



BOOK REVIEW

Mats Berglund, Lars Nilsson and Per Gunnar Sidén, *Swedish Urban History: An Introduction*. Stockholm: Stads- och kommunhistoriska institutet, 2023. 185pp. 5 figures. 1 table. Bibliography. 180 SEK pbk.
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Today, nearly 90 per cent of the population of Sweden resides in urban areas as they are defined by the state. In addition to the great capital city of Stockholm and the large cities of Gothenburg and Malmö, Sweden has about 2,000 urban areas, some of which are roughly the size of a village. Most of the bigger cities are on the coasts, while many inland cities are on the shores of a lake. This rich urban landscape was formed over many centuries and the physical legacy of all these eras of city-building is still very much present. Though it is among the most urbanized nations in the world, the country as a whole is sparsely settled. The urban core is in the centre and the south, whereas much of the north is forest, grassland and mountains.

In their introduction to Swedish urban history, three historians in Stockholm have written a chronicle of more than a thousand years of urban growth and change. Published by the Institute of Urban History at Stockholm University, their book summarizes the latest research in the field and offers a useful guide for historians unfamiliar with the region. Their focus is on the history of Sweden as the borders of the country exist today, but for much of its history it was bound in a union with its neighbours or ruled them outright when it was a great power. Naturally, then, they analyse the urban history of Sweden in the larger context of Scandinavia and the Baltic region.

This short book covers a lot of ground and the authors have divided the subject into five periods. A chapter on the first substantial settlements in Sweden during the Iron Age and Viking Age is followed by chapters on the medieval period, the early modern era, the modern era and the post-industrial period. Throughout the book, the authors highlight the big-picture dynamics of urbanization and stress political, economic and demographic history. They also address the changing ‘cityscape’ with discussions of architecture, housing and city planning and analyse the cultural life of cities. The authors draw upon classic urban theory and recent scholarship, and they make good use of a well-established Scandinavian tradition of urban biography.

While Swedish cities have changed a great deal over a thousand years, several key themes in the book are worthy of note. The authors’ main argument is that Sweden’s urban development basically kept pace with trends in Europe with which it became integrated through trade, statecraft and religion. The urbane, high-tech and multi-cultural Sweden of today is a relatively recent development, and yet already in the late medieval period it conducted extensive foreign trade in copper, iron and timber and was home to merchants, craftsmen and seamen from throughout the Baltic. The road

to a prosperous urbanized society was a long and difficult one, however, with bursts of urban growth followed by periods of stagnation.

Another key theme in Swedish urban history is the all-important role of the central government in city-building. Beginning with the Vasas in the early modern era, the state has adopted an aggressive 'urban policy' to boost city development. The town-building activities of the crown in the seventeenth century differs a great deal from the city-planning activities of the post-war Social Democratic governments, but there is nonetheless a long tradition of the state creating, supporting and shaping urban life. Not that this urban policy was always effective, however. In the early modern era, the state privileged some cities at the expense of others and founded new towns only to see some of them wither over time.

Sweden also has a rich tradition of local urban government, since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Municipalities became the main vehicle for delivering social services in the twentieth century and the development of the welfare state is thus a key topic for urban historical research. For this reason, the authors patiently explain the evolving laws relating to local government and the continual redefinition of the municipalities' powers. In the heyday of the welfare state, local public investment in housing, schools and infrastructure accelerated urban growth. More recently, in a time of retrenchment, municipalities compete with one another for private investment and residents.

According to the authors, Swedish urban history and that of the North more broadly is marginalized in European urban historiography. The region may never attract the same attention as the ancient urban civilizations of the Mediterranean or the urban societies of Great Britain, France and Germany, but the urban history of Europe would be incomplete without it. The city arrived relatively late in the North, but once the seeds of urbanization were planted it resulted in a distinctive urban culture that has retained its identity while adapting to a global market society.

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