

# Doing Household, Performing Power Agency, Authority and Space in Early Modern Sweden

*Karin Hassan Jansson*, Department of History, Uppsala University

The household plays a major role in our understanding of the early modern European society and it has been defined in many different ways. Historians talk about households as groups of related people living together and households have often been regarded as organizations for early modern production and reproduction. In early modern administration, households were vital units, the bases for many taxes and church records. We also talk about the household as a religiously based ideology or model, spelling out the order and relations between different groups of people in the early modern society.<sup>1</sup>

I rather talk about *household culture* than household ideology, thus emphasizing the crucial and general meaning of the household as a practice, as a way of thinking and structuring the early modern society. Culture is a much broader concept than ideology; consisting of loosely connected ideas, norms, and values, open for diverse interpretations and possible to use for different groups of people. It is, as William Sewell stresses, both system and practice and as such, constantly changing.<sup>2</sup> As I see it, the household culture provided a repertoire of roles, relations, and course of events. They were played out by people in early modern society, not automatically nor without variation, but creatively and with a potential for reproduction as

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Jansson, Haus und Haushalt im frühneuzeitlichen Schweden. Geschichtswissenschaftliche Trends und neue Zugänge, [forthcoming, *Das Haus in der Geschichte Europas. Sozialer Raum, Identitätsort, Ordnungskonzept. Ein Handbuch.*]

<sup>2</sup> William Sewell, The Concept(s) of Culture, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, (eds.) Victoria E. Bonnell, Lynn Avery Hunt & Richard Biernacki, London 1999, pp. 35–61.

well as for change. People were tactical, in the sense of de Certeau, and made use of their available roles in ways that favored them.<sup>3</sup>

This perspective fits nicely with the way the German historian Joachim Eibach discuss household and *das Haus* as practice and performance. In analogy to 'doing gender', he talks about 'doing house[hold]'.<sup>4</sup> This paper takes an eighteenth century court case as the starting point for a discussion about how household was practiced and performed in early modern Sweden. It focuses especially on the spatial aspects of doing household and performing authority.

The setting of the court case is Häradsmåla farm in Småland.<sup>5</sup> It was an *officersboställe*, a farm where an officer lived as a part of the Swedish military system, and in 1734 it was inhabited by the Sergeant (*furir, förildare*) Daniel Wirstedt. From the legal records it is possible to identify at least three groups of people living in separate houses at the farm [*gård*]. It was the household of the Sergeant consisting of Wirstedt and his 13-years old daughter Greta and the households of two tenant farmers. Måns Jönsson lived with his wife Rangnil Bengtsdotter and their children Sune and Britta. The other tenant farmer was Anders Olofsson, living with his wife Kerstin Larsdotter.<sup>6</sup> In 1734 Wirstedt was accused in court for having raped Måns daughter Britta.<sup>7</sup> The local court treated the case on several occasions in August and September 1734. The legal records following the accusation form the bases for the coming discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> My understanding of the household culture is similar to, and inspired by Eva Österbergs understanding of early modern mentalities (e.g. Eva Österberg 1992), Julie Hardwick, in *The practice of patriarchy: gender and the politics of household authority in early modern France*, University Park 1998, and Garthine Walker in *Crime, gender and social order in early modern England*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Eibach, *Das offene haus: Kommunikative praxis im sozialen nahraum der Europäischen frühen neuzeit*, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 38:4 (2011), pp. 621–664. There is a problem of translation between German and English (and Swedish) when it comes to the concept house/household. In German *das Haus* generally refers to the household as ideology and order, often with reference to Otto Brunner, while the concept household only refers to the group of people living together in a house, often linked to research about household size and household structure originating from The Cambridge Group [for the History of population and Social Structure]. I will only use the word household in English letting it incorporate the aspects covered by the German *das Haus* as well.

<sup>5</sup> All information and all citations about the case of Britta Månsdotter and Daniel Wirstedt comes from Allbo häradsrätts protokoll 30/8 and 9/9 1734, Domböcker 1734–1735, Allbo häradsrätts arkiv, Landsarkivet i Vadstena.

<sup>6</sup> The church book (*bussförhörslängden*) from 1734 is very unclear but it is possible to identify at least the households of Wirstedt and Måns as registered on the farm.

<sup>7</sup> It may seem strange (and somewhat discriminating) that I use the family name when I refer to (Daniel) Wirstedt, while I mostly use the first names when I refer to the tenant farmers and their family members, as Måns (Jönsson) and Britta (Månsdotter). I have taken the easiest way out and follow the naming custom in the source.

In July Britta and her brother submitted a letter to the local court and the local governor. They complained about the misery they had been inflicted by Wirstedt. According to them, he had raped Britta on three separate occasions, mistreated her badly and assaulted their father when he tried to talk with him about reconciliation. The father also addressed the local governor. He described the serious consequences of Wirstedt's actions. The Sergeant had robbed the honor and virtue of his daughter, his children were "wrecked" and he and his wife suffered from a "fatal agony and distress". Besides the rape, he had threatened Måns and insulted his wife.

Early modern household was often a matter of family relations and this was the case also at the Hărădsmåla farm. In the letters, and later in the trial, the members of Måns' household were all coherently talking about themselves as a family, using words as sister, son, father, wife and parents. Thereby they represented themselves as a family and a household at the same time as they performed loyalty to it.<sup>8</sup> The letters supported Britta's rape accusation but also depicted Wirstedt as a danger to the entire family. Måns pleaded to the governor that Wirstedt should be held in custody awaiting trial. Otherwise none of them "dared to stay in their poor house". By writing and sending these letters, Måns and his children, performed family and household.

Their descriptions of what happened and the rhetoric they used were also explicitly linked to the ideology of the household. Måns Jönsson repeatedly called Wirstedt his master in the letters and court proceedings, thus emphasizing the hierarchical relation between them. Wirstedt who called Måns his tenant farmer also acknowledged this relation. Måns was the master of his household, his wife and their children, but he was at the same time subjected to Wirstedt, the owner and master of the Hărădsmåla farm from which Måns earned his living as a tenant farmer. In the court proceedings a couple of witnesses from other families also called Wirstedt their master. They were probably living on the farm on the same terms as Måns. Households were not exclusive, but could overlap and enclose each other, creating a complex web of relations.

The relation between Wirstedt, as the master of the people on his farm, and the others were constantly present and seem to have influenced the behavior of all people on the farm. At the same time, the exact relation between Wirstedt and Britta was up for discussion. In

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<sup>8</sup> Sune, the brother, signed the letter together with his sister even though it seems as if he were not present at the farm when the assaults happened.

Wirstedt's letters and in his testimonies in court he consequently called Britta his maid (*piga*), thereby placing her in his own household in a directly subordinate position to himself as her master. None of the others heard in court used the word maid (*piga*) to describe Britta. The people on the farm recognized Wirstedt's superior position as master of the entire farm but none of them acknowledged the relation between Wirstedt and Britta as a relation between a master and a domestic servant.

Titles were not used accidental, but filled with meaning based in the household culture and the exact relation of Wirstedt and Britta was significant for the interpretation of their actions as well as for their arguments in court. By giving specific titles to themselves and others, people were placing themselves and others in different positions supplied by the household culture. In their use of language they were doing household.

As the master of the farm Wirstedt should care for his subjects. According to the letters of his antagonists he did the opposite. Britta and Sune wrote in their letter that Wirstedt had threatened her and her parents to life and – as they phrased it in the letter – “attacked her with hits and strikes in an unchristian and inhuman way” They defined their master's actions as an example of “brutal and inhumane tyranny, against both the law of God and the law of humans”.

Wirstedt declared to the court that he was totally innocent to the crimes Britta and her family accused him of. He also sent several letters to the local governor and court, arguing that Måns was governed by hatred against him and that he had forced or persuaded his daughter to make her accusation. According to Wirstedt the rape charges were actually related to another, earlier conflict between him and Måns and he described the accusations against him as an outbreak of “jealousy and treacherous evil”. They had attacked him “to life, honor and welfare”. He called Britta a whore and implied that her mother was a drunkard. His arguments linked Måns and his household to the ideals of servants. Their prime virtues were loyalty and diligence and their worst offenses were disloyalty and idleness; the latter clearly shown by Måns and his household according to Wirstedt.

Several people testified in court about Wirstedt being very violent to Britta. One of them, a neighbor maid, said that she once saw Wirstedt beat Britta “in such an unmerciful way that she thought Britta would die”. Other testified about the injuries Britta had from Wirstedt's assaults. Thus, his violence against Britta was beyond dispute. He, on his side, described his

violent acts in a completely different language. He said he “pulled Brittas hair and gave her a few cuffs” because she had been reckless with things in his house and answered him with “a shameless mouth”. He defined his violence as “a few well deserved slaps”. Wirstedt built his defense on ideas about subordinates being reckless, disobedient and envious towards their masters and framed his violence as chastise. Britta, for her part, depicted his violence as the very antithesis of<sup>9</sup> the acts of a proper master: the selfish and criminal exploitation of the loyalty of his subordinates, the very people he should protect.

The parties in court used concepts, norms and values present in the household ideology, mobilizing them on their respective side in the legal process. By doing so they could reproduce as well as change the household culture. At the core of the household ideology was the authority of the household head, an issue widely debated in many contexts in early modern Sweden.<sup>10</sup> People like the Sergeant Wirstedt, the tenant farmer Måns, his young daughter and the witnesses in court were part of that discussion as they understood and described actual events and actions through the concepts and the language of the household order.<sup>11</sup> There could be disagreements of the positions of people in the household culture and – consequently – about the expectations they should meet and the way their behavior should be interpreted and there could be different opinions about where to set the limits for the agency and authority of people in different positions. However, there were not – in this case anyway – any disagreements about the hierarchies of the household culture. They did not argue against a master’s right to discipline his maid, even though they had different opinions about the exact relation between Wirstedt and Britta.

In early modern society authority was linked to the head of the household, but also to the actual house itself. It had a spatial aspect. This is evident in the Häremsmåla court case. In the proceedings Britta told the court that she, more or less against her will, had been doing

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<sup>9</sup> In this specific case there was also a conflict between the authority of two masters: Måns and Wirstedt.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Karin Hassan Jansson, *Kvinnofrid: synen på våldtäkt och konstruktionen av kön i Sverige 1600-1800*, Uppsala 2002, Ch. 4; Marriage, Family and Gender in Swedish Political Language, 1750–1820, *Scandinavia in the age of revolution: Nordic political cultures, 1740-1820*, (eds) Pasi Ihalainen, Michael Bregnsbo, Karin Sennefelt & Patrik Winton, Farnham 2011, pp. 191–204; When Sweden harboured idlers: gender and luxury in public debates, c. 1760-1830, *Sweden in the eighteenth-century world: provincial cosmopolitans*, (ed. Göran Rydén), Farnham 2013, pp. 249-272; Jonas Liliequist, Changing Discourses of Marital Violence in Sweden from the Age of Reformation to the Late Nineteenth Century, *Gender & History* 23:1, 2011, pp. 1–25.

<sup>11</sup> Julie Hardwick uses a similar approach when she discusses civil court cases from early modern Lyon and Nantes in relation to the early modern state. (Julie Hardwick, *Family business: litigation and the political economies of daily life in early modern France*, Oxford 2009.)

household work in Wirstedt's house, as he had asked her to do his housework and to take care of his animals..<sup>12</sup>

According to Britta, Wirstedt had locked her in at night and raped her on three occasions when she worked in his house. After the first time she had told her mother and thereafter they tried to avoid situations in which it could happen again. When Wirstedt would go away for a few weeks he ordered Britta to sleep in the cottage with his daughter. She did so, but unexpectedly, after a few days, the sergeant came home in the middle of the night, pounding on the door. Britta opened and immediately wanted to leave the house, but Wirstedt stopped her, locked the door and assaulted her.

When he went away the same day he ordered her to stay with his daughter in the house during the night but Britta refused to. She did the household chores and then went to his parents to sleep. At midnight Wirstedt's daughter came and told them that her father was home ordering Britta to come. She refused, which led Wirstedt to come and get her himself. Britta, Måns, Ragnil and four eye witnesses told the court what happened that evening. According to the witnesses, Wirstedt had come in to Måns' cabin, shouted at Britta, pulling her hair, pushing and beating her. To avoid his violence, Britta went to her mother, in her bed, which resulted in Wirstedt threatening both of them. Then, Britta tried to go into a creep-hole to get out but she did not succeed. The neighbor wife, Kerstin, begged Wirstedt to stop to save Britta's life. Britta told the court that she, finally, as her words were recorded, "went to him anyway, following the advice of her mother, who otherwise feared that Wirstedt would attack their house".

The spatial dimension was constantly present in Britta's narrative. She worked in Wirstedt's house, thus obeying his orders. However, she did not acknowledge her role as his maid. She regularly slept in the house of her parents, thereby demonstrating her household belonging. Britta depicted Wirstedt's house as a dangerous place for her, stressing that she tried to avoid being there, exposed to Wirstedt's vicious will. At the evening of the last assault, she sought refuge at the home of her parents, but the Häradsråda master did not respect the sanctuary of their house. Although she retreated into the innermost parts of the house, he did not let her be. His trespass can be compared to breaches of the home peace. The description of this evening's incidents is strikingly similar to many narratives of such

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<sup>12</sup> Wirstedt was divorced from his wife. There had been female servants in the household for many years, but for some reason he had no maid this winter.

crimes. The aggressor violated boundary after boundary – the door, the hall, the chamber – to come as far as it was possible.<sup>13</sup>

Wirstedt told another version of what happened that evening. He went home to Måns to confront Britta with some rumors she had spread about him. He admitted that he may have said some thoughtless words, pulled Britta's hair and given her a few slaps, but in his version he did nothing wrong. He came with a legitimate cause, chastising a subject who had misbehaved, doing exactly what a master should do. In his last letter to the court he also stressed that in general, someone having a servant could order it to stay in the house at nights. As he described Britta at his house maid, he should then have the right to decide where she spent her nights.

The court did not explicitly discuss the relation between Wirstedt and Britta and did not comment Wirstedt's statement about his right to order Britta to stay in his house. However, they did not use the term maid for Britta and when they summarized the proceedings they wrote that Wirstedt had forced Britta to stay in his house. In the trial several other crimes related to the parties were dealt with, among others a couple of fights between Måns and Wirstedt. They had started with Wirstedt coming to Måns' house in wrath and the court stated that Wirstedt, who came to Måns' cabin without any necessary matter, was to be regarded as the one who caused the disagreement. Thereby they explicitly set the boundaries for Wirstedt's authority at Måns' door. As I see it, the same boundary was implicitly present also in the rape case.

Joachim Eibach and Maria Ågren have, among others, criticized the image of the household as a unit with clear boundaries and a closed character. Instead they talk about permeable households and open houses (*offene Häuser*).<sup>14</sup> In the Håradsmåla case this permeability and openness is clearly present, not least in the spatial aspect of the events described. I do not know exactly what the farm looked like, but the houses of Wirstedt, Måns and the other tenant farmer must have been close to each other. Britta went back and forth between the houses, as did Wirstedt, his daughter and the other people living on the

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<sup>13</sup> Karin Hassan Jansson, Hemfridsbrott 1550–1650: Våld som aggression eller kommunikation?, *Historisk tidskrift* 2006:3, pp. 429–452.

<sup>14</sup> Joachim Eibach, Das offene haus: Kommunikative praxis im sozialen nahraum der Europäischen frühen neuzeit, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 38:4 (2011), pp. 621–664; Maria Ågren, Emissaries, allies, accomplices and enemies: married women's work in eighteenth-century urban Sweden, *Urban history* 2014, pp. 1–21. See also Naomi Tadmor, The Concept of the Household-Family in Eighteenth-Century England, 151 (1996).

farm. The tenant farmer Anders told the court that had he heard Wirstedt order Britta to go to his house, when he was sitting in Måns' house. The following morning, when Anders came in to Måns' cabin, he noticed that Britta lay ill on a bench. At another occasion Britta's mother, Ragnil, had come to Anders' home at night, asking him to come with her to hear Britta crying inside Wirstedt's house. Anders wife, Kerstin, had been asked by Wirstedt's thirteen-year old daughter to come to Wirstedt's home to take care of the laundry on one of the days after Britta had been abused.

From the court protocol it is evident that Wirstedt, the owner of the farm, as well as the tenant farmers, Måns and Anders, lived with their respective families in separate homes which they called their own. It is also evident that they socialized and had business together, as they visited each other regularly. The houses of the tenant farmers could also accommodate guests. Some of the witnesses in court were people traveling through the area, sleeping at one of the tenant farmers for a night. Thus, even though there did not seem to be any doubt about who belonged to which household, houses were open in a very concrete way and the interaction between household members happened in relation to leisure, common affairs and when people needed housing. Households were also open in relation to work. Female members of the tenants' families were doing chores for the Sergeant's household, as it appears on an irregular every-day basis. The openness and permeability of households and houses stressed by Eibach and Ågren was by no doubt present on the Håradsmåla farm in Småland in the 1730s.

However, the openness and permeability did not mean social equality. Wirstedt seems to have had more access to the homes of his subordinate tenants than the other way around. When witnesses described his visits, he just entered the homes of his tenants, without knocking or declaring his coming, and sometimes he came "in wrath" late in the evenings. There were no testimonies about the male tenants being inside Wirstedt's house except at one time when Måns was invited by Wirstedt to have a meal with him while discussing an agreement. The tenants' wives and Britta were sometimes in the house of the Sergeant but only when they were asked by Wirstedt or his daughter to perform specific tasks in their household. There were also occasions when the people on the farm were denied access to Wirstedt's house as when he locked the door to keep people out when he assaulted Britta and refused to open it, even though her mother begged him to let her come in and get her



daughter. Wirstedt ruled the Hărădsmåla farm and his authority seems to have been strongest in his own house.

Thus, the hierarchical relations between Wirstedt and his tenants were played out in their daily movements on their common homestead. Their embodied interaction shaped their own experience and understanding of the household, engendering the household culture. As historians, we cannot know how closely the witness depositions followed what really happened, but they are interesting and telling anyway. If they did not correspond to reality they were anyway told for a reason, here probably as an additional argument for the abusive character of Wirstedt and the submissiveness of his tenants.

In this paper I have discussed a single court case starting from the question: how did people do household in early modern Sweden? The discussion is tentative and due to the limitations of the paper I have left out many important aspects. Anyway, I find the perspective fruitful. People were doing household with the help of the ideas, norms and values in the household culture at the same time as the household culture was made up by the 'doings' of common people. Sometimes the ideas were outspoken and the norms probably used intentionally, but sometimes they were probably not very conscious as they were embedded in the language and embodied in everyday practices and performances.

By systematically asking how people were doing house, using legal records from complex court cases as rape, infanticide, man slaughter and such, I think we could get a deeper understanding of the meaning of the household in early modern society, not least in the everyday life of common people. I have in other contexts argued that the significance of the household culture declined in the end of the early modern period. We may be able to know much more about the content, timing and meaning of that process of change by looking closely at how the household was practiced and performed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.