

Political climate

In many ways, Sweden was still a fledgling nation in the fourteenth century. There does not seem to be much national identity. Many probably thought of themselves as East Goths, West Goths, Svears or Finns. The king was elected in the area of Svealand, and then had to travel to the different areas to be accepted in the other areas. This journey was called Eriksgata ("Erik's Way") after the first king that made it. An Eriksgata was surrounded by rules and tradition. Failure by the king to follow them, was not taken lightly. The reign of Ragnvald "Knaphuvud" (Short of head or Dumb head) was very short, as he ignored the rule of hostages upon entering Västergötland. This traditional rule means that the king needs to wait for "hostages" or rather escort when entering a province. Ragnvald Knaphuvud was of the opinion that he was so powerful that he didn't need any escort, and entered Västergötland with his own sworn men. The West Goths promptly killed him, and did not want anything to do with the kingdom of Sweden for several years after that incidence.



SWEDEN AND SKÅNELAND IN THE MID 14TH CENTURY

In the latter part of the century a greater centralization of power starts to appear. The kingdom is becoming more structured and works more like a united nation than before. The power struggles between the king and the nobles dominates the national politics during the period. The true power was mostly concentrated to Sweden's richest and most powerful man of all times; Bo Jonsson Grip. Only a squire

(and hence not even a knight), he owned Finland (called "the Eastern half of the Realm") and most of two parts of the rest of Sweden at the time of his death in 1386.

But let's look at how power and politics developed in Sweden in the beginning of the fourteenth century - it gives us something to fall back to when discussing the subject later in the century. In

1319 the three year old Magnus Eriksson is elected king of Sweden and inherits at the same time the crown of Norway. The young king Magnus is one of few survivors of a bitter family feud, where brother slew brother in struggle of the throne. Son of the fabled duke Erik, who after his death became a hero of almost epic proportions, and was portrayed as "the true noble Swedish knight", he was seen as the most fitting heir to the throne by his father's supporters. What Erik concerns, the Erikskrönika (Erik's chronicle) that describes him as a true, gentle knight, also gives the modern reader a glance at something closer to reality - he was most likely as scheming and backstabbing as any noble of the time. In the fourteenth century however, he was a tragic victim to imprisonment (and starvation to death in the dungeon of Nyköpinghus castle) by his evil brother king Birger.

A three-year-old on the throne suited the nobles just fine, since it in effect let them rule, even though the young king's mother, the Duchess Ingeborg, was a bit more stubborn and powerful than the council of nobles really liked. When she single handedly declared war on Denmark and tried to take the province of Skåne (Scania) with Norwegian and German troops, the council lost what patience they had with her. Fighting a long war on Novgorod in the Finnish part of Sweden, they certainly don't need another front. In 1323 they decide that something has to be done. They sign a treaty with the Novgorodians at the castle of Nöteborg, and thereby regulate the Swedish/Russian borders in Finland. Then they turn on the capable duchess, and besiege her strong castle of Axvalla. 1326 the nobles and Ingeborg finally come to terms and she is forced to give up much of her power. She is given the small Dovå castle to support herself.

In 1332 the people of more or less autonomous province of Skåne decide they would rather be subjects to Swedish rule than Danish - since 1330 Denmark has no king, and most of it is pawned to nobles from Holstein in northern Germany. These nobles try to get the most out of the opportunity, and ravage the land. Skåne is at the time under the rule of Johann of Holstein, but he decides that the people of Skåne very well could be subjects of king Magnus of Sweden - on one condition: That Magnus buys the province from him. Magnus agrees, and buys Skåne for the staggering price of 34 000 mark silver (the sheer weight of this silver has been estimated to almost 8000 kilos!).

After this Magnus begins calling himself "The king of Sweden, Norway and Scania". Also, this is about the time when three crowns start to appear as a symbol of the realm (as in king Albrecht's seal on the top left of the page). When the young king comes of age, he doesn't seem to share the nobles' point of view of what is good for Sweden. He starts to restrict the power of the nobles, and try to make Sweden a country where the crown is passed down from father to son, as in Norway, where he also is king. Not surprisingly, this is bad news for the nobles - they want to put a weak king of their choice on the throne, not the son of an independent, mighty ruler. In the so called Magnus Eriksson's Landslag ("The Magnus Eriksson law of the land") of 1349 it is therefore stated:

Nu ær til kunungx rikit i Suerike kununger væliande ok ey ærvande
"Now is to the kingdom of Sweden king elected and not inherited"

Furthermore, it states that a man that is to be elected king is someone:

Huilkin en af inrikis føddum - ok hælzt af kununge sunum
"Who is born in the kingdom and preferably son of a king."

Landslagen was composed by a council of lawmen, headed by the father of Saint Birgitta (internationally known as saint Bridget), and based on earlier county laws. This is the first law to pertain to the country as a whole, hence its name, and therefore an important milestone in the forging of a state. Even though Landslagen bears his name, Magnus never officially sanctioned it, quite possibly because he did not agree on above cited paragraphs...

The nobles also frowned upon Magnus' close relationship with the noble Bengt Algotsson. Bengt was of low nobility, but was lavishly granted favours by Magnus, putting "finer" families aside. Rumours of a homosexual relationship between the king and his favourite Bengt circulated. The gossip worsened after the Black Death hit Sweden in 1349-1350; Saint Birgitta declared that the plague was caused by the wearing of immoral clothing and, worse, the king's scandalous relation to another man. She dubs him Kung Smek ("King Fondle"), a derogative that sadly has survived through the ages and stuck to this otherwise quite able king. It is hard to tell if there is any truth in the claims, but frankly, it is not really important.

When Magnus installs Bengt as the Duke of Finland, the nobles has had it with him. One of Magnus' sons, Erik, tires of waiting for his father to die; he wants to have a shot at the throne as fast as possible. He and a band of nobles, as well as five of Sweden's seven bishops, declare war on Bengt Algotsson in october 1356. This is in part a covert war on Magnus. In 1359 a treaty is signed. Magnus agrees on giving his son great parts of the kingdom to his son. Erik takes on the title of king of Sweden (his brother Håkon already possesses the Norwegian part of the realm), and banishes Bengt Algotsson from his new kingdom. Bengt Algotsson flees to Scania.

In the meantime, the Danes have risen once again, under the very able king Valdemar. He purges the land of German counts and restore it to some of its former glory. Sweden has had its own war against the Russians, loosely disguised as a crusade, and its internal conflicts at hand. When Valdemar unleashes his army to retake Scania, the Swedes are taken by surprise. The Swedish army under Erengisle Jarl and Karl Ulfsson is camped at lake Ringsjön but stays passive. The only thing they seem to manage is to kill the exiled Bengt Algotsson; it is said his murderers were Karl Ulfsson of Tofta and Magnus Niklisson. Then the Swedish army returns north. The nobles showed very little interest in fighting in Scania. This, and the poor economy of Sweden, forces Magnus into a treaty that costs him Scania.

Being on a roll, Valdemar sets sail for the islands of Gotland and Öland in 1361. Öland is taken relatively easy, and despite warnings from Magnus, the Gotlanders are taken by surprise. The campaign culminates the 27th of July in the battle of Wisby where almost 2000 Gotlandish commoners were slaughtered by Danish and German mercenaries, and thrown into massgraves. Wisby is plundered, and according to legend, Valdemar forces the inhabitants of the city to tear down a part of its city walls. Even though the attack was a great success, it was a mistake; Wisby was part of the Hanseatic League. The city of Lübeck starts negotiations with the Swedes in August, and a combined attack is planned. The Swedish nobles, however, are showing usual reluctance to support their king. The mustering of troops is going slow, but about a year after the attack on Wisby, Magnus (with some help from his son Håkon, king of Norway) has gathered

enough men to launch an attack on Valdemar in the Scanian city of Helsingborg. 27 koggs and 25 other vessels set out to teach the Danes a lesson. Meanwhile, back in Sweden, the nobles have had enough of their stalwart king that refuses to do as they tell him...