

Saints and Enlightenment: St Erik of Sweden in eighteenth-century Swedish history-writing

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In the early modern period, the intellectual milieu of Western Europe, including Sweden, experienced two major challenges: the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Which of these made the greatest difference may be debated. Traditional views on the Enlightenment have been challenged by revisionist historians. For example, the idea that Europe experienced one uniform revolutionary turn of the intellectual climate in the eighteenth century is now disputed.¹ Especially from a Swedish perspective, it would be difficult to argue that the impact of the Enlightenment is comparable to that of the Reformation, even when it comes to intellectual history. While the Swedish Reformation brought new theological doctrines, new religious practices and a new educational and cultural landscape (the isolation from Roman Catholic universities, for example), the Enlightenment was much less dramatic.² The Swedish Enlightenment scholars were mostly sincere Lutherans, loyal to

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- 1 Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. xviii; J. G. A. Pocock, 'Historiography and enlightenment: a view of their history', *Modern Intellectual History*, 5:1 (2008), 83–96; Erik Sidenvall, 'Förnuftets och teologins kritik: ett bidrag till förståelsen av frihetstidens historieskrivning', *Historisk tidskrift*, 139:2 (2019), 223–50 (229).
 - 2 For recent overviews of the effects of the Reformation in Sweden, see Jakob Evertsson, 'Den långsamma reformationen i Sverige: fyra exempel från Uppsala ärkestift', *Uppsala Stiftshistoriska Sällskap: Årsskrift*, 2 (2019), 5–18; Kajsa Brillkman, Morten Fink-Jensen and Hanne Sanders (eds), *Reformation i två riken: Reformationens historia och historiografi i Sverige och Danmark* (Gothenburg: Makadam, 2019). A shorter overview in English can be found in Ole Peter Grell, 'Intellectual currents', in E. I. Kouri and Jens E. Olesen (eds), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, II: 1520–1870 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 89–100.

the Swedish government.³ Their main concern was to promote economic and moral utility, not to rebel against the authorities.⁴ It has even been suggested that Sweden never truly experienced an Enlightenment. According to this standpoint, there were definitely ideas that were similar to, and probably inspired by, those of continental and British Enlightenment scholars; but these were never particularly influential.⁵ Even if that claim may be somewhat presumptuous, it is hard to deny that the Swedish Enlightenment differed from Enlightenment in other countries. For example, an effective and rationally managed society was more important than freedom of thought, even though ideas about freedom of religion started to become more common.⁶

This chapter does not aim to argue for or against the idea of a weak Swedish Enlightenment. It does, however, claim that with regard to the attitude towards the past – more precisely, Sweden’s medieval pre-Reformation era – and the domestic saints who had been venerated role models during that time, the Enlightenment did have a bigger impact on intellectual life in Sweden than the Reformation. The present chapter shows that while change in the depiction of these characters had been mild in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was much more dramatic in the eighteenth. The focus here is on King St Erik (d. 1160), who held a special position among Swedish saints. By virtue of being the sole Swedish

3 Nils Eriksson, *Dalin, Botin, Lagerbring: Historieforskning och historieskrivning i Sverige 1747–1787* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 1973), pp. 18–50; Sten Lindroth, *Svensk lärdomshistoria*, III: *Fribetstiden* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1978), pp. 615–16; Jouko Nurmiainen, ‘Past, present and future in eighteenth-century Swedish history writing’, in Petri Karonen (ed.), *Hopes and Fears for the Future in Early Modern Sweden, 1500–1800* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2009), pp. 291–314 (p. 294).

4 Jakob Christensson, *Lyckoriket: Studier i svensk upplysning* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1996), pp. 48–9; Peter Hallberg, ‘History and ethics in pre-revolutionary Sweden’, in Jóhann Páll Árnason and Björn Wittrock (eds), *Nordic Paths to Modernity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 111–42 (p. 121).

5 Tore Frängsmyr, *Sökandet efter upplysningen: En essä om 1700-talets svenska kulturdebatt* (Höganäs: Wiken, 1993), pp. 183–4.

6 Lindroth, *Svensk lärdomshistoria*, p. 613; Gunnar Granberg, *Gustav III: en upplysningskomungs tro och kyrkosyn* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1998), pp. 66–9; Carola Nordbäck, *Lycksalighetens källa: Kontextuella närläsningar av Anders Chydenius budordspredikningar 1781–82* (Turku: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 2009), pp. 380–4.

royal saint, he symbolized not only Christianity and the Church but also the state and the Swedish nation.

The state of history-writing in eighteenth-century Europe and Sweden

A comparison between Enlightenment-era Swedish history-writing and that of other countries reveals both significant similarities and distinguishing differences. Historical writing in Western Europe experienced considerable development throughout the entire early modern era.⁷ It is, however, fair to claim that the eighteenth century brought extraordinary changes in this regard. On the basis of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, a new epistemological perspective affected several academic disciplines. For historical writing specifically, it meant that natural factors, rather than divine intervention, were emphasized as causes of various occurrences and changes. Growing empiricism also inspired a more critical attitude towards given facts, especially if these facts came from old or obscure sources. These new attitudes meant, among other things, that scepticism towards miracles grew as early as the end of the seventeenth century.⁸ A feature that is less obviously connected to the scientific revolution, but still forms a distinctive trait in Enlightenment history-writing, has to do with the idea of a glorious past: nostalgic backward looks towards a lost golden age were replaced by developmental optimism and contempt for past eras if their values differed from those of the present. The last fact, combined with a general mistrust of ecclesiastical authorities, meant that historians in general held the Middle Ages in low esteem.⁹

There were differences between countries as well as between individuals, however. Several of the more prominent Enlightenment figures, both from Roman Catholic and from Protestant countries, held an unfavourable view of the medieval Church. Famous names in this context are Voltaire and David Hume (1711–1776), although in their cases it was not a matter of displaying specific animosity towards either Roman Catholicism or the Middle Ages; both were

7 Harry Elmer Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938), pp. 136–7.

8 James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing, II: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 28.

9 Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, p. 152.

critical of the Reformation, too.¹⁰ Among people known primarily as historians, the picture differs somewhat. Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), who may arguably be called the main representative of eighteenth-century history-writing, entertained some understanding of, but mostly aversion against, Christianity in general and the medieval Church in particular. Among other things, he blamed Christianity for the fall of the Roman Empire.¹¹ William Robertson (1721–1793), Scottish Historiographer Royal, was more specific and a more loyal Protestant. He disapproved of medieval Catholicism, but viewed the Reformation as a turning point for the better in European history.¹²

This attitude was also prevalent among German history-writers, especially Lutherans, who were generally more traditional and less oppositional towards both Church and state than their French or British counterparts. They shared the contempt for the Middle Ages, but took a more favourable view of the past in general. In their opinion, history-writing did not only serve as a search for *exempla* in the past but also as a pursuit geared towards emphasizing continuity.¹³ Differences between schools and individuals were present among the Germans as well. Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755), active during the first half of the century, was in many ways a traditionalist; and although he was cautious towards sources and did not approve of early Christianity, he was not fully sceptical in his view on miracles. On the other hand, Ludwig Spittler (1752–1810), who was active during the second half of the century, was secular and had liberal sympathies, but Spittler too held the Middle Ages in low esteem.¹⁴ The starting points of these scholars were hence different, but the outcome was the same.

The last comment may also be applied to Swedish historians during the same time. Like other Swedish Enlightenment thinkers and writers, historians were not particularly hostile towards the contemporary authorities. On the other hand, their dislike of

10 Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, pp. 154–6.

11 Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, pp. 159–61; Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 231.

12 Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, pp. 156–7.

13 Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, pp. 103, 126; Kelley, *Faces of History*, p. 244.

14 Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, pp. 120–4.

Roman Catholicism and the Middle Ages is well known, and it was embraced by both orthodox traditionalists and more profiled Enlightenment thinkers.¹⁵

The best-known representatives of these views were all active during the middle and/or second half of the century: professional historians like Professor Sven Lagerbring (1707–1787) or royal historiographers Olof von Dalin and Anders Schönberg the younger (1737–1811); publishers like Carl Christopher Gjörwell (1731–1811) or top civil servants like Anders af Botin (1724–1790). Most of these people combined a critical method with suspiciousness of or disdain for older times, especially the Middle Ages. Even so, they were also generally loyal to the leaders and values of the society they lived in.¹⁶ Another important trait found in this time's history-writing was that its intended audience became broader: history books were not only written for other scholars or for men of the state, but also for people in general. Among other things, that wider audience meant that more books, and books by less well-known authors, were published.¹⁷

The earliest decades of the eighteenth century have attracted less attention from modern historians than those of its second half. That does not, however, mean that no important works on history were published during this period, or that it did not bring certain changes. Both international and domestic factors affected history-writing at that time. The sceptical attitude towards the notion of divine intervention in history that is seen internationally at the end of the seventeenth century may be observed in Sweden as well at approximately the same time.¹⁸ Domestically, Sweden's loss of its position as the great power of Northern Europe in the 1710s also meant that a new and more modest attitude came to characterize history-writing. Representatives of this school include the Swedish archbishop Erik Benzelius the younger (1675–1743) and the history

15 Tore Frängsmyr, *Svensk idéhistoria: Bildning och vetenskap under tusen år, I: 1000–1809* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2004), pp. 327–9. See also Eriksson, *Dalin, Botin, Lagerbring*, pp. 22–44.

16 See Eriksson, *Dalin, Botin, Lagerbring* for a good overview.

17 Carl Arvid Hessler, “Aristokratfördömandet”: En riktning i svensk historieskrivning’, *Scandia*, 15 (1943), 209–66 (212); Hallberg, ‘History and ethics’, p. 134.

18 Henrik Ågren, *Erik den helige – landsfader eller beläte? En rikspatrons öde i svensk historieskrivning från reformationen till och med upplysningen* (Lund: Sekel, 2012), p. 269.

professor Jacob Wilde (1679–1755).¹⁹ Other prominent historians from this era were, among others, the antiquarian Johan Peringskiöld (1654–1720) and the church historian Claudius Örnhielm (1627–1695). Even though they did not embrace the new view of history to any remarkable degree, it can still be traced in their works.²⁰ What that meant for the presentation of Sweden's medieval royal saint will be shown after something has been said about the saint himself.

Historical background

St Erik's regency is mainly known through his legend, which may have been written as late as a century after his death. It is therefore of questionable source value for information about Erik's own life.²¹ That problem is not of any great concern for this study, though. What is important is that in early modern Sweden the legend was believed to be reasonably accurate, and that it served as a base for all history-writing about St Erik. On the basis of that source, Erik was a pious, just and good king, who promoted both the Church and the realm and took good care of his people. Among his most prominent deeds was a crusade to Finland, where he christened the Finns and brought their lands under the Swedish Crown. His personal life was distinguished by his good character, manifested in fasting and sexual abstinence, generosity with alms and moderation with taxes, and the like. King Erik's death was the tragic result of an attack by his rival for the throne Magnus Henriksen when he was celebrating mass in Uppsala; after he was killed, miracles occurred at that site.²²

St Erik's cult was never extensive, and it is possible that he was more important as a political symbol for the Swedish government than as a symbol for the Church, even before the Reformation.²³

19 Urpilainen, Erkki, 'Algot Scarin och historievetenskapen i början av 1700-talet', *Historisk tidskrift för Finland*, 76 (1991), 347–57 (347).

20 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, pp. 272–73.

21 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, p. 69.

22 Bengt Thordeman (ed.), 'Erik den heliges legend på latin, fornsvenska och modern svenska' (written c. 1270), in *Erik den helige: Historia. Kult. Reliker* (Stockholm: Nordisk rotogravyr, 1954), pp. xviii–xx.

23 Biörn Tjällén, *Church and Nation: The Discourse on Authority in Ericus Olai's Regni Gothorum (c. 1471)* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007), p. 81; Sara Ellis Nilsson, *Creating Holy People and Places on the Periphery: A Study of the Emergence of Cults of Native Saints in the Ecclesiastical*

Nevertheless, as a saint, his name and person were connected to Catholic Christianity. It is therefore reasonable to presume that Protestant historians would have presented an unfavourable picture of Erik, or at least marked some distance from him. He could, in theory, have been used as an example of the evils inherent in the old system.

Anyone looking for such judgements in Reformation-era Swedish history-writing will be disappointed, though. Throughout the sixteenth century, and most of the seventeenth, St Erik was still described as a role model for both kings and Christians in general. His rule and general characteristics were as praiseworthy as his piety.²⁴ The only major difference compared to Roman Catholic Swedish history-writing was that the more obvious medieval Catholic traits of his faith were consistently omitted or markedly toned down. Giving alms was described as a sign of good character, mortification or fasting were viewed as signs of an ascetic temperament, and so on.²⁵ This indicates that the early Protestant historians were not unaware of the problems associated with Erik, on the contrary. The fact that they passed by these qualities in presentations that were otherwise both detailed and true to earlier history-writing shows not only that medieval Catholic customs were thought to be embarrassing, but also that Erik still possessed a function as a role model whose memory needed to be protected. Harmony between past and present was the main concern in this history-writing, not conflict between what was considered to be right or wrong.

Changes during the Enlightenment era

All this began to change rather suddenly at a specific point in time, namely 1689. The year before, Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) had published his *Inledning till svenska historien* ('Introduction to Swedish history') in which the traditional picture of Erik was provided: completely laudatory, and faithful to earlier sources.²⁶ Now, however, in Claudius Örnholm's *Historia Sveonum Gothorumque*

Provinces of Lund and Uppsala from the Eleventh to the Thirteenth Centuries (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2015); Christian Oertel, *The Cult of St Erik in Medieval Sweden: Veneration of a Christian Saint, Twelfth–Sixteenth centuries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), p. 7.

24 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, p. 5.

25 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, pp. 152, 158.

26 Samuel von Pufendorf, *Inledning till svenska historien* (Stockholm: Johann Eberdt, 1688), pp. 75–7.

Ecclesiastica ... ('Swedish church history'), hints of criticism were starting to permeate the narrative. For example, Örnghjelm states that Erik was not a better king than most of his contemporaries.²⁷ This is of course not criticism in and of itself, and it was hardly voiced as such either. However, the statement is noteworthy for two reasons. One is that Erik was no longer necessarily seen as a particularly glorious regent, rather one among many. A more nuanced characterization than previous accounts had provided was presented. The other is that Örnghjelm was also questioning the known facts about Erik. With a few exceptions, particularly during the middle of the Reformation era, previous history-writing had mostly been reproducing a one-sided, glorifying picture.²⁸

From this modest beginning, a drastic change in the descriptions of St Erik took place over the course of the eighteenth century. Even though a mainly favourable picture survived the entire period, a detached attitude, a degree of scepticism and even criticism became more common and more explicit, too. Before the different aspects of this change are presented, a brief overview of the development is in order.

Looking at history-writing several decades into the eighteenth century, any critique of Erik was still rare. When it did occur, it was never aimed at his general character, which was still praised. Instead, only particular traits or deeds were questioned, often in an almost sympathetic way. Some authors, for example, argued that Erik should have been more cautious when he received news that Magnus Henriksen's superior army was approaching.²⁹ Others presented the opinion that while the crusade against the Finns was justified, maybe it should have been less violent.³⁰ To the extent that open criticism was voiced, it was aimed at the miracles and the cult connected to the dead saint, not at the living king. Especially, the people who had believed in and spread these stories – in other words, priests and monks of the medieval Church – were ridiculed.³¹

27 Claudius Örnghjelm, *Historia Sveonum Gothorumque Ecclesiastica* ... (Stockholm: Nicolaus Wankivius, 1689), p. 480.

28 For one of the exceptions, see Laurentius Petri, 'Svenska Chrönika', in Eric Michael Fant, Erik Gustaf Geijer and Johan Henrik Schröder (eds), *Scriptores rerum Svecicarum Medii Aevi*, 3 vols (Uppsala: Palmblad et soc., 1818–1876), (written c. 1560), II:b (1828), pp. 1–160 (p. 64).

29 Örnghjelm, *Historia Sveonum*, p. 474; Haquin Spegel, *Then svenska kyrkohistorian*, 2 vols (Linköping: Kempe, 1707–8), II (1708), p. 15.

30 Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket (KB), D-collection 385, p. 27.

31 Uppsala universitetsbibliotek (UUB), Nordin collection 766, p. 41; KB, Engeström collection B.III.1.39, pp. 39, 92, 202.

Three observations may be made on the basis of these facts. One is that such criticism against Erik as was expressed was either mild and nuanced or indirect. Another is that the criticism was mainly aimed at aspects of Erik that can be labelled religious or even Roman Catholic: crusades, choosing mass over defence, miracles, as well as the cult that emerged after his death.³² Erik's general traits and his worldly deeds were still praised. Finally, the circumstances recapitulated in the preceding paragraph show that scepticism towards the credibility of earlier traditions and history-writing was an alternative to hostility or ridicule. That attitude may stem from a change in epistemological values rather than in theological ones, but the effect was the same. Scepticism of this kind is a significant component in Enlightenment mentality, but in this case it encompasses an evident anti-Catholic or anti-medieval angle.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, attitudes towards St Erik continued to deteriorate. In more ways than one, the criticism became less restrained and limited. The dominating sentiment was still one of approval, but an increasing number of scholars interpreted a larger part of Erik's story in a negative way, and they were more explicit in their judgements. The main difference was that Erik was now (occasionally) criticized for his general persona and not only for traits or deeds with particularly Roman Catholic connotations. For example, the Finnish expedition was now not only criticized on the grounds that it was wrong to spread Christianity through war, but also that the accepted reason behind the attack on Finland – Finnish piracy against Swedish coasts – did not excuse the brutality committed by Erik's forces.³³ In other cases, Erik was described as a well-meaning and good-natured person, but also as weak and perhaps not too bright.³⁴ Even though such statements were rare, they do show that opinions were changing. What these changes consisted of in detail, and how they can be interpreted, will be examined below.

32 Protestants did not deny the possibility of miracles; but they were generally suspicious of non-biblical ones, especially if they were of medieval origin. See Ralph Del Colle, 'Miracles in Christianity', in Graham H. Twelftree (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 235–53 (p. 241); Sidenvall, 'Förnuftets och teologins kritik', 245.

33 [Fredrik Conrad Broman], *Anteckningar uti svenska kyrkohistorien* (Stockholm: A. J. Nordström, 1782), p. 54.

34 Anders af Botin, *Utkast till svenska folkets historia*, 4 vols (Stockholm: Lars Salvius, 1757–1764), IV (1764), p. 162.

Categories of criticism

Criticism against Erik may be roughly categorized into three – not mutually exclusive – categories. The first has already been touched upon and is probably the most obvious: Protestant criticism. It was also the most common type, especially during the first half of the eighteenth century. This kind of criticism manifested itself in condemnation of, or sometimes a sense of distance or scepticism towards, details which Swedish scholars of the time perceived as particularly Roman Catholic. Among these were miracles and the Erik cult, as mentioned above, but there were other aspects as well. To begin with, Erik's personal life included practices that were unseemly from a Protestant point of view. For example, Claudius Örnghjelm and Sven Lagerbring were of the opinion that wearing a horsehair shirt was a vain attempt to appear pious.³⁵ Anders af Botin was even more hostile. He referred to mortification as the 'at these times often practised external sermon' and went on to condemn other types of religious practices of a physical nature: extensive prayers, waking, fasting, cold baths and sexual abstinence, the last being in conflict with 'the voice of nature', 'marital duty' and 'legitimate needs'.³⁶ As we can see, af Botin thought Erik's religious practices perverted. He did not explicitly mention medieval Catholic faith; but the fact that he placed the practices in the past ('at these times') is a clear hint that this is what he had in mind. So is the fact that one important component of Protestant criticism against Roman Catholicism was that it was too fixated on ceremonies, practices and material aspects of faith, and less so on spiritual (or internal, to paraphrase af Botin) aspects.

While we may not agree with af Botin's and other Swedish eighteenth-century historians' harsh comments, or even accept that fasting and so on are defining aspects of Roman Catholic faith, it is easy to recognize their criticism as a typical Protestant attack on medieval Catholicism, in the same manner as antipathy against the Erik cult or the scepticism towards miracles mentioned above. There are, however, certain other aspects of Erik's life which are not as obviously Catholic in character but were still viewed as such among

35 Örnghjelm, *Historia Sveonum*, p. 465; KB, D-collection 385, pp. 275–76.

36 Anders af Botin, *Svenska folkets historia*, 2 vols (Stockholm: Johan A. Carlbohm, 1789–1792), II (1792), p. 58.

eighteenth-century historians. One is the crusade against Finland. Early modern Protestants were not against religious war or defending the faith by violence as such. The Thirty Years' War is one of many examples of that. This may also be one reason why seventeenth-century historians had been so favourably disposed towards Erik's Finnish campaign. During the eighteenth century, however, there were many examples of historians who disapproved of the crusade, which they thought excessive and morally questionable. Their opinion was often expressed as attacks on the Pope and his priests, who were said to have instigated the attack on the Finns.³⁷

Other examples of the changing attitude towards St Erik are found in passages dealing with his concern for the state of Christianity in his realm. Two efforts of his were, and had always been, emphasized: one was Erik's commission of ecclesiastical buildings and the other his support for priests. Both might seem praiseworthy even from a Protestant point of view. However, they also contained aspects that were problematic. Erecting or maintaining churches was not, and had never been, frowned upon by Protestants. Stories about how Erik founded monasteries raised another question, though. That pursuit clearly belonged within the field of Catholic Christianity. Therefore, it is a little surprising to notice that even though no one commended Erik for such actions, criticism of or distancing from them was restrained during the entire eighteenth century. Some scholars doubted that Erik had actually been involved in setting up monasteries at all.³⁸ Others argued that the idea behind monasteries was good – they were meant to be institutions for education – and that founders could not be held accountable if a monastery was used to 'support and feed a crowd of useless and pernicious people'.³⁹ From this perspective, Erik was protected even by eighteenth-century scholars. However, the fact that they admitted that some details in the stories about him were problematic was a novelty. Seventeenth-century Protestant historians had passed over these details in silence.⁴⁰

37 Olof von Dalin, *Svea rikets historia ifrån dess begynnelse till våra tider*, 4 vols (Stockholm: Lars Salvius, 1747–1761), II (1750), p. 106; Sven Lagerbring, *Svea rikets historia ifrån de äldsta tider till de närvarande*, 5 vols (Stockholm: Carl Stolpe, 1769–1987), II (1773), p. 155; Botin, *Svenska folkets historia*, p. 54.

38 Lagerbring, *Svea rikets historia*, p. 160.

39 [Nils Erik Lundström], *Kärnan av Svea rikets historia*, 2 vols (Stockholm: Peter Hesselberg, 1760), II (1760), p. 388.

40 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, p. 137.

The attitude towards Erik's relation to the clergy was similar. The claim that he had taken specific care of priests and monks and given them particular privileges had not normally been mentioned in seventeenth-century works.⁴¹ In the eighteenth century, though, that claim began to appear. Often it was simply mentioned without comment, especially in the early decades.⁴² Sometimes, however, an author clearly stated that the King's benevolence towards men of the cloth affected Sweden in a bad way. Some of these authors mainly put the blame on the clergy's schemes to trick Erik, and other early medieval Swedish kings, into giving them more power.⁴³ Other writers were more frank and claimed that Erik deliberately gave the clergy too much influence, as a consequence of his misguided views on piety and Christian values. Common points in this criticism are that the inheritance laws became too Church-friendly, and that Rome and the Pope were given too much influence over Sweden.⁴⁴ In other words, the criticism clearly had Protestant features, in these cases also with a hint of nationalism.⁴⁵

Protestant dogma was obviously an important part of the negative sentiments towards St Erik. However, it was not the only or even primary reason why he was being re-evaluated. If that had been the case, the change would have occurred sooner, during the Reformation. Furthermore, in many of the examples mentioned above, viewpoints other than Protestant ones are discernible.

One such viewpoint may be called rational. What is and what is not rational is, of course, debatable. In the present case, the term

41 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, p. 141.

42 Johan Peringskiöld, *Monumenta Ullerakerensia cum Upsala Nova Illustrata eller Ulleråkers härads minningsmärken med nya Uppsala* (Stockholm: Horn, 1719), p. 48; Jacob Wilde, *Sueciae Historia Pragmatica* (Stockholm: Gercken, 1731), p. 341; KB, D-collection 356:1, p. 96.

43 Dalin, *Svea rikets historia*, p. 109; [Lundström], *Kärnan av Svea rikets historia*, pp. 400–1; Anders Schönberg, *Anders Schönbergs historiska brev om det svenska regeringssättet i äldre och nyare tider*, I (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt, 1849 [1778]), pp. 37, 140.

44 Botin, *Utkast till svenska folkets historia*, p. 163; [Samuel Loenbom], *Kort inledning till svenska historien och statskunskapen* (Stockholm: Kungl. tryckeriet, 1768), p. 24; Christian Wählin, *Fäderneslandets historia för begynnare* (Lund: Johan Lundblad, 1791), p. 33.

45 Several early modern Protestant countries used anti-Catholicism to build national identity; see Pasi Ihalainen, *Protestant Nations Redefined: Changing Perceptions of National Identity in the Rhetoric of the English, Dutch and Swedish Public Churches, 1685–1772* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 5.

is used to describe how eighteenth-century historians viewed themselves. These historians sometimes based their criticism of Erik and his time on the assumption that he and the Middle Ages were inherently irrational, whereas they themselves and the eighteenth century were rational. More precisely, this means that these men presented a picture in which people in the Middle Ages were prone to believe in preposterous stories about extraordinary occurrences, whereas they themselves had a more sceptical and down-to-earth mindset.

The most common example of the rational attitude on the part of eighteenth-century historians is the dismissal of medieval miracles as manifestations of misconceptions that modern people were too enlightened to believe in, at least in Sweden. An early representative of that view, Örnholm claimed that these miracles were fabricated, and he emphasized that belief in them belonged to times past.⁴⁶ Similar opinions were expressed throughout the century. The Erik miracles were called ‘unsavoury and made up’,⁴⁷ ‘only trumped up by monks to fool common people into parting with their money’,⁴⁸ or ‘so great, so many and so childish that they lacked nothing except maybe truth and decency’.⁴⁹ The canonization was ‘a foolish arrangement’,⁵⁰ typical of ‘that superstitious era’.⁵¹ It is obvious that while earlier Protestant historians had tried to play down the differences between the present and the past, these differences were now put forward and used to emphasize the distinction between an older, superstitious era and the sound – or enlightened – eighteenth century.

This censorious attitude was expressed during the entire time period. The quotations above were not aimed at Erik as a person, though they do point in the same direction as the overt judgements of him in the second half of the century. One of the kinder judgements was that Erik’s faith seems to have been honest ‘although mixed with false belief’.⁵² Other historians were less understanding. Anders af Botin, in his criticism of Erik’s sexual abstinence, claimed that

46 Örnholm, *Historia Sveonum*, p. 480.

47 KB, Engeström collection B.III.1.39, p. 92.

48 KB, F-collection m16:1, c. 5.

49 Botin, *Utkast till svenska folkets historia*, p. 165.

50 Lagerbring, *Svea rikes historia*, p. 163.

51 [Loenbom], *Kort inledning*, p. 24.

52 Jöran Jakob Thomæus, *Sveriges historia uti kort sammandrag för den späðare ungdomen* (Kristianstad: F.F. Cedergréen, 1812), p. 15.

it was ‘false belief and superstition’⁵³ that made him go against his conjugal duty and the voice of nature. Obviously, af Botin was of the opinion that he himself and people of his time had a better understanding of twelfth-century people’s real needs than a saintly king from their own era.

This brings us to the last aspect of the Enlightenment alienation from St Erik and the Middle Ages. One way of interpreting the quotation from af Botin is that he was of the opinion that the biological urges of human beings were more important than spirituality. Of course, it could just be a manifestation of the common opinion that it was medieval piousness in particular that was flawed. However, other statements make it clear that secularism was another aspect of the increasingly unfavourable sentiments towards Erik and the Middle Ages. This dimension comes out in different contexts. One is the story about Erik’s last stand. Several historians stated that he should have thought more about survival than about the spiritual values he honoured by staying in the church before facing his opponents. Among these historians, the most interesting example is Carl Christopher Gjørwell, who calls Erik’s action an expression of ‘excessive godliness, which we now call superstition’.⁵⁴ For Gjørwell, not only the nature of Erik’s faith but also its intensity qualified as superstition. In the previously mentioned examples, both the criticism as such and the word ‘superstition’ alluded to a certain kind of belief, a belief that is Roman Catholic and medieval in character. In this case, no such specification is made. The problem was simply that Erik cared too much for religion. It seems that in Enlightenment-era Sweden, it was possible to be *too* Christian. Such comments might be expected from modern authors; but in still officially Christian eighteenth-century Sweden, they are somewhat surprising. From a Christian perspective, whether Catholic or Protestant, it could actually be argued that it was more rational to prepare your soul just before a battle than to prepare your forces.

Such secular sentiments can also be found in comments on other parts of St Erik’s life. Sometimes they are specifically aimed at Roman Catholicism, as when the schoolbook author Christian Wählin (1761–1829) stated that Erik ‘resembled or rather surpassed

53 Botin, *Svenska folkets historia*, p. 58.

54 Carl Christopher Gjørwell, *Characteren av Sveriges regenter alltifrån överdrotten Oden till Konung Gustaf III* (Stockholm: Johan A. Carlbohm, 1793), p. 210. See also Lagerbring, *Svea rikets historia*, p. 161 and note 29 above.

the monks in religious fervour'.⁵⁵ More often the criticism was less specific and focused more on worldly than celestial ideals, without explicit digs at Roman Catholic faith. One example which is probably anti-Catholic, but definitely secular, concerns the established fact that Erik cared much about his subjects' material well-being. To begin with, he was said to be generous with alms to the poor. Furthermore, he also refused to accept revenues from his subjects. Some versions of this story concern taxes; others involve fines and still others are concerned with voluntary gifts. In any case, Erik's refusal was almost always presented as an example of his good character as a king. Quite often it was omitted or toned down by Protestant historians. This can be explained by the fact that a king who refused taxes was a sensitive subject in almost any feudal society, especially one as dependent on domestic incomes as Sweden in the early modern era.⁵⁶ Even so, there are a few cases where authors took up another standpoint. Two of them come from Anders af Botin, who opined that refusal to accept fines encouraged criminals and that generosity with alms filled the country with idlers.⁵⁷ Another comes from a handwritten chronicle by an essentially unknown author named Johan Hermansson. He comments that refusal of taxes accustomed people to not paying.⁵⁸ To be sure, these examples are few; but if compared to some of the more approving comments on the same stories, they paradoxically display the same values. Several historians interpreted Erik's reluctance to accept taxes as a sign that he knew how to manage his resources well. They also commented that a prosperous population was the base for a thriving country.⁵⁹ Even though these comments represent more or less the opposite viewpoint from that of Hermansson and af Botin, they were born from the same value system. In these situations, St Erik's deeds are judged on the basis of the general consequences for society, more specifically its economic gains. Consequently, they show not only a secular but even a mercantilist attitude. Concern about the wealth of the nation was typical of the Swedish Enlightenment, a feature which manifested itself in different ways.

55 Wählin, *Fäderneslandets historia*, p. 21.

56 Ågren, *Erik den helige*, p. 131.

57 Botin, *Utkast till svenska folkets historia*, pp. 163–4.

58 UUB, Nordin collection 775, p. 34.

59 KB, F-collection, e13A [1.], no page; Lagerbring, *Svea rikets historia*, p. 154; Gjørwell, *Characteren av Sveriges*, p. 210.

If concern for Sweden's economic prosperity sometimes resulted in eighteenth-century historians being less concerned about the well-being of their compatriots than their predecessors, there is one instance where they acted in a more soft-hearted manner. As mentioned above, there was growing criticism of Erik's actions in Finland. To some extent that criticism was based on a Protestant world view, as stated above, but also on a more secular one. Fighting against heathens was no longer an excuse for the use of excessive violence; that practice was said to belong to a cruel and uncivilized past.⁶⁰ Still, it is worth noticing that Protestant historians from earlier centuries did not object to Erik's violent methods against the Finns. There are also comments from the eighteenth century that make it clear that conversion by force was generally condemned. A greater concern for people's lives than for their souls was becoming apparent, and starting wars on religious grounds was now regarded as, generally speaking, reprehensible.⁶¹ The most remarkable expression of this sentiment was once again made by Anders af Botin. According to the older historiography, Erik had displayed the goodness of his heart by crying over the dead Finns whose souls, he believed, were now in hell, when they could have been blessed if they had willingly accepted the Christian faith. Instead, af Botin made this reflection: 'Surely, Erik expressed regret at the condemnation of so many souls, but absolutely no concern over the loss of so many innocent lives.'⁶² In this quotation, secularism approaches atheism. Of course, the statement in itself is not a denial of the existence of a deity. However, the consequence of investing as much concern in earthly life as in eternal fate does come close to such a position, and af Botin's well-known criticism of medieval Christianity has a general reputation of being more than just Protestant.⁶³ Even if the author himself would not have agreed with that interpretation, it is at least clear that negative feelings towards St Erik and his piety were more than merely an expression of Lutheran anti-Catholicism.

60 KB, D-collection 356:1, pp. 95–6; [Broman], *Anteckningar uti svenska*, p. 54 and the following notes.

61 UUB, E-collection 61, no page; KB, D-collection 385, p. 272; Lagerbring, *Svea rikets historia*, p. 155.

62 Botin, *Svenska folkets historia*, p. 55.

63 B—lk, 'Recension', *Skandia: Tidskrift för vetenskap och konst*, 4 (1834), 313–451 (321) and repeated among others by Eriksson, *Dalin*, *Botin*, *Lagerbring*, p. 31.

On the other hand, such anti-Catholicism was indeed present in most of the criticism levelled at Erik. Deeds and traits that were, in one way or another, associated with medieval Catholic Christianity inspired most of the disapproving comments: miracles, the cult of a saint, crusades, monasteries and their inhabitants, independent priests, or fasting, self-mortification and alms. By clearly stating that these phenomena were typical of a past, superstitious and less-developed period, Enlightenment-era historians managed to simultaneously criticize a competing faith system and mark their own time as civilized and rational.⁶⁴ Taken altogether, whether the arguments were Protestant, rational, secular or a mixture of all these, they all expressed Enlightenment attitudes. The entire century was characterized by an idea of development, where – unlike in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – differences from earlier epochs were emphasized, not similarities. Previous research has observed a profound optimism with regard to development among some of the more influential Swedish eighteenth-century historians, something that fits well with this conclusion.⁶⁵ The eighteenth century differs more from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in respect of attitudes towards the Middle Ages than those centuries do from the view that the Middle Ages had of their own era. In other words: the Enlightenment had a bigger impact than the Reformation with regard to the re-evaluation of Sweden's Catholic past.

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64 This has also been noted by Sidenvall.

65 Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, p. 148; Eriksson, *Dalín, Botin, Lagerbring*, p. 208.

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