

Project Report for the Rettig Fellowship 2024

Project title: Territorialising the Nation: Conceptualising the Landscape in Early Modern Swedish Travel Writing

Recipient: Natalie M. Smith, PhD.

In this project, I have made use of the personal archives of three individuals (Fale Abrahamson Burnam, Barthold Anders Ennes, and Carl Gustaf Gottfried Hilfeling) to examine how the landscape of early modern Sweden was conceptualised in domestic travel accounts. An article based on the findings of this research is being drafted. The target journal is the *Journal For The History Of Ideas*, and I intend to submit this in the spring of 2026. Moreover, the material is being used in support of a larger postdoctoral funding application on narratives surrounding Scandinavian colonial landscapes. The findings of this project have been presented on two occasions, once at the *History of Knowledge* conference, 8-10 October at Lund University, and at the Rettig Symposium in Stockholm, arranged by the Swedish National Heritage Board and the Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities on 26 November. The research for this project was also used to write a popular history article, titled “Swedish landscapes through early modern eyes: diaries, military maps and ruins” which was published on the History of Knowledge blog *Scilicet*, and can be found here: [Swedish landscapes through early modern eyes: Diaries, military maps and ruins | Scilicet](#)

Project description

The aim of this project was to explore how domestic travel writing functioned as a tool for conceptualising the landscape in Sweden during the long eighteenth century. From the seventeenth century onwards, the rise of European Enlightenment scientific thought brought with it a new emphasis on measuring, categorising, and understanding the natural world. Travel writing, both international and domestic, became an important medium through which scholars and officials tried to make sense of their surroundings. In Sweden, as elsewhere, domestic travel accounts were a key way that educated men engaged with their own national landscape, often with a clear eye toward its natural resources and how they might be exploited.

Building on my previous research, which situates Sweden within the context of Empire Studies, my focus was on the ways in which these travel accounts reflect imperial modes of thinking. Relevant for this project are the agricultural settler-colonial movement into the North of the Kingdom; the desire to reconquer the Baltic provinces lost to Russia at the treaty of Nystad in 1721; and the effort to culturally integrate the formerly Danish southern provinces.

This project has been guided by the following questions:

- How is Sweden being territorialised in these accounts?
- How are human interactions with the landscape described?
- What kinds of value are being assigned to these regions (cultural, historical, archaeological)?
- How do these narratives reflect broader imperial or national concerns?

This research was done with reference to three case studies. The first of these was Fale Abrahamsson Burnam, a historian and high school teacher from western Jämtland, who kept travel diaries between 1793 and 1802. His aim, although never realised, was to publish a comprehensive account of Jämtland that would cover its history, geology, botany, archaeology, and even its economic prospects. This source material contains topographical and botanical descriptions, including assessments of where one might attempt agricultural cultivation, mine for iron ore, or fish. Particularly important in Burnam's writing is how it reflects tensions over competition for land use. His text comes less than 50 years after *Lappmarkreglementet* of 1749, a royal decree aimed at settling and farming Sápmi. Settler-colonists (*nybyggare*) were encouraged to move northward to establish agrarian settlements in exchange for tax breaks and exemption from military service, something which brought them into direct conflict with indigenous Sámi land use. Burnam's text shows traces of this dynamic. He described the hardships of early settler communities, many of whom lacked livestock and struggled to feed themselves. But he also noted how many of the settled farming communities appeared healthier than those in central Sweden, something which he ascribed to their success at hunting. This, however, indicates that they were breaking the rules of land use in *Lappmarkreglementet*, which reserved hunting rights for the Sámi. This source demonstrates some interesting settler-indigenous dynamics, particularly concerning contested land use.

The second case study focused on Barthold Anders Ennes, a Swedish army officer and military historian active in the early nineteenth century. While best known for his military biographies, he also left behind travel accounts and a rich body of cartographic material. The written accounts focus on runic remains on southern Sweden. Moreover, the Ennes material includes cartographic material, which include depictions of Skåne, Finland, and reconstructions of Russian military encampments at Pirtmäcki. These were produced in the wake of Sweden's military losses to Russia during the wars of 1788-1809, and make the landscape a site of strategic control, with a focus on supply routes, attack lines, defensible positions, and the visibility of key points, while areas deemed irrelevant to strategic decision-making are omitted. Here, a militarised vision of the landscape is prioritised, which can be understood as an imperial afterimage when interpreted alongside the strong revanchist sentiment in Sweden, given the longing to reclaim the Baltic holdings lost to Russia.

The third case examined Carl Gustav Gottfried Hilfeling, an artist, historian, and antiquarian. His travels took him through the southern provinces of Blekinge and Skåne, regions that had been part of Denmark until their transfer to Sweden in the seventeenth century. Hilfeling's material sought to document historical and archaeological material of significance to Danish heritage, a task which was funded by the Danish crown. This assignment that shows that while the border disputes were settled, the southern areas were still contested in their importance to Swedish and Danish national identity respectively. This work was ultimately repurposed for a Swedish audience, leveraged to build a strengthened Swedish identity. Unlike first two case studies, Hilfeling's focus is narrow: his interest was in Norse antiquities

Ultimately, this project is part of an attempt to contribute to broader scholarship on travel writing by highlighting the role of a “minor” empire in shaping imperial geographies and knowledge regimes. The Swedish case study offers a counterpoint to research which has focused on dominant colonial powers (Russia, UK, France, etc), showing how peripheral and contested landscapes were surveyed, described, and imagined through overlapping frameworks, with their own stakes in how space was valued and used.

In conducting the research of these three case studies, we can conclude that the Swedish imperial project was not monolithic, and it connects to the eventual development of the national identity. To make some broader assessments based on how the Swedish landscape was understood in this the material:

- the *north* was seen as an internal colony, rich in resources and potential, with agrarian-colonial policies that created conflict with indigenous land use;
- the *east* (Finland) was only of interest for its strategic position, particularly as a buffer to Russia;
- and the *south* is imagined as a cultural heartland, rich in historical memory and national symbolism. Crucially, despite its fairly recent acquisition, it is seen as a core part of how Sweden is imagined.

It is also worth noting here that despite their different aims, all of these writers demonstrated at least some interest in the Swedish cultural and national imagination.