

Famine and plague in Nuckö 1697-1710

By Karl-Erik Frandsen

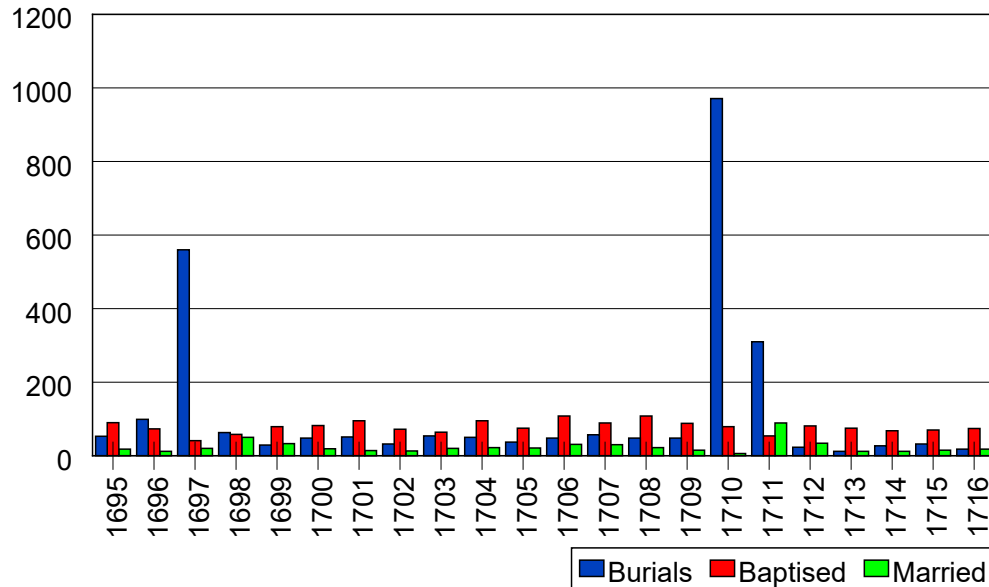
University of Copenhagen.

Nuckö is a peninsula located in the north-western corner of Estonia in Wiek, north of Hapsal. As in many other places in Estonia more than 77% of the population died because of the plague, or more precisely, the population dwindled by more than 77% from 1709–1712. The area was populated by Swedish speaking farmers and fishermen who settled there in the 13th century, which is why there are well-preserved church records written in Swedish.¹ The parish of Nuckö is still officially a Swedish-Estonian municipality.

The following graph shows the tragic history of this community at the beginning of the eighteenth century:

Nuckö

Demographic development 1695-1716



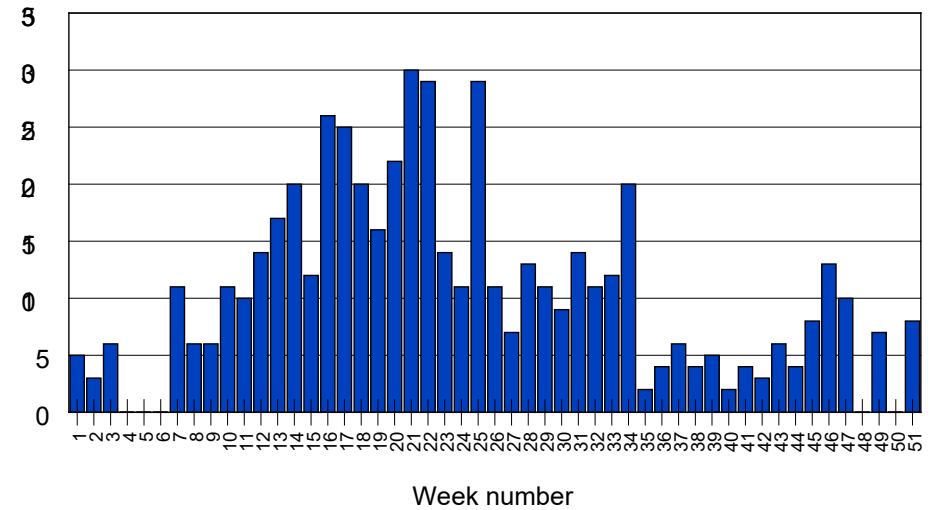
Church records indicate: Total number of burials 2,670; baptised 1,718

The plague in 1710 clearly hit a society already weakened by the disastrous great famine of 1697, which raged in the entire East Baltic region and was caused by repeated crop failures.

Church records make it possible to analyse the terrible year of 1697 in Nuckö.

Nuckö 1697

Burials per week



Total burials according to the church records: 537

More than 500 people died in 1697, compared to 44 people in a normal year, which means the Crisis Range Mortality (CRM) for 1697 was 12.8. The vicar wrote in the church records that they died of hunger,² and there is no reason to doubt his words. The quantity of statements similar to the following, “Died under an open sky in a field or in the village street” or “A boy’s body found in the morass”, indicate the terribleness of the situation.

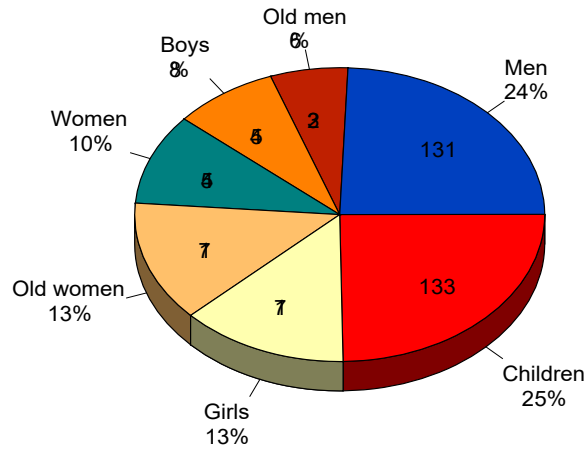
The above graph indicating the number of burials in Nuckö in 1697 differs from similar graphs on the plague in that there is no clear climax. There is, however, a marked decrease in the number of burials in week 35 (end of August), which is remarkably late. Presumably the harvest started in week 31 at the beginning of August in the Swedish calendar corresponding to the middle of August in the Gregorian calendar. There was also a big increase in the number of burials in week 34. Apparently, the surplus of food from the harvest did not affect the death toll from the famine. The vicar not only writes the family names and name of the village of the deceased, but individually categorises those who died into husband, wife, old man, old woman (mostly widows), boy, girl and child. The exactitude of the terminology, however, is of course impossible to determine.

¹ Estonian State Archives in Tartu, Fond no. 3169.

² “uthaf hunger och rödsoot”

Nuckö 1697

Burials according to gender and age

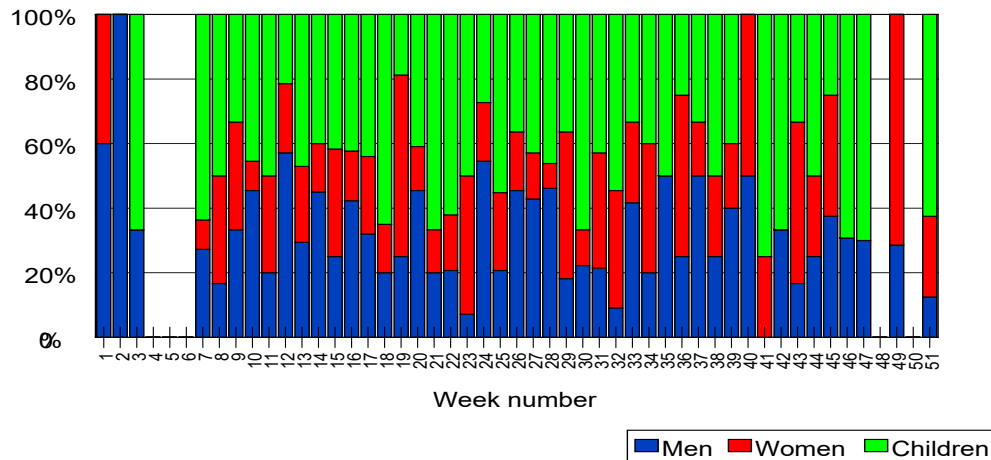


Total 537

Apparently, the famine hit men to the same degree as women, and, not surprisingly, approx. 45% of the deceased were children. Surprisingly, however, ~25% of the dead were adult men.

Nuckö 1697

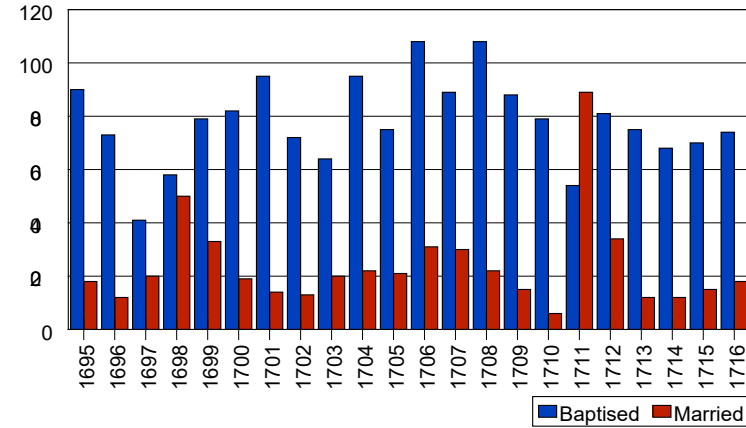
Percentage of burials according to age and gender per week



An analysis for burials in 1697 of the development of the relative distribution of gender and children shows that the distribution was rather stable throughout the year, contrary to expectations, where one would have expected, for example, that relatively more children would have died at the beginning of the famine compared to the end of the year.

Nuckö

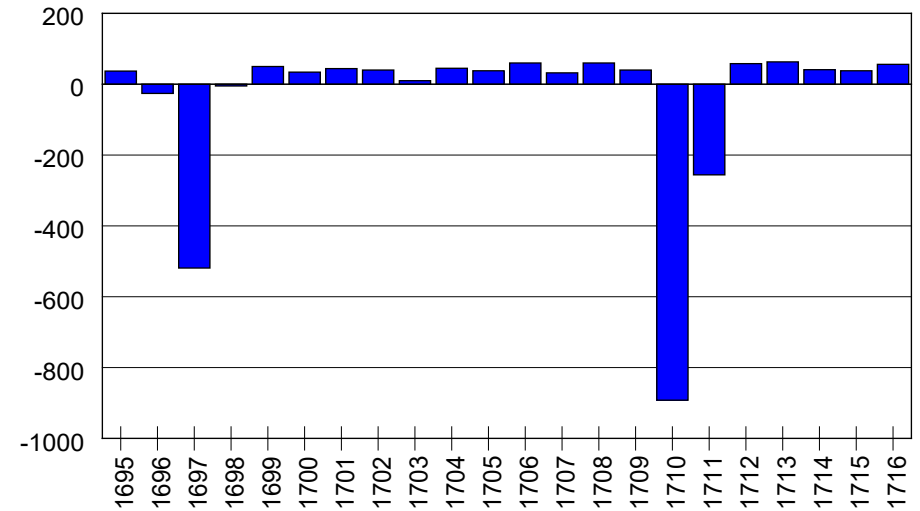
Married and baptised



Nuckö is a prime example of a well-known phenomenon where many people marry and subsequently give birth to a lot of children after a demographic disaster such as the famine of 1697 and the plague in 1710.

Nuckö

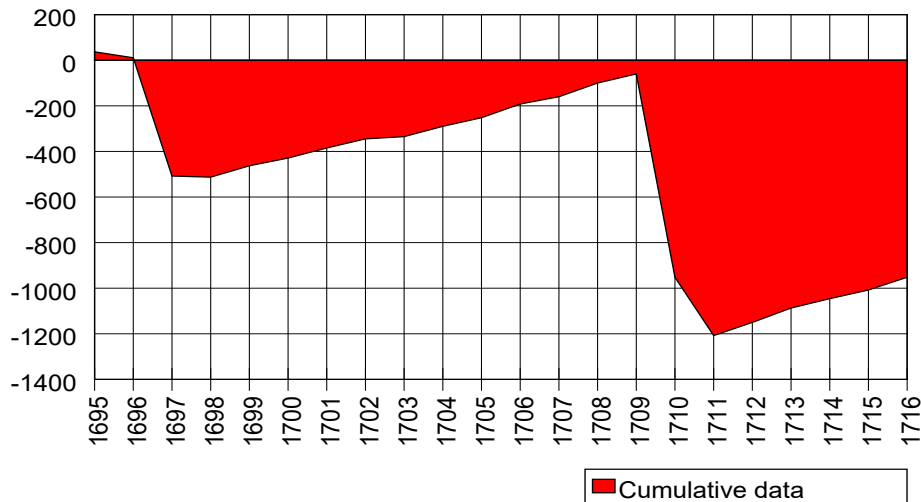
Annual natural growth



As expected, the result was a net annual growth in the population of a surplus of births over deaths of approximately 50 people over the next decade.

Nuckö

Natural increase (baptisms - burials)

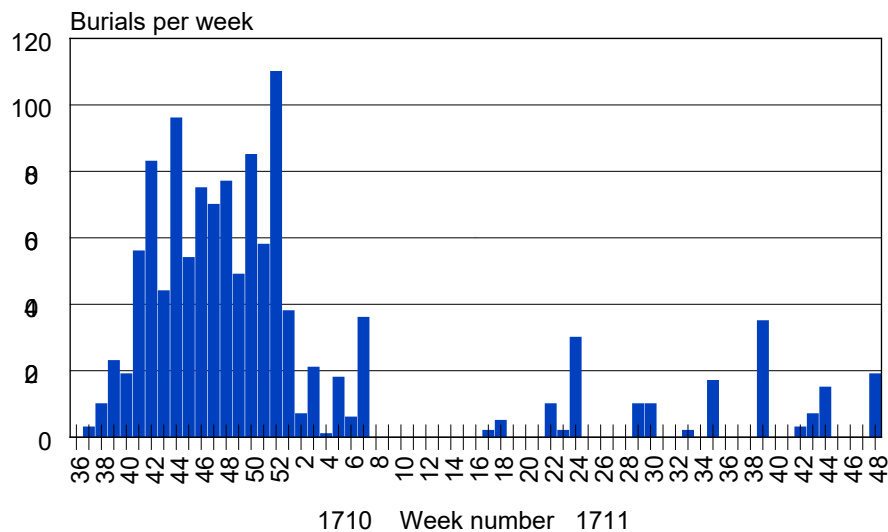


Total burials: 2.670: baptisms: 1.718: deficit: 952.

By 1709, the population loss had been recuperated, but then the next disaster hit the small community. This time, there is no doubt that it was the plague.

Nuckö

1710-1711



Burials 1710: 971; Burials 1711: More than 310

On the top of a page in the church records, the vicar wrote, “morbo pestis incipiente”.³ On 28 September (week 39), seven people were buried at the church in Nuckö. One of them was Oluf Jacobsen from Skatenäs. The vicar wrote that Jacobsen, “Died on the boat between Reval and Spithamn”⁴ in the northern part of the parish. Of course impossible to prove, the obvious conclusion to make is that Jacobsen brought the plague with him from Reval, where conditions were pitiless at the time.

The same day, a maiden and a boy from Anders Tomassen’s farm in Rickul were buried. A few days later on 4 October, the wife of Hendrich Lucasson and three maidens from the same farm in Rickul were buried. The following entry in the church records on 16 October is the first of its kind, “Thomas Persson’s farm in Roslep. Six corpses buried”⁵. This was not the last time the vicar gave up listing people individually, but it makes compiling any statistics relating to gender and age impossible, which is a great pity.

In the second week of October (week 41), the epidemic in Nuckö worsened and on 25 October, for example, the following 12 people were buried:

- A wife, Jürgen Jürgenson and two children
- A husband, his wife and two children from the same farm
- An old man from Rickul, Hans Petersen and two children

On 29 October the following people died:

- At Hendrich Robertsen’s farm in Hästfjord, 6 people
- At Mathias Robertsen’s farm in Kirkhult, 3 people
- At Erich Simonsen’s farm in Enby, 4 people
- At Magnus Mattsen’s farm in Spithamn, 6 people

In the village of Gamby, which must have been severely hit, the following burials are listed on 1 November:

- At Bengt’s farm, 5 people
- At Lebb Mårtensen’s farm, 9 people
- At Oluff Bertelsen’s farm, 5 people, no one survived

These horrific numbers pale in comparison to an entry from 7 November, which states, “60 people died in the village of Persåker”.⁶

From 1 to 11 November alone (weeks 43, 44 and part of 45), 181 people “died by the raging plague”⁷ in Nuckö. It is unfathomable how they could possibly have managed to bury so many corpses.

And yet, there is another entry on 27 November from Odensholm, which states, “50 people died, villagers and foreigners”.⁸ The foreigners were most likely refugees seeking protection from the Russians.

³ “Deaths due to the plague began”.

⁴ “bleff dødth på båten mellan Reval och Spithamn”.

⁵ Thomas Perssons gård i Roslep. 6 Lijk.

⁶ “Dödde ur Byn Persåker 60 Personer”.

⁷ “Grassante pestis morbo”.

⁸ “Dödde Bys Folck och fremmande 50 pson”.

On 22 December, the vicar wrote in the church records that “the deadly plague is still raging”, and he was right.⁹ Contrary to the normal pattern, the plague did not diminish with the coming of winter and only reached its peak in the final week of the year with 110 burials. The vicar calculated that 971 people out of approximately 1400 died in 1710, 912 of them during the plague.

In January 1711, the plague continued, but the vicar was apparently no longer able to update the church records. There are only a few entries in the second week of January, one at the end of the month and five in mid-February. There are no entries at all between 18 February and 15 March. This certainly does not mean that the plague had ended, on the contrary.

On 15 March (week 11) the records state that ten people from Bergsby died, but only a few burials were recorded over the next few months. On 12 June (week 24) the records state that between 12 June and 8 July more than 30 people died in Sutlep. This means that the plague was absolutely not over. A 22 July entry stating that ten more people died indicates that the wretched people of Sutlep continued to suffer.

The village of Österby, located on the southern part of the peninsula, had barely been touched by the epidemic, but it eventually hit full force with ten burials listed for Österby on 2 September and 32 more on 27 September. One of the last to die of the plague in the parish of Nuckö was a young boy from Österby named Claus Matsen, who was buried on 2 December.

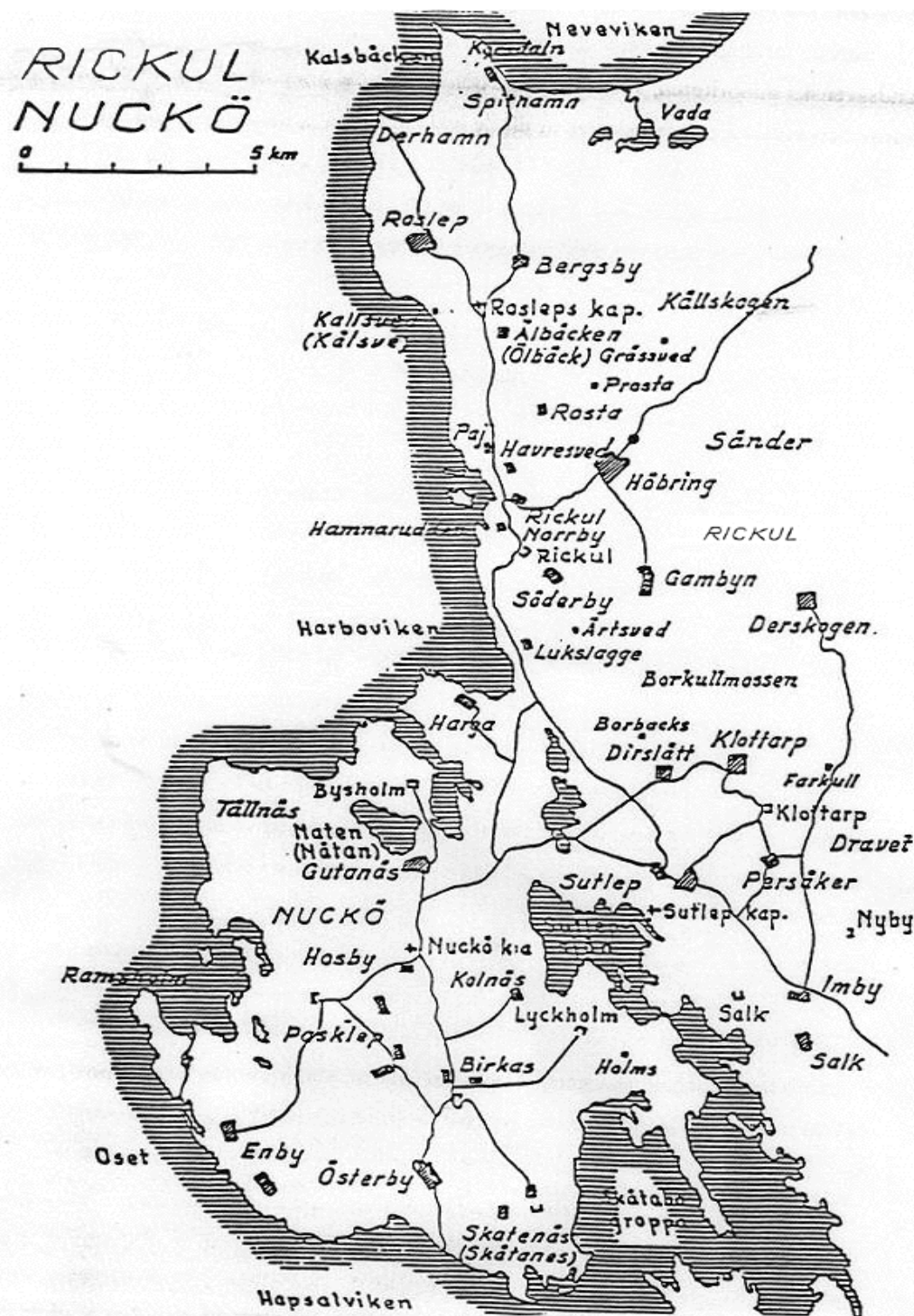
Even at this point, it is difficult to say whether the plague in Nuckö truly was over, because even though there are no entries after the 2 December, the vicar wrote at the end of the last page for 1711, “And still many who are not recorded,¹⁰ **summa summarum 1711 öfver 320**”.

Describing what happened in the many weeks where no data is available is of course difficult, but I would cautiously guess that the plague continued throughout most of 1711 until the last week of November, but on a smaller scale than in 1710, simply because almost everyone had died.

In an unpublished paper, the Estonian historian Tiiu Oja calculates that 1,276 people died in the parish of Nuckö because of the plague, or 84% of the population, which means, according to her calculations, that the parish had a pre-plague population of 1,500. The magnitude of Oja’s estimates is probably right, but the percentages are more likely to be too low rather than too high.

The plague continued its way through Estonia and Livonia. From the countryside people tried to escape as well the Russians as the plague by seeking shelter inside the strong fortifications of Reval (Tallinn) and Riga.

Unfortunately the refugees brought the plague with them, so in the spring of 1710 the plague showed itself inside the gates of the two cities. The disease took its harvest not only among the civilians but also among the soldiers, so Riga was forced to capitulate to



⁹ “Pesto mor bo adhuc grassante”.

¹⁰ “Idem många ther icke äro upptecknadhe”.



A nineteenth-century print of people from Nuckö wearing clothes similar to what was most likely worn in the eighteenth century.

the Russians on 5/15 June and Reval a few months later: 30 September/10 October 1710. There were simply not enough men to arm the bastions, so in this dreadful way the powerful Swedish empire was lost not so much because of the weapons but because of the awful contagious disease.

Many native Swedes managed to escape from the Russians by boats to Finland and Sweden, but they brought the bacteria with them. In August 1710 Helsingfors and Stockholm was hit, and after having caused a lot of deaths and misery the plague marched southwards towards Scania.

In October 1710 a passenger on a Dutch ship from Stockholm arrived in Elsinore. He got sick and died a few days later. In the same house were more deaths during the next weeks. The inhabitants were terrified, but the epidemic did not really explode until the spring of 1711. In the summer about 1/3 of the people of Elsinore died by the plague, which spread along the coast to Copenhagen, where a similar proportion of the inhabitants perished.

The Danish authorities were really efficient to confine the plague to Eastern Sjøælland East of a line from Roskilde to Præstø. Because of the war, however, they could not manage to keep the disease away from Schleswig and Holstein. In August 1712 Stade was hit, and the Plague at last died out in Hamburg and Bremen in the summer of 1713.

Litterature:

Karl-Erik Frandsen: The last Plague in the Baltic Region. Copenhagen 2007.

Bodil E.B. Persson: Pestens gåta. Farsoter i det tidiga 1700-talets Skåne. Studia Historica Lundensia. 2001.

Major outbreaks of plague in the Baltics

