibility and science. This creates in my view, a natural curiosity to visit the nearby site with the remains of the actual prehistoric settlement. It is almost like something failed and damaged that becomes something great and functioning.

For the new Gene Fornby I also think a good idea would be to incorporate the remains of the prehistoric settlement in within the concept of 'Gene Fornby' along with the remaining reconstructions. There are several arguments for such an approach. Firstly, it has a greater scientific relevance. It will most certainly be more practical, interesting and, above all, more logical for different types of visitors, such as tourists, schoolchildren, students and visitors on the Internet. A strong argument is also the fact that only one longhouse and a smithy may not be what many would a 'village'. However I believe that it would be a good idea to still retain the concept of 'Gene Fornby', because that name is not only well established, but it also appears to be easy to remember. This does not mean that one not also can speak about 'Genesmon' or 'Gene Fornby at Genesmon'.

An important issue is the present dating presentation of the reconstructions. Currently they are made to reflect the transition from the Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period, circa 400-600 AD. I would like to stress that this dating terminology is not fully satisfying, since the

mentioned period also means a clear affiliation to the Vendel era - a fact that certainly is relevant. Not least in question of importance are comparisons with Uppland sites like Vendel, Valsgårde and so on. The Vendel era is special for Sweden, so it seems important to highlight this interesting aspect for a number of reasons. The consequence of this deficiency is not merely a question of specific analogical issues, but it also risks being detrimental for students and scholars due to lack of information. Most of all, it is a limiting factor in a general scientific sense, and one that also risks inhibiting otherwise possible advances in the research field for the Vendel era. Not least in a theoretical and methodological meaning.

## Conclusion

Within the framework of the final City Council decision, the archaeological reconstructions of the longhouse and the smithy of Gene Fornby are to be preserved and restored. It is these two buildings that, at least in my opinion, are the important and major reconstructions. It is also clear from the final political decision that educational materials are to be developed and updated at various levels. New and more scientific information is to be presented in connection with the reconstructions, and the archaeological reconstructions are to be explicitly linked to the excavation site. Digital information is also to be devised, such as 'apps' that can be downloaded to computers and mobile phones. I am firmly convinced that the two extant reconstructions will shine in the park's greenery and represent a very harmonious delight for visitors staying in the area for relaxation, recreation, exercise, business or other reasons. They will attend not only a park and recreation area, but also have something magnificent to watch and experience. It's great that Örnsköldsvik has the privilege to have this kind of important ancient remains accompanied by archaeological reconstructions: a full-scale longhouse and smithy. They are also the symbols of Örnsköldsvik's very early history. Of course, Gene Fornby is also the place to invite formal guests of Örnsköldsvik to show one of the municipality's most interesting aspects.

Some critical scientific points of view are of relevance: the archaeological dating of the prehistoric Gene-context is not fully correctly presented, since it should be mentioned that the ancient settlement's timeline ends during the Vendel era. That is an important aspect when comparing the site to other important Vendel era sites in Sweden. The lack of relevant information can have a potential negative affect on scholarly research. These are aspects that should be corrected.

Finally, I would like to emphasize my hope that the new Gene Fornby on Genesmon will be established in the same way as, for example, Eiríksstaðir (the Viking-methods reconstructed longhouse considered to be the original home of Greenland discoverer Erik the Red) in Búðardalur, Iceland.

2 dnr - diarienummer (eng. ref)

3 FMIS - Fornminnesregistret, Informationssystemet om fornminnen (= The Swedish records and information system for antiquities)

🔖 **Keywords** (re)construction  
archaeological open-air museum  
restoration  
excavation  
living history  
heritage  
settlement  
smithy

🔖 **Country** Sweden

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## | Gallery Image



*Fig. 1. The longhouse at Gene fornby seen from the woods (from SE). Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 1. THE LONGHOUSE AT GENE FORNBY SEEN FROM THE WOODS (FROM SE). PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 2. The longhouse from SE. The reconstruction is 40 m long, 9 m wide, have birch-bark roof and walls of braided twigs sealed with clay. The building is supported by heavy poles. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 2. THE LONGHOUSE FROM SE. THE RECONSTRUCTION IS 40 M LONG, 9 M WIDE, HAS A BIRCH-BARK ROOF AND WATTLE AND DAUB WALLS. THE BUILDING IS SUPPORTED BY HEAVY POLES. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 3. The longhouse from SW. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 3. THE LONGHOUSE FROM SW. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 4. The longhouse from NW. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 4. THE LONGHOUSE FROM NW. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 5. The smithy from NE. The reconstruction of the largest found prehistoric smithy in the Nordic region. It measured 16 x 9 and had four forges. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 5. THE SMITHY FROM NE. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LARGEST FOUND PREHISTORIC SMITHY IN THE NORDIC REGION. IT MEASURED 16 X 8 M AND HAD FOUR FORGES. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 6. The Smithy from SE. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 6. THE SMITHY FROM SE. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



Fig 7. Excavation site of Genesmon today seen from the woods (from NW). Well prepared for visitors. Photo by Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).

FIG. 7. EXCAVATION SITE OF GENESMON TODAY SEEN FROM THE WOODS (FROM NW). WELL PREPARED FOR VISITORS. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



Fig. 8. Information sign of the prepared excavation site. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21)

FIG. 8. INFORMATION SIGN OF THE PREPARED EXCAVATION SITE. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig 9. The two Longhouse remains (RAÄ 22:1) from NW. Left (yellow-marked) - c. 100-350 A.D. Right (white-marked) - c. 350-600 A.D. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 9. THE TWO LONGHOUSE REMAINS (RAÄ 22:1) FROM NW. LEFT (YELLOW-MARKED) - CA. 100-350 AD. RIGHT (WHITE-MARKED) - CA. 350-600 AD. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 10. The longhouse remains at Genesmon (RAÄ 22:1) from S. Right (yellow-marked) - c. 100-350 A.D. Left (white-marked) - c. 350-600 A.D. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 10. THE TWO LONGHOUSE REMAINS (RAÄ 22:1) FROM S. RIGHT (YELLOW-MARKED) - CA. 100-350 AD. LEFT (WHITE-MARKED) - CA. 350-600 AD. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 11. Archaeologist Carl L Thunberg inside the younger longhouse at Genesmon. Photo S. G. Käll (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 11. ARCHAEOLOGIST CARL L. THUNBERG INSIDE THE YOUNGER LONGHOUSE AT GENESMON. PHOTO S.G. KÄLL (2018-08-21)



*Fig 12. Chieftain grave mounds by the excavation site at Genesmon. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 12. CHIEFTAIN GRAVE MOUNDS BY THE EXCAVATION SITE AT GENESMON. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 13. Grave mound & paving (c. 400-600 A.D.). Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 13. GRAVE MOUND & PAVING (CA. 400-600 AD). PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)



*Fig. 14. Tomb globe (of the mound and paving from c. 400-600 A.D.). Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 14. TOMB GLOBE (OF THE MOUND AND PAVING FROM CA. 400-600 AD). PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21)

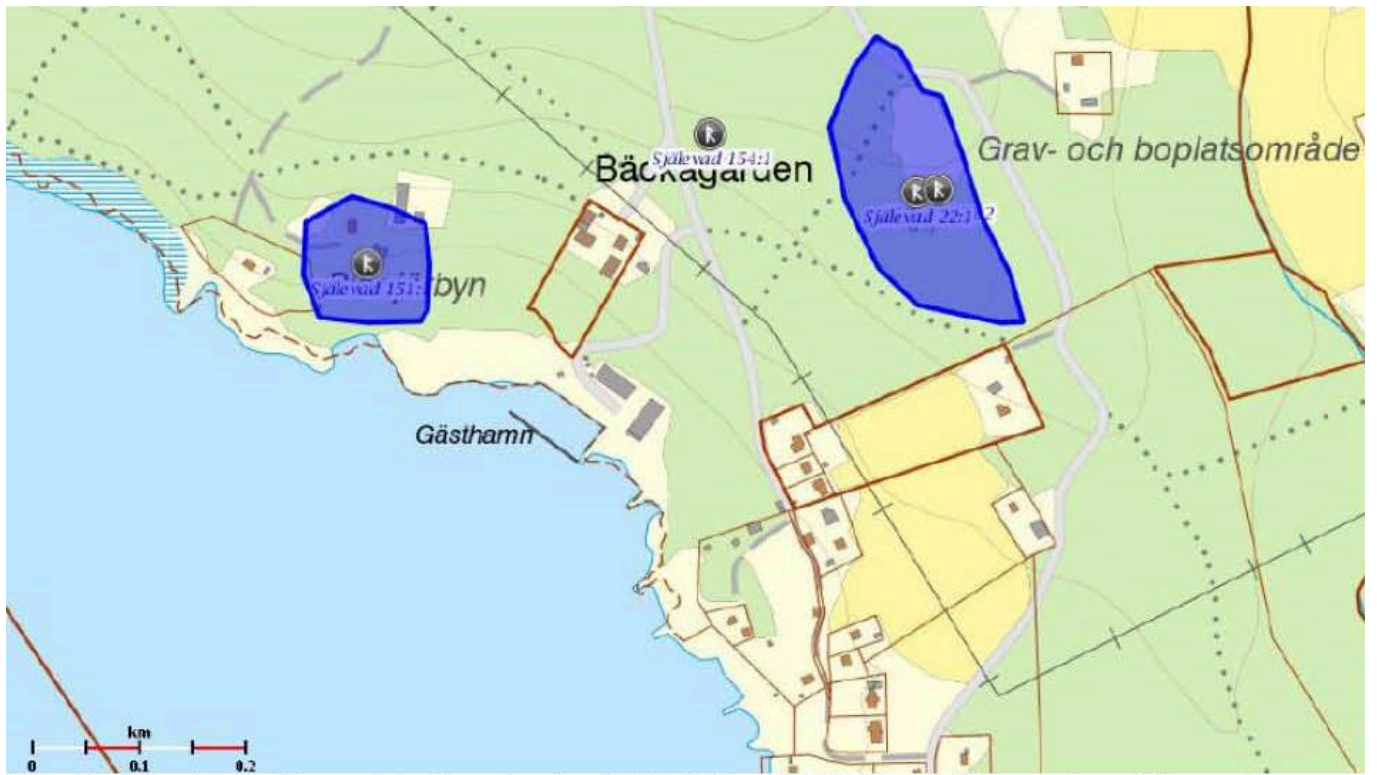


Fig. 15. Map 1 (smaller scale). Gene fornby (RAÄ Själevad 151:1) and the remains of the ancient settlement at Genesmon (RAÄ Själevad 22:1). Through FMIS (2012-08-17).

FIG. 15. MAP 1 (SMALLER SCALE). GENE FORNBY (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 151:1) AND THE REMAINS OF THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENT AT GENESMON (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 22:1). THROUGH FMIS (2012-08-17).

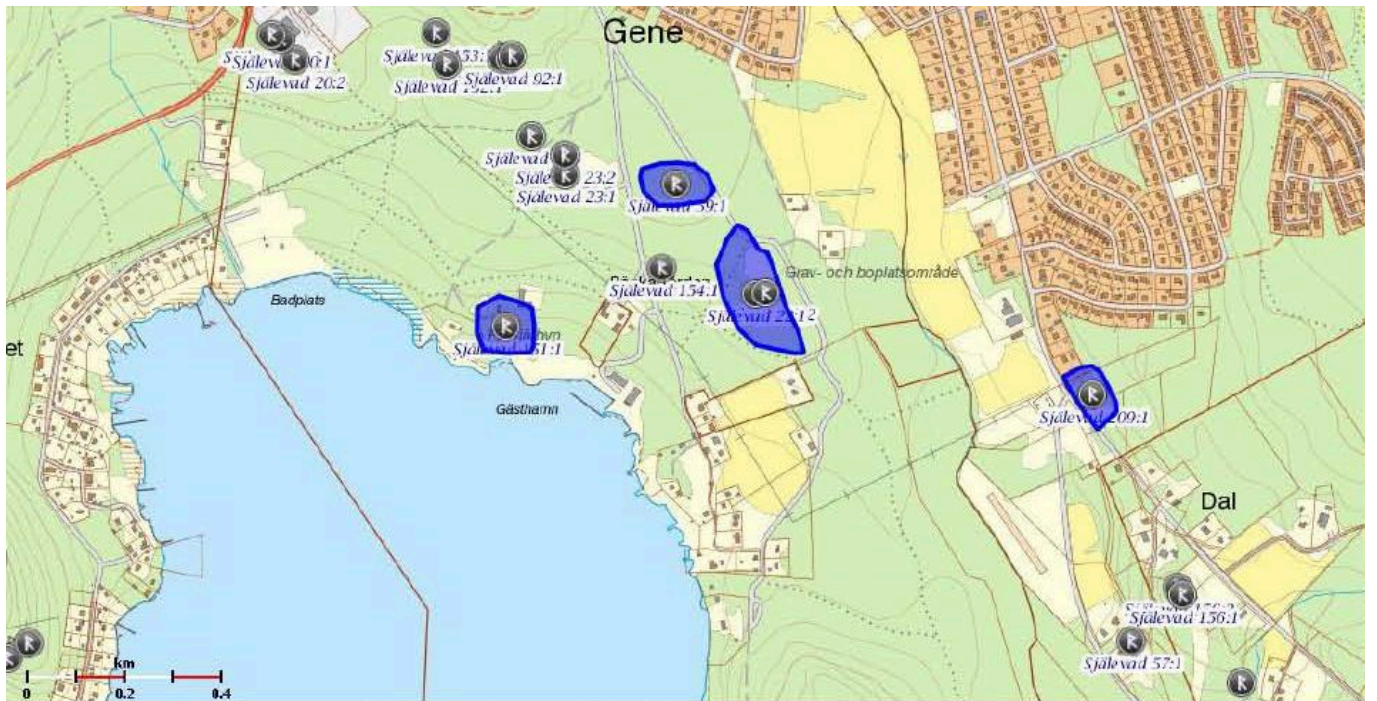


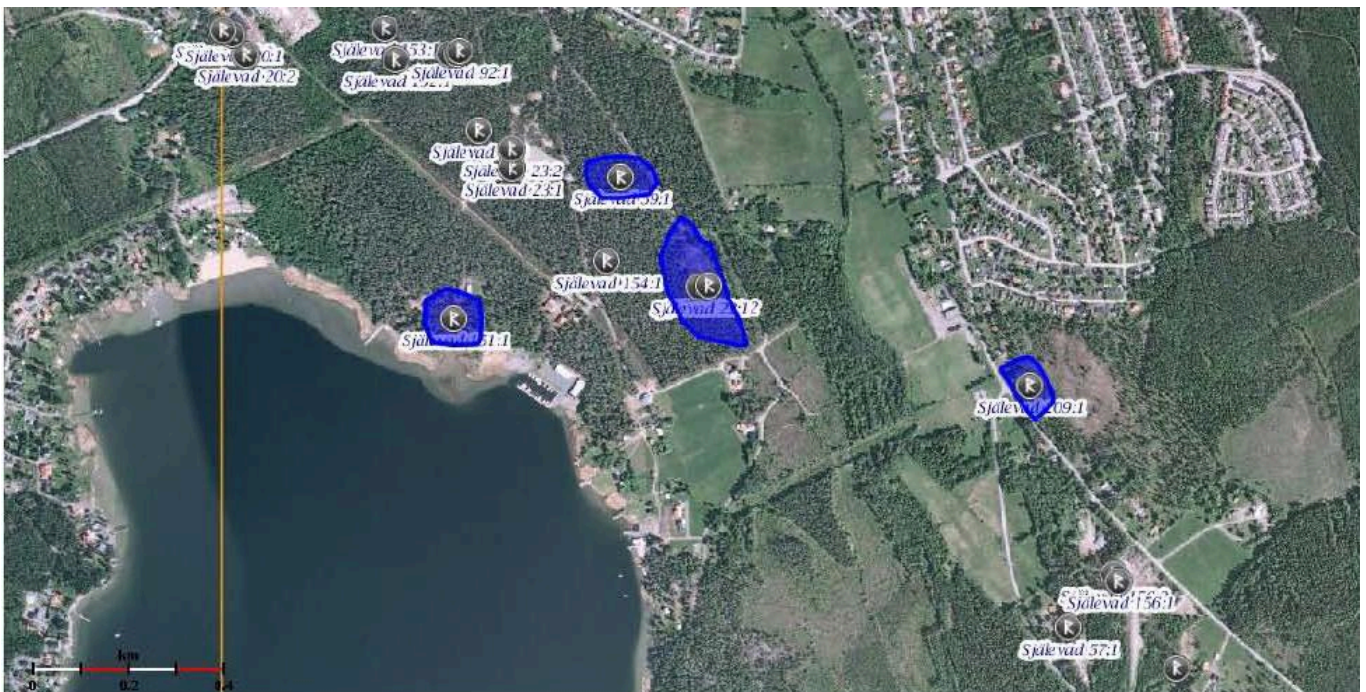
Fig. 16. Map 2 (larger scale). Gene fornby (RAÄ Själevad 151:1) and the remains of the ancient settlement at Genesmon (RAÄ Själevad 22:1). Through FMIS (2012-08-17).

FIG. 16. MAP 2 (LARGER SCALE). GENE FORNBY (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 151:1) AND THE REMAINS OF THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENT AT GENESMON (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 22:1). THROUGH FMIS (2012-08-17).



*Fig. 17. Satellite photo (smaller scale). Gene fornby (RAÄ Själevad 151:1) and the remains of the ancient settlement at Genesmon (RAÄ Själevad 22:1). By Carl L. Thunberg on the FMIS system (2012-08-20).*

FIG. 17. SATELLITE PHOTO (SMALLER SCALE). GENE FORNBY (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 151:1) AND THE REMAINS OF THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENT AT GENESMON (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 22:1). BY CARL L. THUNBERG ON THE FMIS (2012-08-20).



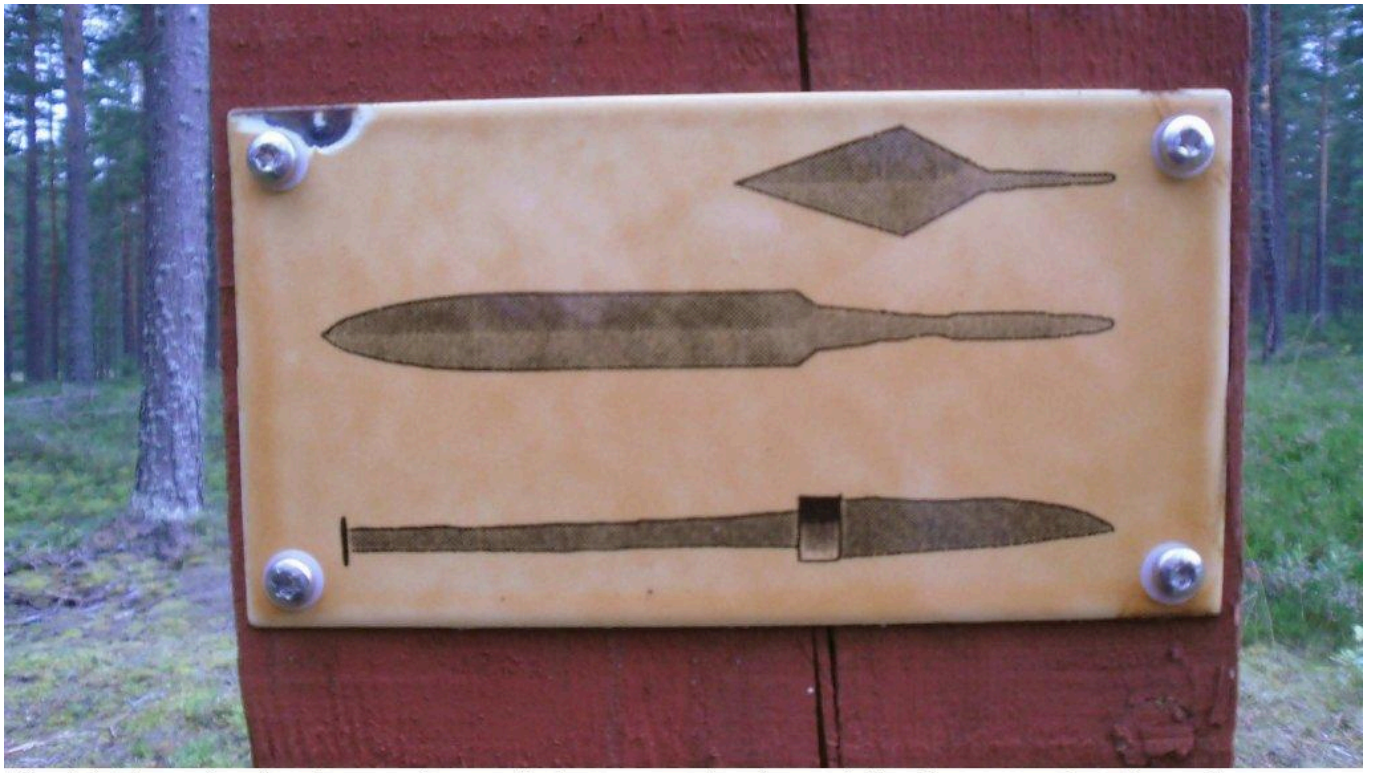
*Fig. 18. Satellite photo (larger scale). Gene fornby (RAÄ Själevad 151:1) and the remains of the ancient settlement at Genesmon (RAÄ Själevad 22:1). By Carl L. Thunberg on the FMIS system (2012-08-20).*

FIG. 18. SATELLITE PHOTO (LARGER SCALE). GENE FORNBY (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 151:1) AND THE REMAINS OF THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENT AT GENESMON (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 22:1). BY CARL L. THUNBERG ON THE FMIS (2012-08-20).



*Fig. 19. Air photo from 1988 of the excavation. Photo Jan Norrman, RAÄ (1988-06-17).*

FIG. 19. AERIAL PHOTO FROM 1988 OF THE EXCAVATION. PHOTO JAN NORRMAN, RAÄ (1988-06-17).



*Fig. 20. Example of a picture of some finds at a certain place within the excavation site at Genesmon (RAÄ Själevad 22:1). Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 20. EXAMPLE OF A PICTURE OF SOME FINDS AT A CERTAIN PALCE WITHIN THE EXCAVATION SITE AT GENESMON (RAÄ SJÄLEVAD 22:1). PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21).



*Fig. 21. A picture showing the inside of a grave.  
Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 21. A PICTURE SHOWING THE INVENTORY OF A GRAVE. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21).



*Fig. 22. There are also text signs in connection to the picture signs. Unfortunately yet only in Swedish. Photo Carl L. Thunberg (2012-08-21).*

FIG. 22. THERE ARE ALSO TEXT SIGNS IN CONNECTION TO THE PICTURE SIGNS, UNFORTUNATELY ONLY IN SWEDISH SO FAR. PHOTO CARL L. THUNBERG (2012-08-21).