Swedish Place-Name Research – A short survey

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From of old place-name research has occupied an important place in Scandinavian studies in Sweden. Modern Swedish onomastics has its starting point in the early 20th century.

In order to produce a Swedish counterpart to the series Norske Gaardnavne (‘Norwegian Farm-Names’), Kungl. Ortnamnskommittén (‘The Royal Place-Name Committee’) was set up in 1902. The committee was commissioned to provide for research work on the names of villages and farms as well as of important mountains and large forests, lakes and tracts of land. The launching of the work Sveriges ortnamn (‘The Place-Names of Sweden’) was of decisive importance for future progress. The working material for this project soon developed into the world’s most comprehensive place-name collection, the present Namnarkivet i Uppsala (‘The Institute of Place-Name Research’, a part of The Institute for Language and Folklore, Uppsala).

At an early stage Jöran Sahlgren joined the committee, and in due course he became its leading figure. In 1913 he started the journal Namn och bygd (‘Names and Settlement’), the oldest and for long the only scholarly place-name journal in the world. In 1930 a chair of Scandinavian place-name research was set up in Uppsala specifically for him. Sahlgren’s time as professor (until 1950) represented a period of expansion without equal in Scandinavian place-name research. The main lines were drawn up, and these are still up-to-date. Of fundamental importance is the examination of the elements in place-names, their meanings, distribution and age. Field studies play an important part.

The period that followed was one of consolidation but in recent times also of renewal. One result of a successful collaborative venture between the Department of Scandinavian Languages (Uppsala University) and the Institute for Language and Folklore is Svenskt ortnamnslexikon (‘The Swedish Place-Name Dictionary’), published in 2003 as the first Swedish dictionary of its kind.
The public at large are extremely interested in both the spelling and the origins of place-names. To respond to this and to make the place-name collections more widely available, the Institute for Language and Folklore is computerizing the material in its care. Almost four out of ten million index cards have now been scanned and are accessible on the Internet (www.sofi.se), opening the way for future research. In addition, the National Land Survey's place-name database will function as a national place-name dictionary. To meet the demand for access to place-name information the Land Survey has on its home page an Internet service (www.lantmateriet.se) called Map Search and place-names, which will give authorities, organisations and the general public easy access to the officially approved place-names.