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Personal Agency in the Age of State-Building

Sweden c. 1550 - 1650

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Controversial state building

In this project, early modern state building in Sweden is studied from the point of view of personal agency. This brings a new “personal level” to the much debated state building process, which has so far been mainly studied from a structural perspective. A lot of new basic research is needed, as macro-level studies have forgotten the practical significance of persons as agents, a factor which offers a new viewpoint on 16th-century reality. The project aims to satisfy this deficiency by applying new methods that combine various types of source material and already existing biographical data.

Our study will deal with an era when strongly centralized states of a new kind began to emerge in Europe. Internationally, the case of early modern Sweden is especially interesting as the state building process transformed a locally dispersed and sparsely populated area into a strongly centralized absolute monarchy and a European overseas empire at the beginning of the 17th century.

The first steps in forming a state in Sweden were taken by King Gustav I (1523–1560), who replaced semi-independent local vassals and made the monarch the true centre of power. After his reign, the realm was torn for decades by power struggles between his sons, culminating in civil war in the 1590s. At the same time, Sweden was engaged in almost continuous wars against Russia. Enormous new demands on resources ensued, but reform failed to keep pace with these. On the contrary, the late 16th century has been seen as an era of hesitation and even regression into the medieval dispersion of power.

It seems that focused state building faltered at a time when it would have been most needed. What happened? In both the European and the Swedish contexts, state building has been studied from numerous points of view. The traditional approach, concentrating on the actions of kings and other rulers, has broadened to encompass conditions at the local level, which determined the central government’s possibilities to wield power. The situation has been described as bargaining between kings and their subjects. Depending on the point of view adopted, researchers have emphasized either the “top-down” model, resulting, in the Swedish context, in a strong-power state in the 17th century, or the “bottom-up” model, in which the subjects are the decisive factor behind all state organisation.

We wish to bring the role of persons into focus here. Our project approaches state-building in early modern Sweden from the point of view of personal agency. This has long remained in the shadow of the study of structures and institutions. We believe that with this novel approach we can shed light on numerous important questions about the nature of administration and the possibilities of state formation. The emphasis on individuals also corresponds well with 16th-century reality. The powerful, all-pervasive centrally controlled structures that characterized the Swedish power state of the following century were simply not a reality in the 16th century. Administration comprised the execution of various tasks that the king delegated to his followers. Some of the posts, like those of local bailiffs, were established by Gustav I. Others were created when some special service was needed, like the collection of a new tax or the organization of a plundering expedition on

enemy soil. The most important posts such as lordship of castles and government of territories, were reserved for members of the nobility.

There still remain a number of controversies concerning the role of individuals in our current picture of state building. A widely accepted idea is that the possibilities of the central power were circumscribed because it had to legitimize its power and integrate subjects into the decision-making processes. However, equally well known is the fact that in the Swedish context the king's person played a crucial role. After Gustav I, the king made all important decisions alone and listened to the advice of his counsellors only if he so wished. Much depended on his current state of mind, and both of the following kings, Eric XIV and John III, were notorious for their mood swings.

Such paradoxes concerning the division of power in the realm have their roots in the approaches taken by earlier research, which have not permitted a synthesis of agent and structure. We believe that studying persons and their actions can reveal new mechanisms of the distribution of power in practice and the dynamics of networks of influence. The governing apparatus had not yet been adapted to the growing needs created by war and international competition. It gradually became impossible for the king to control everything personally; but he did not have an effective administration to rely on. It would be decades before Charles IX seized power (1604–11) and re-instituted reforms which were completed by his son Gustav II Adolf (1611–32) in co-operation with the Privy Council.

The much discussed subject of state building needs new basic research on the micro level focusing on the concrete manifestations of the phenomenon. The broad outlines and structural development have already been well researched especially with regard to political events and war history on the macro level. However, many basic studies of this era are already relatively dated and to some extent obsolete. The basic problem of the current picture is that state building is usually seen as an institutional process that develops inexorably, following its own internal logic. The micro level, including the role of persons at different levels of society in initiating and realizing the process of state building, has largely remained uninvestigated.

This is why innovative approaches are urgently needed. Our researchers' myriad new methods, including the use of personal and private sources, a comprehensive comparative approach and theoretical innovations such as re-writing and re-adapting rational choice theory to better suit the historical reality, make it possible to exploit sources that have formerly remained under-utilized and also to re-interpret already used source materials from a fresh point of view.

Actors inside state building

The aim of this project is to provide fresh insights into the state building process in Sweden in the transitional period circa 1550–1650. During those years, many far-reaching administrative reforms were carried out, and the Swedish state developed into a prime example of the early modern "power-state". The chosen time period for our project does not follow the usual timelines, which have emphasized the sovereignty of the Swedish

Crown and Gustav Vasa's rise to power in 1523. However, radical changes started only after 1550, which is also the starting point for this research, and thorough-going reforms in central and local government, state finances, the church and everyday life likewise took place only in the latter half of the sixteenth century. This era of change continued into the 17th century.

In Sweden, continuous warfare and the problem of the royal succession after Gustav Vasa, which was resolved only at the beginning of the 17th century, accompanied the domestic reforms and for their part "prolonged" the 16th century. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was a significant watershed in establishing the status of Sweden in the European context. Although the domestic process of reshaping and building the state reached its peak in the 1630s, our research continues up to 1650 because the implementation of the reforms in practice was realized only gradually.

Despite the fact that during this period, the Swedish state developed significantly, it has attracted relatively little attention from researchers in recent decades. Much attention has been paid to the years of instability in the 1590s, but apart from that, few researchers have analyzed the state building process in detail. However, the Swedish case is internationally interesting because Sweden's success in the Thirty Years War has been considered primarily a result of the restructuring of the state and its ability to hold society together despite the heavy burdens that warfare imposed on it. Thus, this research will provide new nationally and internationally relevant information, which will be reported to the research community both in the Nordic countries and internationally.

The main hypothesis of our project is that state building was a more diversified and personalized process than has previously been assumed. In the case of Sweden, the state formation process has often been presented as an ongoing evolution directed by the ruler and his closest counsellors or institutions, but our hypothesis is that many individuals – noblemen, office-holders, etc. – were also crucially important actors in the process, and that the development itself was not a straightforward progression but fundamentally intertwined with the ability and activity of these "lower-level" actors. Thus this research re-evaluates the process of state building by focusing on actors and individuals rather than macro-level institutions.

In the early modern period, the private and the public were often tightly intertwined, and this connection is of particular interest to us. By researching individual lives or careers, we want to take a look at the period from below but without forgetting the broader picture formed by the macro-level context. The personal approach enables us to expose the difficulties, setbacks and false steps that the administration had to deal with, not to mention the possibility that at times there was no direction or progress. In addition, this approach makes it possible to study how personal power and institutional power were interwoven. Patron-client networks and informal relations inside "public" institutions have so far received little attention in research in the case of Sweden.

The innovativeness of this research consists of several elements. The approach is unique, and the time period under discussion questions the conventional epoch marks set by

historians. Moreover, in order to produce groundbreaking results from a long established area of research, we will be using methods and source materials that have not been employed in research on this period before.

Research partners

Wim Blockmans is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Leiden. Rector of The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). He was editor-in-chief of the twelve-volume series “The Roots of Western Civilization”, and of the seven-volume series “Origins of the Modern State”.

Michael Braddick is Professor of History at the University of Sheffield and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. He has published widely on various aspects of state formation and forms of political resistance in early modern England.

André Holenstein is Professor of Early Modern Swiss and Comparative Regional History at the University of Bern. He has published widely on various aspects of state building and also organized an international conference on state building from below, Europa 1300–1900, in Monte Verità, Switzerland in 2005.

Jon Mathieu is Professor of History at the University of Lucerne and lecturer at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. He is the founding Director of the Institute of Alpine History at the University of Lugano. He was co-organizer of the conference on state building from below.

Christian Krötzl is Professor of History at the University of Tampere and Head of the Department of History and Philosophy. His research interests include medieval society and church history, the papacy and the cults of saints. He currently (2008–2011) leads the Academy of Finland-funded project “Transition and Continuity. Society, Everyday Life and Religion in Northern Europe, 1450–1600”.

Jason Lavery is Associate Professor of History at Oklahoma State University. His research interests include early modern Europe, Germany and Scandinavia. He is currently working on a book project entitled *Lutheranism's Frontier: The Reformation in Finland 1523–1611*.

Mats Hallenberg, Ph. D. is university lecturer at the University of Stockholm. Hallenberg has conducted extensive research on 16th- and 17th-century public officials and points of tension in the state building process in the Swedish realm.

Marko Lamberg, Ph. D., adjunct professor, is a researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. Lamberg is an expert in the medieval and early modern periods of Swedish and Finnish history. He has widely studied community history and used prosopographic methods in his analyses of personal and administrative history.

Anu Lahtinen, Ph. D., adjunct professor, is a research fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. She is an award-winning gender historian who has studied women as actors in 16th-century Sweden.

Mirkka Lappalainen, Ph. D., is a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki. She is a well known and respected historian who has widely studied 16th- and 17th-century Swedish family and political history.

Nils Erik Villstrand is Professor of History at Åbo Academi University. He is one of the leading experts in the fields of political culture and agency in the period when Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden.

Harald Gustafsson is Professor of History at the University of Lund. He has conducted extensive research on the practical implementations of the state building process and promoted discussions on state building theories in the Nordic countries.

Researchers

Professor Petri Karonen concentrates on the difficult question of the denouement of the so-called crisis of the 1590s, which forms an extremely important watershed in state building in the Swedish realm. The passing of power to Duke Charles (later King Charles IX) made the long-range and systematic development of the country possible. However, Sweden encountered serious difficulties because Charles carried out extensive purges in the central administration. The King's closest advisers were largely secretaries not of noble birth, and in 1609 the only influential member of the aristocracy to be made a member of the Privy Council was the 26-year-old Axel Oxenstierna. Oxenstierna quickly obtained the confidence of the absolutistic king. When Charles died in 1611, Oxenstierna was the most important figure in the Nobles. The new king, Gustav II Adolf, at once made him Lord High Chancellor, in which post he became the most influential individual directing Sweden's fundamental policies during her period as a great power. The study will examine the relationship between Charles IX and Axel Oxenstierna in the state building process and particularly the domestic pacification of society in this period of crisis.

Professor Kustaa H.J. Vilkuna will publish a study entitled "The Mad Prince". This work is closely linked to the project's central subject and studies the life of Prince Magnus (1542–1595) on three analytic levels. The first is the prince's training to be a monarch, which combined traditional Medieval and ideologically new views of monarchy. The second was Magnus's mental illness, which dictated the social relationships of the royal family, who strove to keep it secret, and the third was the public use of the notion of illness (keeping in mind the stigma attached to the mental defects of the older Vasa family and the older nobility) in the political struggles for power related to state building.

Adjunct Professor Olli Matikainen will publish a biographical study of Gödik Gustafsson Fincke (c. 1546–1617), who was a prominent figure among Finnish noble administrators, and whose personal life reflected the socio-political tensions and structural changes taking place in the transition from the medieval to a more modern state. The focus of his study

will be Fincke's actions as the lord of Savonlinna Castle in the period 1582–1599. Nearly all of the biographical source materials from this period have survived, in addition to the administrative accounts and registers. The goal of this biographical study is to broaden the contextual framework surrounding Fincke's life and to situate his actions within a wider perspective.

Ph.D. Janne Haikari will study the careers of three officials in the Swedish administration during the Thirty Years War. Erik Andersson was a tax officer and a war commissar in various locations in the 1620s, Antti Äimä was appointed a *cammarfiscal* in 1633, as was Samuel Cröell in 1646. Although as a commissar Erik Andersson was part of the military administration and the latter two officials belonged to the civil administration, their jobs were essentially directed towards the same goal. They were administrative controllers who tried to uncover possible derelictions of officers and officials. Their attention was directed mainly toward local administration, to those officials who worked face-to-face with the common people and to their closest superiors, but they were also supposed to proceed in their actions if the suspected party was a nobleman or a higher-ranking officer. In order to succeed, they had to have a good knowledge of local conditions and bureaucratic practices, including the weaknesses of the system. The three persons in question have already been well studied in historical research. Previous research thus provides a solid background for this study, showing as it does that the duties involved in the job were difficult to execute. Charging and prosecuting powerful noblemen created problems for all three officials. This study will re-evaluate the picture we have of these three by comparing them with each other in terms of their careers, social networks and communication skills. Moreover, the position of these actors may need to be reconsidered. While previous research is more or less nationally orientated and emphasises "bureaucratic rationality" as the main driving force behind their actions, this study turns its attention to the informal areas of their careers and lives. To understand their successes and failures, it is necessary to locate their place in patron-client networks and to evaluate their abilities to inspire friendship, loyalty and trust among people who were their servants, superiors or colleagues. Since their duties dealt with the malfunctioning of bureaucracy, this study will also explicitly shed light on the problems of state building in Sweden.

Ph.D. Piia Eino will study the ethos and morality of office-holders during the formation of the Swedish state (c. 1550–1650). The process of state building required experienced and literate officials in order to put new measures into effect and to establish novel reforms. The central government was created during the reign of Gustav I Vasa, and this research asks: How were the office-holders recruited, and what qualifications were required? How did the conditions of office-holding change during the state formation period, and what kind of ethos and morality were entailed in office-holding – were they created by pressures from below and/or above, or did the office-holders construct their own norms? Office-holding and its ethos and morality will be examined in a broader urban and social context through the activities of two important officials, one of whom was the Royal Secretary and later Burgomaster of Stockholm, Nils Hansson Brask, and both official and personal source materials will be used. These office-holders offer

significant insights into the process of state making and into the thinking and moral conceptions of the 16th century in general.

(Ph.D. 2011) Ulla Koskinen will study Arvid Tawast as a nobleman and an entrepreneur. This study will concentrate on the management of landed property as an integral part of a noble office-holder's life. Landed property was a prerequisite of an aristocratic lifestyle. It made possible the material wealth needed to maintain an honourable standard of living. Noble office holders also often needed to use their own money in their administrative tasks, since the Crown constantly lacked sufficient resources to fund undertakings such as wars. This also led to delays in paying salaries and other payments, so official rewards were not reliable. This is another reason why it was vital for noblemen to have a secure income from landed property. At the same time, entrepreneurship and commercial activities on the part of a nobleman represented a contradiction as they were traditionally regarded as alien to the noble identity.

(Ph.D. 2011) Marko Hakanen will study the significance of the personal actions of four aristocratic brothers – Erik Brahe (1552–1614), Gustaf Brahe (1558–1615), Magnus Brahe (1564–1633) and Abraham Brahe (1570–1630) – who were caught in the middle of a power struggle between two kings, Sigismund and Charles IX. In an age when family and pedigree played an important role in a person's social destiny, it is striking that the four brothers were evenly divided between the rival kings and that when the power struggle was over and Charles IX was the only King of Sweden, the two brothers who supported the new king were able to maintain their position in court even though some members of their family had been declared enemies of the king. Magnus and Abraham served the King in high offices and were part of the administrative machinery that played a central role in the state building process. Because the state administration in the 16th century was run by so few persons, personal relations and personal actions played a highly significant role in the process of state building as a whole.

Selected publications

Hopes and Fears for the Future in Early Modern Sweden, 1500–1800. Edited by Petri Karonen, SKS, 2009.

Marko Hakanen & Ulla Koskinen: 'From Friends to Patrons'. Transformations in the social power structure as reflected in the rhetoric of personal letters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Sweden.' *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 10:1 2009, pp. 1–22.

Ulla Koskinen: Friends and brothers: rhetoric of friendship as a medium of power in late-16th-century Sweden and Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 30, No. 3/4 (2005), pp. 238-248.