1

A medieval marchland

The physical contours of northern Europe, including the 338,145 sq.km. of land and water that constitute the present-day republic of Finland, were essentially shaped in the aftermath of the great Ice Age. The retreating mass of ice scoured the crystalline bedrock of the Fenno-Scandian shield, leaving in its wake thousands of shallow lakes, eskers and drumlins, and a deeply indented coastline that is still emerging from the sea as the land recovers from the tremendous compression of the glaciers. Only in the far north of Finland does the land rise above a thousand metres. To the east, the Maanselkä ridge is a watershed for the rivers that run westwards into the Gulf of Bothnia and eastwards into the White Sea. The great lake systems of central and eastern Finland are separated from the coastal regions by a further series of ridges running in a south-eastward direction towards the south coast. Almost a quarter of the surface area of this inland region is covered by water, and a further 20 per cent is classified as wetland, mostly bogs and morasses. With all but a tiny tip of land lying north of the sixtieth parallel (Oslo and the Shetland Islands lie on this latitude, Stockholm slightly further south), Finland can claim to be the most northerly of all the countries of mainland Europe, stretching over a thousand kilometres from the northern shores of the Baltic towards the Arctic Sea. Summers are warm, but brief; winters long, dark, and cold, though there is a considerable difference between the south-west, with snow cover on average between 70 and 110 days a year, the eastern regions, averaging 160–90 days, and the

north, averaging 200–20 days. The inhabitants of this northern land have had to learn to live with winter, the floods of spring, and the vagaries of the summer months, when frosts in May or August can wreak havoc with crops, and this has helped shape a culture in which stubborn resilience, patient endurance, and hard work are held in esteem.

Finland is above all a land of trees, mostly pine and spruce, vast forests stretching as far as the eye can see; even today, over half the land surface of the country is still woodland. It was in all likelihood the forest, rich in game, that attracted settlers from the south and east some nine thousand years ago. Artefacts and bone remains from the Mesolithic period reveal an extensive hunting and fishing culture, essentially confined to the coastline and main watercourses. Elk were an important source of meat, bones, sinew, and hide, and were also an inspiration to Neolithic artists in wood and stone; seals provided blubber, meat, and skins for consumption and trade; fish, pike in particular, birds, nuts, and berries all supplemented the diet of these early settlers.

From around 3300 BC, the area of present-day Finland was on the westernmost limits of a new culture, producing pottery with a characteristic comb pattern. It is thought that the bearers of this new culture from the Volga region also spoke a Finnic language, which, in turn influenced and modified by other languages with which it came into contact, developed into what philologists term Proto-Finnish. These people appear to have settled largely south of the Gulf of Finland, though one group from which the Sami are linguistically descended seems to have broken away at an early stage and migrated to the lands north of the great lakes of Ladoga and Onega. Contacts with Ancient Baltic and East Germanic peoples significantly altered the Proto-Finnic language, and the culture of the peoples who spoke it. From the southern shores of the Gulf of Finland, the peoples who were to constitute the four main dialect groups of the Finnish language, South-West Finnish, Häme, Savo, and Karelian, moved northwards by land and sea over the next centuries.

By the beginning of the Bronze Age in northern Europe, around 1500 BC, two sharply differentiated main cultural zones had emerged. The inhabitants of the western and southern shores

were strongly influenced by contacts with Scandinavia and Central Europe, those of the hinterland continued to receive their cultural impulses from the east. In the more fertile soils of the river valleys and coastal plains, farming became the cultural norm; in the forests and moors of the north and east, the hunting and fishing culture continued to flourish. The origins of the Finnish people, and in particular, the 'eastern' and 'western' aspects of settlement and culture, remain a subject of much debate and occasional controversy, and this debate has influenced and continues to shape the way Finns perceive themselves and others. How the Finns themselves have been perceived by outsiders is quite another matter. The 'Finns' (*phinnoi, fenni, screrefenni*) mentioned by the earliest authors (Tacitus in the first century AD, Jordanes in the sixth) who attempted to identify the inhabitants of this hyperborean region were in fact hunter-gatherers of the far north – the sort of people who might indeed have had trade dealings with a traveller such as the ninth-century Norwegian Ottar, whose account of his travels in the north was preserved for posterity by King Alfred of Wessex.

The dwellers in these far northern lands were described in a twelfth-century history of Norway as 'people who regrettably worship false gods, namely, the Karelians and Kweni, the Hornfinns and the Biarmi'. The Kweni and Biarmi are known from other sources as traders in furs, and seem to have operated in an area between the White Sea and the northernmost part of the Gulf of Bothnia: as a distinctive group, they have long vanished into the mists of time. The Hornfinns were probably Sami, 'Finns' to the Norwegians (the northernmost region of Norway is known as Finnmark). The Karelians began to spread out from their heartland around lakes Ladoga and Onega during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – eastwards to the mouth of the northern Dvina, northwards to the shores of the Arctic, where they clashed with the Norwegians, whilst in the west they came into conflict with the Häme tribe. At the same time, they also began to come under the influence and control of the Orthodox church and the principality of Novgorod.

The medieval European image of the 'Finns' as primitive hunters, practitioners of magic, and sellers of wind to stranded seafarers thus owed much to the tales of North Atlantic adventurers. Of the peoples who lived along the Baltic coastline and gradually

settled the hinterland, we have remarkably little written evidence, although a thirteenth-century description of the sea route from Denmark to the eastern Baltic shows that this was a well-used sea route in Viking times, and archaeological finds also indicate that the shipbuilding technology of the Vikings was known and practised in western Finland.

The word 'Finland' came into common usage during the middle ages, though the area it was meant to embrace remained vague and ill defined. Significantly, the term was used as a means of indicating the consolidation of central authority: by Pope Gregory IX in 1229, announcing that *Finlandia* had passed under his protection, and by King Magnus Ladulås of Sweden in 1284 when he named his brother Bengt duke of Finland. Sources from the period before the consolidation of Catholic and Swedish authority, such as runic inscriptions and Orthodox monastic chronicles, refer more commonly to tribes, such as the Häme. These tribes possessed the organisational ability to make war and engage in trade, and were sufficiently powerful to cause trouble to their neighbours when the occasion demanded; but in common with the other peoples within what Robert Bartlett has termed the arc of 'non-literate polytheism' stretching from the Elbe to the Arctic circle, they were eventually drawn into the institutional framework of Latin Christendom. As a political entity, Finland owes its existence to the realm which gradually established itself between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries on the central plains of present-day Sweden. The expansion and consolidation of the kingdom of the Svea and Göta embraced Norrland and Dalarna to the north and west, the island of Gotland, and what came to be known as Finland Proper (*Varsinais-Suomi, Egentliga Finland*). For the seafaring peoples of northern Europe, the shallow waters of the Baltic were a ready means of communication during the sailing season rather than an obstacle (though the icing up of the sea in winter did effectively cut off communities otherwise linked by seaways and waterways), and there is plentiful evidence of intermingling and mixed settlement of the peoples around the north-eastern Baltic rim before the so-called 'crusades' which have conventionally marked the beginning of the period during which Finland became a part of the Swedish kingdom.

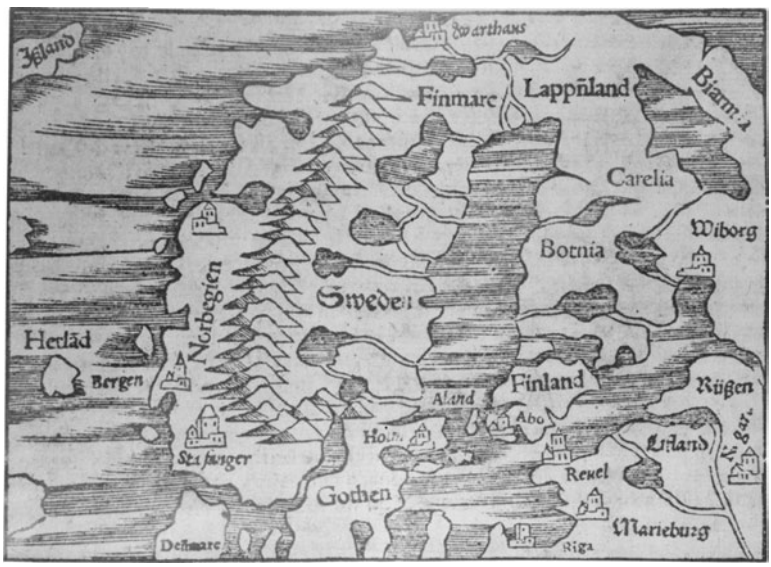

Plate 1 Map of northern Europe, printed in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* of 1552. The first detailed map of northern Europe to be printed was the *Carta Gothica*, later renamed *Carta Marina*, of Olaus Magnus, published in Venice in 1539. The wilderness dominates much of the map, as well as Olaus Magnus's description of the northern peoples published sixteen years later. Signs of human habitation and cultivation are confined to the south-western corner, Finland Proper. To the north and east are the beasts of the forest, fish, and fowl, with the occasional crew steering a boat over the waters of a lake or sleds drawn by horses or reindeers over the frozen sea. This simplified version of the *Carta Marina* was reproduced in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia*, first published in Basel in 1544, and running to numerous editions thereafter. Münster's account of the languages spoken in Finland is a fair indication of the general state of ignorance and confusion about such distant places. In the words of his English translator, George North, 'the inhabitantes of Fynland do speake two sundry languages. From Wiburg to Berga or Sibbona (Viipuri to Porvoo or Sipoo), they do for the most part speake the Sclavon tong, but nere the Sea coastes they use at thys present the Swecian language, and in the myddest of the Country, theyr proper speeche.'

The early eighteenth-century historian Algot Scarin believed the absence of pre-Christian monuments or fortified sites indicated that the sacred rites of the Finnish people must have been different from

those of the other Nordic nations, and that Sweden was already possessed of a proper supreme authority whilst the Finns were still nomads. Historians of a more intensely nationalistic era tended to see in the crusades the establishment of Swedish rule over the Finnish people – a 'Swedish conquest' as M. G. Schybergson described it in his *Finlands historia* of 1903 - and the implantation of western Christian values. More recent scholarship has drawn attention to the fact that the Swedish state itself was in the very early stages of construction, and that much of what happened in the Finnish half of the realm was also taking place in the western half. The crusades themselves, although inspired by the general enthusiasm for taking the Cross and its message to the infidel and the heathen, were less significant than the slower process of establishing an institutional presence. There is much uncertainty over the date and nature of the first crusade, which was first described over a hundred years later in the 1270s. It is supposed to have occurred during the brief reign of King Erik (1155/56–60), and the work of conversion was in the hands of an Englishman, Henry. As both men were murdered shortly thereafter and elevated to popular sainthood, there is reason to be wary of the accretion of legend. The story of Henry's murder by Lalli, and the miraculous events that followed, is of comparatively late provenance, whilst Erik's saintly qualities were promoted by his son in order to reflect honour and prestige upon his family. The brief incursion was probably not unconnected with the increasing conflict between the Swedish realm and the princes of Novgorod, who were also seeking to augment their position west of lakes Onega and Ladoga. Raids and counter-raids, rather than planned and sustained campaigns, were the norm, and it is highly unlikely that Erik had the resources or inclination to support a crusade to convert the heathen Finns.

That some kind of missionary activity was taking place is, however, indicated in the bull *Gravis admodum*, sent to the archbishop of Uppsala and his subordinate bishops by Pope Alexander III in 1171 or 1172, though the main thrust of this missive indicates that such work was having only limited success. The bull may have been intended to stir the Swedes into action, or it may also have been part of a campaign by the exiled archbishop of Lund, in the Danish kingdom, to reassert his authority over the newly created Swedish

Plate 2 Bishop Henry trampling his murderer Lalli underfoot. From the *Missale Aboense* of 1448. According to the earliest versions of the legend, dating from the thirteenth century, Henry was an Englishman, elected bishop of Uppsala, who accompanied King Erik of Sweden on crusade to Finland in the 1150s. Here, he was murdered on a frozen lake by a peasant, Lalli, egged on to do the deed by a spiteful wife. A thirteenth-century poem, fragments of which remain, has Henry decreeing before his death that his body shall be borne on a wagon drawn by two oxen, and be buried at the spot where the oxen came to rest. This happened to be Nousiainen, the first seat of the bishop of Finland, and although the see was finally transferred to Turku in the thirteenth century, Nousiainen remained a centre of pilgrimage throughout the middle ages. Lalli was justly punished for his impiety, losing his scalp when he tried to pull off the bishop's cap he had stolen. It is tempting to see in this fateful encounter between the first Finn recorded in history, a 'wild' man, and the 'civilised' westerner a paradigm for the later development of Finnish identity.

archbishopric. The expansion of trade into the eastern Baltic, which brought German merchants to Gotland and Novgorod, the consolidation of Danish power in northern Europe, and the creeping eastward progress of forcible conversion along the southern shores of the Baltic, may also have prompted renewed papal interest in

northern Europe. Danish forces raided the Finnish and Estonian coastline several times between 1191 and 1202. The military Order of the Sword-Brothers, established in 1200 by Albert of Buxtehude, bishop of Riga, were busily engaged further south with the forcible conversion of the Livs around the mouth of the river Daugava. Papal correspondence indicates that the Swedes also carried out crusading raids, though they appear not to have attempted to build a more permanent presence in Finland until Danish forces had finally shifted their attention to the southern shores of the Gulf of Finland, conquering the Estonian stronghold of Lindenisse in 1219 and laying the foundations of the castle that still dominates the skyline of the modern city of Tallinn.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, there existed a recognisably Christian community in the relatively fertile plains of Finland Proper and on the scattered islands of the Åland archipelago. The see of the bishop was finally established on the banks of the river Aura, and work had begun on the cathedral in what was to be for almost six hundred years the capital of Finland: in Swedish, Åbo, or 'settlement by the river', in Finnish, Turku, or 'trading place'. Under the energetic leadership of Bishop Thomas, missionary work to the heathen Häme of the hinterland had begun. The work of conversion was not, however, a monopoly of the Catholic church. Russian Orthodoxy, having extended its influence into the region around lakes Ladoga and Onega was also active amongst the Häme. The crusade called by Pope Gregory IX in 1237 against the Häme became in fact a full-blown clash between the forces mustered by the church and the king of Sweden and the prince of Novgorod, Alexander Nevsky. The Russian chronicler records that the Swedish forces were heavily defeated in 1240 in a battle at the confluence of the rivers Neva and Izhora. However, according to the *Erikskrönikan*, a rhyme-chronicle written in the 1330s, the Swedes were revenged some nine years later, when, led by the powerful nobleman Birger Jarl, the Häme were finally subjugated. In the words of the chronicle, 'They settled the land with Christian men / and there I trust they still remain, / And the land was turned to our belief / which gave the Russian king much grief' (trans. Eric Christiansen). The fact that Sweden and Norway were locked in a serious conflict in 1249–50 makes the dating of this second crusade

unlikely, and it has been argued that it actually took place a decade earlier, *before* the disastrous campaign against Alexander Nevsky, at a time when Novgorod was being hard pressed by the Mongols.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the building of strong fortresses in Turku and Häme was a highly visible symbol of the presence of Swedish royal authority on the eastern shores of the Gulf of Bothnia. The foundations of a third castle were laid at the end of the century, at Viipuri on the eastern frontier, and a lengthy period of warfare between Sweden and Novgorod was formally ended in 1323 with the signing of a peace treaty. The precise terms of the peace of Oreshek (Pähkinäsaari, Nöteborg) have caused much dispute amongst historians. It would appear that the two parties ensured a fairly careful delineation of the frontier in the Karelian isthmus, which was divided in two, but thereafter the line of the frontier is open to interpretation. It is likely that the two parties were less interested in securing territory than in defining spheres of influence for taxation purposes over the peoples who dwelt in the vast tracts of forest and moor that stretched northwards from the great lakes to the Arctic. Novgorod was subsequently seriously weakened by internal convulsions and threatened by Mongols, Lithuanians, and the knights of the Teutonic Order, and was therefore in no position to assert its rights. The claim to authority, and the rights of taxation, were, however, remembered and renewed by the first Russian settlers on the Arctic coast in the sixteenth century.

The institution of a Swedish royal council, the emergence of a regular administrative structure and a fiscal apparatus, and the codification of law codes during the reigns of Magnus Ladulås (1275–90) and Magnus Eriksson (1319–64) are the most evident signs of the consolidation of a realm that was also heavily involved in ambitious territorial and dynastic ventures in northern Europe. The Finnish lands were to all intents and purposes integrated into this realm, overseen by the king's representative, the *capitaneus Finlandiae*. In recognition of the expansion of territory beyond the limits of Finland Proper, Dan Niklisson was named in 1340 as *partium orientalium praefectus* (governor of the eastern parts), and his successor, Gerhard Skytte, was also named as governor of the Eastland, a term that continued in use until the sixteenth century. The governor was also castellan of Turku castle and had authority over the two other castle

fiefdoms, although the castellans of Viipuri on the eastern frontier were usually able to maintain a fairly independent position as marcher lords. At the end of the fourteenth century, new bailiwicks were created for the 'New Land' (Uusimaa, Nyland) on the southern coast, whose skerries and inlets had attracted settlers from Sweden in the previous two centuries, and for the region of Satakunta in the south-west. This administrative reorganisation was largely the work of the powerful magnate Bo Jonsson Grip, who had secured the Finnish fiefs as a reward for assisting Albrecht of Mecklenburg to the throne of Sweden. Bo Jonsson also pushed the frontier northwards into Ostrobothnia, laying the foundations of Korsholm castle and successfully resisting the attempts of Novgorod to eject his forces.

The administration of the Finnish lands was entrusted to members of the nobility; and although formidable figures such as Bo Jonsson Grip and Karl Knutsson in the early fifteenth century were able effectively to create their own power bases there, this did not loosen the ties with the rest of the realm. In the words of Eric Christiansen, 'the effect of this ungovernability was not to separate the province from Sweden, but, rather, to encourage the growth of Swedish institutions as a means whereby local interests could be protected'. Justice was dispensed, disputes settled, and fishing and hunting rights sorted out by a variety of law meetings held in the hundred. The jurymen of these courts were drawn from the local peasantry, though the man in charge of the hundred was invariably a member of the local squirearchy. From 1435, when the land was divided into two circuits, Norrfinne and Söderfinne, an annual high court was to meet in Turku in the week before St Henry's feast day (18 July). There were several variants of King Magnus Eriksson's Land Law in circulation, together with the revised codification of the laws issued under the name of King Kristoffer in 1442, and it was not until 1608 that a definitive printed version of the Land Law was available in Finland.

Magnus Eriksson's long reign ended in chaos. His nephew Albrecht of Mecklenburg eventually succeeded in establishing his claim to the throne, but at the cost of major concessions to the magnates, led by Bo Jonsson Grip. Albrecht in turn was outmanoeuvred by Margareta, daughter of the great Danish king Valdemar Atterdag (1340–75), and wife of Magnus Eriksson's son