



On the Swedish *polska*

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Translator's note

As a first translation of Ernst Klein's pioneering work on the *polska* I hope that this text will lead to more international interest in the history of Scandinavian dance research and further investigations of Klein's scholarship. In his article Klein uses a rather dated and colloquial Swedish and in my translation I have tried to strike a balance between preserving some of his stylistics and making the text easy to follow for a modern day reader. The original work was not intended to be used as a free standing journal article by itself but as an accompanying text for an exhibition on traditional dance. Taking this into account, I have added a few notes where the original text needed some further explanations. I have retained Swedish terminology in order for the reader to be able to find further text pertaining to areas of interest.

E.W.

In my ears, and those of my contemporaries, the term *polska* has a romantic overtone. I doubt that I am alone in once having thought of *polska* as being a romantic or dialectal way of writing the more colloquial polka. Such a miscomprehension is understandable, but completely wrong, and most likely the meanings of the two words have little in common. The polka is a product of the early 19th century, whereas the origins of the *polska* can be traced at least another two hundred years

[†] At the time of the author's passing, on Walpurgis Night 1937, the manuscript of this essay was found in the state that it has now been published. It summarises the findings of a number of the author's previous studies and was compiled by him for a large exhibition arranged for the Exposition des Danses populaires d'Europe in the summer of 1937 at the Archives Internationales de la Danse in Paris. The illustrations in the essay were chosen from the pictures at the exhibition according to the notes left by the author. The editors [of the original publication. Eds.] have had the pleasure of working with Miss Laura Strindberg, assistant at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, and Miss Lisa Santesson, the author's assistant in preparing for the exhibition. Miss Santesson created all drawings, graphic production and music transcriptions for the essay.

further back in history. The former may originate as a bohemian folk dance, which, in its popularised form spread like wildfire across Europe. The latter may in some form have been based on Polish models, although these remain unknown. When the term *polsk dans* (polish dance) began to gain ground in Sweden in the mid-17th century, it was most likely referring to a certain style rather than a specific dance. It is about this style I will dare to draw some conclusions below.

First, however, I need to clear a path through the many *polska* theories and hypotheses littering the way forward in order to avoid falling and breaking a leg. For the last fifty years, musicologists have traced the history of *polska* melodies and arrived at a number of different theories, though rather little substance has resulted. It has been suggested that melodies labelled *polnischer Tanz* or even *tanietz polski* were already in use Sweden in the 1580s. Such claims are open to question as they refer to a music manuscript compiled from a number of loose sheets once belonging to the German Church in Stockholm that are now kept in the collections of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. No one knows who, among several centuries of German cantors based in Stockholm, brought the manuscript to the church. Moreover, the connection between the written music and the date, written on a separate sheet in the manuscript, is rather unclear.



Fig. 1 [p. 270 in the original manuscript]: *Leksandslåten* [the Leksand tune]. *Stampning på låten* [Stomping on the tune]. Leksand, Dalarna.

The earliest example of *polska* transcription made by a Swedish national can be found in Per Brahe the Younger's [1602-1680] lute book in which Brahe notated *polnische Tänze* during his journeys in Germany during the 1620s. There have also been numerous attempts to connect the *polska*'s existence in Sweden with each and every close contact between Sweden and Poland from the reign of King Sigis-

mund^{*1} until King Karl XII^{*2}. In these accounts, different types of Swedish *polska* melodies – generally divided into *sextondelspolska* (semiquaver-*polskas*), *åttondelspolska* (quaver-*polskas*), and *triolpolska* (triplet-*polskas*) – have been assigned various origins; all Polish, all Swedish, or some Swedish and some Polish. With regards to the triplet-*polskas*, Norway has also been considered a source for parts of the Swedish *polska* repertoire.

All this research refers only to the *polska melodies*. Very little research has been conducted with regard to the *polska dances*, and such research that does exist gives little credibility to theories arguing for a foreign origin. All we can show is that in Denmark and Germany at the beginning of the 17th century as well as in Sweden in the second half of the same century, the term *polska*, among other things, refers to a couple dance^{*3} of questionable moral standards. Unfortunately, we will have to conclude that moral condemnation is not a particular trait of the *polska*, but common for many couple dances, old and new, as well as numerous other dance forms.



Fig. 2 [p. 271] *Leksandslåten* [the Leksand tune]. *Fördans* [fore-dance]

Based on the evidence above we can only show that, in some areas, the energetic couple dances that gained popularity among the urban populations, and possibly among the higher strata of society, were referred to as *polskas*.

From the mid-17th century, the word *polska* in Swedish gained a more specific meaning, although we still lack detailed descriptions helping us to fully identify it.

^{*1} [reigned 1592–1599, E.W.]

^{*2} [reigned 1697–1718, E.W.]

^{*3} [“Couple dance” rather than “couple’s dance” is the term used by most scholars to describe these dances. It refers to a particular kind of dancing in which the couple is the foundation rather than other forms of dances which may be danced by a couple but where this is not an integral part of the dance itself. E.W.]

The *polska* is talked about as a lively and energetic dance, easy, popular and unrefined; simple to the degree that a late 18th century dance master from Gothenburg outright refused to describe it in his dance book. On the other hand, many literary sources indicate that the *polska* was a particular, if multiform, dance. We have to assume, therefore, that the *polska* – when its form becomes more widely described, from the mid-19th century (with traditions going back to the 18th century) – really is representative of the older forms established in the 1650s.

I now want to outline my findings about the Swedish *polska* dances' characteristics as they appear in transcripts and living traditions from the last hundred years.

Firstly, the *polska* is *a very simple dance, done with walking steps, running steps and sometimes hopping steps*. Anything requiring greater choreographic skills is absent from the very beginning. In different *polskas*, however, there is often a series of interludes or figures of a more or less singular kind, which I will return to later. In accordance with the simple character of *polska*, an important feature is that it is always directed one-way. This simply means as follows: when dancing the waltz, you start left-right-left and continue right-left-right, after that left-right-left. In the *polska*, on the other hand, you start right-left-right-left and continue in the same way endlessly until perhaps you turn and dance in the opposite direction. This is, as far as I can find, common for all *polska* dances. Variety and finesse, which are by no means lacking, have been created in quite different ways than by means of complicated foot positions and dance steps. The *polska* exists in *two basic forms, either as a kedjedans (chain dance) or as a pardans (couple dance)*.



Fig. 3 [p. 271] *Leksandslåten* [the Leksand tune]. *Tjuvturen* [the thief's dance]

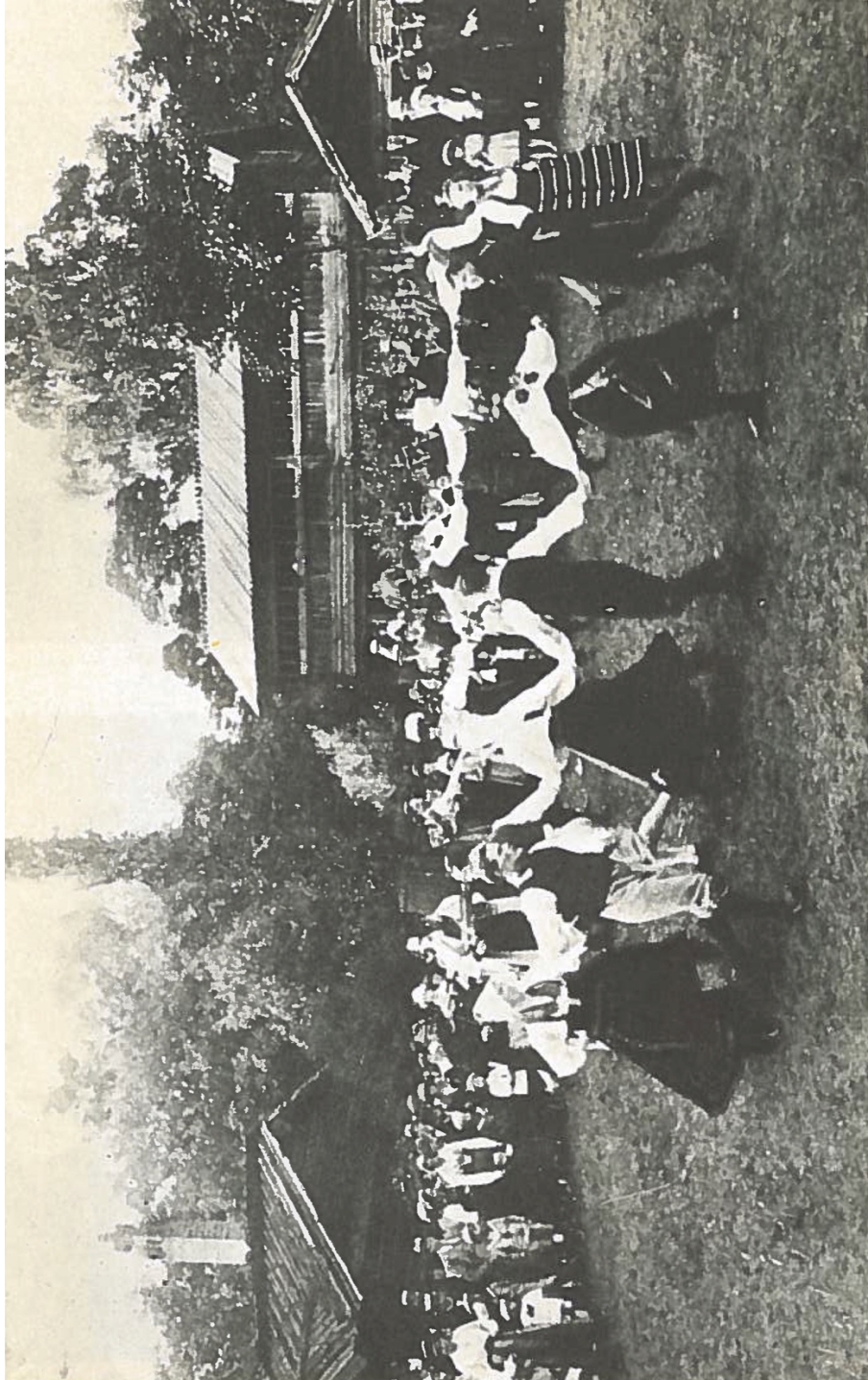


Fig. 4 [p. 272] *Midsommardans* [Midsummer dance], *Långdans* [long dance]. Skansen's Folk Dance Group (*Skansens Folkdanslag*)



Fig. 5 [p.273] *Trekarlspolska* [Three-man *polska*]. The turn. Skansen's Folk Dance Group (*Skansens Folkdanslag*)

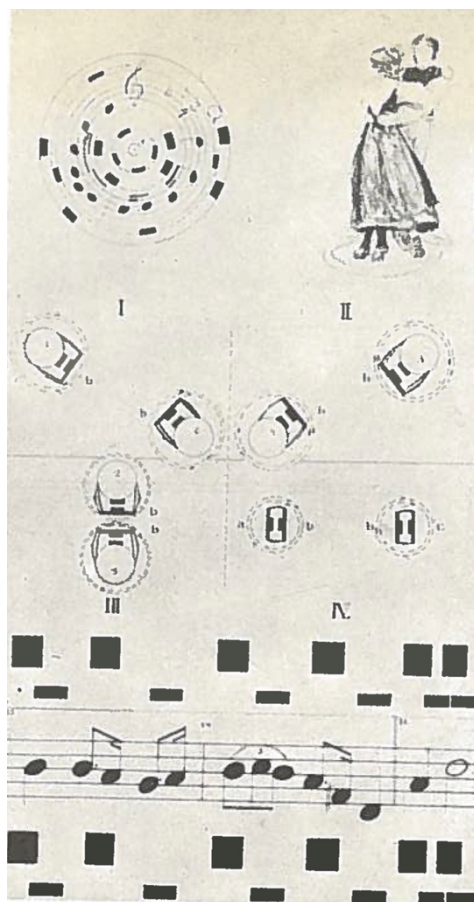


Fig. 6a [p. 274] *Trekarlspolska* [Three-man *polska*]. Turning in couples. Diagram by Lisa Santeson.

Explanation of the dance diagrams and pictures above: the square and rectangular symbols above and below the transcriptions mean left [square] and right [rectangle] foot, respectively. The circular transcription with step notation illustrates a double *polska* step in one whole turn. The step notation inside the circle is for the man and outside of the circle, for the woman. The symbols [circle with square on side and line with square on side] mean man and woman, respectively. The figures above the step notation show the dancers' positions and the turn in relation to the different sections of the music.

The chain dance is either a *ringdans* [circle dance] around a common centre or a meandering *långdans* [long dance]. Both of these, the former in particular, are closely connected to popular ceremonies surrounding a number of important annual feasts. In several Swedish provinces (in Dalarna in particular) terms for circle dance, such as *ringdans*, *ringlek* or *ringlåt*, are the same as what in other provinces are called *julpolsskor* [Christmas *polskas*] or *jullekar* (Christmas games). These dances are older than the Christmas tree in the Swedish popular Christmas ceremony. The fact that they are danced indoors has most likely contributed to their closed circle structure. It is possible, however, that the focal point of this circle, such as the Christmas tree is today, was once something else; for example, the open fire which was placed at the centre of the house from ancient times to the

end of the middle ages. The chain dance, with its weaving spiral of human bodies, is more suited to outdoor dancing during Midsummer celebrations, but it also takes place at the end of parties and celebrations where it makes its way through all the rooms and buildings of the farm. As a couple dance, the *polska* is often known as *slängpolska* [fling-*polska*]. It also has other names. In Leksand parish it persists under the name *leksandslåten* [the Leksand tune], whereas in Floda parish, both in Dalarna, it is known as *fördans* [literally, first dance, or, fore-dance], and is part of a larger dance suite known as *huppleken* [the hupp-game]. Everywhere, however, the couple's *polska* has the following characteristics: only *one couple dances it at a time; it is fairly slow and ceremonial; and, importantly, it is danced within a very narrow circle on the floor*. The first of these characteristics is connected to its social function. The *polska* has undoubtedly been regarded as the Swedish people's most prestigious dance and as such it may be devoted to the most important couple on the dance floor. This prestige is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that the *slängpolska*, according to many accounts, used to be the most common bridal dance. That is, this particular dance was to be danced by the bride with the most important male guests at the wedding, such as, the vicar and the groom's father or grandfather, after the wedding ceremony and the feast. This ubiquitous ritual has deep roots in the social system underpinning the wedding practices of the rural folk. In the *slängpolska* as well as in the previously mentioned *leksandslåten* and *fördans* it is also possible to buy the right to dance – a way of paying for prestige, not dissimilar to other practices in our contemporary society. As we all know, if the prestige is small then the price will be, too. In the case of the *polska*, it is just a matter of being the first to the fiddler and handing him a few coins – you have bought the right to «dance first» (*dansa före*).

King Gustav Vasa told his deputies Sten Leijonhufvud and Konrad von Pyhy, when they arrived back from a pleasant and expensive diplomatic mission to Paris, that «while you have danced *fördans* with Madama de Tampåss, Madamma de Sell and Madamma de Massa, we have danced with Gudmund Fässing, Per Skägge and Nils Dacke»^{*4}. The practice of paying to dance first was apparently in existence long before the *polska*. I recently found a description of such a dance when Mr. Å. Meyerson forwarded me a quote from a document held in the National Archives (Riksarkivet), which outlined the rules of ring jousting (*ringränning*) in Nyköping in 1584. It is stated that a competitor who accidentally knocks over the ring stand will have to dance a «fore-dance with the house maiden behind the door». Such a *dance of inverted prestige* must therefore have been performed on a restricted floor area similar to the more recent *slängpolska*.

^{*4} [This refers to a peasant uprising against the crown in 1542 that took place during the time of the Paris trip. E.W.]

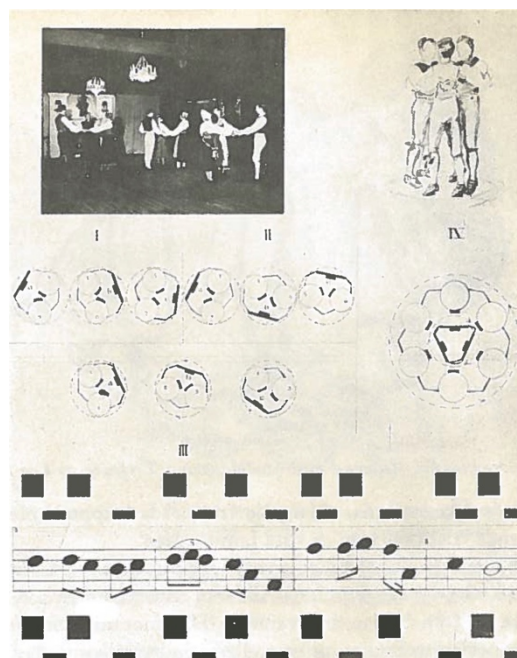


Fig 6b [p. 275] *Trekarlspolska* [Three-man *polska*]. The turn (cf. fig 5) and final figure with the men dancing inside the ring.



Fig. 7 [p. 276] *Fyrmannadans* [four-man dance]. Mid-section figure with hand claps. Drawing by Lisa Santesson.

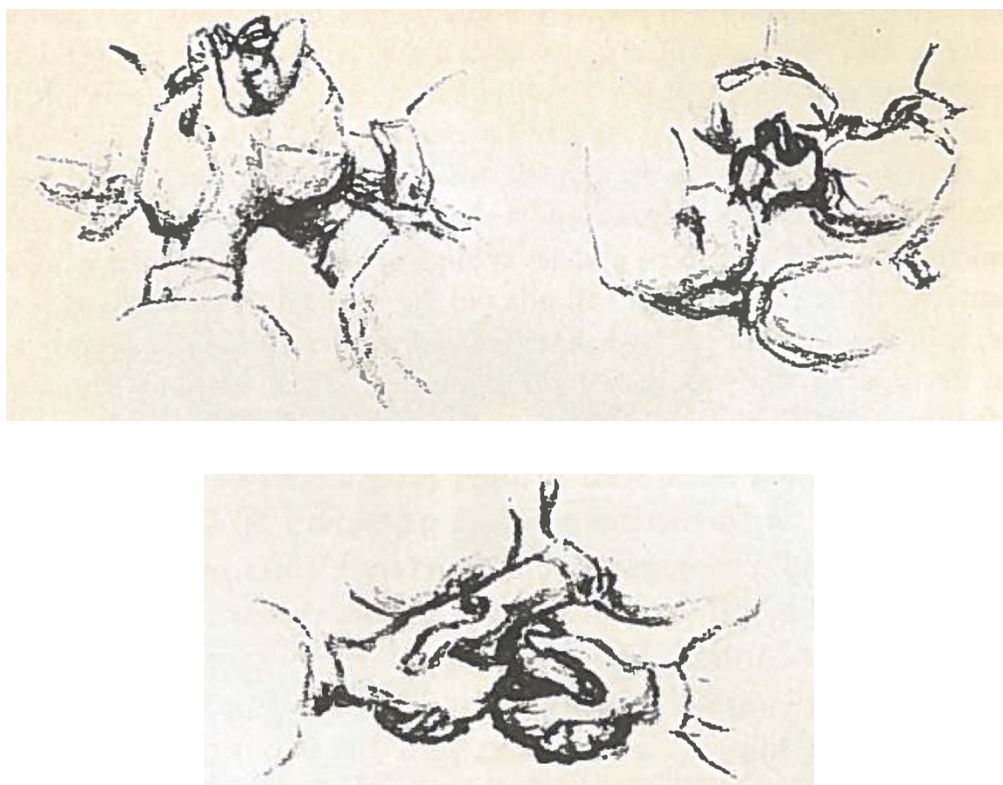


Fig. 8 [p. 277] *Fyrmannadans* [Four-man dance]. A. thumb grip for *korset* [the star], b. thumb grip and elbow grip, c. *kryssfattning* [cross-grip]. Drawings by Lisa Santesson

When notating and describing *leksandslåten* ten years ago in Dalarna, I initially felt very puzzled by the fact that the steps and the music were regularly out of sync with one another. Miss Lisa Santesson, who has analysed the *polskas*, and many other dance forms, has succeeded in producing a graphical description of the syncopated metre used by dancers in the *leksandslåt*^{*5}. The noted Gotlandic folk music collector A. Fredin describes a similar phenomenon learned from his grandmother, who lived and danced in the 1790s. In this instance, too, masterly finesse was evident in dancing *correctly out of sync*. This is one of the more original ways in which the *polska* offers variation and finesse, and it is certainly refined enough. Only jazz has since been able to afford difficulties of such kind.

Different forms of *polska* developed due to the need for more lively variations. In *leksandslåten* we find old ideas of forced marriage, and curiously enough, some remnants of matriarchal society; that is, if one wants to enter one of the quagmires of social sciences. The choice of partner in the *leksandslåt* simply goes like this: before the dance the girl, or lady, chooses a partner for the evening. Then it is up to him to buy the dance for himself and his partner and, as the music starts, to enter the floor to 'stomp on the tune' (*stampa på låten*), that is to formally ask his girl for a dance in that striking manner – more familiar to a moose than a

^{*5} [Analysis is not present in the text. E.W.]

dancer – which has long been used in Leksand. When they have danced for a while, however, another man will gently push him away and take his place on the dance floor. The original owner of the dance will always be allowed to return to the dance towards the end of the tune. Occasionally, however, the ‘thief’s’ own partner for the evening intervenes and the dance may briefly include two women dancing with one man, or even two couples, all holding onto each other and dancing together.

The so-called three-man *polska* (*trekarlspolska*) and four-man dance (*fyrman-nadans*) are different developments of this theme. The former (together with its cousin, the peculiarly named Russian *polska* (*ryska polskan*)) likely developed as an influence from contra dances (*kontradanser*), whereas the latter is a wide-spread and simple variation on the *slängpolska*. Another such variation is *snurrebocken* in which the dancing couples, on a cue from the musician, execute a couple of deep bows in time with the music. This particular dance is from the Hälsingland province where it has several relatives, all which include similar gracious figures that we so closely associated with the stately character of Hälsingland’s folk culture.

The pinnacle of the *polska*’s figures and interludes have developed in dances such as the *jösshärspolska* (*polska* from Jössehärad), which, for almost a hundred years, has been the rightful pride of the people of Värmland. This *polska* gathers the full gamut of acrobatic figures, and although the boys execute the most demanding moves, they are in need of considerable support from the girls. According to an account from the 1840s, the *jösshärspolska*’s exuberant movements contributed to an intoxicating visual expression where, at times, »there are almost as many feet on the ceiling as on the floor». The climax of the dance is the *jösshärsthrow* (*jösshärskast*) [fig. 10], where the dancer executes a cartwheel or somersault and strikes his heels into the roof beams of the cottage. Such demonstrations of strength and agility are especially common in Norwegian dances. In between these figures the couple returns to dance an ordinary *slängpolska*, although it will speed up and move in greater circles as it progresses. Similar dances to the *jösshärspolska* also appear around the same time in other provinces, for example, in Skåne.

The last development of the *polska* is represented in the *hupplek* suite from Floda in Dalarna. The *hupplek* includes a short formal *fördans*, which, although bought by one couple alone, is generally danced by several couples. The original purpose of buying the dance seems to have been forgotten, and the transaction is now only considered a device of regulating access to the dance floor. In practice, the paying couple and subsequently every second couple in the ring from them on will dance first, and the remaining couples get to dance next. In addition to the *fördans*, the *hupplek* contains, as its last dance, a so-called *dalpolska* (*polska* from Dalarna) in a *hambo*-style. The *hambo* is, as with all *polskas*, unidirectional, but it differs in all other ways, both with regards to speed and scope, from older forms of *polska*. The *hambo* is a child of the mid-19th century. Any attempt to confirm the popular etymology with the Hanebo parish in Hälsingland must be considered false. There are more examples of the term *Hamburger-polska* (*hamburgerpolska*) and similar contemporary uses of the terms *Hamburger-waltz* (*hamburgervals*) and *Hamburger-polka* (*hamburgerpolkett*). *Hamburger*, and its derivate, was simply a

term used for something modern, foreign and new. The character of the *hambo* is thus precisely that of an old threshing-machine equipped with a modern engine. In the *bakmes*, a form of *polska* common in Dalarna, such connections between the old and new are particularly clear due to their poor integration. The dance begins as a polka in duple metre and then, without changing the metre, turns into a *polska*.

The fact that *polskas* in general are in a triple metre is not that important and may also be due to prevalent transcription practices. It is the direction of the dance that differs; the polka is bidirectional and the *polska* unidirectional. It is like turning a coat inside out. In its first section the *bakmes* is danced in a modern way whereas later the old folk patterns become immediately visible with their peculiar and insistent character, far removed from light-hearted frivolousness but supported by great passion. This is the true essence of the folk dance.

Finally, I want to add a few words on the origins of the *polska* dance, which I had to leave to one side when talking about the *polska* music. Moving on from my analysis of the dance itself, I will now investigate if we find some clues to the *polska's* origins in its distribution. To help we have several thousands of dance melodies, only a few with any kind of description, but all with their titles as given by the musicians. The most important source is the Folk music commission's multi-volume publication *Svenska låtar* [Swedish tunes], a work started by court registrar Nils Andersson [1864-1921] in Lund in the 1880s, and continued to the present day by his editor Olof Andersson. K. P. Leffler has collected and published a large number of tunes from Södermanland and his collections from Ångermanland contain more or less everything we have of this province's folk music.

Finally, in Gotlandstuner, A. Fredin has created a grand monument to the fiddlers of his home island. The selection of dances I have used to create my statistical survey of the *polska* consists of more than 5,000 melodies. I have gathered this data in two maps of distribution. The first map, diagram VI^{*6}, shows the *polska's* prevalence in relation to other dance forms in the Swedish provinces. Such other dance forms are waltzes and their variations; polkas, with subdivisions such as *polkett*, *reinländer* and *schottis*; contra dances (*kontradanser*) such as *kadrilj* and *anglaise*; and a few additional forms here labelled as 'other dances'. In short, the results suggest that the *polska* (red) dominates in most of the country and counts for half of all the dances in the old Swedish provinces [most likely referring to Swedish provinces before 1658, E.W.], and two thirds in the northern provinces. Other dance forms are more unevenly distributed across the country. In Blekinge, Skåne, Halland [the old Danish provinces] and Södermanland, with its many manor houses, contra dances remained popular among rural people throughout the 19th century. Further north these dances are not found in great numbers (with the exception of Ångermanland, but there are other reasons for this anomaly which warrant their own investigation elsewhere). The polka and its relations are widely distributed in the central provinces.

^{*6} [The numbering refers to other diagrams which are not present in the original version. Eds.]

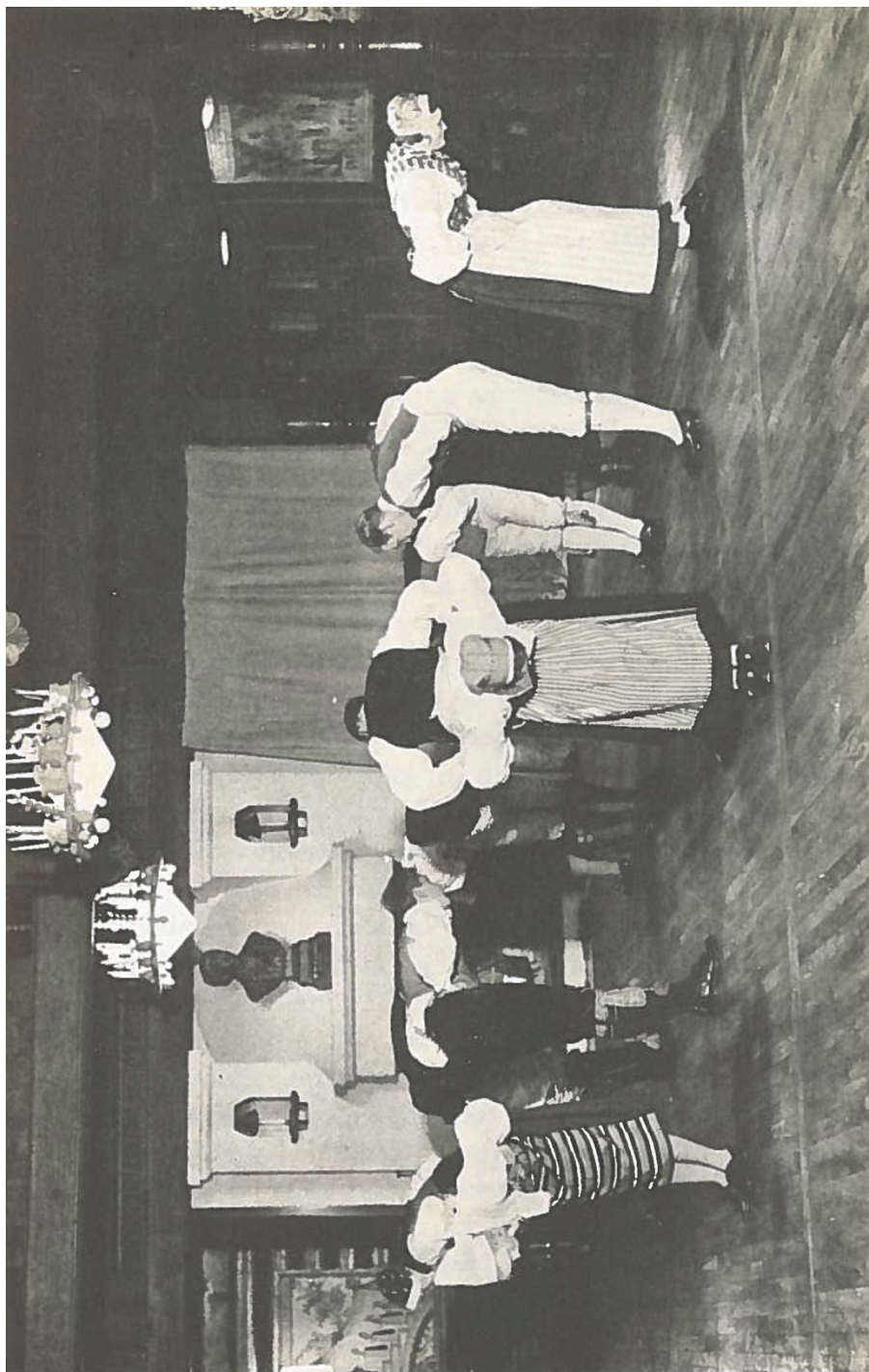
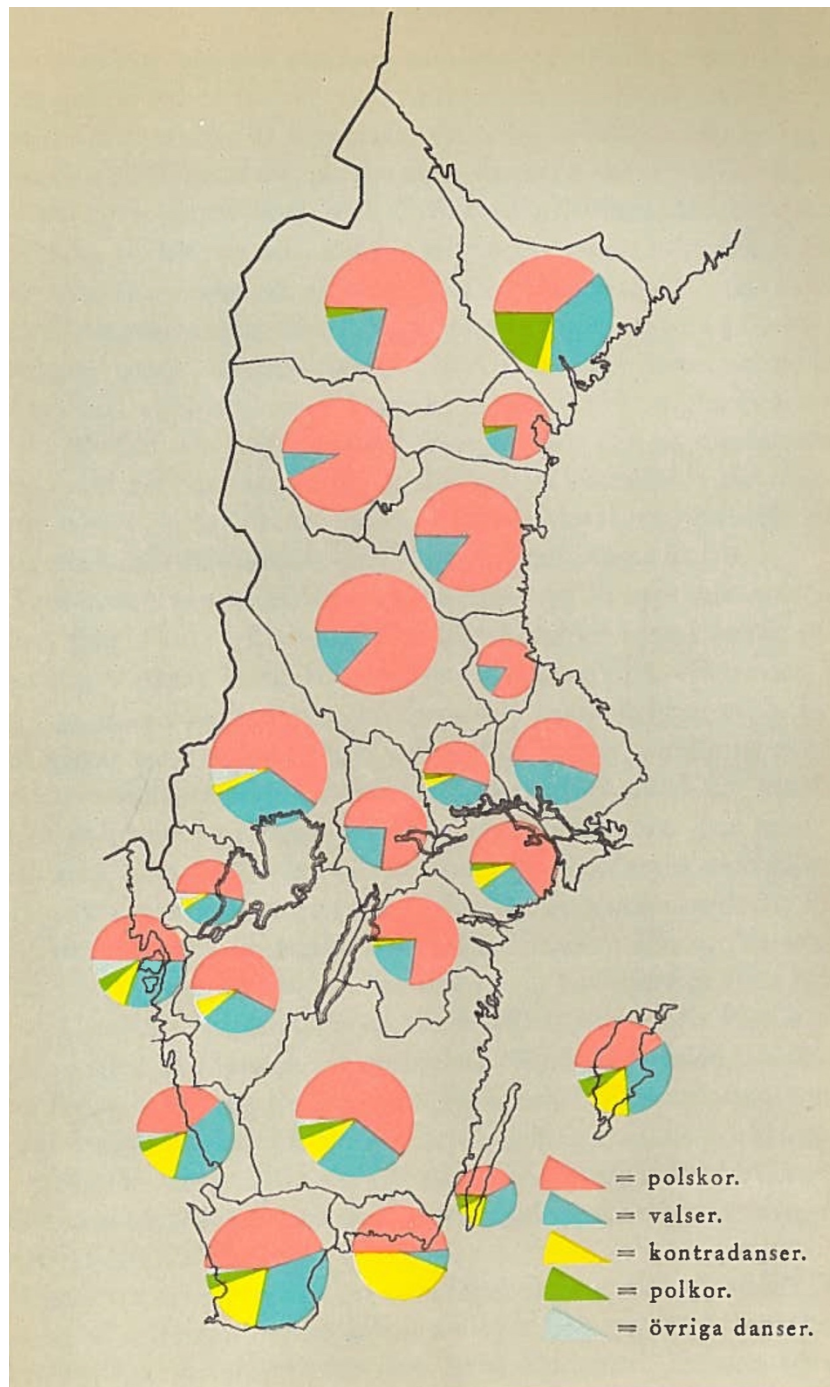


Fig. 9 [p. 279] *Snurrebocken*. The bowing-figure. Skansen's Folk Dance Group (*Skansens Folkdanslag*).



Pl. VI [p. 280] The *polska*'s distribution in Swedish provinces in relation to other folk dances. Red: *polska*, blue: waltz, yellow: contra dance, green: polka, grey: other dance forms.



Fig. 10 [p. 282] *Jösshärads polska* [*Polska* from Jössehärad]. *Jösshärskast* [Jösshär's-throw]. Drawing by Lisa Santesson



Fig. 11 [p. 283] *Jösshärads polska* [*Polska* from Jössehärad]. Cartwheel. Drawing by Lisa Santesson

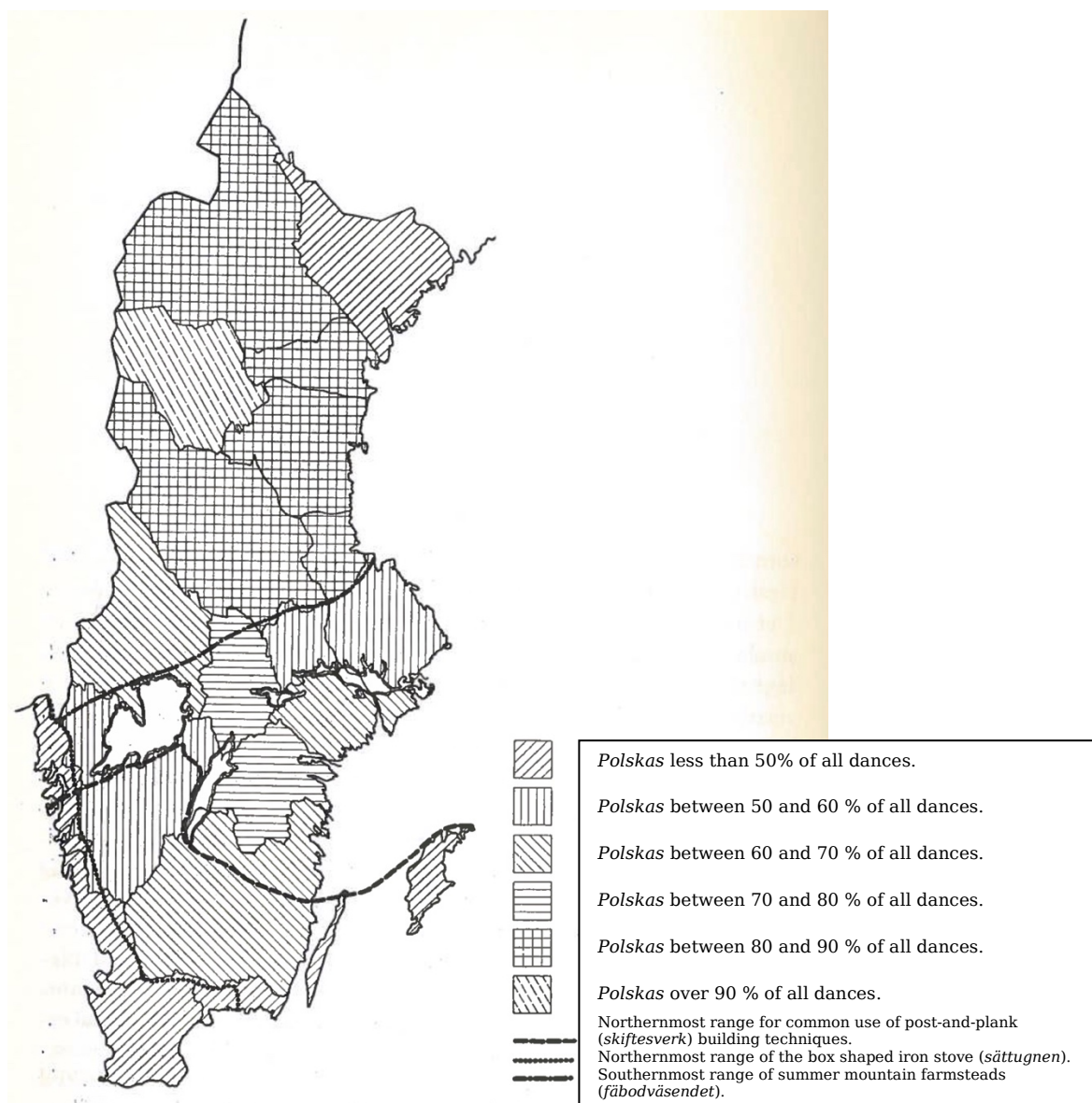


Fig. 12 [p. 284]. The prevalence of *polskas* in relation to all other dances, and in comparison to some of Sigurd Erixon's suggested cultural borders.

The polkas represent the last dances that became part of the folk dance repertoire and are unlikely to be from before the 1850s. The waltz, however, began its spread across the country at least 25 years before the polka, and it is the only competitor to the *polska* all the way up to the northern provinces. My only explanation of these circumstances is that, in these northern areas, folk music and folk dance were extinct after the arrival of the waltz but before the arrival of the polka. For several reasons I argue that this was around the 1880s.

The second map (fig. 12) shows both the *polska's* relative frequency in relation to all other dance forms and its relation to a few of the ethnologist Sigurd

Erixon's suggested cultural borders. Of great importance is that the areas with the lowest *polska* frequency, under 50 per cent, are in the old Danish provinces and on the island provinces of Öland and Gotland. This also corresponds to the northern range of the box-shaped iron stove ('*sättugnen*'). This point and the former support one another to confirm the importance of the old political border between Sweden and Denmark. With regards to the *polska*, this relationship is more unexpected as it suggests that a distinction was already established prior to the Treaty of Roskilde^{*7} and thus before the term *polska* itself became widely used in Sweden. It is also notable that the present-day southern border for the practice of bringing animals to mountain farmstead for summer pasture (*fäbodväsendet*) closely follows the southern border for those areas with the highest frequency of *polskas*, that is, where it represents 80 per cent or more of all dances. The importance of this cultural border is obvious. That areas where people have preserved an old-fashioned, almost ancient, economical system have the most *polskas* is unlikely to be a coincidence. The Värmland province has a somewhat lower frequency of *polska* than would have been expected from its position. Therefore, I have made a special investigation of the source material from this area (fig. 13). The investigation shows that the relatively high frequency of waltzes, which influences the results, is from one single region in the province. In the late 18th and early 19th century this particular region, which had previously been uninhabited, emerged as a centre for iron mills and industrial activity. In the province's older farming communities, the so-called Bergslagen area with its medieval iron mills and also along the river Klarälven, where mills were built in the 17th and 18th centuries, the *polskas* are in the clear majority.

What conclusions do we dare draw from this investigation? First, it is certain that even if they were once imported into the country, the *polskas* include some of the oldest known Swedish dances. Furthermore, the *polska*'s distribution and change in frequency across the old national border suggest that they contain characteristics that are purely Swedish rather than Scandinavian.

Finally, drawing on both the *polska*'s distribution and our analysis of its form, one might speculate that the picture of dancers on a stained glass window from Gotland dated 1609 [fig. 14], contains characteristics of a kind that 50 years later could have been called a *polsker dans* [polish dance].

^{*7} [In 1658 when Denmark ceded the provinces of Skåne, Halland, Bohuslän and Blekinge to Sweden. E.W.]

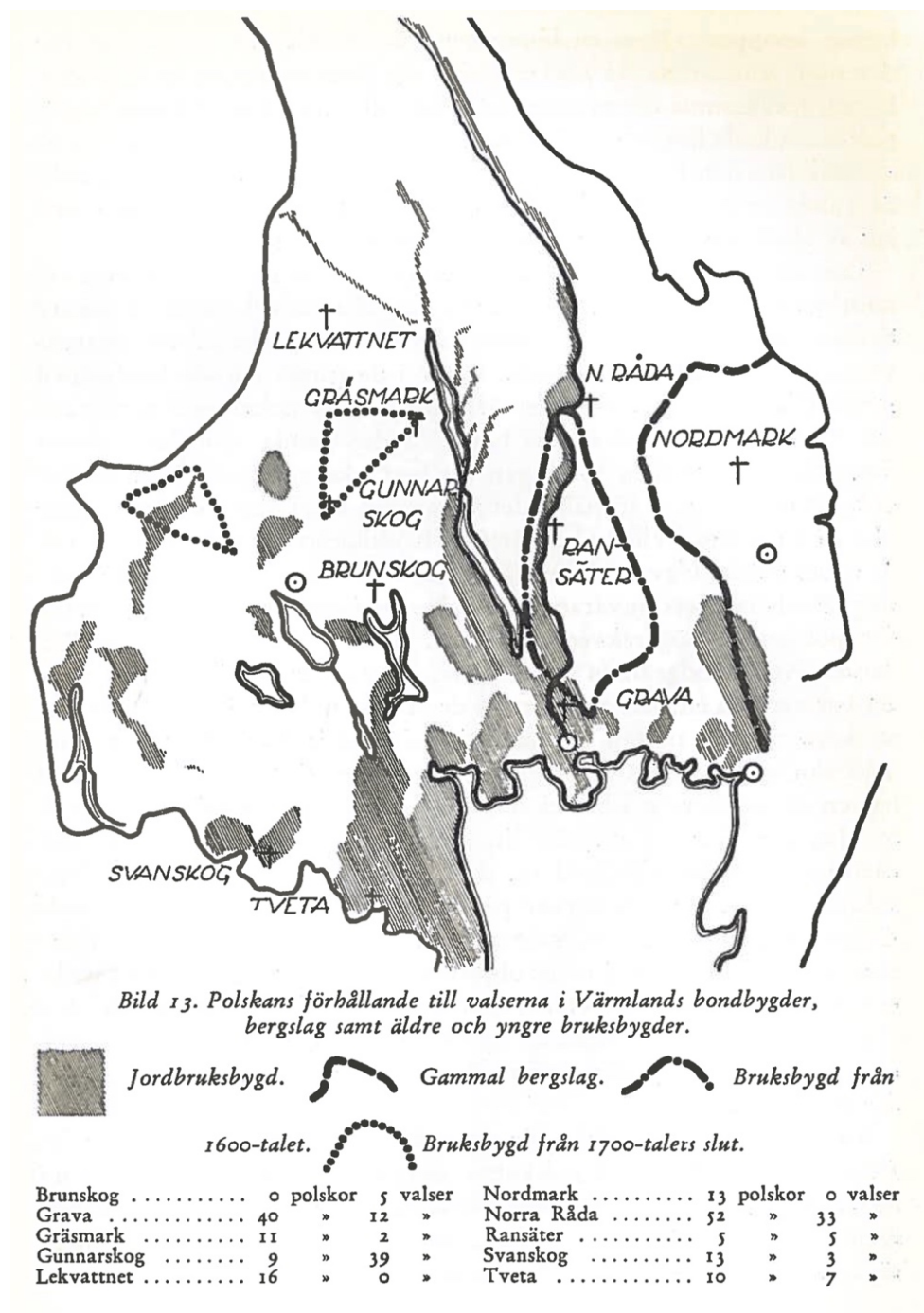


Fig 13 [p. 285] The *polskas* relation to the waltz in agricultural and iron mill communities of older and more recent date in the Värmland province.

[from upper left to right: agricultural communities; older iron mills; mills from the 17th century; mills from the late 18th century; below: list of place names/churches, *polskor* = *polskas*, *valser* = waltzes. E.W.]



Fig. 14 [p.287], *Polska*. Stained glass window from the Gotland province, dated 1609. In the collections of the Nordic Museum, Stockholm.