

HERITAGE OF NEW SETTLERS IN ESTONIA: PRESERVING RURAL ARCHITECTURE WITH RUSSIAN AND SWEDISH INFLUENCES

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The specific expression of Estonian rural architecture has developed mainly during the past 300 years, whereby the architectural heritage of only past 150 years has survived till nowadays.

I am going to focus on the bigger part of Western Estonia (including the islands), which was once the habitat of Estonian Swedes, as well as on the western shore of Lake Peipsi, which has been settled by Russian Old Believers. All these regions are characterized by an architectural heritage different from traditional Estonian rural architecture.

The political changes in the 20th century interrupted the continuation of building traditions. The Soviet occupation brought along the departure of Swedes and Finns from Estonia. The most viable architectural heritage is that of the Russian Old Believers' as they stick strongly to their traditions. Even today on the western shore of Lake Peipsi people continue building traditional covered farmyards.

There are no exact data on how human habitation developed and the first Russian fishermen settled down in the region under discussion (Varnja, Kolkja, Kasepää) on the western shore of Lake Peipsi. It is, however, known that in the 14th century Russian fishermen did not inhabit this region permanently; it was visited only seasonally for fishing (Moora 1964: 51). A sizeable Russian settlement on the shore of Lake Peipsi

started to take root only in the 17th century, when due to war events more and more Russian peasants settled down in coastal villages.

In 1653 patriarch Nikon rose to power in Russia and he initiated reforms aimed at conforming church rituals and doctrines to those of the Greek Mother Church. A great number of believers and the clergy did not accept the reforms. The adversaries of the church reform started to be persecuted by the decree of the church council and the tsar's ukase (1685). The Old Believers who had been declared outlaws fled to the remote areas of the tsarist state.

The first Russian Old Believers, who mainly came from Novgorod and Pskov, appeared near Mustvee and Kallaste on the shores of Lake Peipsi at the end of the 17th century. In the late 18th century the fishing villages on the western shore of Lake Peipsi were inhabited by a great number of Old Believers from the neighbourhood of Vitebsk as well as Novgorod and Tver guberniyas. Villages with permanent settlement started to be established in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Varnja ja Kasepää were among the first villages in the area.

Varnja village

Varnja (*Warnia*, later on also *Waronja*, *Воронья*, *Варнья*) is the southernmost village on the shore of Lake Peipsi, to the north of the River Emajõgi. Varnja mire extends to the south of it, up to the river mouth. By today the village has grown into one with Kolkja (Suur (Big) and Väike (Small)-Kolkja, Sofia) and Kasepää, forming a street village stretching out to the distance of ten kilometres. Varnja was first mentioned in written records in 1582. (Moora 1964: 56.)

At the end of the 19th century Varnja village comprised approximately 200 households, about fifty of which were in the possession of Estonian farmers (Рихтер 1976: 29). All Estonian families were engaged in agriculture, but only five Russian ones, who also step by step sold their lands and took up other occupations. After 1917 the number of

inhabitants in Varnja village amounted to one thousand. The main occupations were fishing and vegetable growing. Three fourths of the inhabitants in the village were Russians, predominantly Old Believers.

Similarly to other Lake Peipsi villages, Varnja village landscape was also characterized by alternating wooden and brick buildings with gable roofs, which densely lined the lanes. Most of the households had buildings following North-Russian building traditions – covered or closed yards (*злѣхоў двор*) with imposingly designed gates facing the lane, which were daily used as the main entrance. This inner yard had several functions. It included a place for horses and cattle, a storehouse, a cellar, a shed for firewood, an earth closet, and a hayloft. This way everything necessary was under one roof and people were able to do their everyday work without having to go outside in poor weather. At the same time all this was concealed from the strangers' eyes. The main façade of the dwelling was very similar to that of the detached houses frequently encountered in Estonian villages.

Until the early 20th century log buildings were prevalent in Varnja village. Today log dwellings are mainly clapboarded. Only a few of them are covered with bricks. Log outbuildings are usually covered with splinters. Wooden-laced window frames and cornice decorations are negligible in Varnja village.

Due to the densely positioned buildings in the street village, fires were a constant threat. Therefore, from the late 19th century people started to build dwellings from locally made red brick with stone or wooden outbuildings on a wider scale. This tendency became more prevalent beginning from 1911, after the great fire of 1910, which destroyed buildings in the village centre. The walls of brick buildings were either plastered and whitewashed or left uncovered. Red brick as a building material for dwellings was relatively new in Estonia. Obviously, influences came from Russian crown architecture. Yet, at the same time this material became more and more popular in Estonian villages, especially in case of manor homes in Mulgimaa.

The Russian settlement by Lake Peipsi extended during the Soviet period. Getting mixed with the representatives of different confessions diversified the general appearance of villages. Close commercial and economic connections with St. Petersburg in the 1990s offered possibilities for renovation or rebuilding. Therefore many specimens of valuable architecture and their details have been demolished. However, due to the economic changes during the past ten years, these regions have become a periphery. The decreasing catch from Lake Peipsi has caused the extinction of the ancient industry. Local inhabitants are forced to search for jobs in bigger cities. The majority of local inhabitants is made up by elderly people who, unfortunately, are not able to maintain their buildings.

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The Republic of Estonia, having re-gained its independence, offered the descendants of former owners the possibility to get back their land holdings. This has created a problem in Western Estonia where many Swedes have returned to their former homes. Unfortunately, the survived buildings are in very bad repair, demolished or rebuilt beyond recognition.

The newly settled Swedes have now introduced a building tradition that spread on the mainland of Sweden in the 1920s–1930s. Today the regions that have preserved their traditional Estonian Swedish building tradition can be found almost only in the coastal areas of Noarootsi and Vihterpalu as well as on Vormsi Island (Wormsö).

Swedes are known to have lived on West-Estonian islands already since the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, we lack reliable data about the architectural tradition of the new settlers, but it is rather obvious that after conquering the villages they might have used the existing barn-dwellings as their abodes. Therefore we can speak about the comparison between the building types of Estonians and Coastal Swedes only starting from the mid-19th century.

The most exact data about the dwellings of that period were presented by Carl Russwurm, a Baltic-German author, in his three-volume work “Eibofolke” (Russwurm

1855: 6-7). When comparing these drawings, we can see that the dwelling consisted of three main rooms – the anteroom, the living-room and the chamber, whereas the first two constituted the core of the dwelling. The living-room was the centre of the family life round the clock. In the cold season it was heated by a big stove, which, in the worst case, also served as a sleeping place for the whole family.

According to Russwurm, the anteroom was meant not only as an entrance to the living-room but it also served as a kitchen with an open fireplace in the corner. Later on this feature was used to give a name to the Coastal Swedes' dwelling type – cookhouse-dwelling.

Actually, the cookhouse-dwelling was not an invention of the Nordic peoples; it emerged in the Alps of Central Europe, where the open fireplace for cooking was combined under the same roof with the East-European chimneyless dwelling. As a result, the building became two-roomed, with the stove mouth turned through the partition wall into the anteroom and connected there with the open fireplace (Weiss 1959).

Just like in the case of the Estonian barn-dwelling, the chimney was a relatively new feature in the Swedish cookhouse-dwelling as well. However, there were already chimneys in a few dwellings in Osmussaare and Pakri Islands and in Riguldi commune. The anteroom had no ceiling and smoke and cooking vapours from the fireplace were directed out of the building through triangular openings in the hip under the ridge of the roof. On Pakri and Ruhnu Islands, where there was a grain drying or threshing room under the same roof, the big stove in the living-room was said to have been heated also from the anteroom. This dwelling type has mistakenly been considered to coincide with the Estonian barn-dwelling; however, the room for grain-drying was never used as a living-room by the Swedes. As the threshing room was just as wide as the rest of the building, the roof above this room was higher – bulged out – which became a characteristic feature of the Ruhnu dwelling house. The most important room here was the living-room with the stove heated from the adjoining anteroom, which was a little narrower.

Chimneyless cookhouse-dwellings could be encountered even as late as at the end of the 1930s. This type of dwelling usually consisted of three main rooms: the chamber, the living-room with a chimneyless stove and the anteroom with a light partition wall, behind which there was the fourth room – a narrow cooking room with an open fireplace in the back corner (Ränk 1996: 69.)

In Western Saaremaa, in the area of Kihelkonna commune, detached buildings already occurred rather frequently; yet, as formerly, the open fireplace heated from the anteroom was used in them. In Estonian it is called *roovialune* (black kitchen), which is a clearly foreign-origin word for Estonians and is derived from the word *rov* or *roa*; this was the word used by Russwurd in his book to denote the hood above the fire preventing the sparks from scattering.

However, besides the aforementioned building type there also existed the Coastal Swedes' barn-dwelling, which is a clear indication of adapting the local architectural tradition. In the 19th century the Estonian barn-dwelling still lacked a separate room for the kitchen. In summertime food was cooked in the summer kitchen in the yard, in the cold season all the activities, included cooking, were carried out in the threshing room, where the big stove was the only heating source in the building.

There is no evidence about the Swedes copying the Estonians' barn-dwelling exactly; yet, evidence can be found to prove that the latter had additions which formerly belonged to the cookhouse-dwelling. However, these changes were inconsistent and no clearly new building type like the cookhouse-dwelling emerged. The ground plan of barn-dwellings varied greatly by regions. In the Swedish barn-dwelling the barn kiln definitely had a chimney and in wintertime it was used as an open fireplace.

We lack statistical data about the percentage of barn-dwellings in the whole habitat of Coastal Swedes, who started to introduce this type of buildings in the mid-19th century; yet, on the mainland coast – Noarootsi and the area of Vihterpalu – they seemed to be

predominant. The housing reform that converted the living-room smoke-free already in the early Middle Ages, became so popular that it spread in the entire Western Europe, certainly including Southern Scandinavia and the Baltic states. Yet, the Estonian barn-dwelling remained as one of the rare exceptions – a predominant building type for the indigenous people of Estonia.

Within the cooperation between the Estonian Open Air Museum and the Estonian Academy of Art during the past ten years, the survived traditional architecture in Noarootsi region has been measured and drawings have been made. Together with the students of Narva College at the University of Tartu inventorying of traditional architecture has been carried out in two villages in Lake Peipsi area – Varnja and Kasepää – which have better preserved their building traditions. According to the results of the inventory, precepts for maintaining the heritage have been handed over to the Board of Heritage. The present state of buildings has been described and registered on photographs, and the valuable architectural details have been listed.

In connection with the obligations imposed on Estonian communes by the state on the one hand and the interest of the local authorities themselves on the other, Vormsi commune has turned to us with a request to assist them in documenting their preserved architectural heritage and support them with recommendations, which would help them to establish building restrictions. This small island is an attractive holiday spot not only for tourists but also for real estate developers, and it is very difficult to preserve the milieu value of the island without any clearly worded regulations.

This year the architectural heritage of Vormsi Island will be taken under investigation by the researchers of the Estonian Open Air Museum and students of Narva College.

This is the ultimate time to take steps to preserve the architectural heritage of these peculiar regions.

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