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**Item 5 of the Provisional agenda**

**REPORTS OF THE DIVISIONS**

**The future of the Swedish civil parishes and their names\***

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**\*Prepared by Staffan Nyström, The National Heritage Board, Sweden**

Report of Sweden  
(National standardization – Official treatment of names)  
Prepared by Staffan Nyström (The National Heritage Board)

### ***The future of the Swedish civil parishes and their names***

The Swedish parish has its roots in the Middle Ages. It was then that parishes grew up or were created as a stage in the Church's and emerging royal power's attempts to gain a firmer hold on the realm. Much later, through the municipal laws of 1862, a division into c. 2500 ecclesiastical and civil municipalities (*kommun*) came into being, based on the parish subdivision current at that time. In 1952, a major municipal reform resulted in a decrease in primary civil municipalities to just over 1000 in number, and successive municipal reforms during 1962-1974 resulted in a further drop to 278. By then, the parish's function as a civil municipality had definitely ceased. However, the ecclesiastical municipality (*församling*) still corresponded in principal to the parish, so it was still possible to approximately equate the older parish (*socken*) with the new parish (*församling*) nowadays sometimes differentiated as "civil" and "church" parishes, respectively (even the terms "older" and "newer" are applied).

#### **Church and State separate**

A few years ago, the Church and State in Sweden separated. One consequence of this divorce was that it fell to the Church to make decisions on parish division. More than 400 church parishes were affected at the turn of 2001/2002 by amalgamations affecting their content and boundaries. Of these 400 church parishes, a mere 100 or so survived intact, while c. 300 disappeared and with them an equal amount of parish names. This is most unfortunate and further amalgamations are planned. In some areas there is already now considerable lack of concordance between the older "civil" parish (*socken*) and the present church parish (*församling*). How should society in general deal with this? What role should the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ) take on?

#### **Place-name standardization**

Against this rationalization by the Church, as RAÄ views it, there is unfortunately not much one can do. Ideas, visions and measures concerning the future of the civil parish should be independent of the church parish. In connection with parish change however, we must strive to see that the Church observes what the Ancient Monuments and Finds Act calls the "code of good place-name practice", i.e. that both old and newly formed church parish names be treated as wisely as possible. The Church of Sweden is now a member of the National Place-Name Advisory Board, and together with RAÄ, the Institute for Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research (SOFI) and the National Land Survey (LMV) the Church has formed a working group therein which is at present involved in compiling guidelines for naming matters, directed at the Church dioceses and parish communities. RAÄ thereby tolerates that the Church is now responsible for delimiting the church parish (*församling*), but we monitor this work focussing on the civil parish (*socken*).

#### **Post-card campaign**

Sweden's genealogical and local history researchers demand in an ongoing, highly drastic, "post-card campaign", that "the older Swedish parish (*socken*) be reinstated as the basis for subdivision in population registration, property formation, and cartography, and that older parish (*socken*) boundaries be restored and made inviolable", and claim that even RAÄ supports these demands. This is a qualified truth. RAÄ has for example opposed that

population registration be taken over from the church parish by the municipality, but has never specifically demanded that it should instead be based on a system of resurrected parishes (*socken*). The campaign places the civil parish in the limelight and the problem is raised to the highest political level, which is excellent, but at the same time, the campaign formulation, in an attempt to attract public opinion, is rather too sweeping and inflated. Naturally the older parishsystem and its classification are of fundamental importance also to RAÄ, and we also spend much time and energy safeguarding its history, function, content and boundaries. But our aim is somewhat more modest and our strategy somewhat different.

### **Freeze the civil parish**

To begin with, RAÄ desires to work towards freezing the civil parish divisions and civil parish borders arguing that the civil parish should become locked as an unalterable quantity. In this ambition we are at one with the “post-card campaign”. However we do not believe that a return to the civil parishes of 1951 (prior to the first communal reform) is realistic or even necessary. For a number of years now, we instead advocate a different line. We accept that the civil parish is historic, i.e. a dead administrative unit, and we strive to make it permanent but also well-known and usable (if extinct) in a frozen time-bound form. The cut-off time for “freezing” we prefer as the varying time when the municipality-based computerized property register came into use, county by county, i.e. somewhere within the period from 1976 (county of Uppsala) to 1995 (county of Gotland). This cut-off is, in RAÄ’s opinion, the only practically, technically and economically possible one, even if in other regards it is not fully optimal. The civil-parish boundaries that were current at the cut-off time are recorded on property maps and even digitally stored at the LMV, unlike the civil parish boundaries of the period prior to the 1952 municipal reform. To a great extent, thus, this “freezing” is already in use. A parliamentary (*Riksdag*) resolution from 1974 states, to put it simply, that LMV shall account for the abandoned civil parishes to “compensate” for their disappearance from the new municipality-based property designations. Today, the civil parish is also recorded on the survey maps designated by law by the property-register ordinance (2000:308). At the moment work is in progress at LMV (with support from RAÄ) aimed at correcting the errors and omissions in this record in order to give definitive boundaries to each individual civil parish. The digital civil parish stratum in LMV’s database is thereby quality-guaranteed, at successive intervals.

### **The 1951 situation**

One can justly question whether a complete picture of 1951’s civil parish boundaries and areas would not be even more valuable. This might be so for some cases, and of course much can have happened to change a civil parish’s appearance between 1951 and the time that RAÄ ascribes as the cut-off point. But in the majority of cases it seems that the older civil parishes are reflected in the frozen *socken* that we advocate. The recreation of the 1951 boundaries for c. 2500 civil parishes would involve a gigantic manual effort that would hardly be realistic given the hard economic climate of today. On the other hand, there is nothing to hinder that on a municipal, church parish or civil parish or local society level, conduct such work on a voluntary basis, if such be deemed necessary.

### **“Translation key”**

There already exist today printed lists wherein it is possible to search for e.g. in which municipality a certain civil parish lies. Such aids must be further developed in digital form and be constantly updated so that information searches linked to property, the civil or church parish, municipality, etc., become easy to execute and of use to all. These must facilitate the

localizing of a place in a municipality with its corresponding place in a civil parish or church parish, and vice versa, etc. RAÄ wishes to assist the development of such aids.

### **Civil parish names on maps and in addresses**

Already at the moment, LMV is involved in the placing of each civil parish name on maps, by linking them to parish churches. This means that even if say parish X disappears in a Church rationalization, the map will always contain information as to the whereabouts of church X. In this way the civil parish is marked in not only by its boundaries but also by its traditional name irrespective of whether the civil parish is still alive or not. The extensive address-reform which is at present underway in Sweden, also provides scope for the use of the civil parish names in various ways (and thereby indirectly strengthening civil parish identity). Within the framework of an agreed national standard, each municipality has the right to itself determine how the location addresses are formed. In dialogue and contact that RAÄ has had with the various municipalities, we encourage the use and defense of civil parish names as far as is possible: either as subsections of the municipality or of the so-called address-area. In addition, a revision of the above-mentioned standard is underway which includes a desire for the civil parish to be more dominant in an address.

### **Information on civil parishes**

The civil parish is still a highly relevant living entity for many people in Sweden, while also almost the opposite for many others. Regardless of this, the civil parish has a significance in our shared history and in the development of the Swedish model of society, that can hardly be overestimated. The civil parish is a fundamental institution for the establishment and maintenance of democracy in this country. RAÄ wishes to encourage the gathering of rich and multifaceted information concerning the concept of the civil parish, its history, function, etc, preferably with the addition of work material suitable for use in investigations and in-depth studies of individual parishes (for schools, local history societies, study circles, etc.). The material can be assembled in countless different ways, depending on target group and ambition, from mere folders to elaborate digital presentations. The overall aim must be that facts, knowledge and work reports be recorded in a way that presents the civil parish in a favourable and interesting light, despite the fact that it, in contrast to the municipality and modern church parish, is a petrified historic relic. On the local level, at a subsequent stage, information on an established and well-known civil parish can be successively updated all in accordance with need and interest. Even a "dead" parish can thereby become very much alive.