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From prehistory to Viking hegemony

THE EARLIEST SETTLEMENTS

In comparison with other parts of Europe, what is today Sweden, as a geographical entity with its modern coastal contours, is of relatively recent formation, its modern emergence the result of the end of the last Ice Age, which sheeted much of Europe until about ten thousand years ago. It began to emerge from its glacial covering of ice first in Scania, in the south. There the ice had disappeared by about 11,000 BC. Further north, the glaciers in and around what later became Stockholm vanished only around 8000 BC and it took a further four thousand years for the ice to disappear in most of the rest of the country. Indeed, in parts of Norrland, in the far north, some ice remained until just before the beginning of the Christian era. Therefore, it is only from this period that one can begin to speak of Sweden's prehistory, since there can remain no trace of any possible human presence from before the Ice Age.

The first human arrivals in Sweden in the aftermath of the Ice Age came predominantly from Denmark. They travelled across the Sound which today separates the two countries but, before the mid seventeenth century, was under Danish sovereignty on both sides for centuries. The earliest human settlement so far to be uncovered is that found in the far south of the country, at Segebro, near Malmö, which dates to about 10,000–9000 years BC. Another early settlement was that at Hensbacka, in Bohuslän, which can be dated to 7300–6600 BC. It was sustained by reindeer

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hunting, an important source of food for many of the Nordic region's inhabitants, even as far north as Pechenga (Petsamo, when it was Finnish between the two world wars), in what is today the far north-west of the Russian Federation. This common dependence on reindeer is an indication that a land route through the north of what is today Finland into Sweden may have been an important conduit, not only for reindeer but for migratory people as well. Other later settlements have been uncovered at Sandarna, where modern Gothenburg is now situated, and at Ageröd, in Scania. The former can be dated to between 6600 and 5000 BC, the latter more precisely to 6000 BC. Both communities lived largely by hunting and fishing, using implements of stone, clay, wood and bone.

The palaeolithic in Sweden persisted until the beginning of the third millennium BC, but the arrival of settled agriculture and animal husbandry in the neolithic led to dramatic changes in the life of the inhabitants. A massive influx of immigrants propelled by the westward migration of tribes from the east also further altered the social fabric of human life in the region. The most striking archaeological relics from this period are the massive stone burial tombs, some of which can be seen at Luttra, near Falköping, in Västergötaland, built, it is generally agreed, some two thousand years before the Christian era, even if the ethnic identity of their builders is still a matter of dispute.

BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENTS

Although situated on the northern periphery of Europe, the geographical area which is today Sweden was fully integrated into pan-European trading networks. The introduction of bronze around 1500 BC, made possible by the blossoming of maritime trade across the North and Baltic seas, had far-ranging consequences, especially with respect to trade. Imported bronze was exchanged for fur, slaves and gems. The metal itself was used not only for weapons, agricultural tools and other implements, but for decorative and symbolic purposes as well. Bronze jewellery was much sought after by powerful families and used to adorn woollen clothes, which had now come to supplant animal skins as the primary form of apparel.

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Massive stone tombs, a feature of the beginning of this period, came to be supplanted by earth-covered ones, filled with a wide variety of artefacts, all of which were intended to accompany the dead into the afterlife beyond. The corpses themselves now generally came to be cremated, the ashes being placed in burial urns, which were, in turn, deposited within tombs. One so-called *hällristning*, that is, rock carving, an example of which can be seen at Vitlycke, in Bohuslän, is decorated with images, not only of sailing vessels and people, but of domestic animals and practical implements, in a variety of activities, presumed to be characteristic of the time.

THE IRON AGE

After the arrival of iron in Sweden, first introduced by the Celtic-speaking tribes who had migrated to Sweden across the Baltic Sea from the south, that metal rapidly superseded bronze because of its greater practical utility. Indeed, by 500 BC, its use had become so widespread that it effected profound changes on Swedish society and agriculture. Being much stronger than bronze, iron made not only more durable and efficient weapons but better household and agricultural implements as well.

Yet, if the Iron Age in Sweden had initiated improvements in agriculture, it was also a period in which the climate had become less hospitable. Indeed, the increasingly colder climate led not only to a diminution of the population, but, almost as significant for its survival, to a reduction in trade. Nonetheless, though now more limited in volume, mercantile links were by no means extinguished and archaeology demonstrates that a variety of valuable objects, including glassware and elaborately decorated pots now began to appear in Sweden from the Roman Empire during this period. Roman connections have also been demonstrated by the emergence of a Swedish runic language and script, which clearly shares many characteristics with the Latin alphabet. These similarities are evinced by more than fifty extant runic inscriptions from about the second century AD, which still intrigue archaeologists to this day. Initially, this old runic script was composed of twenty-four letters. However, by the seventh century, it had become more streamlined, reduced to only sixteen. It remained the written mode of expression for Swedes

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until after the country's Christianisation, when direct links with Rome came finally to be established. Thereafter, Latin rapidly superseded it, but by then the use of written language had become much wider in scope than its previous usage, largely limited to memorial inscriptions on wood, bone and stone.

As for domestic arrangements, the three-aisled longhouse was characteristic of this period. It typically contained several rooms for residential accommodation, along with a byre for livestock. The remains of such constructions have been found in various parts of Sweden, as far north as Ångermansland.

GROWTH OF CONTACT WITH THE ROMAN EMPIRE

By about AD 400, closer and more extended contacts had once again come to be formed with the Roman Empire, its political and economic decline during this period notwithstanding. Many imported commodities now passed through the hands of traders from the Germanic tribes which had begun to overrun Sweden and whose networks, largely economic, were spread southwards to the shores of the Mediterranean. Yet trade came from other directions as well, in particular from the east, and it is to this growing mercantile activity that the development of and consolidation of the nascent Swedish territorial state is largely indebted. Already, by the early sixth century, religious and other valuable objects from Asia were brought to Sweden along Russian river routes and then across the Baltic. Among the most interesting of these artefacts is a small Buddhist statue from India, now displayed in the Nordic Museum, Stockholm, a rare but fascinating example of trading links to the Asian subcontinent during this early period.

The Roman Empire throughout virtually all of its history was by no means unaware of the Nordic world and, during the early centuries of the Christian era, some Roman authors wrote about it. For example, according to the great Roman historian Tacitus, in the first century AD, the Sveas, who resided there, were a united people, with a king even in his day, but historians of our own time have come to the conclusion that a united kingdom of the Sveas can, in reality, be confirmed only from the ninth century. Perhaps Tacitus, then, in writing of northern peoples, was more interested in using contrived

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historical writing to influence events in Rome, rather than in remarking upon historical realities elsewhere.

Be that as it may, according to Procopius, a historian of the Eastern Roman Empire, writing in the early sixth century, the population of Sweden consisted of thirteen tribes, each with its own king. Later writers, however, saw the country as composed of primarily two peoples, the Sveas and the Goths, the former living to the north of the great forested belts of Kolmården and Tiveden, the latter to the south and on the island of Gotland. The matter is made more complicated by the fact that modern research concludes that the *Svitjod*, or lands of the *Sveas*, signified a more narrowly confined region, namely that which is today Uppland and parts of Västmanland, rather than a wider geographical area.

Swedish society at this time was highly hierarchical and its leaders commanded considerable political power. This they exerted in their political assembly or *Disartinget*, which helped to provide a focus for the formation of their common political identity. The primary purpose of the assembly had originally been religious, based on common sacrifices to the gods, but matters relating to government, law and trade were also discussed and decided there. The assembly also served to exert a unifying effect on the three local regions of which it was composed – Tiundaland, Attundaland and Fjärdhundraland – by increasingly forging a more unified political and economic identity than had previously been the case. Be that as it may, the existence of royal graves at Hågahögen seems to confirm that a united kingdom of the Sveas had, at least by the Scandinavian late Iron Age, certainly become a political reality. By then, it extended at least as far as Lake Mälaren to the south, the southern reaches of Norrland to the north, and the coastal regions of Finland to the east.

With trade expanding, especially eastwards, the Sveas were coming to enjoy considerable prosperity. This was characterised, in part, by the import of gold, possibly plundered from their neighbours to the south, the Goths, whose economic wellbeing was declining markedly during this period. Whether or not the ninth-century rune stone at Sparlösa, in Västergötland, can be taken to confirm decisively the hegemony of the Sveas in that province is a moot point. However, the report of the Scandinavian traveller Wulfstand to King Alfred of England, in 865, makes clear that by that year, Blekinge, Gotland

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1 Carved and erected towards the end of the first millennium on the central Baltic island of Gotland, the centre of an important trading nexus, this runic stone at Hammars in Lärebo is richly adorned with depictions of horses, warriors and Viking vessels, but its precise meaning remains obscure. Photo: Else Roesdahl.

and Öland – along with much of the Baltic coastline – were all under the rule of the Sveas. That said, it was only under King Olof Eriksson Skötkonung, at the turn of the first millennium, that both the Sveas and the Goths living in today's modern provinces of Uppland, Västmanland, Östergötland, Småland and Västergötland were all united formally under one common acknowledged ruler, thereby

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creating the basis for a unified Swedish state. In the far north, however, Saami (Lapp) settlements were to be found, not only inland but at various sites along the western coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, of which Grundskatan and Hornslandet are the most notable. The recently discovered archaeological remains of these cobbled huts, four by five metres in size with central hearths, provide evidence of their presence from at least the beginning of the fifth century AD until the end of the thirteenth century.

THE VIKING AGE

From the beginning of the ninth century AD, the Vikings of Scandinavia – Sveas, Goths, Danes, Norwegians and others – were, through a combination of pillage and trade, making a dramatic impact economically and politically on much of Europe. It is for this reason that one can speak of a Viking hegemony in the north – the term 'Viking' signifying a person inhabiting the fjords which are so characteristic of Scandinavia's coastline. Yet, whereas many western Vikings pillaged and traded with the west, many Swedish Vikings did so in the east. There they were of great importance in what is today's Russia and Ukraine, assisting in the foundation of Novgorod (Holmgård, as it was known in old Swedish), in the mid ninth century, and Kiev, in the early tenth.

Even at home in Sweden, their activities profoundly changed local life and culture: villages came into being and new lands came under cultivation. Political and judicial administration tightened, as an increasingly centralised and invasive network of powerful military and political figures consolidated their authority over a territory which had become an increasingly unitary and centralised state, and one in which a king, elected by magnates of the most powerful families, had become the dominant power. This had, to a significant degree, been made possible by the increased wealth generated by a burgeoning trade with Russia and the east. This was by no means local or even merely trans-Baltic in scope, but was truly transcontinental in its dimensions. Indeed, by means of the rivers of Russia, Swedish Vikings were able to develop important mercantile links with Byzantium, successor to the Eastern Roman Empire, and the Arab world of the Middle East.

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Towns, attracting merchants from throughout the region, became necessary for this trade and Birka, in the province of Uppland, not far from modern-day Stockholm, was Sweden's first, its *raison d'être* this very trade, which passed through the hands of its prosperous merchants. Extending over some twelve hectares, it thrived between 800 and 975, protected, as it was, by the fort that surmounted the hill to its south-west, the ramparts of which can still be seen. Its trade was from far afield, indeed, and items have been uncovered there from such far-removed places as England and the Middle East, an indication of its role as a major Baltic marketplace. It was from here, in all probability, too, that Swedish merchants went eastward to what is now Russia, through the trading centre of Roslagen, the name of which may have led them to be named the 'Rus', after they had established themselves across the Baltic Sea.

Frankish annals of the period, though, still called these Vikings Sveas and they fanned out both eastwards and southwards deep into Russia and beyond. They travelled down rivers, in particular the Volga and Dnepr, at least as far as the Black and Caspian seas, pulling their boats overland when geographical impediments, such as rapids, required it. Not a few reached Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, where some acquired considerable fortunes, not only through pillage but by employment in the imperial government. With Rome, in the west, on the other hand, to which transport links were poor, direct contacts remained minimal.

The relationship between the Byzantine imperial capital and the Swedes, while sometimes mutually beneficial, was also sporadically highly destructive: in 860, a surprise assault on Constantinople, the initiative for which emanated from Kiev, left the city plundered and weary of these Northmen. More generally, however, they were a source of profit for local people who greedily bought up their goods in the markets of the Byzantine Empire.

Another major centre of trade was Sweden's Baltic island of Gotland. Archaeological remains, both urban and rural, found scattered throughout its parishes, include objects of silver, among them many coins of Arab origins, with Kufic designs, as well as those of Byzantine mintage. These provide an indication of the wealth amassed through this trans-Baltic trade, which was largely carried out by the prosperous local landowners who frequently visited the

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overseas ports from which their trade emanated. Since many of their trading ships travelled in armed convoy, their defensive stance often transmogrified into open Viking marauding, when lucrative booty from poorly defended towns and countryside proved too tempting, beyond their shores. That said, such Swedish merchants often worked in peaceful tandem with the foreign peoples they encountered, especially those who facilitated the import and export of goods throughout Europe and beyond. This was, for example, the case with the Frisians of the North Sea coast to the west and the neighbouring Danes to the south, in particular those based at Hedeby, a major mercantile centre, where in the early tenth century a branch of the Swedish royal clan briefly succeeded in gaining political control.

Swedes traded a wide variety of goods, in all directions, but slaves, usually of Slavic ethnicity, furs and amber were the primary commodities. As for imports, these were various but silver featured prominently, highly fashionable for personal ornamentation.

Russia had by now become a land offering Swedish Vikings considerable potential political domination and, even more importantly, material gain. As the Nestor Chronicle relates, admittedly long after the events, the Swede Rörik, or Rurik, as he is known in Russia, established with his men Swedish hegemony, the so-called *Stora Svitjod*, in the lands settled by Slavs to the south and west. Archaeological remains confirm that Nordic colonists, travelling by way of Lake Ladoga and the rivers Ilmen, Volga, Don and Dnepr, were settled over a wide area, albeit concentrated therein in important seats of trade. These extended from Novgorod in the east, to Smolensk in the west and Kiev in the south. Archaeological relics, such as female jewellery, indicate that these immigrants were largely Svea from the Swedish heartland, by Birka and around Lake Mälaren, rather than from Gotland. The fact that the legal code which came to be established in Novgorod was that of the Sveas further strengthens this conclusion.

Suddenly, in 975, Birka disappeared from the chronicles as a noted trading centre. Probably it was destroyed by an enemy assault, though by whom or why precisely is not known. This did not mean, though, that its province of Uppland ceased to be an important centre for trade, since the newly established settlement of Sigtuna seems to have captured much of Birka's former trade in its

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stead. Moreover, Gotland's mercantile development also seems to have strengthened at this time. After the turn of the millennium, Lödöse, on Sweden's west coast, also became an important centre of trade, with an expanding network extending westwards across the North Sea to England and the Netherlands.

As economic integration with other parts of Europe increased, Sweden increasingly came under another profound pan-European influence: Christianity. In consequence, Sweden, too, would soon enter the ranks of Christendom and by so doing, its centuries-old religion would rapidly disappear. Nonetheless, its cultural influence would persist and, indeed, find a rich resonance surviving up to our own day.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The Vikings of Sweden left many legacies to the world, both beneficial and destructive, yet some of the most lasting, at least in cultural terms, were elements of their system of religious beliefs. The religion of the ancient Swedes has long captivated not only historians, but poets and authors from around the world, in a multiplicity of cultures, fascinated by its complex mythology, rivalling and often influenced by that of the classical world. Nowhere was its influence greater than in the central European heartland of Germany almost a millennium after its heyday, in the course of the nineteenth century, as Wagnerian images of the ancient Norse gods, still popular today, demonstrate. Nonetheless, Nordic gods and goddesses, as evinced in Wagner's majestic and multifaceted operas, should not be taken as representative of genuine pre-Christian Nordic religious beliefs. True, the Æsa cult to which Swedes adhered towards the end of the first millennium AD was clearly related to ancient Germanic religious beliefs and customs. However, their own uniqueness and individuality, as distinguished from that of nineteenth-century concepts of them, cannot be overstressed.

By no means monolithic and dogmatic, it was a porous religious system which encompassed a plethora of gods and goddesses, who played roles related to all aspects of life. It also had no formalised priesthood in the Christian sense of the term. This was in part because, as in most of the world's religions, except for Christianity,

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