Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Scandinavian Economic History Review

ISSN: 0358-5522 (Print) 1750-2837 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/sehr20

Preserving land in noble families. Entailed manors (*fideikommiss*) in Sweden and Finland, 1686–1975

Göran Ulväng

To cite this article: Göran Ulväng (29 Jun 2026): Preserving land in noble families. Entailed manors (*fideikommiss*) in Sweden and Finland, 1686–1975, Scandinavian Economic History Review, DOI: 10.1080/03585522.2026.2653589

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2026.2653589

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 29 Jun 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=sehr20

SCANDINAVIAN ECONOMIC HISTORY REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2026.2653589

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Preserving land in noble families. Entailed manors (*fideikommiss*) in Sweden and Finland, 1686–1975

Göran Ulväng

Department of Economic History, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article explores the establishment of *fideikommiss* in Sweden and Finland from 1686 to 1975. *Fideikommiss* was the right to entail land to a single heir, thus preserving it for future generations. By using probate inventories, the extent of *fideikommiss* has been measured, revealing that they were mainly established between 1720 and 1810, when the right to found new ones was abolished. The establishment of *fideikommiss* partly responded to increased competition for land from non-nobles. The higher nobility, who had the means to set aside land since inherited land could not be entailed, were the main founders. *Fideikommiss* comprised five per cent of the kingdom's area and were mainly established in the southern regions, where the best arable land was located. In 1964, a new law began the process of abolishing *fideikommiss*, although more than half had already been dissolved between 1810 and 1945 due to economic crises. Notably, the smaller and medium-sized *fideikommiss* in the less fertile western and eastern regions of Sweden, often accompanied by ironworks, were the first to be dissolved. In contrast, the largest *fideikommiss* remained, most of which were located in the very fertile southern plains. These undoubtedly preserved the nobility as large landowners.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 June 2025
Accepted 27 March 2026

KEYWORDS
Entails; fideikommiss; nobility; Sweden; Finland

1. Introduction

Land control has been one of the most crucial issues throughout history. Disputes over ownership, rents, yields, and investments have characterised most European countries, involving the state, church, nobility, farmers, towns, and companies. In most cases, land was transferred from the former to the latter with the rise of the market economy, land reforms, and democracy. Since the Middle Ages, noble families had the right to create entails, or *fideikommiss*, in which property could be taken over by a single, usually male, heir and could generally not be sold, mortgaged, or diminished. This practice ensured the family's position for generations to come. However, the *fideikommiss* also created numerous issues. For instance, widows and siblings were left unsupported, land was held off the market and unusable as security for loans, and land reforms were obstructed. The institution of the *fideikommiss* was abolished in nearly all countries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as it conflicted with the modern, liberal legislation of the period.

Earlier research has, to a great extent, analysed the establishment phase, legal disputes, and/or abolition process. At the same time, there are few studies on the scope and significance of the *fideikommiss* over time at the national level.

CONTACT Göran Ulväng goran.ulvang@ekhist.uu.se

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

This article aims to map the number and scope of the *fideikommiss* in Sweden and Finland (part of the Kingdom of Sweden until 1809) from 1686 to 1975, in order to understand its importance in holding land. Using information on land ownership from probate inventories alongside agricultural statistics enables an analysis of the number and size of *fideikommiss* in the kingdom and of regional differences over nearly 300 years. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sweden was one of the least feudal states in Europe, with the nobility owning only a third of the land, holding limited political power, and experiencing their privileges decline (Carlsson, 1949, p. 1, 174–179). These circumstances may have reinforced a strategy of using *fideikommiss* to retain land and influence.

The article shows that *fideikommiss* was mainly founded by members of the higher nobility, who had the means to set aside land since inherited land could not be entailed. They comprised five per cent of the kingdom's area and were mainly established in the southern regions, where the best arable land was located. In 1964, a new law began the process of abolishing *fideikommiss*, although more than half had already been dissolved between 1810 and 1945 due to economic crises. The largest *fideikommiss* remained, most of which was located in the very fertile southern plains, which undoubtedly preserved the nobility as large landowners.

In this paper, I have opted to use the term fideikommiss rather than entails, as fideikommiss was the more common term for the concept in continental Europe and the Nordic countries. Additionally, I use the term 'manor' to refer to a stately estate instead of 'country house', which is the prevalent English term for post-medieval estates (Finch & Dyrmann, 2019, p. 15). Until the 1800s, the Nordic noble estates shared many similarities with their medieval English counterparts. They were protected by legislation and granted certain privileges (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2018, pp, 204–206, 2019; Ulväng, 2019, pp. 98–99).

2. Entails, land, and land reforms

The ownership and control of land was the economic and social basis for most noble families in Europe, in contrast to the emerging elite of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who built their fortunes more on capital and investment (Dewald, 1996, p. 61; Scott & Storrs, 1995, p. 35). In many countries, such as Britain, Spain, France and Denmark, the manors controlled between 65 and 80 per cent of the land (Dewald, 1996, pp. 69–70; Lukowski, 2003, p. 74; Porskorg Rasmussen, 2018, p. 208; Thompson, 1963, p. 64). Regardless of the size of the estate, most families had to manage the transfer of their wealth to the next generation, resulting in a division of wealth that threatened the family's position and the standing of its members. In the early modern period, new ways of preserving property over generations were developed (Scott & Storrs, 1995, p. 33).

The concept of *fideikommiss* (entails or fee tail estates), in which a single heir inherits property and passes it down through generations, was established in the Roman Empire. As Roman law spread across Europe, institutions of *fideikommiss* were subsequently developed in various European states. For example, in the Spanish kingdom, the *fideikommiss* seems to have been established as the 'mayorazago' in the fourteenth century, perhaps influenced by the Arabic 'waqf' foundations. Similarly, an early form of *fideikommiss* also appeared in the German realm. In medieval England, such institutions were also present, although entails in this context differed, as they were adapted to the existing practice of primogeniture (Erichsen & Tamm, 2014, pp. 271–281).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the institution of the *fideikommiss* took on its modern form. A male heir inherited the property, which could not be divided, sold, or mortgaged. The *fideikommiss* was intended to follow an explicit line of succession for future generations or a limited number of generations. During these centuries, the number of *fideikommiss* increased in almost all states. This coincided with the emergence of stronger nation states and the shifts in the relationship between kings and the nobility. As a result, the nobility lost some of its independence and served as officials and officers in the expanding administrations (Asch, 2003, pp. 150–151). This relationship was likely strengthened by a parallel process. The nobility became a more distinct social group, developing a sense of nobility and emphasising the importance of male lineage (Scott &

Storrs, 1995, p. 33). The *fideikommiss* institution fit perfectly into this new concept of state organisation and was sometimes used by rulers to reward loyal families (Erichsen & Tamm, 2014, p. 276; Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, pp. 119–121). *Fideikommiss*, or fee tail estates, are also found in the U.S.A. (Priest, 2015).

However popular they became, the extent of the *fideikommiss* seems difficult to estimate. In Denmark, the *fideikommiss* covered one third of the manorial land, or 25 per cent of the kingdom, at its most extensive (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, p. 126). In Germany, about seven per cent of the land and 10 per cent of the forests were owned by the *fideikommiss* in 1900 (Erichsen & Tamm, 2014, p. 277). Castile in Spain is estimated to have around one-third of its land under entail in the late eighteenth century (Lukowski, 2003, p. 103).

Within each state, laws governing *fideikommiss* were gradually adapted to changing political and economic circumstances. This led to the emergence of various types of *fideikommiss*. For instance, in Denmark, there were initially *grevskap* and *baronier (counties and baronies)*. Later, these were supplemented by *stamhus* and *fideikommiss*, each with different privileges (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, pp. 119–121). Similarly, in southwestern Germany, about half of the *fideikommiss* were so-called *kondominat*. In these, all sons inherited shares, resulting in many part owners (Menning, 2019, pp. 169–173). Likewise, a similar type of collective *fideikommiss* occurred in Amsterdam to preserve town property (Zuijderduijn, 2012).

These changes were partly a reaction to the criticism of the *fideikommiss*, which grew more common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to the influence of the Enlightenment and the increasing commercialisation and liberalisation of society. The *fideikommiss* was alleged to increase inequality; in particular, it tied land to one person who might be unsuitable and possess limited capital for necessary investments, making *fideikommiss* farming ineffective. It also hindered the emergence of a free land market and free trade, thus threatening the principles of property rights. The siblings became impoverished and could not support themselves or marry, leaving them childless and unable to contribute to the economy (Erichsen & Tamm, 2014, pp. 273–281; Priest, 2015, p. 281; Winberg, 1985, pp. 48–52).

Abolition began in the late 1700s, with the U.S.A. leading the way in 1785 (Priest, 2015, p. 278). In Europe, Spain, France, Italy, and several German states followed closely, before 1810, during the Napoleonic Wars. In some states, the *fideikommiss* was reintroduced shortly afterwards, only to be abolished or restricted in the mid-nineteenth century. There were two main reasons for this ambiguity. The abolition was seen as a violation of the principles of property rights. However, the political motive was probably the strongest: the nobility of the *fideikommiss* were generally conservative and loyal to the rulers. It was finally abolished in Spain in 1905. After the First World War, Germany and Denmark followed suit in 1919 (in some German states, the dissolution was gradual), with Finland ending the institution in 1930 (Erichsen & Tamm, 2014, pp. 273–281).

It is probable that many *fideikommiss* were dissolved before the introduction of abolition laws, as they were affected by other reforms and economic fluctuations, similar to those in Denmark (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, pp. 129–130).

In Sweden, while still being associated with Finland, the possibility of entailing property was introduced in 1686. The *fideikommiss* was a clear break with the tradition of partial inheritance; it introduced a holder with limited ability to sell or mortgage the land and a defined line of succession (Jägerskiöld, 1963, pp. 69–72; Trolle Önnerfors, 2010 p. 177; Winberg, 1985, pp. 48–52). The new law was one of many in an ongoing process in which the Crown, in the 1680s, reorganised the tax system and the military by confiscating land from the nobility, which had been donated or sold to them by the Crown prior to 1680 (Magnusson 1985). The nobility, who constituted 0.5 per cent of the population, remained large landowners, however, with the exclusive right to the tax-exempt land that, in the eighteenth century, covered one third of the land in Sweden and 10 per cent in the Finnish part (Gadd, 2000, pp. 42–45).

In a Swedish context, a manor was a property, mostly tax-exempt, owned by a noble or non-noble person of rank, with an estate of tenants and crofters, a hierarchical work organisation,

and a stately main building, surrounded by a garden (Ulväng, 2019, p. 104). They were undoubtedly of great economic importance to their owners, particularly the estates in southern Sweden and the central Swedish iron production areas (Magnusson, 1980, pp. 135–139; Olsson, 2002, pp. 347–353; Ulväng, 2008, p. 112–114). The link between land and political influence was weak. Election to the four estates in the Diet – nobility, clergy, burghers and peasants – was based on family (in the case of the nobility) or geography. In the bicameral parliament that replaced the old Estate Diet in 1866, eligibility was partly based on wealth, which generally favoured landowners (Gadd, 2000, p. 201).

Sweden developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, undergoing an agrarian revolution, followed by a financial and industrial revolution from the mid-1800s, all supported by global market integration. Despite being a geographically vast country with abundant mining and forestry resources and one of Europe's leading producers and exporters of iron since the seventeenth century, the majority of Sweden's population was still dependent on agriculture. Between 1750 and 1860, the population grew from 1.8 million to 3.5 million, excluding Finland and Pomerania, which remained part of the kingdom until the Napoleonic Wars (Magnusson, 2014, pp. 131–135; 194–195).

Generally, the manors benefited significantly from the increased demand for food and transitioned to capitalistic farming, replacing or supplementing the system of day-working tenants and crofters with intensive demesne farming based on salaried workers (Jonsson, 1980, pp. 79–90; Magnusson, 1980, pp. 141–145; Olsson, 2002, pp. 347–353;). In wooded areas and regions with poorer agricultural conditions, such as the southern highlands and western Sweden, many manors were instead divided and sold to non-nobles or freeholders (Ulväng, 2019, p. 110–117; Winberg, 1975, pp. 171–176). Industrialisation from the 1850s favoured manors connected to urban areas, which shifted towards milk, meat and garden production. It also benefited some manors in woodland areas, as their forest products could now reach the market (Morell, 2001, p 70–71; 86–88; 95–96). However, increased competition in iron production particularly affected iron-producing manors in central Sweden; many were sold to paper mills or forestry companies (Ulväng, 2019, pp. 107–108). From the 1920s onwards, agricultural profits gradually declined, despite rapid rationalisation. The depopulated countryside made it harder for elite families to sustain a stately lifestyle (Ulväng, 2008, p. 213–215, 230–238). By 1900, noble families owned around 40 per cent of manors (Ulväng, 2019, p. 107).

In general, the nobility became more divided. At the top were a small group of manor-owning families, while the rest served as officials or workers (Carlsson, 1949, pp. 252–279; Elmroth, 2001, p. 299; Norrby, 2005, pp. 85–87); many of them were quite poor (Bengtsson et al., 2019, pp. 35–37). The abolition of noble privileges partly led to the withdrawal of noble ownership. As early as 1723, non-nobles of rank were given the right to buy tax-exempt land; in 1789 and 1810, all restrictions were removed, resulting in a free land market (Carlsson, 1949, p. 123 & 140). Freeholders increased their share of the land from one-third in 1700 to almost two-thirds in 1900 (Gadd, 2000, pp. 204–205).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the nobility grew increasingly fearful that they would be unable to maintain their position. This was reflected in the opposition to royal ennoblement, which tended to increase their numbers and make it even harder to find a decent livelihood (von Konow, 2005, pp. 246–250). In 1752, Joakim Beck-Friis, a nobleman, suggested in parliament that *fideikommiss* should be mandatory for each ennobled person, thereby ensuring the position of the heirs (Landahl, 1911, p. 322). As infant mortality fell, some families had more children than the number of manors could support (Ulväng, 2008, pp. 140–141). To some extent, this perceived threat was regulated by the fact that almost half of the children never married, arguing that it was unaffordable or there was a lack of suitable candidates (Planck, 2014, pp. 50–57). Until the late 1700s, the higher nobility (counts and barons) primarily married within their own social stratum. However, marriage to non-nobles became more common, although the lower nobility had married non-nobles of rank for an extended period (Carlsson, 1949, pp. 183–186).

The establishment of *fideikommiss* was slow at first but gained momentum in the mid-eighteenth century (Segerstråle, 1979). Many founders were from the newly ennobled families who aspired to become large landowners (Bedoire, 2000; Dackling et al., 2025, pp. 30–31). The establishment of the *fideikommiss* might also be seen as a manifestation of the changing nobility's view of kinship, which was developing at the time, replacing a bilateral view with a unilinear one (Planck, 2024, p. 14). Interestingly, the old noble families were less keen to establish *fideikommiss*, perhaps because they were already substantial landowners with enough manors to support their heirs (Dackling et al., 2025, pp. 17–20).

In 1810, Sweden introduced a new constitution based on modern principles, including stronger property rights and the removal of the nobility's sole right to tax-exempt land. The right to establish new *fideikommiss* on land was also abolished. The arguments in 1810 were purely constitutional and not directed against the nobility. The *fideikommiss* was considered private property and, therefore, untouchable. It was not until the 1880s that the *fideikommiss* was discussed again in parliament, a discussion that continued to arise until 1963, when it was finally decided to abolish the existing *fideikommiss*. The political system and the timing were the main reasons why it was not ended after the First World War, as in most countries. Since the noble families were minor landowners, they were not seen as a threat to society. Land reform was discussed in the 1910s and 1920s. However, with rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as rising wages, the pressure on land diminished. In the following decades, smallholdings were seen as unprofitable and a dead-end solution. Instead, the government favoured large-scale farming to produce affordable food, and the *fideikommiss* were seen as role models. Additionally, from the 1930s onwards, the manors came to be seen as a valuable heritage that would be ruined if the lands were divided. The law abolishing the *fideikommiss* on 1 January 1964, therefore, advocated their gradual dissolution or transformation into shareholding companies (Bergman & Dackling, 2023, pp. 107–108).

In conclusion, the *fideikommiss* was a medieval phenomenon that reached its peak of popularity in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when leading noble families consolidated their power, and remained in use until the early twentieth century, when it became obsolete. There is, however, a lack of detailed studies on the development of the *fideikommiss* institution over time, as well as on how the number of *fideikommiss* and the size of the land they covered changed in relation to other ownership groups and the states.

The scale of the *fideikommiss* institution is, of course, of great importance since it preserves land and, in turn, possibly the economic and political position of certain wealthy elite families. The *Fideikommiss* system may also have hindered economic progress, as it prevents land from entering the market and preserves land ownership in certain areas, thereby hindering the rationalisation of agriculture. Furthermore, the land cannot be used as collateral for loans, which may hinder necessary land investments. Regions or even kingdoms with a high proportion of land in *fideikommiss* could, in other words, experience slower economic development than other regions or kingdoms.

The aim of this paper is to map the *fideikommiss* institution and its scope in Sweden and Finland, using extensive statistical and probate inventory sources. The main questions to be answered are: When and by whom were *fideikommiss* established, and how many were there, what was their size, and where were they located?

3. Definitions, sources and methodology

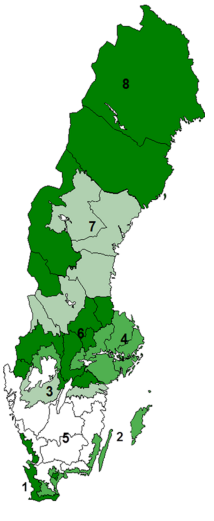
It is essential to recognise that establishing a *fideikommiss* was a matter of private law. It operated within the strict legislation governing the inheritance and purchase of land. A *fideikommiss* could not be created on hereditary land, as this would disinherit the heirs. It could only be created on purchased land (Jägerskiöld, 1963, p. 71). The founder's will established the *fideikommiss*. After the founder's death, his heirs had to accept it. These heirs then had to ensure that the land was distributed in accordance with the testator's wishes. As mentioned above, the *fideikommiss* could not be sold or mortgaged. However, in practice, this was possible by applying to the Monarch. He could

also authorise the transfer of the *fideikommiss* to another property. The changes were then registered with the courts. There was no official regular registration with an authority, nor did the authorities exercise any control. The first official survey of *fideikommiss* was made in Sweden in 1875. Male primogeniture was most common. However, there were *fideikommiss* with provisions for succession by widows and daughters, or for the appointment of the most suitable person (Dackling et al., 2025, pp. 25–29).

Historically, there have been differing views on what a *fideikommiss* is that have sometimes led to legal disputes. To date, five distinct types of *fideikommiss* have been identified. The first and most common was established on land (most often a manor) or in a town, with a single designated holder. In contrast, the second, which was rarer, corresponded to what is known in Germany as a *kondominat*, where all or at least several direct heirs became holders, in most cases a group of siblings (Menning, 2019, pp. 169–173). A third type was the two-stage *fideikommiss* (*tvåleds-fideikommiss*), which was limited in time, with the right to exist for only two generations. The fourth type was the *fideikommiss* on goods (*lösöresfideikommiss*), preferably used for art or book collections. Finally, the fifth was the *fideikommiss* on money (*penningfideikommiss*), consisting of cash or shares. The first was abolished in 1810, while the others were not annulled until 1930. Regardless of type, the *fideikommiss* could be transferred between land, town property, or cash with the Monarch's permission.

There are, of course, exceptions. Some *fideikommiss*, such as Skabersjö in 1824, were indeed established after 1810, and were nevertheless recognised and accepted as genuine *fideikommiss*. Uddeholm Ironworks, one of the largest estates in the kingdom, had been the non-noble Geijer family *kondominat* since 1730 and was dissolved in 1963. However, it was never recognised as a *fideikommiss* by the authorities. To ensure that as many *fideikommiss* as possible can be traced, a broad interpretation has been chosen. The most important requirement is that a will existed that states that the property would be inherited undivided and not sold or mortgaged. Another condition is that the will had to be registered by the Svea or Göta Court of Appeal (*hovrätt*), the two courts that dealt with matters of the nobility, or – if the testator was not a noble – by the local court (*häradsrätt*).

To trace the number of *fideikommiss* and the property within them, data have been collected from a wide range of sources, starting with existing books and articles on the subject, documents at the Board of *Fideikommiss* (*Fideikommissnämnden*), legal documents at the Supreme Court



Code	Name
1	South Sweden southern plains
2	South Sweden plains/woodland
3	South Sweden northern plains
4	Central Sweden plains/woodland
5	South Sweden woodland
6	Central Sweden woodland
7	Lower North Sweden woodland
8	Upper North Sweden woodland

Figure 1. The production areas in Sweden. Source: Jordbruksverket. https://statistik.sjv.se/PXWeb/Resources/PX/Kartor/Produktionsomraden.html

(*Justitierevisionen*), and the wills and probate inventories found at the Court of Appeal (Svea and Göta *hovrätt*) and local courts (*häradsrätt*). All information on succession, holders, and the size of the identified *fideikommiss* has been published in the public, searchable Database on Swedish Manors (www.svenskaherrgardar.se). Finnish entailed estates are documented in a survey compiled by Bo Lönnqvist (Lönnqvist, 2018).

Most of the questions in the paper concern the location of the *fideikommiss*, its size, and changes over time. Since most provinces vary significantly in climate, soil quality, and forest resources, I have chosen to base the study on Sweden's eight production areas, where Area 1 has the best conditions for agriculture and Area 8 the worst (Figure 1). There were notable differences in yield per hectare, with Area 1 yielding three times more than Area 8 and Area 4 yielding twice as much.[1] Of course, the fertility of arable land was not the only factor in determining where a *fideikommiss* was established. For example, the availability of iron ore, forests, and water sources was crucial to the extensive iron production in Areas 4 and 6 and, to some extent, in Area 7. Historical variables, such as the proportion of noble tax-exempt land, which was one-third of the land that the nobility had exclusive rights to, were also decisive; this was largely located in southern and central Sweden. Proximity to the capital, Stockholm, also played a major role, of course.

Size can be expressed in three different ways, each with its own limitations. The oldest and historically dominant measure was the so-called mantal. This was an assessment of a farm's tax capacity, where half to one mantal was deemed able to support a peasant family. In the new tax system of 1680, each farm's tax was assigned a specific purpose, such as paying for the post, supporting an officer, providing soldiers for the army, or funding a hospital. The mantal was then fixed and, with certain exceptions, remained fixed for all time. In terms of area, a mantal could vary greatly depending on where in the country the farm was located. In areas of heavy new cultivation, the area of arable land could increase significantly, thereby also increasing yields, while the mantal remained the same. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were forest locations where the area of arable land had increased tenfold since the seventeenth century; farming families made a living from units equivalent to as small as 0.05 mantal (Gadd, 2000, pp. 231–232). In terms of hectares, a mantal in the most fertile area of southern Sweden could cover around 140 hectares, while a farm in a forested area in northern Sweden could cover over 800 hectares (Table 1). In 1830, the tax value – in practice, a market value – was introduced to better assess the fiscal power and market value of farms. However, this was a relatively unreliable measure for an extended period, as it was difficult for the authorities to keep it up to date. In the mid-nineteenth century, in connection with the major land reforms, the size of farms was also increasingly measured in various surface measures (*rev, tunnland, hectares*).

The relationship between mantal, hectares, and tax value changed over time, depending not only on land reclamation but also on investments in land (Table 1). The widening gap in tax value between 1883 and around 1940 reflects this increased investment.

At first glance, the mantal seems to be the best choice for measuring the size of the *fideikommiss* over time, as information on the mantal is available from 1700 to around 1940. As mentioned above, using this measurement makes comparisons between production areas difficult and is somewhat abstract. Tax value and/or hectares are only useful after the late 1800s. However, hectares can actually be used. The fixed local relationship to the mantal – the total number of hectares of land per mantal, which is quite easy to calculate from the information around 1940, when both mantal and hectares are available (Table 2). Hectares also have the advantage of being a very concrete measure that is easy to imagine. For the latter period, the tax value will complement the hectares, providing more information on the land's quality.

Information on the size of the estate between 1700 and 1850 has been gathered from 150 wills and 300 probate inventories. According to the 1734 law, probate inventories were required for all

[1]Https://statistik.sjv.se/PXWeb/pxweb/sv/Jordbruksverkets%20statistikdatabas/

Table 1. The relation between of mantal, hectares, and tax value *fideikommiss* in the six production areas in 1883 and around 1940.

Production area	Mantal	Tax value 1883 (SEK)	Tax value 1940 (SEK)	Total hectares 1940	Hectares arable land 1940	Hectares forestland 1940
1	1	40,096	118515,	142	78	64
2	1	48,760	94,685	176	77	99
3	1	25,028	55,362	208	50	158
4	1	24,065	73,520	202	49	153
5	1	30,603	88,980	238	52	186
6	1	46,923	162,354	856	71	785

Source: www.svenskaherrgardar.se

deceased persons, although some are missing due to different archiving principles. The courts of appeal (Svea and Göta *hovrätt*) and, for non-nobles, in the district courts (*häradsrätter*) collected and stored the information examined here. In most cases, the landed property is listed at the beginning of the inventory or as an appendix at the end of the document. For this study, the year 1750 is used to correspond to wills and inventories mainly from 1736 to 1770 and, likewise, the year 1800 to inventories from 1780 to 1820, and, finally, 1850 to inventories from 1830 to 1860. In some cases, information on the size of the *fideikommiss* is unavailable; in these cases, I have estimated it based on information from older and later sources, as most *fideikommiss* were fairly stable in size over time, with a few exceptions. The relationship to the *fideikommiss* could obviously vary greatly both within families and over time. In some probate inventories, the land that is *fideikommiss* is clearly differentiated from inherited or bought land. In other inventories, there is simply a list of all properties, regardless of whether they were *fideikommiss*. This uncertainty is evident in the first government survey of 1875; several landowners provided incorrect information about the size of their *fideikommiss* (BiSOS H, 1871–1875, pp. 45–51). Some *fideikommiss* changed in size over time, but due to the addition or sale of farms, these changes had to be approved by the Monarch.

For 1883, the data are taken from C. M. Rosenberg's *Geografiskt-statistiskt handlexikon öfver Sverige*, which provides the number and tax value of properties. For around 1940, the data are taken from Åkerhielm's book *Svenska gods och gårdar* from 1930, *Svenska Gods och Gårdar* (published 1935–1947), and *Sveriges Bebyggelse* (published 1945–1966). For 1975, the data have been taken from Nils Segerstråle's book *Svenska Fideikommiss*, with information on hectares and valuation. All these data are entered and searchable in Database on Swedish Manors (www.svenskaherrgardar.se).

Data on both mantal and hectares are available in Åkerhielm's book from 1930. This information is accessible for the 121 *fideikommiss* that still remained at that time. Additionally, there is information on the number and area of 95 manors that ceased to be *fideikommiss* between 1810 and ca. 1940, but still remained as manors with their estates. Although some would have decreased in area, this decrease has also occurred in mantal, so the relation of mantal and hectares should be relatively constant. In other words, there are data on mantal and hectares from a total of 216 *fideikommiss* out of a total of 270. From the remaining 54 *fideikommiss*, however, there is only information on the mantal, either because the manor in question is not mentioned in geographical works from around 1940 or because there is no information on either mantal or hectares. For these 54, I have instead used the general relation between mantal and hectares at the parish level, which is available in (Rosenberg's, 1883) Rosenberg's, 1883 lexicon. This is admittedly a source of error, as the general mantal-to-hectare relation may differ from the specific relation for a manor. There are seven parishes with both *fideikommiss* and data on mantal and hectares, despite missing data on the *fideikommiss*. When these are compared, the result is that the correlation is good in some cases, while in others the parish-mantal-hectare level is either lower or higher than the fideikommiss correlation. Overall, however, these deviations should reasonably cancel each other out. Furthermore, the effect on the total data is probably minimal, since almost all of the 54 fideikommiss

Table 2. The different measures on land size for the *fideikommiss*, c. 1700–1975.

	Mantal	Tax value	Total hectares	Hectares arable land	Source
1700–1850	X				Probate inventories, wills
1883	X	X			Lexicon (Rosenberg 1882–83)
1885	X	X			Public Statistics (BiSOS H 1881-85)
1910	X	X			Board of Fideikommiss
1940	X	X	x	X	Literature (Åkerhielm 1930 and others)
1975		X	x	X	Literature (Segerstråle 1975)

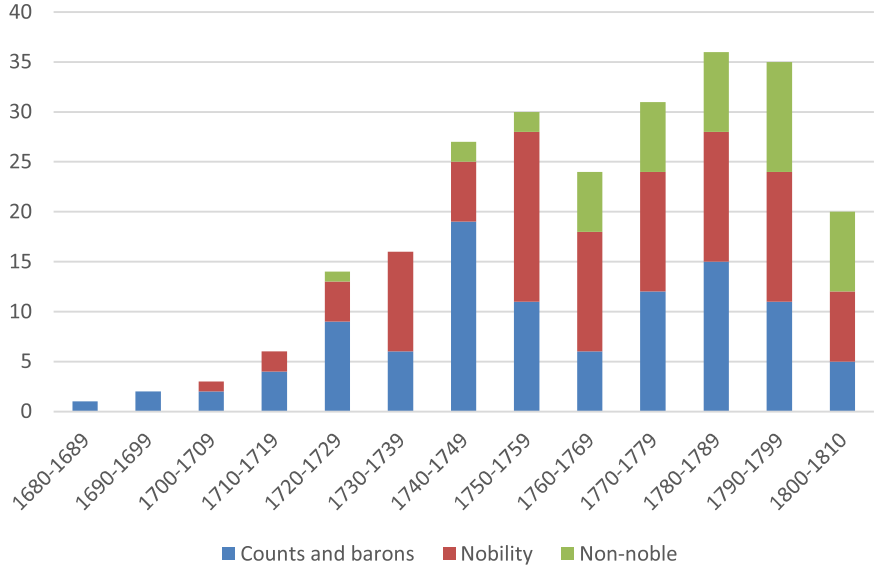
were smaller than the average *fideikommiss* (around 17 mantal; see below), with most of them (36) falling between 0.13 and 5 mantal.

A central part of the study is to relate the landholdings of the fideikommiss to the total area of the kingdom and to manors in general. As of this writing, there are no comprehensive studies on the size of all manors in the eighteenth century. For 1750, there is an ongoing study based on noble estate inventories from the Göta Court of Appeal, which, for now, contains 500 inventories from 1736 to 1755, as well as a study of manors in Uppsala County in 1742 (Ulväng, 2013).

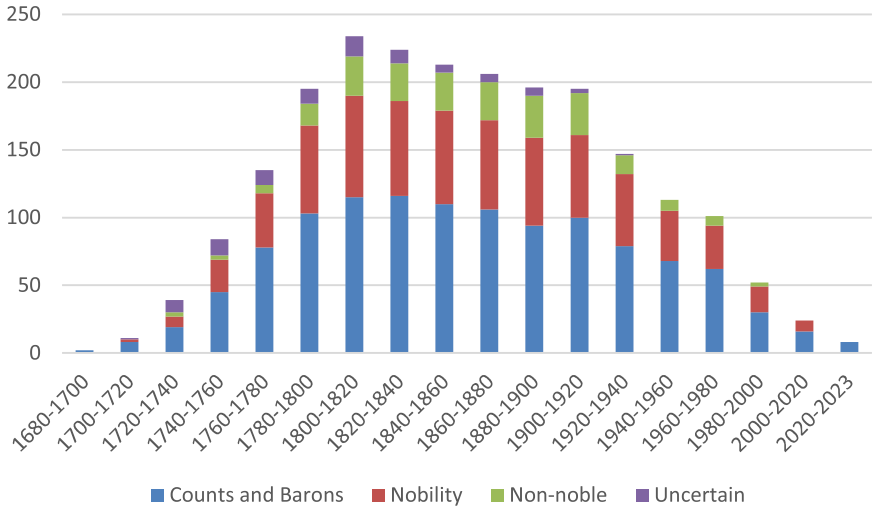
4. Fideikommiss in Sweden and Finland: when, where, and why?

So far, a total of 350 *fideikommiss* have been identified: 328 in Sweden and 22 in Finland. Of these, 40 are goods or money *fideikommiss*, which are not part of the study. Thus, 310 *fideikommiss* on land or urban property are available for study.

As mentioned above, *fideikommiss* were not permitted to be established on hereditary land. In practice, however, it could be used. The founder could purchase land of equivalent value, which could then be distributed among the heirs, or provide the heirs with financial compensation in advance equal to the value of the land. In this way, one third of the *fideikommiss* could be founded on inherited land. There is information on the purchases from 223 *fideikommiss*, of which 159 (71%) were founded on purchased land and 64 (29%) on inherited land. Of the 14 in Finland, 8 were bought and 6 inherited.



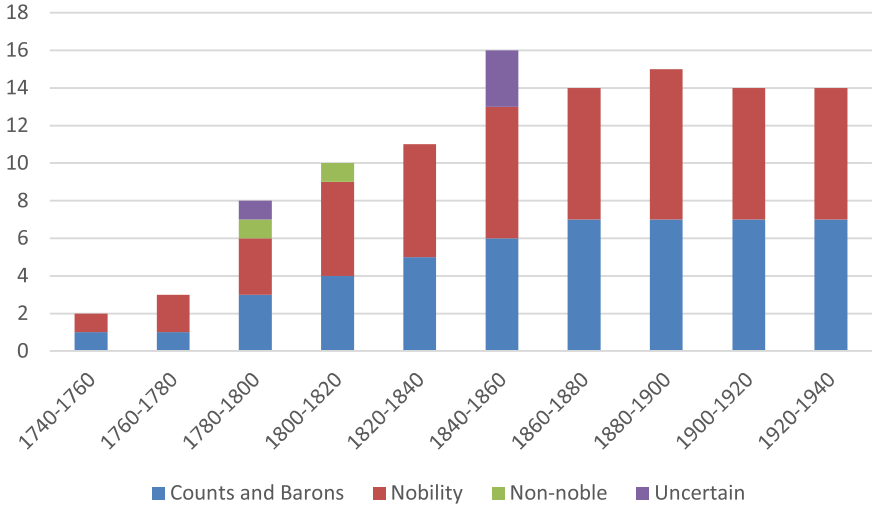
Graph 1. The establishment year of the *fideikommiss* on real estate from 1686 to 1810 in present-day Sweden, by social group.



Graph 2. The number of *fideikommiss* on real estate from 1686 to 2023 in present-day Sweden, by social group.

As shown in Graphs 1 and 2, the establishment of *fideikommiss* in Sweden (within its present borders) was rather slow in the first decades after 1686, although it accelerated after the 1720s. In 1810, there were more than 230 *fideikommiss* within the realm. The establishment of *fideikommiss* had already declined before the 1810 law. Between 1750 and 1800, an average of 30 *fideikommiss* were established per decade, compared with just over 21 between 1800 and 1810 (Graph 1). The dominant holders were from the higher nobility (counts and barons), followed by untitled noble families (lower nobility). At the end of the eighteenth century, some non-noble families established *fideikommiss*. The parallels with Denmark are clear: the number of entails increased rapidly between 1750 and 1799 (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, p. 120).

Finland, the eastern part of the Kingdom of Sweden until 1809 and subject to Russia until 1917, was characterised by vast forests and rather scattered estates. The exception was the southern plains, where the nobility was stronger and the estates larger (Snellman, 2016, pp. 127-136 Until 1809,



Graph 3. The number of entailed properties on real estate in present-day Finland, 1740–1930, by social group.

many of these were owned by noble families who preferred to live in the Swedish part of the kingdom (Snellman, 2016, p. 127). Few *fideikommiss* were established during the Swedish period, amounting to only a handful. When Finland became part of the Russian Empire, the Swedish legal system was largely retained; the noble families kept many of their privileges, including the sole right to own tax-exempt land and to establish *fideikommiss* (Graph 3). Another handful of *fideikommiss* were established in the nineteenth century, only to be abolished in 1930. Counts and barons were less likely to hold *fideikommiss*, as the Finnish nobility as a whole consisted mainly of lower noble families (Snellman, 2016, pp. 126-127)).

How can this increase in the number of *fideikommiss* from the 1720s to 1810 be explained, extending for a few decades later in Finland? Perhaps they were influenced by what happened in Denmark, for example, although there is no evidence of that yet. The perceived threat to the nobility as landowners cannot be ignored when they were forced to give up privileges in 1723 and 1789, and the competition for land in general from non-noble groups, including freeholders. One argument for this is that the nobility was not very keen on setting up *fideikommiss* between 1686 and approximately 1730. It was certainly a period of uncertainty, with sometimes interminable negotiations between the state and the nobility over land ownership after the confiscation process in 1680, when the Crown withdrew most of the donations made before 1680. A high death rate from the wars was also common during this time, which kept the number of heirs down and, therefore, reduced competition for land. Many noble families were, in fact, able to expand their possessions (Olsson, 2002, pp. 65–67; Ulväng, 2008, pp. 52–57). The need for founded *fideikommiss* was probably low, as there were manors for most children.

The situation changed in the middle of the century. The economy strengthened and a non-noble class emerged, competing not only for land but also for civil and military occupations. As mentioned above, this might have strengthened the need for a manifestation of a noble unilinear kinship line (Planck, 2024, p. 14).

In other words, the establishment of *fideikommiss* was a way of securing land for some families for generations to come, which also had a symbolic importance. As mentioned above, newly ennobled counts and barons were the most common founders (Dackling et al., 2025, p. 17–20). They probably became the dominant holders because they were large landowners and could set some of their land aside as *fideikommiss*, while still having enough land or money to transfer to their heirs. In 1800, a high noble holder generally owned about three additional manors. Meanwhile, a noble holder had one, and a non-noble typically had none (see Table 1). Based on data from 500 probate inventories in the Göta Court of Appeal from 1736 to 1755, most noble families owned just one manor or were part-owners together with siblings or cousins, despite having no possibility to found *fideikommiss*. For that reason, the funding of *fideikommiss* was not widely spread. Of the approximately 260 higher noble families in the mid-1700s, only 44 were holders of *fideikommiss* (17%), and in the lower nobility, just 41 of 1,200 (3.4%) (number of noble families calculated from Fahlbeck, 1898) were holders.

The low proportion of *fideikommiss* in Finland may have been due to the fact that many of the wealthiest noble families did not reside there. There was, however, also less competition for land. It was possible to increase the amount of agricultural land through land reclamation, and the nobility

Table 3. The number of manors in the entails and manors owned besides the fideikommiss, by social group, 1800–1820.

	Manors in the *fideikommiss*					
Social group	One	Two	Three or more	Total	Mean	Manors owned beside the *fideikommiss*, mean
Counts and Barons	64	24	26	114	1.7	2.7
Nobility	58	11	7	76	1.5	0.9
Non-nobles	24	4	1	29	1.2	0.3
Total	146	39	34	219	1.5	1.5
Per cent	67%	18%	15%	100%		

Source: Database on Swedish Manors, www.svenskaherrgardar.se

Table 4. Moved entails in Sweden and Finland from 1740 to 1940.

	1740–1760	1760–1780	1780–1800	1800–1820	1820–1840	1840–1860	1860–1880	1880–1900	1900–1920	1920–1940	Total
Entails, total	85	136	196	235	225	213	206	196	195	147	
Moved entails	4	8	3	8	13	5	3	4	5	1	54
To worse farmland		1		1	2						3
To better farmland	1	6	1	3	6	1		1	1		20
Further away from town		4		1	2						7
Closer to town	1	2			2		1	1	2		9
From town property	1		1	1							3
To the town property							1	2	2	1	6
From iron work		1		1	1			1			4
From Finland/ Pomerania		1	1		1						3

commonly purchased freehold farms, converting them into manors (Nikander & Jutikkala, 1939–1942). Some of the *fideikommiss*, such as Steninge in Sagu and Wik in Kimito, were moved to the Swedish mainland.

Around 1820, the number of *fideikommiss* was at its highest. They then began to decline, sometimes by being definitively dissolved or by being transformed into monetary *fideikommiss*. Until about 1900, this process was relatively slow, but it then accelerated. Between 1900 and 1960, nearly 100 *fideikommiss* were either dissolved or transferred. When the 1964 legislation came into force to abolish the *fideikommiss* once and for all, more than half of all *fideikommiss* had already been dissolved. Before entering into a discussion about this, the size and geography of the *fideikommiss* must first be analysed.

5. Size and geography, circa 1700–1975

As mentioned above, most *fideikommiss* was established in the southern and southeastern regions of the Swedish realm. In this section, I will focus on their location and size relative to the manors as a whole, using data from probate inventories, geographical lexicons, and public statistics.

Most *fideikommiss* were founded on a manor and its associated estate, which, in turn, could consist of smaller, inferior manors.

In total, the 310 *fideikommiss* consisted of 544 properties. Of these, 495 were manors with associated estates: seven were ordinary farmsteads, and 42 were town estates. Of the 310 *fideikommiss*, 28 are considered uncertain. They are mentioned in wills and legal proceedings, but it is unclear whether they were actually inherited, as most appear to have been dissolved at an early stage. A further 12 are borderline cases. Five of these were *kondominat* and seven were two-stage *fideikommiss* established around 1900. None were ever officially recognised as *fideikommiss,* and all somehow vanished after a few decades. In total, there are 270 *fideikommiss* in the study.

Between 1800 and 1820, most *fideikommiss* – 67 per cent – consisted of only one manor, and only 15 per cent of them had three or more manors (Table 1). The largest of these, the Lövsta ironworks, owned by Baron de Geer, had six manors, two palaces in Stockholm, and a house in Uppsala, in addition to 500 farmsteads on the estate. As mentioned above, a holder could also own manors in addition to *fideikommiss* (Table 3).

The *fideikommiss* could be transferred, for example, from a town property to a manor or from one production area to another. This was particularly the case during the founding period in the mid-eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century after the 1810 legislation

Table 5. Total size of the *fideikommiss* in Sweden in mantal, hectares, and tax value compared to the size of all manorial land and the land in the kingdom, 1700–1975.

	Entails				All manors, including Entails		Kingdom			
	Mantal	Mantal rents	Hectares (calculate, in 1000's)	Tax-value	Mantal/Tax value	Entails share %	Mantal	Entails share %	Tax-value	Entails share %
1700 (N:12)	177	0	34,315							
1750 (N:120)	2,320	139	469,993		21,816 (mtl)	11	66,381	3.5		
1800 (N:220)	3,646	176	774,570							
1850 (N:200)	3,381	159	721,888				59,712	5.6		
1885 (N:189)	3,110		662,680	108,185,807	511,510,765 (tax)	21	66,639	4.6	1,910,655,250	5.6
1910 (N:170)	2,922		597,997	113,792,400						
1940 (N:121)	2,196		427,787	181,697,839	1,084,422,784 (tax)	17				
1975 (N:88)			310,177	913,673,985						

All manors' mantal (noble tax-exempt land) in 1750; see Carlsson, 1949, p. 109, all manors' tax value in 1885 in Rosenberg, 1883, and for around 1940; Åkerhielm, 1930 and others. The kingdom's total mantal for 1750 and 1845 in Carlsson, 1949, p. 109 and p. 169, and the mantal and tax value in 1885 in BiSOS H 1881–1885.

Table 6. The mean size of the *fideikommiss* in mantal, hectares, and tax value compared to the mean size of manors in general from 1700 to 1975.

Year	Entails, mean size				Manors in general (except entails), size						
	N	Mantal	Hectares	Tax-value	N	Mantal		Hectares		Tax-value	
						Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
1700	12	14.7	2,860								
1750	120	19.3	3,917		598*	7.9	4.4				
					175**	5.7	4.1				
1800	220	16.6	3,521								
1850	200	16.9	3,609								
1885	189	16.5	3,506	572,412	2,100	5.5	3.5			191,149	111,950
1910	170	17.2	3,518	669,367							
1940	121	18.1	3,535	1,501,635	2,100			1,071	409	433,974	237,950
1975	88		3,525	10,382,658							

* = All manors mentioned in all noble probate inventories from all provinces in southern Sweden from 1736 to 1755. ** = All manors in Uppsala province in the Crown's register (*Jordebok*) from 1742. The number of manors and their size in 1885 from Rosenberg (1883) and from around 1940, Åkerhielm (1930) and others. All data are collected and presented at www.svenskaherrgardar.se

abolished the possibility of establishing a *fideikommiss* (Table 4). The moves in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries appear to have been driven primarily by the desire to establish *fideikommiss* in areas with better farmland and to relocate them out of forested areas, town properties, ironworks, and Finland. High-quality farmland was likely viewed as a sound and secure investment for the fideikommiss at a time of high grain demand. Farming also required less investment and knowledge than iron production, which is probably why the ironworks were abandoned. At the end of the nineteenth century, the *fideikommiss* took a different direction likely due to a decline in agricultural prices and the process of urbanisation. When grain prices fell, several *fideikommiss* were transferred to town properties.

The analysis starts with the size of the *fideikommiss*, with the aim of getting a grasp of how much land was subject to the *fideikommiss* in the kingdom as a whole, and how the *fideikommiss* were distributed geographically and between the high nobility (counts and barons), nobility, and non-noble families. The study covers eight periods: 1700 (with data from the period 1686–1725), 1750 (1725–1775), 1800 (1775–1825), 1850 (1825–1875), 1885, 1910, 1940 (1930–1950) and 1975. These offer excellent opportunities to observe changes over time and across geography. As can be seen, the four older records and the 1930 cover span different periods of time because I have used material from different years within each period. For the older periods, the material consists mainly of probate inventories and wills, while the period around 1940 is characterised by geographical works. The relatively wide intervals around each year also mean that the number of *fideikommiss* in each period does not exactly match the numbers given for the previously used periods. The period 1740–1760 above had 85 *fideikommisses*, while the period 1750 (1725–1775) had 120.

A closer look at the total area of the *fideikommiss* in mantal, hectares, and tax value from 1700 to 1975 reveals some interesting results (Table 5). When the number of *fideikommiss* was at its highest in the early 1800s, they covered a total of 3,646 mantal, or 774,570 hectares of land, which was about five per cent of the total area of the kingdom in mantal. In 1885, they comprised 3,110 mantal, or nearly 663,000 hectares and 4.6 per cent of the land, and 21 per cent of all manorial land in the kingdom. For the *fideikommiss* in Finland, there is not yet enough information to make an estimate of their share of the land; it was undoubtedly lower, at probably just one or two per cent.

This does not seem a significant amount compared to Denmark, for example, where about 25 per cent of the land was *fideikommiss*, although the elite owned about 80 per cent of the land (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, p. 126). However, regional differences were considerable. In the old feudal provinces of the south, where the nobility owned more than half of the land, the *fideikommiss*

Table 7. The number of entails between their mean and median size in hectares and tax value by production area, 1700–1975.

Area	Entails (N)	Hectares (calculated)			Tax-value (SEK, current)	
		Total	Mean/Entail	Median/Entail	Mean/Entail	Median/Entail
Area 1 och 2 (South Sweden southern plains). Tax-exempt noble land: around 50%.						
1700	1	613	613	613		
1750	17	79,049	4,650	3,085		
1800	23	108,030	4,698	3,061		
1850	24	112,522	4,688	2,710		
1885	23	114,710	4,987	3,372	1,534,730	1,442,100
1910	22	112,221	5,101	3,106	1,783,595	1,590,500
1940	19	85,679	4,509	3,595	3,247,063	3,869,400
1975	17	71,307	4,195	3,315	20,876,632	20,737,000
Area 5 (South Sweden woodland). Tax-exempt noble land: around 20–30%.						
1700	2	19,330	9,665	8,665		
1750	32	126,618	3,957	3,795		
1800	48	185,309	3,861	2,087		
1850	41	160,181	3,907	2,184		
1885	38	149,050	3,922	1,918	583,191	214,350
1910	35	147,601	4,217	2,250	723,663	263,000
1940	27	104,630	3,875	2,100	1,590,380	737,900
1975	18	67,156	3,731	2,096	11,353,575	3,605,500
Area 3 (South Sweden northern plains). Tax-exempt noble land: around 30–40%.						
1700						
1750	8	25,655	3207	1696		
1800	24	48,168	2007	677		
1850	23	46,602	2026	671		
1885	20	35,265	1763	763	283355	165900
1910	19	33,176	1746	660	307426	179300
1940	11	43,196	3927	1725	1048055	604900
1975	8	18,896	2362	1571	4487863	3748600
Area 4 (Central Sweden plains and woodland). Tax-exempt noble land: around 50–60%.						
1700	8	12,063	1508	1285		
1750	58	208,339	3592	1755		
1800	116	369,695	3187	1520		
1850	107	335,777	3138	1447		
1885	102	303,554	2976	1281	396803	231000
1910	92	283,092	3077	1518	448599	272350
1940	63	177,782	2822	1679	985486	637100
1975	40	136,718	3418	1944	7312600	4431500
Area 6, 7 and 8 (Central and North Sweden woodland). Tax-exempt noble land: around 10%.						
1700	1	2,310	2310	2310		
1750	5	30,331	6066	2455		
1800	9	63,368	7041	2310		
1850	9	66,807	7423	2936		
1885	7	60,001	8572	2889	654967	199667
1910	3	21,907	10954	2889	704300	185500
1940	1	16,500	16500	16500	3449200	3449200
1975	1	16,100	16100	16100	26000000	26000000

controlled between seven and 14 per cent of the land in the Stockholm region (Area 4) and 10 per cent in the province of Skåne (Areas 1 and 2) (BiSOS H, 1881-1885, pp. 67–72).

What is even more striking is the size of the *fideikommiss* compared to the manors in general. As mentioned above, a *fideikommiss* generally consisted of a main manor and sometimes some subordinate manors, with an estate of considerable size. The average size of a *fideikommiss* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was three times that of an ordinary manor, with around 17 mantal and 3,500 hectares of land, compared to around six mantal and 1,000 hectares of land (mean). However, most were even smaller, with around four mantal and 400 hectares (median). The difference in tax values was even greater, as most *fideikommiss* were located in the areas with the best farmland. In 1885, 77 per cent of all *fideikommiss* were located in production Areas 1, 2, 3, and 4, compared to 64 per cent of all manors (Table 6). The Finnish *fideikommiss* were all situated in the south, where the best arable land was located, although they were largely forested, unlike the Swedish ones. In the

1920s, they were even larger than those in Sweden, with a mean of 4,000 hectares and a median of 2,000 hectares (Nikander & Jutikkala, 1939–1942).

This brings us to the question of regional differences in number and size over time. Based on the production areas, I will discuss the different ways that the *fideikommiss* were dissolved (Table 7). In the four cases where a *fideikommiss* held manors and estates in two production areas, I have placed the *fideikommiss* in the production area where it owned the most land.

Starting with the two southern areas, 1 and 2, which had the kingdom's most fertile farmland, the nobility owned around 50 per cent of the land. This area was, by far, the strongest seat of the nobility in the past and remains so today. The number of *fideikommiss* was not huge – just over 20 in the nineteenth century – but they were of considerable size, with a mean and median size of almost 5,000 hectares and around 3,000 hectares, respectively. The largest were Vanås (22,000 hectares) and Högestad (17,000 hectares). The average tax value was 1.5 million SEK in 1885 (compared with 280,000–650,000 SEK in the other areas) and 20 million SEK in 1975 (compared with 4.5–11.3 million SEK, except for one area). The excellent farmland, the size of the manors, and the optimised land consolidation are probably the main reasons why the number of *fideikommiss* has remained fairly stable over the years, with only a few dissolutions after 1910. As with manors in this area, the owners generally maximised their profits through strong control over tenants, enclosures, demesne farming, early mechanisation, and proximity to the continental market (Olsson, 2002, pp. 347–353). This strength was probably the reason why the *fideikommiss* was able to withstand the decline in profits from the 1880s onwards, which hit many manors hard. Three of the largest *fideikommiss* – Vanås, Högestad and Skabersjö – sold off land but survived.[2] In 1975, there were still 17 *fideikommiss* in the area, and it remains home to most of the remaining *fideikommiss*.

Southern Woodland Area 5, located just north of Areas 1 and 2, had an almost opposite starting point, as it was largely situated in a highland area characterised by a harsher climate and covered by forests and small lakes. With the exception of some more fertile parishes on the east coast, most of the arable land was scattered. Nevertheless, the nobility was strong, as this was the old borderland between Sweden and Denmark before 1645, and the area contained more than 700 manors, most of which were rather small. The economy was based on cattle breeding and the production of iron, glass and timber, the latter becoming increasingly important with the introduction of steam saws and improved communications. The small and scattered nature of the manors made them difficult to rationalise; as early as the 1700s, freeholders began to buy manors and subdivide them into farms. Many manors were bought by the owner of a neighbouring manor and merged (Ulväng, 2019, pp. 112–114). The *fideikommiss* in Area 5 were generally smaller than those in Areas 1 and 2, with a mean size of about 4,000 and a median size of about 2,000, but with very limited arable land. Tax values were low, one-third (mean) and one-seventh (median) of those in Areas 1 and 2. Already in the early 1800s, *fideikommiss* were being dissolved or moved; one-fifth of all moved *fideikommiss* left Area 5 for a province with better farmland. Of the 48 *fideikommiss* in 1800, 35 still existed in 1910. The agricultural crises of the 1880s appear to have had little impact, as they were less dependent on cereal production and thrived as producers of butter and timber.

Fertile plains dominated Area 3, and in the 1800s, it was a major exporter of cereals to the international market, which was made possible by early agrarian reforms and the proximity of Gothenburg on the west coast. As with Area 5, it was generally dominated by many smaller manors with scattered estates that were difficult to rationalise. The area experienced rapid proliferation of *fideikommiss*, increasing from eight in 1750 to 24 in 1800, with most lasting throughout the century. They were small in size, around 2,000 hectares (average) and only 700 hectares (median). During the 1800s, the area was abandoned by the nobility and successful freeholders bought and divided the manors. The small size of the *fideikommiss* likely contributed to its rapid dissolution after 1910, leaving only the larger ones.

[2]Vanås went from 22,000 to 8,000 hectares, Högestad from 17,000 till 13,000, and Skabersjö from 7,700 to 4,000.

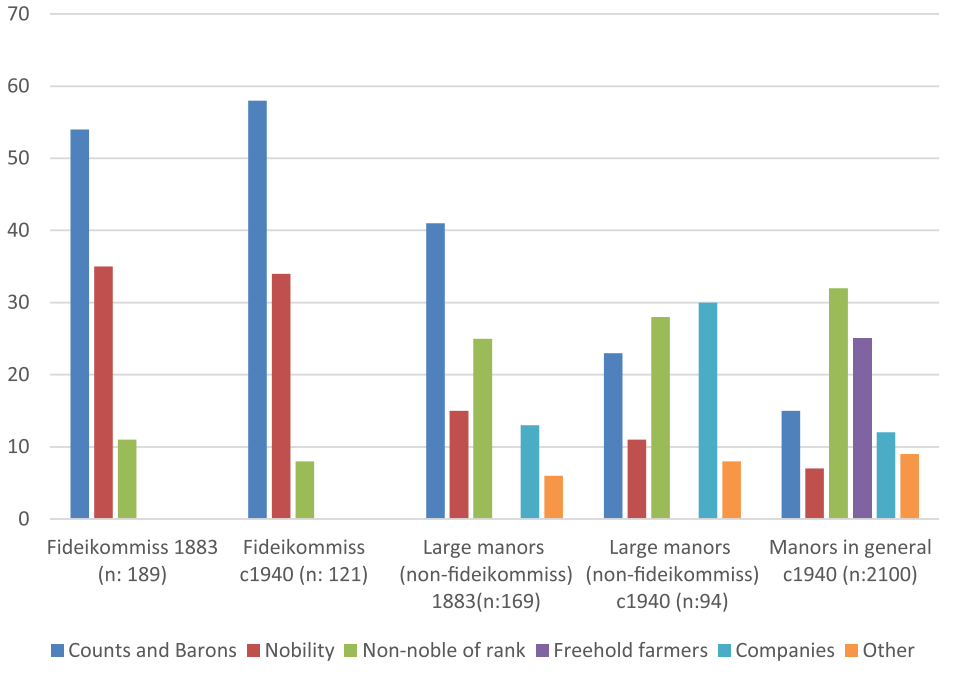
Area 4, the Stockholm area, had fertile plains in the centre and south, and vast forests in the north, with successful iron production. Rye and wheat were grown on the plains and sold to the ironworks and to Stockholm, in a seemingly old-fashioned two-field system adapted to the dry early summers. Noble families owned 50–60 per cent of the land, and in some parishes up to 90 per cent. It is not surprising, then, that the area was home to the largest number of *fideikommiss*, with a very early and rapid period of creation, from eight in 1700–116 in 1800. However, most of the *fideikommiss* were quite small, with a mean of 3,000 hectares and a median of 1,500 hectares. Here were some of the largest *fideikommiss*, such as the Lövsta ironworks, which spans 40,000 hectares, as well as very small ones with less than 100 hectares, many of which were established by less wealthy townspeople. Several agricultural crises hit the area in the 1800s, and in the second half of the century, iron production was reorganised, with the older ironworks in the interior being outcompeted by modern steelworks established by the railways. The 116 *fideikommiss* in 1800 were reduced to just 63 in 1940, and it was generally the smaller ones that disappeared. However, some of the largest were also dismantled, including the Lövsta ironworks, which decreased in size from 40,000 hectares to just 2,500 hectares in the 1910s. The profit from the sale was turned into a monetary *fideikommiss*.

Areas 6, 7, and 8 in the northern forest area, and one in central Sweden, had very few *fideikommissens*, the most being nine. They were either ironworks with considerable large estates of 10,000 hectares of land, or very small farms founded by town burghers on the outskirts of towns. Some of the ironworks *fideikommiss* were transferred to other manors as early as the 1700s, and others followed in the second half of the 1800s when the crisis hit.

Finally, Finland is more difficult to analyse due to the lack of information on both mantal and hectares, as well as tax value. As mentioned above, the average size in the 1920s was approximately 4,000 hectares, and the median size was around 2,000 hectares. It is not clear whether they were reduced by the land reforms of 1918 and 1922. They were then all abolished in 1930, but remained in the families and later lost even more land during the 1945 land reform.

In summary, it is evident that the dissolution of the *fideikommiss* began before the mid-1800s and accelerated during the early decades of the twentieth century. Compared to Denmark, the dissolution process was later here. Unlike Denmark, where liberal legislation favoured freehold farmers in purchasing manorial land, the dissolution here was primarily driven by the economic crises that severely impacted both agriculture and the iron industry in the second half of the nineteenth century (Porskorg Rasmussen, 2019, pp. 121–135). Generally, the smaller *fideikommiss* and those in production Areas 4, 5, and 6 were among the first to vanish, while those in production Areas 1, 2, and 3, with more fertile land, persisted longer. Memoirs and historical records confirm that the second half of the 1800s was a challenging period for many *fideikommiss* in the Stockholm area (production Area 4). The manors were leased out, and the main buildings were repurposed as grain stores or converted into dwellings for workers (Fröberg, 1945, pp. 8–9; Nisbeth, 2011, p. 257; Ulväng, 2008, p. 384, 425, 434).

Was this the result of a poorly managed *fideikommiss*? It is difficult to say, but judging from the works on specific *fideikommiss*, most seem to have developed in a similar way to other manors at the time (Gary & Olsson, 2017, pp 156–158; 2011 ; Ulväng, 2008 , pp. 384; 424–425; 430–434). Government surveys from the early 1900s also confirm that most *fideikommiss* were well managed (Bergman & Dackling, 2023, pp. 107–108). The higher nobility was often perceived as conservative and reactionary, but generally managed their estates as efficiently as possible, as they were their primary source of income (Jonsson, 1997, pp. 676–680) 1980). This means that the statement that the *fideikommiss* could not be developed due to the restrictions on mortgaging their land must be questioned (see discussion in Erichsen & Tamm, 2014, pp. 273–281; Winberg, 1985, pp. 48–52). As late as 1900, the majority of credit in Sweden was still private and based on promissory notes (Lindgren, 2022, pp. 34–35). The removal of a *fideikommiss* from the manor did not necessarily mean the end of the *fideikommiss* itself. Some of them were turned into a monetary *fideikommiss* or moved to a town property.



Graph 4. Owners of the *fideikommiss*, the largest non-*fideikommiss* manors and manors in general in Sweden, by social group in 1883 and c. 1940.

6. The fideikommiss as saviour of the nobility as a landowner

The high nobility dominated completely as owners of *fideikommiss,* and they were considerably larger than the manors in general and also located in areas with the best arable land.

There can be no doubt that the *fideikommiss* played a major role in preserving the high nobility as landowners. As already mentioned, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an increasing number of manors were sold to non-noble families, including both bourgeois and freeholders. Many of the large manors held by noble families in the eighteenth century were divided during succession, and the farms were gradually sold to outsiders. In the second half of the nineteenth century, ironworks were often taken over by joint-stock companies, a form of ownership made possible by the Limited Liability Companies Act of 1848 (Ulväng, 2019, p. 107).

I have chosen here to compare the *fideikommiss* with the absolute largest manors that were not *fideikommiss* in each production area (Graph 4). Largest, in this context, refers to manors with an assessed value equal to or above the mean *fideikommiss* tax value for each production area. For Areas 1 and 2, this is for 1883: 1,534,730 SEK, and for 1940: 3,247,063 SEK, and so on (Table 7). This means, of course, that these manors were larger than the average *fideikommiss*, which is not a disadvantage in this analysis; however, changes in the number and ownership of these much larger manors become an even clearer indicator of the changes.

Even in 1883, the high nobility (counts and barons) and nobility were the dominant owners of the largest manors, owning 50 per cent or more. The nobility owned 90 per cent or more of the *fideikommiss* (Graph 3).

By 1940, the situation had undergone a complete transformation. Firstly, the number of large manors had fallen sharply overall from 169 to 94 through continued subdivision, while the *fideikommiss* began to be dismantled, leading to land sales. Secondly, the nobility was in the minority as owners. Only just over 30 per cent of the largest manors had noble owners, and among all manors, they owned only just over 20 per cent.

The *fideikommiss*, however, was still occupied by the high nobility and nobility, whose share had even increased to more than 90 per cent, due to the dismantling of many of the small, non-noble *fideikommiss* in Areas 3 and 4. In other words, there is no doubt that the *fideikommiss* institution is the salvation of the nobility as landowners. Without it, these larger estates would probably have met the same fate as the others, i.e. they would have been divided up in succession and/or acquired by companies.

7. Conclusion

This article examines the institution of the *fideikommiss* in Sweden (including Finland) from 1686 to 1975, with the aim to map when they were established and by whom, and their number, size, and geography. Previous studies, with a few exceptions, have primarily focused on the institution from a legal or political perspective, while the number and extent of land they controlled have been of lesser interest, primarily due to a lack of sources. This case study is based on Swedish public statistics available from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, as well as wills and probate inventories. Together, this has made it possible not only to analyse the number of entailed estates over time and their share of the kingdom's land, but also the geographical variations and the differences between holders from the high nobility, the nobility and the non-nobles.

The right to set up *fideikommiss* was not a privilege of the nobility. Still, the nobility dominated as founders and holders, and certainly the higher nobility – counts and barons – as they were generally the wealthiest and the main owners of the largest estates. By law, a *fideikommiss* could not be established on inherited land; however, this limitation was easily overcome by either purchasing additional land and making it inheritable or by paying future heirs in advance. It was not until the 1730s that the *fideikommiss* gained popularity among the nobility, who had previously been virtually unchallenged as landowners. Two important changes occurred at this time: the end of the war and a subsequent recovery, accompanied by an increase in the number of heirs. Additionally, in 1723, the right of non-nobles of rank to purchase manors was established.

Between about 1720 and 1810, more than 350 *fideikommiss* were established in Sweden and its eastern part, Finland. Nearly all of them were set up in old feudal regions, where the nobility were powerful landowners holding the best farmland, or in some forested areas where they owned ironworks. Nearly 20 per cent of the *fideikommiss* were transferred to manors in areas with better soil or from town property to a manor. The fideikommiss were in general three to four times larger than the average manor, comprising around 3,500 hectares of land. At most, the *fideikommiss* covered 20 per cent of all manorial land and five per cent of the kingdom's total area. This is comparable to Germany, which had seven per cent of its land in *fideikommiss* by 1900. Similarly, the process closely resembles that of Denmark, which also experienced rapid growth of *fideikommiss* in the second half of the eighteenth century, and where, in total, about 25 per cent of the manorial land was owned.

As in Denmark, the process of dissolution was a long one, beginning even before the legislation of 1810, when the right to establish new *fideikommiss* was abolished. Initially, only a minority of elite families could establish a *fideikommiss* because they had to purchase additional land. With increasing competition for land, especially after 1789, when more liberal legislation came into force, allowing all citizens, including freeholders, to buy noble tax-free land, fewer families were able to turn their estates into *fideikommiss*. The establishment of *fideikommiss* was already in decline before 1810, particularly in high noble families. A side effect of the competition for land, which had not been considered here, is that it probably made it more difficult to buy additional manors to compensate the siblings of the future holder, which in turn may have reduced the desire to establish a *fideikommiss*.

The extent to which there was a desire for justice could not be investigated. A number of *fideikommiss* were dissolved at a very early stage, sometimes after only a few years or after the first or second generation, due to legal disputes between the heirs. Of course, the liberal ideas of democracy

and property rights that were being disseminated may have strengthened the idea of justice and equality and limited the desire to turn property into a *fideikommiss* or to dissolve it.

The process of dismantling accelerated in the second half of the nineteenth century, largely due to the worsening economic conditions in both agriculture and iron production, a trend that intensified as profitability declined. Between 1900 and 1960, approximately 100 *fideikommiss* were dissolved, accounting for almost half of the total in 1850. It was mainly the small *fideikommiss*, owned by the lower nobility and non-nobles and located in the areas with the worst economic conditions, that disappeared.

The high nobility, who were the main owners of the *fideikommiss* in the areas with the best arable land, were able to keep their *fideikommiss* and thus their social position. Other large estates owned by the higher nobility were hit hard by the economic downturn and either passed into the hands of non-nobles or companies, who often broke them up. In contrast to the countries in eastern Europe, Denmark and Finland (Thompson, 1993), Sweden did not undergo land reforms due to rapid industrialisation, which eased the pressure on land. It was not until 1964 that a law was passed to abolish the *fideikommiss*, providing for the gradual dismantling of the 100 remaining *fideikommiss* to preserve the heritage.

This study raises several new questions about the possibilities and strategies of the holders. Is the degree of injustice between siblings that the *fideikommiss* is supposed to represent overestimated? As shown above, there is evidence that holders owned additional manors. Perhaps the *fideikommiss* acted as an incubator, as the holder did not have to buy out siblings and could use the income to buy manors to compensate the other children. Another question concerns the administration of the *fideikommiss*. Was the restriction on borrowing a problem, or was it perhaps outweighed by the fact that the holders were less indebted? And to what extent was the rounding of estates an obstacle to the rationalisation of agricultural land, as Priest has argued for the situation in the U.S.A. (Priest, 2015, p. 281)? Buying and exchanging land appears to have been quite common, judging from the many cases mentioned in the courts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Jan Wallander's, Tom Hedelius's, and Tore Browaldh's foundation: [grant number P20-0082].

References

Sources
Riksarkivet (The Swedish National Archives)
Statsdepartementens gemensamma organ, Fideikommissnämnden
Nedre justitierevisionen. Högsta domstolen

Svea hovrätt
E IX, Adliga bouppteckningar

Göta hovrätt
E XIb, Adliga bouppteckningar

Häradsrätter
F I and F II, bouppteckningar

Digital sources
Database on Swedish Manors: www.svenskaherrgardar.se
Printed sources

Bidrag till Sveriges Officiella Statistik (BiSOS) ser. H, 1871–1875.
Bidrag till Sveriges Officiella Statistik (BiSOS) ser. H 1881–1885.

Literature

Åkerhielm, E. (1930). *Svenska gods och gårdar. Illustrerade herrgårdsskildringar*. Stockholm: Tullberg.
Asch, R. G. (2003). *Nobilities in Transition 1550–1700. Courtiers and Rebels in Britain and Europe*. Arnold.
Bedoire, F. (2000). "Til sin Families Heder och Conservation" eller "then flytande nyttan".. In Johansson B & Lovén C (Eds.), *Byggnader och betydelser. En antologi om arkitektur*. Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag.
Bengtsson, E., Missiaia, A., Olsson, M., & Svensson, P. (2019). Aristocratic Wealth and Inequality in a Changing Society: Sweden, 1750–1900. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, *44*(1), 27–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2018.1480538
Bergman, M., & Dackling, M. (2023). Between deplorable anachronism and valuable heritage. The persistence of the Swedish fideikommiss institution, 1810–1964. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, *49*(1), 92–113.
Carlsson, S. (1949). *Ståndspersoner och ståndssamhälle. Studier rörande det svenska ståndssamhällets upplösning,*. Lund: Gleerups.
Dackling, M., Planck, B., & Ulväng, G. (2025). Entailed Dynasties: The Establishment of fideikommiss in Sweden, 1686-1810. *Virtus*, *32*, 9–32.
Dewald, J. (1996). *The European nobility, 1400–1800*. Cambridge Univ. Press.
Elmroth, I. (2001). *Från överklass till medelklass: studier i den sociala dynamiken inom Sveriges adel 1600–1900*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.
Erichsen, J., & Tamm, D. (2014). *Grever, baroner og husmaend. Opgoret med de store danske godser 1919*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
Fahlbeck, P. (1898). *Sveriges adel. Statistisk undersökning öfver de å riddarhuset introducerade ätterna. D. 1 Ätternas demografi*. Lund: Gleerup.
Finch, J., & Dyrmann, K. (2019). The estate landscape in Northern Europe: An introduction. In: J. Finch, K. Dyrmann & M. Frausing, (Eds.) *Estate landscapes in Northern Europe*. Aarhus University Press.
Fröberg, E. (1945). *Hemma i Sörmland, ute i världen*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.
Gadd, C.-J. (2000). *Det svenska jordbrukets historia. Den agrara revolutionen, 1700-1870*. Natur & Kultur/LT.
Gary, K., & Olsson, M. (2017). Business as Usual: Nobility and Landed Estates in Sweden. *Economic and Business History*, *35*(1), 151–173.
Jägerskiöld, S. (1963). Farväl till fideikommissen? . *Fornvännen*, *58*, 65–89.
Jonsson, U. (1980). *Jordmagnater, landbönder och torpare i sydöstra Södermanland 1800-1880*. Stockholms universitet.
Jonsson, U (1997). Den jordägande aristokratin och moderniteten i Europa under 1800- och början av 1900-talet - en spänningsfylld och motsägelesefull relation. *Historisk tidskrift*, *4*, 655–684.
Landahl, S. (1911). *Sveriges ridderskaps och adelns riksdagsprotokoll från och med 1719*. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & söner.
Lindgren, H. (2022). 'Over-indebtedness' – or not? Household debt accumulation and risk exposure in nineteenth century Sweden. *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, *70*(1), 33–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2021.1879242
Lönnqvist, B (2018). Fideikommissen i Finland, uppgång och fall. *Saga och Sed 2018*, 41–71.
Lukowski, J. (2003). *The European nobility in the eighteenth century*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Magnusson, L. (1980). *Ty som ingenting angelägnare är än mina bönders conservation: godsekonomi i östra Mellansverige vid mitten av 1700-talet*. Uppsala universitet.
Magnusson, L. (1985). *Reduktionen under 1600-talet. Debatt och forskning*. Malmö: Liber förlag.
Magnusson, L. (2014). *Sveriges Ekonomiska Historia*.
Menning, D. (2019). Nobility, Peasentry and Estates in southwestern Germany from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. In Finch J, Dyrmann K, & Frausing M (Eds.), *Estate Landscapes in Northern Europe* (pp. 161–191). Aarhus University Press.
Morell, M (2001). *Det svenska jordbrukets historia. Jordbruket i industrisamhället*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur/LT.
Nikander, G., & Jutikkala, E. (1939–1942). *Säterier och storgårdar i Finland 1–2*. Helsingfors.
Nisbeth, Å (2011). *Engsö slott*. Stockholm: Atlantis.
Norrby, G. (2005). *Adel i förvandling. Adliga strategier och identiteter i 1800-talets borgerliga samhälle*. Uppsala universitet.
Olsson, M. (2002). *Storgodsdrift. Godsekonomi och arbetsorganisation i Skåne från dansk tid till mitten av 1800-talet*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
Planck, B. (2014). *Kärlekens språk. Adeln, kärlek och äktenskap 1750-1900*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.
Planck, B. (2024). 'Gudsfruktan, dygd och ära och ett anständigt lefverne och upförande" – adlig ideologi i svenska fideikommissbrev 1686—1810'. *RIG*, (1), 3–19.

Porskorg Rasmussen, C. (2018). Manors and states: The distribution and structure of private manors in early modern Scandinavia and their relation to state policies. *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, *66*(2), 201–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2018.1453373

Porskorg Rasmussen, C. (2019). Den lange lensafløsning. Lensafløsningens grundlag og praksis'. In Andersen B & Elkjær M (Eds.), *Herregårdshistorie* (Vol. 15, pp. 114–147). Aarhus: Gammel Estrup Danmarks Herregårdsmuseum.

Priest, C. (2015). The end of entail: Information, institutions, and slavery in the American revolutionary period. *Law and History Review*, *33*(2), 277–319. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248015000024

Rosenberg, C. M. (1883). *Geografiskt-statistiskt handlexikon öfver Sverige*. Stockholm: A V Carlsons förlag.

Scott, H. M., & Storrs, C. (1995). Introduction: The consolidation of noble power in Europe, c.1600–1800. In H. M. Scott (Ed.), *The European nobilities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Volume one*. Longman.

Segerstråle, N. (1979). *Svenska fideikommiss*. Stockholm: AWE/Geber.

Snellman, A (2016). The Economic and social transformation of the Finnish landed elite, 1800-2000. *Virtus*, *23*, 125–145.

Svenska Gods och Gårdar, Uddevalla, 1935–1947.

Sveriges Bebyggelse: Statistisk-topografisk beskrivning över Sveriges städer och landsbygd, Uddevalla, 1945–1966.

Thompson, F. M. L. (1963). *English landed society in the nineteenth century*. Routledge.

Thompson, S. (1993). Agrarian Reform in Eastern Europe following World War I: Motives and Outcomes. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, *75*(3), 840–844. https://doi.org/10.2307/1243605

Trolle Önnerfors, E. (2010). *Justitia et prudentia. Rättsbildning genom rättstillämpning - Svea hovrätt och testamentsmålen 1640–1690*. Lund: Institutet för rättshistorisk forskning.

Ulväng, G. (2008). *Herrgårdarnas historia. Liv, arbete och bebyggelse på uppländska herrgårdar*. Uppsala: Hallgren & Björklund.

Ulväng, G. (2013). Betydelsen av att äga en herrgård. Herrgårdar, ståndsgårdar och gods i Uppsala län under 1700- och 1800-talen. *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, *2*, 287–316.

Ulväng, G. (2019). The Swedish Manor 1750 to 1950. Decline or Continuity?. In Finch J, Dyrmann & K Frausing, M (Eds.), *Estate Landscapes in Northern Europe* (pp. 97–128). Aarhus University Press.

von Konow, J. (2005). *Sveriges adels historia*. Stockholm: Axel Abrahamssons förlag.

Winberg, C. (1975). *Folkökning och proletarisering. Kring den sociala strukturomvandlingen på Sveriges landsbygd under den agrara revolutionen*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.

Winberg, C. (1985). *Grenverket. Studier rörande jord, släktskapssystem och ståndsprivilegier*. Stockholm: Institutet för rättshistorisk forskning.

Zuijderduijn, J. (2012). Grave concerns entailment and intergenerational agency in Amsterdam (1600–1800). *The history of the family*, *16*(4), 343–353.