

Building a Nation? – The Publishing of Geographical Knowledge in 18th Century Sweden

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The tradition of the 17th century

Around the mid-1600s the history and geography of Sweden can be said to have been “reinvented” through certain investments made by the government. Sweden had become a great political power in Europe and the regime felt a need to establish Sweden as a cultural power as well. The international legitimacy of the military state was to be boosted through conscious politics of culture. The aim was to show other powers in Europe that Sweden had once before been a great power, and that it was now merely reclaiming what rightfully belonged to it.

In the 17th century, history and geography was thus perceived as tools to be used on an arena of international politics. The control of this knowledge was in the hands of a few learned men located at the academies and in the administration of the government. The monumental and lavishly illustrated work of Erik Dahlberg, “*Antiqua Svecia et hodierna*” or “Ancient and contemporary Sweden”, is but the most well known propaganda work of this time, using both history and geography.

Simultaneously, a number of dissertations were produced in Latin at the universities between the early 1600s and the end of the Age of Greatness around 1720. For example, in the century from 1618 to 1722 no less than 40 dissertations describing provinces were printed. However, these orations were most often primarily exercises in rhetoric and Latin more than actual empirical studies, as many of them were based on ancient authorities. Furthermore, most of them were very brief and did seldom reach a wider audience than a handful of students, teachers and collectors. Since they were written in Latin they could not be read by commoners.

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The rise and shift in the 18th century

The Age of Liberty c 1720–70 saw a shift both (a) *quantitatively* in the publishing of descriptions, and (b) *qualitatively*:

- a. There was a significant rise starting in the 1730s when the government first encouraged students to write dissertations on their native places. The rise grew until the 1790s when a calmer period intervened for two decades and lasted well into the early 1800s. According to a recent study, 146 descriptions of places in proper Sweden (Göta-, Svea- and Norrland) were printed from 1721 to 1800. The most intensive period of the century was 1741–70, when 72 works were printed.

From 1741 to 1828 a total of 33 descriptions of provinces and counties were published in the form of monographies and dissertations. Seen to their number, they were not necessarily more frequent than provincial descriptions of the 17th century, but they were much more extensive and presented an abundance of topographical, economic and antiquarian knowledge which had never been printed before. Most 17th century descriptions were very brief and based on already published material or well-known collections of sources.

- b. The nature of the contents shifted from an antiquarian and learned style centred on restoring former national glory by mapping rune stones, graves, ruins and old documents, to a style focusing more on the *improvement of society*. However, this shift should not be over-emphasized: the antiquarian style survived well into the 19th century, but it was increasingly mocked for being pedantic and useless.

A more important change was the introduction of the *Swedish language*: I have noticed that the first provincial description in Swedish was published in 1741, a date that coincides well with the rise of geographical publishing. After that, descriptions were published more and more seldom in Latin. Only 3 of the 33 provincial descriptions published 1741–1828 were written in Latin.

Another important qualitative change was the *new forms* in which descriptions were published. They were no longer just dissertations shaped like thin pamphlets. Extensive

monographies were written and published by authors based outside the academies. No more than 7 of the 33 provincial descriptions were academic dissertations. Before the 1740s, the dissertations had been the most common form for publishing geographical knowledge. Besides the monography, the periodical article also appeared as a new form in the latter half of the century. Especially descriptions of towns and parishes began to appear in a rather wide range of periodicals, while most provincial descriptions were too voluminous to fit this form. Regarding towns and parishes, the dissertation was to remain the most common publishing form for the whole century.

More on provincial descriptions of the 18th century

At the end of the 18th century just a few provinces (Närke, Dal, Gästrikland) in proper Sweden were lacking printed descriptions in Swedish, and no province lacked a printed description in Latin. In the Finnish part of the country, the situation was somewhat different: descriptions of towns and parishes were common, but few descriptions of larger areas were produced and printed during the 1700s, and most of them were in Latin (as opposed to works on Finnish towns and parishes, which ordinarily were written in Swedish). None of them was published as a monography, only as dissertations or articles. Besides the four descriptions of Finnish provinces included among the 33 studied here, another three were published in periodicals (in Swedish).

True, Finland had considerably fewer provinces than proper Sweden, but all of the descriptions were briefer and less elaborate. Evidently, the publishing of geographical knowledge in Finland was totally dependant on the academy of Åbo (Turku), where almost all descriptions were produced and printed. In proper Sweden towns such as Uppsala, Lund and Stockholm functioned as nodal points for the publishing of geographical knowledge, but the publishing was spread more evenly among towns with printing presses.

Thus it can be said that the movement of describing the native country was based and most established in proper Sweden. When Finland was involved the purpose was mainly utilitarian and focused on finding ways to reform the economy of the country. When proper Sweden was described, on the other hand, social improvement was merely one of several areas of interest. Antiquarian questions were frequently mixed with economic ones, and political history was

appreciated. Somewhat simplified, one might say that when topographers were describing proper Sweden, they were describing a social and cultural heritage on which ideas of a common culture and history, a unified society, were to be based and constructed.

Abraham Hülphers' "Diary of a journey through Dalarna in 1757"

In the summer of 1757 the young merchant Abraham Hülphers travelled through the province of Dalarna in central Sweden. The journey took him two months, and he kept a diary from the start to the end, making notes every day. The hand-written diary is 360 pages long and neatly written. Five years, several manuscripts and a couple of hundred letters later, a completely revised version of it was published by Lars Johan Horn, a well-known publisher and printer in Hülphers hometown Västerås. The description was printed in 1 500 copies and ended up fairly expensive, since it became considerably larger than Hülphers first had planned.

Prior to that, Hülphers had corresponded with about one hundred civil servants and local experts in Dalarna and elsewhere in order to make his diary – now an extensive description of Dalarna – as complete as possible. For a long time to come, the diary was pointed out as an example for other authors of provincial descriptions to follow, and it established Hülphers as an author of topographical works. In time he would print a monumental description of Norrland or the whole north of proper Sweden, and also begin publishing a series of town descriptions.

Hülphers was eager to root his description both locally, in Dalarna, and centrally, in Stockholm. Especially on the local level his efforts were well received. He knew that the description would get a better reception among the learned members of the Royal Academy of Sciences (Kungl Vetenskaps-akademien) if it were firmly anchored among experts on the topography and economy of Dalarna. It is well known that Hülphers wanted to become a member of the Academy but never managed to gain access. In the 18th century, the mines and mills of Dalarna received much attention from the Academy and the government.

Without a doubt, Hülphers managed to fill a knowledge gap since Dalarna lacked a description in Swedish. The "diary" was also officially approved by the Academy, which thought it was "useful". Hülphers had let a close friend and member of the Academy, the counsel Daniel Tilas who was an

expert on the geology of Dalarna, proofread the manuscript and make corrections. Thus, Hülphers not only inquired and compiled new material, but also subjected it to the scrutiny of authorities. This way of collecting information locally and having it criticized centrally was a process in which the description became officially sanctioned and approved on a national level.

The creation of Hülphers' map of Dalarna is especially interesting to study from a perspective of nation building. Hülphers inquired the necessary material from the government and had the map engraved on a copperplate. He was not happy with the draft, though – certain kinds of places (iron mills) were missing, names were spelled wrong and some places (lakes) were missing their names. Hülphers, in turn, had been corrected by Tilas and other correspondents regarding the names of places.

On his map, Hülphers arranged Dalarna according to the advice of locally and centrally placed experts, making an official map of Dalarna approved by the state. Here, the objectively correct or "true" Dalarna was shaped: place names were fixed, locally and nationally important places like mills, towns, parishes and churches pointed out, not to mention the clear-cut border against Norway which was also illustrated inside the book with mounds of stone marking the border. The borders of Dalarna were made absolute, showing only the ways (roads and rivers) out of and into the region. Neighbouring provinces were pointed out but not depicted.

Conclusion

I have argued that the publishing of geographical knowledge changed significantly in Sweden during the course of the eighteenth century. More works were published than earlier, and Swedish was introduced as a language of knowledge instead of Latin. This enabled and encouraged more people to read and to use geographical works. Geography also broke out of the academies and was printed in more various forms, often more extensive than before. Maps were made in which the parts constituting the Swedish nation were pointed out and described according to official norms and printed together with textual descriptions.

At the end of the century, most places in Sweden had received printed descriptions in Swedish and were thus much easier to remember, refer to and associate with. Descriptions of whole Sweden

could easily fit into a neat bookshelf and did not cost a small fortune to acquire either. It had become possible to compare and judge the history, geography, culture and economy of different parts of the country.

I have not tried to give just answers, but also to point at potential "problems". For example, the impact of changes in the publishing of geography in Finland does not seem easy to assess. On the one hand, Finland attracted much attention by the government in the eighteenth-century because of its economic problems. On the other hand geography does not appear to have become as locally anchored as it did in proper Sweden, where local clerics and other civil servants willingly engaged in describing their home or assisting other geographers in their work.

Appendix: Provincial descriptions published in Sweden 1741–1828

Bergman J. M.: Beskrifning om Dalarne eller Stora Kopparbergs län. 1822.

Bexell S. P.: Hallands historia och beskrifning. 1818–19.

Broocman C. F.: Beskrivning över de i Östergötland befintliga städer, slott, sockenkyrkor, socknar, säterier, överofficersboställen, järnbruk och prästgårdar mm. 1760.

Castrén Eric: Historisk och Oeconomisk Beskrifning öfwer Cajanaborgs-Län. 1754.

Ekman E. S.: Wärmeland I Sitt Ämne och I Sin Uppodling. Upsala 1765.

Fernow E.: Beskrifning öfwer Wärmeland, afdeld i sex tidehwarf, twänne under hedendomen, och lika många under påfwedömet och lutherska tiden; jämte en kort inledning, om landets läge, namn, wattudrag, bergsträkningar, skogar ... 1773–79.

Forsell C. af.: Beskrifning öfwer Halmstads län eller Halland. 1826.

Gadd P. A.: Försök, til en oeconomisk beskrifning, öfwer Satacunda häraders norra del. 1751.

Gillberg J. L.: Historisk, oeconomisk och geographisk beskrifning öfwer Malmö Hus lähn. 1765.

Gillberg J. L.: Historisk, oeconomisk och geographisk beskrifning öfwer Christianstads län uti hertigdömet Skåne. 1767.

Grau O.: Beskrifning öfwer Wästmanland med sina städer, härader och socknar. 1754.

Hagström J. O.: Jemtlands oeconomiska beskrifning. 1751.

Hermelin S. G.: Försök til en beskrifning öfver Lappmarken. 1810.

Hülphers A. A.: Dagbok öfver en resa igenom de, under Stora Kopparbergs Höfdingedöme lydande Lähn och Dalarne. 1762.

Hülphers A.A.: Samlingar til en beskrifning öfver Norrland. 1771–97.

Högström P.: Beskrifning öfver de til Sveriges krona lydande Lapmarker ... 1747.

Linnell C.: Schediasma historica de Tavasta. 1748.

Lindskog P. E.: Försök till en kort beskrifning om Skara stift. Skara 1813–16.

Löfgren N. I.: Kalmar och dess stift i Småland, landskaps-beskrifning. Kalmar 1828.

Oedman J.: Chorographia Bahusiensis thet är: Bahu-läns beskrifning ... 1746.

Radloff F.W.: Beskrifning öfver norra delen af Stockholms län. 1804–05.

Radloff F. W.: Beskrifning öfver Åland. 1795.

Richardson J.: Hallandia antiqua et hodierna. 1752–53.

Rogberg S.: Historisk beskrifning om Småland i gemen ... 1770.

Salvius L.: Beskrifning öfver Sverige, första tomen om Upland. 1741.

Sjöborg N. H.: Anmärkningar öfver Malmöhuslän samt Malmö stads historia och beskrifning med karta. 1812.

Sjöborg N. H.: Utkast til Blekings historia och beskrifning. 1793.

Sjöborg N. H.: Skånes historia och beskrifning. 1801–12.

[Tuneld E.]: Geografi öfver Norrland, eller Beskrifning om landskaperna Gestrikland, Helsingland, Herjedalen, Medelpad, Ångermanland, Jemtland och Vesterbotten, tillika med lappmarkerne... 1826.

[Tuneld E.]: Geografi öfver Götha rike ... 1826.

Tärnström C.: De Alandia. 1739–45.

Wahlbom C.A.: De Oelandia. 1786.

Åhstrand P.: Beskrifning öfver Öland, besynnerligen det Norra Motet eller Fögderiet. 1768.