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Don't Throw Garbage-Throw Varpa: Traditional Games, Local Identity, and the Struggle against the "Sportification" Process on Gotland, 1920-1990

Gotland is in many ways a unique part of Sweden. It is the largest island in the Baltic Sea, situated between Sweden and the Baltic States. Gotland has belonged to Sweden since 1645, but the island has its own customs, dialect, flag, cultural identity, and sport culture. The people on Gotland want to see themselves primarily as Gotlanders, not Swedes.

Many traditional games in Sweden and other European countries have disappeared, but on Gotland traditional customs and games can still be found. The island is one of few so-called "survival areas" in Sweden, and the traditional Gotlandic game "Varpa" is one of the survivals for it has been played all over Gotland since the Middle Ages. During recent decades this and other traditional games have even experienced a renaissance, and they are today still a very vital expression of the Gotlanders' cultural identity. Varpa is a throwing game, very similar to horseshoes, in which both women and men compete. The Varpa is made of stone or metal and the objective of the game is to throw it to land as close as possible to a pin 20 meters away.

Since the late nineteenth-century emergence of modern sports in Sweden, Varpa's position on Gotland's sporting scene had been threatened, both by imported sports such as soccer and by the "sportification" process. Interestingly, however, the diffusion of traditional and modern sports has been a two-way process, for at the beginning of the twentieth century, Varpa spread to the Swedish mainland, where attempts were made to modernize it. This created a serious conflict between "traditionalists" on Gotland and "modernists" on the mainland as two cultures, with completely different conceptions of sport in general and Varpa in particular, clashed.

This paper examines this conflict with one central question in mind: what happens to a traditional game like Varpa when it is introduced to a new and more “sportificated” culture?



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