

Sweden and Scandinavia: History-Writing as an Identity Project in the Early Modern Period

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Interest in Old Norse literature can influence any image of the North. When knowledge of Old Norse culture increased in the seventeenth century, a more positive image of the uncivilised and barbaric North spread throughout Europe. The competition over *who* contributed the most to Old Norse culture affected the relationship between the communities in the North, as well as those communities' relationships to their own culture. Modern research, especially on identities, tends to focus on the national framework, and we often forget to include larger geographical areas or smaller regions. The following will discuss the fact that Scandinavia seems to have been an important point of reference for the eighteenth-century historian, Sven Lagerbring, partly because of his interest in the Old Norse sagas.¹

Sven Lagerbring was born in the south of Sweden, and became a professor of history at Lund University in 1742. An immensely productive scholar and teacher, he wrote several new lectures series on the constitutional and political history of different European countries. Besides political history, he also engaged in the study of biography and genealogy, and gave lectures in church history, the history of ideas, and cultural history. However, his best-known production is *Swea rikes historia, ifrån de äldsta tider til de närwarande* ('A history of the Swedish realm from the oldest times to the present') published between 1769 and 1783/1786. The kings' lives provided him with his chronological framework, which he followed with a description of the country region by region before returning to the life of influential people in the form of minor kings and chieftains. Descriptions of the laws, regional economies, and different customs are offered in the course of some three thousand pages, from the first ruler – pinpointed in time to *c.* 350 BC – until the fifteenth century.

Although older, more imaginative, interpretations of Sweden's prehistory were criticized in the eighteenth century, the sagas and the Eddas remained important material for Lagerbring to study in his history of the Swedish realm, thereby providing him with a Scandinavian framework. Lagerbring firmly believed that historians should provide examples of how a country should be governed: by making interpretations available, a historian offered

the tools necessary for readers to make up their own minds. Discussions about politics in his time were defined by uncertainty over what might be the best system to rule a country.² He himself wrote during the so-called Age of Liberty (1719–1772). He did not wholeheartedly approve of this form of parliamentary rule. He found it to be a weak, easily corrupted, and inefficient form of government, where the nobility had too much power. He proposed an enlightened despot as the better option. This ideal could sometimes be found in the Old Norse literature.

The importance that Lagerbring accorded the sagas as a source for historical events had implications for his view of the North. What is the North in Lagerbring's history-writing? What is not part of the North? Hendriette Kliemann has studied European eighteenth-century scholars' work with the concept of the North, and how one of Lagerbring's contemporary colleagues in Göttingen, Prof August Ludwig von Schlözer, included practically all peoples who had escaped incorporation into the Roman Empire. Others, for example the Norwegian scholar Gerhard Schøning, viewed this as too broad a definition.³ Lagerbring's own definition of the North coincided with his use of the term 'Scandinavians'. He talked about the Scandinavian people in plural. He did on occasion refer to Swedish subjects as 'the Swedes', and subjects of the Danish crown were 'the Danes', but mostly he used the term 'Scandinavians', either to refer to inhabitants of the Scandinavian peninsula or to Norsemen. The Scandinavians were the Danes and Norwegians, and sometimes the Finns, Icelanders, and Swedes. The Icelanders posed a special

och Hermiones bodde uti eller omkring Ostersjön. E
lar om Scandinavia och säger, at där war intet stor
wa Landet. Pinius underrättar oss, at Sillexiones
Scandinavian, fördelte uti fem hundra de byslag, eller
behagar kalla des Pagi. Ibland Darna upräknar h
dia, Dumna, Bergos, Nerigon. Widare ombrö
nomannia, Baltia, Basilea. Hwad som gifwet e
alla dessa olika namn, är swårt at säga. Efter utsee
sig större delen på Skeppare-tidningar, som wäl inter h
altatuföräteligaste, men bewisa likwät något, nemligen
Scandiå. war öde. Ptolomæus talar om fyra Scandiå, af
första låg längst i öster, och i denna bodde Chedini
Savoni och Firesii åt öster, i söder Gutå och Dau
midt uti de så kallade Levoni. För en widlyftig und
dessa och mera dylikt förskonar jag läsaren. Rudbe
Atlantica, Lundius uti Kamolris, och Peringskjöld
märkningar til Theoderici Veronensis Leswerne, och
samlat, alt hwad som kan sägas i dessa saker, och i
mer. Ibland alla de gamla, har wäl Tacitus haft
rättelsen om war Nord. Men han byr sig mer om

From *Swea Rike* by Swedish historian Sven Lagerbring (1707–1787).

problem. They were not that important in themselves. Their importance was only because of the sagas and skaldic works, Nordic treasures not spread from Iceland to the rest of the North, but rather destroyed in 'their rightful fatherland' and merely safeguarded by the Icelanders due to their island's isolation, free therefore from corruption from the rest of Europe.⁴ When he wanted to distinguish the Swedes from the others, he would talk about 'our Swedish North' (*vår Svenska Nord*), or simply 'our North' (*vår Nord*). This was not only a geographical term for Lagerbring; it had an ideological meaning.

Even if Lagerbring wrote on the history of the realm, his overall context seems to have been a Nordic one. Scandinavia was the underlying, and stable, unity. According to Lagerbring, the Scandinavians were of the same stock; all of them were Europeans, but the men from the North were just a little bit healthier thanks to their naïvety. The Scandinavian language – in the singular – demonstrates the disposition of its people. It consists of few words, and the harshness of the language proves them to be brave. The Scandinavians are characterised by justice and simplicity. The ancestors were idealised, not as proud warriors, but as essentially egalitarian and noble men. Thanks to the simplicity of the language, Scandinavians of the past were to be admired over the more pretentious, and therefore deceitful, Romans.⁵

The idea that cultural and linguistic barriers should coincide with political boundaries is a modern idea. A multinational arrangement with different laws, taxes, privileges, et cetera was a more common notion than that of a cultural, economical, and political unit. Naturally, identities in the early modern era related to other things than to the state – but a good patriot could not be ignorant of the welfare of the state.⁶ *Patria* meant several different things in the eighteenth century; it could be the state, but also a region or a province. Nevertheless, all history should be relevant to the kingdom, and the study of customs and economies of different districts would then benefit the state as a whole.⁷

Lagerbring seemed to think of *patria* mostly as a region coinciding with legal jurisdictions. Patriotic loyalty had to do with loyalty towards the political institutions. But loyalty directed towards the *pater patriae* ('fädernas fader') should also be directed towards the people that the state represents. There was a moral to the usual definition of who could be a member of a *patria*. Besides the political institution and organisation, or administrative area, things such as religion, language, and culture mattered. There was emotional significance in the concept 'land of our fathers'. Any differences between the regions, or the different people of the North, were considered more due to the actions of the rulers than to any difference in the character of the people. Lagerbring used the Christianisation of Norway and Sweden as an example, where the Norwegian ruler was harsher than the Swedish king.⁸

Lagerbring's usage of the Old Norse sagas meant that he insisted on a

shared foundation for the Scandinavians, and thereby emphasized a common history. Naturally, a negative image of, for example, Denmark was never far away in Sweden. Lagerbring himself blamed the Danish nobility and their greed for power for the destruction of the Kalmar Union.⁹ But it was their deeds, not their quality as Danes in particular, that presented the problem. Even if Lagerbring wrote his magnum opus as a history on the realm, we cannot ignore the view of Scandinavia as *one* important part in any image of the North, whether in the Middle Ages, the early modern period, or the modern age.¹⁰ The North must have had some specific significance in the past, as well as in the present, otherwise there would not be a need for a *Nordic* History Congress in the twenty-first century.

Sverige och Skandinavien – tidigmodern historieskrivning som identitetsprojekt

Skandinavien som region påverkade den svenska 1700-talshistorikern Sven Lagerbring i hans arbete med den svenska historien. Ett av skälen till att en tidigmodern historiker såg en gemenskap för nordborna var att de isländska sagorna utgjorde en stor del av källmaterialet för den äldsta historien. Men istället för att tala om götiska eller svenska sagor visade dessa ”isländska handlingar” Lagerbring att skandinaverna delade språk, religion och historia, vilket gav dem en samhörighet. Isländska sagor sades vara representativa för ett stort område, och de historiska relationerna mellan de skandinaviska rikena blev således en viktig fråga för Lagerbring. Skandinaverna hade dessutom liknande lynne. När han ville skilja ut svenskarna talade han om *vår Svenska Nord*. En historiker som Lagerbring reflekterade över historiska tiders styrelsekick. Historien skulle förmedla lärdomar. Därför kunde detta gemensamma sinnelag vara nödvändigt att känna även för en svensk patriotisk historiestudent.

Key words: Historiography, eighteenth century, Sven Lagerbring, Scandinavia, Sweden, identity, Old Norse literature

Notes

- 1 For an account of Lagerbring and his use of the sagas, see Anna Wallete, *Sagans svenskar. Synen på vikingatiden och de isländska sagorna under 300 år*, Malmö 2004.
- 2 Peter Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty. Social Upheaval, History Writing, and the New Public Sphere in Sweden, 1740–1792*, Stockholm 2003, p. 35.
- 3 Hendriette Kliemann, ‘Ett mångfaldigt begrepp. August Ludwig von Schlözers konstruktion av Norden’, *Historisk tidskrift för Finland*, 2002:3. Schöning wrote the history of Norway, *Norges Rüges Historie* (1771–81). See also P.F. Suhms *Forsøg til Forbedringer i den*

- gamle Danske og Norske Historie* (1757) or *Om de nordiske folks ældste oprindelse* (1770), that Jan Ragnar Hagland examines in 'The Reception of Old Norse Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century Norway', in *Northern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, ed. Andrew Wawn, Enfield Lock 1994.
- 4 'At däremot många af de Nordiska Skaldeqwäden blifwit flyttade til Island, och där äro förwarade, då de förkommit i sit rätta fädernes land', Lagerbring 1769, p. 481.
- 5 Lagerbring 1769, pp. 57, 428, 449.
- 6 Jonas Nordin, *Ett fattigt men fritt folk. Nationell och politisk självbild i Sverige från sen stormaktstid till slutet av frihetstiden*, Eslöv 2000; *Nationalism och nationell identitet i 1700-talets Sverige*, eds. Åsa Karlsson and Bo Lindberg, Uppsala 2002; Patrick Hall, *The Social Construction of Nationalism: Sweden as an Example*, Lund 1998.
- 7 See Mattias Legné, *Fäderneslandets rätta beskrivning*, Helsingfors 2004, or Johanna Widenberg, *Fäderneslandets antikviteter. Etnoterritoriella historiebruk och integrationssträvanden i den svenska statsmaktens antikvariska verksamhet ca 1600–1720*, Stockholm 2006.
- 8 Lagerbring 1769, p. 204.
- 9 See the dissertation *Dissertatio de unionne Calmariensi*, presented by the student Aaron Törngren, 1745.
- 10 Perhaps this is a typically Swedish dilemma, since Swedes in particular have been confronted with the issue of being both nationalistic and Nordic, as Steinar Imsen puts it in 'Grenser i Nord', in *Grenser og grannelag i Nordens historie*, ed. Steinar Imsen, Oslo 2005, p. 17.

Taming the Barbarian

Literary Representations of Northern Antiquity, 1750–1850

Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

Around 1600, scholars outside Iceland became aware of the rich resources on Nordic history that were preserved in old manuscripts on this remote island. As early as the seventeenth century, scholars in Denmark and Sweden began extensive studies of the content of the manuscripts. The poems and sagas also attracted attention elsewhere in Europe, as the Nordic scholars of that time generally presented their findings in Latin, even translating examples of the Old Norse writings into that language. But it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that serious consideration of the writings as literature commenced outside Iceland, when the pioneers of pre-Romanticism in European culture discovered this heritage, and began to translate the writings and to rework them in new literary works. In due course, this creative reception of Old Norse literature became focussed in Scandinavia, culminating in