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Title: The Gentle Art of Counselling Monarchs (1560-1655)

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Hakanen, M., & Koskinen, U. (2017). The Gentle Art of Counselling Monarchs (1560-1655). In P. Karonen, & M. Hakanen (Eds.), *Personal Agency at the Swedish Age of Greatness 1560-1720* (pp. 47-81). Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura. *Studia Fennica Historica*, 23. <https://oa.finlit.fi/site/books/10.21435/sfh.23>

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The Gentle Art of Counselling Monarchs (1560–1655)

The Council of the Realm (*riksrådet*) was an aristocratic institution positioned at the heart of the centralized power structure in Sweden along with the king and the Diet. Consequently, political structures and events related to it have been well studied in historical research. Nevertheless, contrary to what many might believe, the personal political agency of those on the Council had not always been so extensive. We examine how the agency of these councillors (*riksråd*) was shaped in Sweden between 1560 and 1655. It was a twofold period: the first part after Gustavus Vasa's death was marked by an ongoing shaping and testing of forms of agency, and the latter by the establishment of clear regulations for the councillors' work. After Queen Christina came to the throne, the role of the Council of the Realm stabilized. As the political chronology of this period is already quite well-known from extensive historical research, we are able to concentrate more precisely on the factors that both contributed to and constrained councillors' agency as a collective entity, and as individuals; and how these factors changed during this epoch. To be able to get a more detailed view of this, we have thus created a database for all the councillors of this period.

In early modern Sweden, the king's councillors had the traditional right to give counsel to the ruler in important matters. Gustavus Vasa pushed through the law that allowed for inherited kingship in 1540, ending the tradition of elected kingship. However, legislation did not stop Eric XIV, John III and Charles IX (1550–1611) all having to gradually increase the power of the nobility to continue to receive support for their kingship. The nobility thus gained privileges and large fiefdoms for supporting the Vasa kings throughout the sixteenth century. The latter part of the century was marked by a balancing act between aristocratic demands and the rulers' efforts to control them.

The wars in Europe pushed Sweden into a rapid state-building process at the turn of the sixteenth century and the civil administration was completely restructured. This also meant that the notion of an ideal aristocrat changed from that of a military official to that of a civil servant. It became useful to serve the king in his administration, and at the same time, the power of the king's council increased because it was in charge of the whole administrative system, naturally reporting to the king.¹

The continuous institutionalised power of the most distinguished aristocratic families in Sweden contrasts with the rest of Western Europe, where generally the upper nobility had lost much of its political predominance by this time. As Richard Bonney has pointed out, in France and Spain, where university education was readily at hand, trained professionals of lesser nobility and commoners came to replace aristocrats in the administrative councils; whereas in Sweden, Poland, and Russia, it was still the inherited aristocracy that prevailed.²

Through privilege, all the high offices belonged to the aristocratic nobility, but the problem was finding those of them who were educated, capable, and willing enough to work in the lower administrative offices.³ This meant a growing demand for civil servants at this level, and eventually the lower nobility began to infiltrate the power structure. Although the Ordinance for the House of Nobility restricted appointments in 1626, and the higher nobility took up all the places in the Council, a new administrative nobility was born.

Even though the Councillors of the Realm held a significant position in the Swedish administration, they have been mainly studied in either short articles or as parts of a larger study, without a comprehensive database or register for the whole period to hand.⁴ The database that forms the basis of this chapter of the book covers the 257 acting councillors who were in office for the period 1523–1680, of which 185 councillors were active between 1560 and 1655. The information has been collected from various sources: biographical registers and databases, biography collections, lineage databases, and research literature. It consists of data on births, deaths and marriages; dates of appointments; age at appointment; spouses and their parents; information on family relations inside the Council; and the number of acting councillors per year. All persons appear in the database with their names. The data has been collected using *collective group biography*⁵ and *new prosopography*⁶ methods. Prosopographic analysis enables the councillors to be studied collectively, while still taking into account their individual agency and personal life stories.⁷ It is a method that has been used in medieval and early modern studies since the 1960s⁸, but in this chapter we seek to develop a new interpretive historical approach which focuses more on personal agency by combining agency theories with the group's biographical information database (on status, activities, marriage details, and blood relations).

In this chapter, we examine how the personal agency of councillors changed from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth century. The database used throughout this article is compiled from biographical registers based on primary sources, examined with strict source criticism. The database is the foundation of our interpretation, but to gain a deeper analysis of the councillors' personal agency, we have added more qualitative information to support the quantitative material. This biographical information is based on previous research from primary source materials (for example *Svenska biografiska lexikon*, *Kansallisbiografia*, and biographies when available).

The source of agency – a tradition of giving counsel

The Council of the Realm was an institution dating back to early medieval times. According to the Law of the Realm (1442), it was to consist of 12 lay councillors (*riksråd*) representing the Swedish aristocracy and an undetermined number of bishops and other clerics.⁹ It was the Council's task to give advice, help the king in important administrative matters, and stand together as representatives of the realm. The members were chosen from the most prominent aristocratic families or, exceptionally, from among other persons especially trusted by the current ruler. Councillors also took care of numerous other prominent tasks in central and regional administration, the armed forces and the judicial system. In this respect they formed the general administrative elite of the realm.

In the sixteenth-century, giving counsel (*rådgivning*) was an emblematic feature of the administration in Sweden. It was at the same time a right and a duty. Righteousness (*rättrådighet*) was among the virtues of a decent subject. It is mentioned in vows of loyalty by office-holders to the king.¹⁰ Indeed, a culture of negotiation not only permeated the aristocracy but also society as a whole. Friendly counsel from a trustworthy person was expected before major decisions. This communal practice can also be seen in juridical documents, such as contracts of sale, which typically mention that the decision has been made with the counsel and agreement of family and friends.¹¹ Giving counsel was also part of an educated and courtly identity, as it was central to the classical ideal of friendship. It can be found in the influential writings of Cicero as well as medieval Scandinavian chronicles. In the latter, the king appears as a lord among others and it was important that he listened to the counsel of righteous persons.¹²

The Council of the Realm exemplified this tradition by giving reciprocal advice in an institutionalized form. In medieval Europe, it had been customary that princes ruled with councils consisting of both spiritual and lay aristocrats. Typically, the councils did not have the formal power to make decisions, but only offered advice to the ruler; and this left room for negotiation. The exercise of actual power depended on the current relations between king, aristocracy and representatives of the church. In Sweden, these foreign models were utilized as the early medieval gatherings of aristocracy around the king developed into a more established institution by the late thirteenth century. The institution was called in Latin *consilium*, and later this became *rikets råd* in Swedish.¹³

The Swedish Council held an ambiguous position with regards to an elective kingship. The king was elected at the Council's consent, and yet the Council was subject to the king at the same time. As far back as King Magnus Eriksson's Law of the Realm (circa 1350), the king had nominated the Council, but before long the Council was also asked to help in the appointment of new councillors. In effect, the king and the Council were both needed to represent the realm.¹⁴ The fifteenth century became the century in which the Council consolidated itself as the centre of power in Sweden. Late medieval Sweden has been described as an "aristocratic republic" or

“aristocratic power system”.¹⁵ A hundred years later a less powerful and humbler Council started to look back on those days with nostalgia.

According to the Law of King Christopher from 1442 (the so-called *landslag*), the councillors took an oath confirming that they “shall advise the king, of what they know in front of God to be for his and his kingdom’s gain and benefit, and not leave it aside because of partiality, kinship, affinity or friendship”. The law also stated that a councillor must keep all confidential information secret and support the king to uphold the laws and keep his oaths.¹⁶ In practice, the Council’s task was to give advice to the king and help him in decision-making with regard to foreign affairs, the armed forces, state finances, legislation, and taxation. They also took care of the highest judicial matters, although they had no right to award fiefs (*förläningar*).¹⁷ It is worth noticing the somewhat vague definition in the law mentioning that the king rules with the help of counsel from the Council (*med råds råde*). This was to become a key point of dispute between Crown and Council later.¹⁸

During the last decades of the Union of Kalmar 1470–1520, Sweden was ruled by a regent and the Council. Councillors were active in developing the idea of state in opposition to the king. The end of the Union was, however, marked by the notorious Stockholm Bloodbath in November 1520. An influential number of the Swedish high aristocracy, including ten councillors, were executed after the accession of King Christian II of Denmark (1481–1559) to the throne of the Kalmar Union. The purpose seems to have been to break the aristocratic opposition to his rule in Sweden, led by Sten Sture the younger (1493–1520), but the final result was in fact the end of the Union, and the accession of Gustavus Vasa (1496–1560) to the Swedish throne.¹⁹

For most of the sixteenth century, Diet and the Council of the Realm were not the only official representative bodies in Sweden that gave counsel to the king. There still existed other means of counsel that only came to an end at around the turn of the century. Gatherings of nobility (*herredag*), for example, aimed at making a unanimous suggestion to the king, and regional meetings (*landsdag*) gathered representatives of other societal groups for the same purpose too.²⁰

The Council worked within a central administration that was rather simple in structure. In practice, Gustavus Vasa took care of the realm personally, even to the point of being in touch with local bailiffs. He organized the state according to German models. The Chancellery and the Chamber, which were occupied by non-aristocratic secretaries, were permanent institutions which took care of the king’s correspondence and the state finances. They officially played no part in making decisions; but unofficially the royal secretaries wielded significant power, as we will see later in this book.²¹

Setting the rules – vaguely defined limits to agency

The agency of individual councillors becomes more visible with the emergence of Council Protocols from the 1620s onwards. Before that, there are mostly only sporadic documents covering negotiations within

the Council. This is due to the fact that the Council was not yet either an administrative organ or a continuous assembly with responsibilities to keep tabs on everyday administrative matters. As it was only called into being by the king as and when he needed the Council's pronouncements on separately defined matters, it was sufficient to give a joint statement to the king. A collection of these *rådslag* survive from the early sixteenth century onwards, but shed no light on the role of individual councillors.²²

Generally the position of councillors vis-à-vis administration and the limits of their agency remained vague throughout the Vasa dynasty, even if Gustavus Vasa did make some attempt to shape the Council into a supreme administrative and legal power that met on a regular basis. The experiment of a Governing Council (*regementsråd*) was conducted by his trusted German Chancellor, Conrad von Pyhy (d. 1553), in line with Habsburgian principles, but it came to an end in 1542.²³ After that, it was not until the 1620s that an effective reorganisation of the central administration took place.

In the sixteenth century, the king and Council represented the realm together, but the Council had no independent role in the administration. Relations between the king and councillors remained flexible and personal rather than defined by written orders. This purely supportive role of the Council was particularly prevalent in the reign of Gustavus Vasa. The king appointed all the members, many of them from among his own kin; and the frequency of Council meetings (*rådsmöten*) varied greatly, but was usually low. As late as 1593 Duke Charles suggested there should be three meetings of the Council every year.²⁴

Meetings of the Council received the king's written proposition and gave a written counsel that was signed and sealed by the councillors who were present. However, the king was not tied to their verdict. In fact, if anything, the Council was customarily utilized as a tool by the king to consolidate and legitimize his ordinances, or to sign important documents alongside him and thus add emphasis to a matter.²⁵

This lack of definition in the Council's role can also be seen in the councillor's oath (*rådsed*) which, in the late fifteenth century consisted of four articles: to be loyal to the realm, to only counsel in the realm's best interests, to act in confidentiality, and to avoid arbitrariness. At the coronation of John III, the oath was changed to stipulate that councillors had to take part in the meetings, to have freedom of speech, to be in agreement with each other, and to stick to the decisions taken.²⁶

John III also doubled the official number of councillors to 24 in 1569. This effectively confirmed what had already become an established practice of exceeding the regulated number.²⁷ In this respect the Council resembled the *duma* of Muscovy, which varied considerably in size. This has been seen as reflecting the instability and inconsistency of the Muscovite state and its policy.²⁸ The same easily applies to the political situation in Sweden in the times of Gustavus Vasa's sons.

New members to the Council were nominated at meetings of either the Council or Diet, and at coronations. Under the Kalmar Union it was ordered that councillors had to be Swedish men born in Sweden. Some exceptions were made along the way, but it was also customary that councillors came

from the most prominent aristocratic families of the kingdom, many with a long line of predecessors in the Council. Emil Hildebrand calls them “the finest or most splendid flower of nobility”. So when the clerical members of the Council were removed in 1527, as a consequence of the Reformation, virtually all the Council’s members came from the ranks of the highest aristocracy.²⁹

Whereas the agency of a councillor was vaguely defined, his post was permanent. Among the councillors who served between 1560 and 1655, the majority stayed in office until their death. Those who did not were related to the crisis of the 1590s, when Charles IX acceded to the throne and the remaining cases were related to personal conditions, like health matters. This said, the deaths of councillors were not always natural (i.e., falling into royal disgrace could lead to execution), and this will be dealt with more later.³⁰

Most of the councillors appointed in the mid-sixteenth century were provincial magnates and they remained in their residences, scattered around the kingdom for the duration of their appointments. The councillors that lived closest to the king, in the vicinity of Stockholm, may have had a greater degree of personal agency, but most seemed reluctant at the idea of permanent service in the heart of the realm. A hundred years later however, the aristocracy were only too keen to flock to Stockholm for a place in the centralized state administration. Gustavus Vasa tried to make the Council more permanent, so it could help the king in everyday administration, and for a while the Council agreed that two of its members should take turns to accompany the king for one month at a time; but it seems that this was more the exception than the rule.³¹

Jan Samuelson has noted that the key regions of recruitment were, in the sixteenth century, Västergötland, Uppland and Södermanland. The Finnish part of the realm was generally represented by one or two councillors at a time, equating roughly to Swedish provinces Småland and Östergötland. In the next century, the number of councillors of Finnish origin gradually increased and even exceeded 10 in the 1660s.³²

The individual political agency of councillors was more visible in their numerous other offices in central and regional administration. The kings gave them permanent and temporary tasks that were, among others, military, judicial, and financial, or related to steward (*ståthållare*). The most distinguished councillors took part in foreign policy negotiations and were used in diplomatic missions, but at all times they remained instruments for the king’s decision-making, with no agency of their own.³³

Some councillors were at times referred to as Secret Councillor or Highest Secret Councillor (*sekrete råd, överste sekrete råd*), which was reminiscent of the *regementsråd* experiment in the 1530s and 1540s, when the highest department was referred to in this way. It can be regarded as an honorary title, as the concrete significance remained undefined and there were no special tasks or status as a permanent minister attached to it.³⁴

The Council gains new confidence but is bound by old constraints

All over Europe, the trend of sixteenth century was that administrative and military power became ever more concentrated in the hands of monarchs as a consequence of the gradual process of state formation. Aristocratic groups could not efficiently compete with this monopoly of power.³⁵ Even in Sweden, the agency of aristocratic councillors remained subordinate to the king throughout the reign of Gustavus Vasa's sons 1560–1611. Their status varied according to political fluctuations.

The break from the Kalmar Union under the strong leadership of Gustavus Vasa meant that the Council relented from asking the king to delegate more of his power. Even his sons did not want to risk passing power to their aristocratic rivals, as they perceived them. Instead, they relied on the practical but unofficial help of non-noble secretaries in the royal Chancellery. The Council of the Realm thus remained a temporary meeting to be summoned as and when needed. The period was marked by an active foreign policy, inner power struggles, and dire state finances. The tense relations between king and aristocrats, and the councillors' lack of political agency and reliance on the king's grace eventually culminated in massive tribunals and executions of councillors in the 1560s and 1599–1600.³⁶

As he had lost his father in a similar fashion, Gustavus Vasa trusted the sons of councillors executed in 1520 and managed to make Sten Eriksson (Leijonhufvud) (1518–1568) and Per Brahe the elder (1520–1590) his sturdiest supporters.³⁷ However, Eric XIV was paranoid of aristocratic plots against his rule. One of his main targets was the Sture family of councillors, that before Gustavus' reign had provided the last Regents of Sweden (*riksföreståndare*). They had so far successfully preserved their agency in the new Vasa dynasty by not arousing mistrust, but this came to an end when Eric XIV eliminated three of its most prominent members in the Sture Murders of 1567.³⁸

Secret Councillors³⁹ Per Brahe and Sten Eriksson (who had barely escaped with his life) became the central figures of the Council that took care of the administration during the king's subsequent mental breakdown. This was the first time since the Kalmar Union that the Council had a role independent of the king. The Council suggested that if King Eric could now no longer take responsibility of the government personally, he should delegate authority, organize the central administration on a clearly defined basis, and give members of the Council the mandate to take care of matters. As the king recovered, this brief period was soon forgotten about, but it remains the first occasion that councillors requested a defined structure to their agency.⁴⁰

Although the councillors continued to have no formal power over the sovereign, they sought other ways to balance the king's power. Secret Councillor Sten Eriksson (Leijonhufvud) figures as one of the leading men of the aristocracy. He not only negotiated the nobility's responsibilities for cavalry service in early 1560s, but when Dukes John and Charles staged an uprising against King Eric in 1568, Sten Eriksson became the leader of their aristocratic allies. He was the one who led the troops into Stockholm and

got killed in doing so.⁴¹ The 66-year old Secret Councillor Gustav Olofsson (Stenbock) (1502–1571), who had been Gustavus Vasa's brother-in-law, trusted ally, and promotor of princely power also joined this uprising, as Erik had previously condemned his two sons to death for treacherous speech.⁴²

Statements about the need to delegate supreme power between the king and the Council reappeared after John III seized power in 1568. This is an important turning point. Traditionally, the councillors had been rather defensive towards the kings' suggestions about a permanent organization for their work, but now they took on a more active political role, initiating propositions and demanding that their counsels be carried out. The councillors felt confident once again that they could criticise the king's actions. One of their main concerns was "the rule of secretaries". In the years 1573–1575 the Council, led by the king's brother Duke Charles, made several suggestions about reorganizing the central administrative institutions.⁴³

The upsurge of interest in central government among the leading councillors has been interpreted in different ways. The most obvious explanation seems to be they were interested in more power at the expense of the king. But for a deeper evaluation, one needs to take into account the changes that had occurred in the international military, political and economic situation and called for an overhaul of Sweden's central government. The vague principles of personal cooperation between the royal family and aristocracy were now no longer suitable as they served instead as a constant source of rivalry and unrest. Although both Gustavus Vasa and John III could always rely on *kungafränder* (members of royal kin) in the Council, in John III's case they were already more distant relatives, forming such a tight social structure in itself that rather than creating an atmosphere of loyalty to the king, gave them confidence to disagree with him.⁴⁴

The remarkable thing is that the councillors did not demand a weakening of central administration, which would have been the traditional aristocratic position. Instead, they wanted the central organs of power to remain strong but with the aristocracy given a prominent position within them. Although they were asking that royal power be restricted by law, the central role of a monarch remained unquestioned. This reflects the general European trend at the time to see royal power as emanating from God.⁴⁵

Nils Edén (1899) and Michael Roberts (1968) have stressed how, at this point, the aristocracy had become more conscious of the need to cooperate with the king and to secure their position by taking part in courtly life and the central administration in Stockholm.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Richard Bonney (1991) has referred to the nobility's attempts to reclaim their 'lost freedoms' from the lowborn secretaries who were effectively wielding more power than them at the time.⁴⁷ Aristocratic demands for more extensive privileges and less dependence on the inconsistent grace of the monarch have been most profoundly addressed by Sven A. Nilsson (1952).⁴⁸ In such a state, which was under the personal rule of Vasa monarchs, personal factors were more important than they perhaps should have been. According to Lars Ericson Wolke's biography of John III (2006), the king's mood swings made his governance volatile rather than well-considered. In order to control the

monarch's ad hoc decision-making process, the councillors thus had to be physically present and find a secure place within the central administration.⁴⁹

Finnish historians Pentti Renvall and John E. Roos (1934) have highlighted the importance of specific rewards called *beställningar*, introduced in John III's reign. These became a common form of payment for the highest office-holders. Only then did councillors become willing to take on duties that required absence from their landed properties.⁵⁰ Another factor that gradually led towards a paid office-holding nobility was the simultaneous reduction in the number of fiefs awarded. Sven A. Nilsson has pointed out that this was especially relevant to the leading group of councillors (Bielke, Banér, and Sparre), who held the highest state offices, earned *beställningar*, and who also voiced the hardest criticism over John III's reductions.⁵¹ According to Jan Glete, the aristocrats shifted their support quickly toward a more centralized administration, because their position as regional magnates had been comparatively modest in Sweden and they perceived a strong Vasa state as the best form of administrative and military organisation, provided that they had a share in it.⁵²

However sophisticated their views on the delegation of power, the councillors could not form a united aristocratic front that would have been necessary to take on John III. The leading group consisted of Hogenskild (1538–1605) and Ture Bielke (1548–1600), Gustaf (1547–1600) and Sten Axelsson Banér (1546–1600), Per Brahe the elder, and his son-in-law Erik Larsson Sparre (1550–1600).⁵³ But instead of determined action, their agency was wasted on power struggles and voicing their powerless critique over the way Sweden was ruled. In this situation, the only means of having a greater agency in state matters depended on the councillors' personal relations to the king.

Pontus De la Gardie (1520–1585) serves as an example of this. He came to the realm as an outsider to the councillor families, a foreigner with no connection to existing domestic power struggles and with capabilities that were rare among the Swedish aristocracy at the time. He had international political expertise, knowledge of military tactics, and linguistic skills that made him a useful diplomat. De la Gardie came to Sweden in Eric XIV's service, but quickly changed sides. The French diplomat, Danzay, reported that he was one of those to whom John III felt most indebted, upon becoming king. De la Gardie's rise to become the most powerful man in the realm was quick after that. In the beginning, he was not a steady royalist, as he plotted with foreign powers and may have even had some part in a conspiracy against John III. However, John was able to tie him to the royal throne so that De la Gardie found he was in the best position as a strong supporter of the Swedish king. With royal grace, his authorizations and agency was strong and his family was permanently blended in with the other councillors, although in the beginning their relationship was not quite so harmonious.⁵⁴

The widowed John III married Gunilla Bielke (1568–1597), the daughter of Councillor Johan Axelsson Bielke (d. 1576), in 1585. Despite this symbolic diminishing of distance between the aristocracy and royalty, the councillors clashed with the king over foreign policy. The meeting at Reval in 1589

served as the next turning point for their agency. Briefly they returned to the independent role they had once had within the Kalmar Union, as a strong representative body between king and the people, as they formulated it.⁵⁵ John III wanted to take his son Sigismund (1566–1632), King of Poland, to Sweden, but had to give this up because of the strict opposition of the Council and other nobility. A king having been scandalously forced to bend before his Council was too humiliating for John III however, and in retaliation he punished councillors by disgracing them and stripping six of their titles before the Estates. They were the aforementioned Bielke and Banér brothers, Erik Sparre, and Claes Åkesson (Tott) (c. 1525–1590).⁵⁶

Meanwhile, councillors Claes (Eriksson) Fleming (1535–1597) and Nils (Göransson) Gyllenstierna (1526–1601), basked in royal grace and were awarded additional offices. These men had, however, used two quite different strategies to achieve greater agency. Gyllenstierna had enjoyed a long career as a councillor by being a mediator, or “caution personified”, throughout;⁵⁷ while the Finnish “Iron Marshal” Claes Fleming had been the only councillor who stood on John III’s side in Reval, confident that with the backing of his army in Finland, he could defeat the rest of the Council and Duke Charles. Fleming became a favourite of John III in the same way that Pontus De la Gardie had done earlier. Both were competent military leaders and outsiders with respect to the Swedish aristocracy. After the death of Claes Åkesson (Tott) in 1590, Fleming was the only councillor from Finland for the years 1591–1597.⁵⁸ Like De la Gardie, he was also tied to the throne through marriage to the sister-in-law of Gustavus Vasa.⁵⁹

Fleming’s relations with the rest of the councillors, especially the Sparre-Bielke-Banér network, were tense. He was not particularly interested in their constitutional ideas about delegating power, being more content with the traditional autocratic role of the king and the possibilities this afforded to those who showed loyal service. In this respect, he allied himself quite clearly with the Vasa dynasty’s ideas of ruling Sweden, which explains the enormously powerful position he eventually gained, controlling the whole of Finland as a separate entity as Governor, Marshal and Admiral. Ironic as it may seem, his strategy of subordinating himself to the monarch had led to a greater agency that bypassed the rest of the councillors. If he had, however, joined the aristocratic front, they would have gained the strong leading figure they were lacking.⁶⁰

As John III died in 1592, the Crown passed to his son Sigismund, who resided in his other kingdom, Poland. Duke Charles thus took over the reins of government alongside the Council. The Council’s propositions for central rule included a systematic organization of central government, dividing it into different sections led by high-ranking office-holders, and with defined hierarchical links to the lower offices. Although these propositions were rejected, they bear a striking resemblance to the reorganization that eventually occurred thirty years later, in the 1620s. The leading councillors had evidently internalized the idea that supporting a centralized state controlled by themselves was the best way to attain greater agency. This was now quite the opposite of the traditional aristocratic ideals that prevailed in Denmark, Germany and Poland.⁶¹

Hogenskild Bielke and Erik Sparre were perhaps the most politically aware councillors of this period. Both were well-educated political theorists, doing their utmost via research and writing to restore the privileges and political power that they argued the nobility had held in earlier centuries. Their basic thesis was that the realm should be governed by “rule of the law” and the hereditary sovereign’s power should be limited in favour of the people (i.e., the Council and the Estates). The political and legal agenda they proposed had its roots in the Middle Ages, and has been described as either constitutionalism, or “Council-constitutionalism” (*rådskonstitutionalism*). In the early 1570s, Hogenskild Bielke even seems to have been considering the overthrow of John III to replace him with a regent and rule via the Council as had been done in the fifteenth century. It seems Hogenskild Bielke and Erik Sparre were not engaging in these activities only to better their agency as councillors, but to represent the highest aristocracy as a group.⁶²

Erik Sparre’s pamphlet *Pro Lege, Rege et Grege* from the 1580s, was actually written with John III’s consent and was directed against Duke Charles’ aspirations for power. It marked a turning point in its legalistic anti-absolutist stance and with its references to Roman law. Indeed, it effectively challenged the assumptions on which the Vasa monarchy rested. According to Kerstin Strömberg-Back, Sparre’s arguments were influenced by other councillors, especially his father-in-law, Secret Councillor Per Brahe. Brahe was also concerned about the nobility’s lost privileges and shared Sparre and Bielke’s sympathies towards Catholicism. Otherwise Brahe, already an older man, adopted a moderate position and avoided taking too overt a stance in the power struggle that ensued.⁶³

Axel Stensson (Leijonhufvud) (1554–1619) was the only councillor who came to the Diet of Arboga in 1597, when Duke Charles virtually carried out a coup d’état and made himself the regent (*riksföreståndare*).⁶⁴ Axel Stensson’s agency as a councillor stands out in opposition to the rest of the group concerning this. As a cousin to both John III and Duke Charles he had a renowned social status.⁶⁵ Explanations for the volatility of his agency can be found in his personality: he was a political opportunist and, according to contemporaries, was quick to lose his temper. Leijonhufvud started out as royalist but soon channelled his loyalty towards Duke Charles in spite of the opinions of the other councillors, and he eventually ended up as judge at their trial.⁶⁶

The councillors now found themselves in a situation with “evil on all sides”, as Gustav Banér wrote to Hogenskild Bielke. They did not want to surrender to Duke Charles, yet despite their efforts, they could not agree on a joint policy against him. Their ranks started to break, until by the spring of 1597 Erik Stenbock (1538–1602), Sten Banér, Göran Knutsson Posse (1556–1616) as well as Erik Sparre himself had left Sweden to seek help in Poland.⁶⁷

In the civil war that followed, Charles cruelly crushed any dreams the aristocracy may have had of power. The former leading councillors were either sentenced to death or went into exile, and the Council as good as disappeared in these chaotic years. In Linköping, March 1600, Duke Charles (from 1605 officially King Charles IX) arranged a show trial with a tribunal of 155 judges, some of them councillors themselves. Seven councillors were

accused and Ture Bielke, Erik Sparre, Gustaf Banér, and Sten Banér were executed.⁶⁸

It is clear then that sixteenth-century councillors had quite limited political agency, and from the 1570s onwards most of this centred on efforts to get the king to delegate some of his power to them. This was therefore an era in which councillors attained a new political consciousness. The leading group adopted an approach novel to aristocrats: actively using their agency to gain a secure position in central administration. However, they were a small group without an independent feudal background or strong leader, and while opposed by the Vasa monarchs, they lacked the means to achieve their goals before the 1620s.

The fate of the elderly Hogenskild Bielke serves as a fitting epilogue to the councillors' limited agency in the sixteenth century. He was imprisoned in Linköping in 1600 and had the dubious honour of becoming the last councillor to be executed in the Swedish realm in 1605 because of his incautious letters regarding Charles IX.⁶⁹ This sudden end to the executions that had shadowed Swedish political life up to this point leads one to ask, what had changed between the Council aristocracy and the king so that such displays of power were no longer needed?

The Council of the Realm is restored and given greater agency

In October 1601 the remaining last councillor, Nils Gyllenstierna (1526–1601), died and the Council of the Realm ceased to exist for all practical purposes; but only for a while, as it soon became clear that the kingdom could not be ruled without it. There were so many administrative tasks now, that the king and his secretaries could not manage everyday operations alone. And without councillors, other countries found it difficult to negotiate with Sweden, as they thought the country now lacked credible negotiators.⁷⁰

The old institution was restored without major modifications at the Diet of 1602, with Duke Charles appointing 15 new counsellors.⁷¹ He found it sufficient to state that, to avoid the earlier troubles, the Council was there only to give counsel, and not to rule (*råda, ej regera*);⁷² yet he still had to trust the same noble families who had formerly been members of the Council. Of the 15 new councillors seven had fathers, one a father-in-law, and four had grandfathers (on their mothers' side) who had also been councillors. Only three had no relatives previously in the Council of the Realm.

The king had nonetheless made some quite important changes to the Council, as he still did not trust the higher nobility. Now there were only a few members representing them. These were led by the two Brahe brothers, ranked first among the handful of counts in Sweden. Jan Samuelson has studied the geographical composition of the Council and found that Charles IX favoured his former duchy with regard to the nominees for the new Council. All the provinces were represented, but there were now more councillors from Västergötland and Södermanland.⁷³ But Charles IX not only turned to those who had previously served as counsellors in his dukedom Ludbert Kauer (d. 1608), Johan Oxenstierna (1557–1607), Seved

Ribbing (1552–1613) and Jöran Stiernsköld (1552–1611)); he also wanted to reward those who had changed side during the crisis: Göran Boije (d. 1617), Mauritz Leijonhufvud (1559–1607), Erik Ribbing (1558–1612), and Arvid Horn (d. 1606/7).⁷⁴ This both legitimized their status and his as a ruler. Göran Boije had originally belonged to Sigismund's party and played a big role in defending the eastern border against the Russians. Boije had chosen Sigismund, because he saw cooperation between Poland and Sweden as essential to protect the realm against Russia. Nevertheless, because of his former allegiance, Charles IX stripped Boije of his position as a Chief Judge and Commander-in-Chief in Estonia, leaving him as simply the Commander of Tallinn Castle. Then, in 1602, Charles IX visited Tallinn and pardoned Boije, making him once again the Chief Judge in Estonia and appointing him to the Council of the Realm. After this, Göran Boije was given many confidential posts to do with defending the eastern border.⁷⁵ His military expertise and knowledge of the local area were essential to gaining this greater agency for himself as a councillor.

Arvid Horn had also been a supporter of Sigismund, but he managed to remove himself in time, and became one of the key figures who signed a new oath of allegiance to Charles IX. In return, Charles IX appointed him to the Council of the Realm, but did not give him any significant tasks.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Mauritz Leijonhufvud earned Duke Charles' trust by being the active spokesperson of the duke at the Diet of 1602.⁷⁷ Although Erik Ribbing had stayed with Sigismund in Poland, he returned to Sweden in 1595 and earned Duke Charles' trust as a judge both in Linköping (1600) and Stockholm (1605). He was also the brother of Seved Ribbing (1552–1613), who was an acquaintance of Charles IX.⁷⁸ Due to the circumstances of their appointments, made on the slimmest benefit of the doubt, both Mauritz Leijonhufvud and Erik Ribbing were somewhat restrained in their roles as councillors. Their personal agency was only as great as the trust in which they were held, and at the start of the seventeenth century, this was not a great deal. In fact the Council of the Realm had little real power at this stage.

For example, the Chancellor of the Realm, Svante Bielke (1567–1609), did not receive any actual instructions and thus spent most of his time taking care of personal business on his estate. Meanwhile, the everyday tasks of the Royal Chancellery were taken care of by Royal Chancellor (*swe: hovkansler*) Nils Chesnecopherus (1574–1622) (also appointed in 1602). He had been educated in Marburg University and was not from the nobility. Svante Bielke had been one of the judges in Linköping in 1600, but he was afraid that he had fallen from Duke Charles' grace after the Linköping trials. His wife urged him to ask Duke Charles to reassure him of his trust, which he duly did, with the result that Bielke was appointed to the Council of the Realm.⁷⁹ From the personal agency point of view, this case is interesting because, although Duke Charles made Bielke Chancellor of the Realm, Chesnecopherus had more real power than him. This suggests that Duke Charles was afraid to give any real power to the nobility, which might have given them greater individual agency.⁸⁰

Indeed, Charles IX had only a few trusted councillors. One of them, Axel Ryning (1552–1620), had been the negotiator between him and the

Council of the Realm after the death of John III. Axel had made a personal oath of allegiance with Charles IX and was given special tasks. He was in charge of several diplomatic negotiations, but also played an integral part in the duke's marriage negotiations. The trust of Charles IX was the fount of Axel's agency as councillor, and thanks to it he was able to work in many different sectors of the administration. He was even chosen to be admiral without any substantial experience of seafaring and later, under Gustavus Adolphus, he was made a Field Marshal (though without any administrative responsibilities).⁸¹ The other councillor Duke Charles had used as a negotiator was Jöran Ulfsparre (1544–1612). His job had been to negotiate with Sigismund about Sweden's freedom of religion, which was one factor in the internal crisis of the 1590s.⁸²

If Axel Ryning was an important and powerful member of the Council of the Realm, then Seved Ribbing, appointed as Lord High Treasurer in 1602, was even more so. One of his responsibilities as chief of Stockholm Castle was its fortification and arranging supplies for the troops, over which he had substantial personal agency.⁸³ One of Charles IX key strategies was to appoint very trusted men such as these in all the important castles of the realm to lead military operations (for example, Jöran Stiernsköld (1552–1611), Jöran Gyllenstierna 1575–1618), and Mats Kruus (d. 1606)).⁸⁴ In a world where controlling armed forces was crucial, it shows a huge amount of trust on both sides and strongly indicates these men had a greater degree of personal agency. This trust gave them more room to operate and plan individual actions. People earned the ruler's trust in a variety of ways. In Charles' case, being a judge in critical situations where Sigismund's supporters could be punished seemed to work. Many of the new councillors had indeed proven themselves this way by condemning former fellow members of the nobility to death. Svante Bielke had been a judge in Linköping, as had Abraham (1569–1630) and Magnus Brahe (1564–1633); Erik Ribbing, Peder Ribbing (1544–1604), and Johan Oxenstierna had been judges in both Linköping and Stockholm; and Seved Ribbing and Jöran Ulfsparre had been judges in Jönköping and Linköping. Sometimes Charles IX demanded that families act against their best interests in order to gain his trust. Abraham and Magnus Brahe, for example, had to condemn their sister's husband to death, while Erik and Seved Ribbing had to condemn their wife's uncle to death.

Almost everybody from the 1602 Council of the Realm had relatives, usually a father or grandfather (on their mother's side), in the council before. The only odd man out was Ludbert Kauer who was hired as an administrator without the help of large aristocratic networks in Charles' dukedom, and then awarded a place in the Council of the Realm for, it seems, doing a good job.⁸⁵ Only two people in the Council were from a different social rank. Magnus⁸⁶ and Abraham⁸⁷ Brahe were counts (in fact, their father Per Brahe the elder was the first to have ever been awarded this title in Sweden),⁸⁸ and this gave them a certain agency. First of all, it gave them access to networks of power. Abraham Brahe escorted Duke Charles many times in his travels, and this not only gave him access to more information, but also the opportunity to provide the duke with advice and guidance.⁸⁹ The brothers also represented the government in official ceremonies such as weddings and funerals.

The Council of the Realm's collective agency was minimal in the early years of the seventeenth century; but being on the Council did make it easier for its individual members to influence things. Still these new councillors had to rely more on their personal agency than their peer group in later decades. By the reign of Charles IX, the lower nobility held most of the seats on the Council, but they were all from families who had previously provided councillors – usually their fathers or grandfathers (on the mother's side). The only real exception to this would seem to be the Banér family who were only able to return to the Council of the Realm after 1623. Even the Bielke family were not banished for so long, as by 1606 they had not one (the first came back in 1602), but two representatives on the Council.⁹⁰

Charles IX did not really have the chance to develop his administration even if he had plans to do so. The priority in his reign became to secure the king's position by keeping the nobility under control and ensuring that they remained servants of the realm. But by the time he died in 1611, his son Gustavus Adolphus (1594–1632) could finally focus on restructuring the central government with the help of Axel Oxenstierna (1583–1654). Oxenstierna was a dynamic man who had gained diplomatic experience abroad, and with the threats of war that Sweden now faced, the time was ripe to create a more efficient chain of command at home so that not every decision would need to be directly made by the king.⁹¹ The king would indeed spend most of his reign outside the country. This effectively meant that the Council of the Realm would have more responsibilities, as a caretaker government. But to ensure that there would be no danger of it usurping the king's authority, there needed to be clear instructions, which would set out the limits of the councillors' agency and their responsibilities to the king.

So it seems that the key to solving Sweden's domestic problems lay outside its borders. Gustavus Adolphus needed to rebuff claims to the Swedish Crown from Sigismund, who was now King of Poland. It took almost two decades to do this, but at the same time it catalysed the state-building process in Sweden. The first part of the administration to be reformed by Axel Oxenstierna was the Royal Chancellery, where tasks now became clearly delineated. Oxenstierna established office working hours and structured salaries for all workers (including councillors). In the process, the role of the Council of the Realm changed.⁹² It became the top institution, whose task was to supervise the whole administration via separate Collegia (colleges), of which the head of each was naturally also a member of the Council; and its role grew even bigger during the extensive periods that the king spent abroad with his army.⁹³

During the 1620s, the role of the Council became clearer as a result of specific instructions. Its prime function was to guarantee the administration ran smoothly in the absence of the king, but it had to keep a record of all of its actions, so the king could check the decisions made afterwards. From 1625 to 1630, there were new instructions every year. The first orders stipulated that it was mandatory for at least six councillors to always be present in Stockholm. In practice, this meant that they had to live in the capital at a time when most councillors had their own castles outside Stockholm. But

the workload eventually proved to be so great that, in 1626, the stipulated minimum number of councillors required in the capital increased to ten.⁹⁴ From then on, the king was so often away that the number of council meetings grew enormously and the Council soon became the foremost institution for making domestic political decisions. Between 1625 and 1635, the number of council meetings grew from approximately 50 meetings a year to nigh on 200.⁹⁵ In practice this meant the councillors were no longer men who gave occasional counsel to the king; but had become fully professional administrative personnel who spent most of their time solving matters of national importance.

The nobility had gained new privileges from Gustavus Adolphus in 1617. They were now entitled to all high-ranking offices in the civil administration.⁹⁶ There was now a great need for nobles who were capable of doing the job required and it became a challenge for the noble Estate.⁹⁷ This need should have come as no surprise, as Per Brahe the elder had already stated in his guidebook for raising nobility in the 1570s, that part of their education should be in administrative skills.⁹⁸ In reality, however, many important figures in the administration had to be recruited from outside the nobility. This influx of commoners put some pressure on the higher nobility, but also had the effect of raising the status of the Council of the Realm.

By 1609, the Council had 20 members.⁹⁹ When the new rules for the Council came into force, this number jumped to 24, as stipulated by law. But the one striking feature was that all these new appointments came from the lower nobility. It was not until after Gustavus Adolphus' death during the interregnum, that members of the higher nobility were again appointed to the Council of the Realm. In fact, just a year after the king's death, the Council got six new members,¹⁰⁰ and during the 12 years of the interregnum, the higher nobility were able to return to power.¹⁰¹

As caretaker in the king's absence, the Council increased its workload, but the number of councillors stayed practically the same throughout the 1620s. In that time seven councillors passed away and eight new ones were appointed. Only two of them (Per Banér (1588–1644) and Claes Fleming (1592–1644)) were appointed for their administrative expertise; and both were appointed in 1625.¹⁰²

Per Banér was perhaps King's most trusted officer, and when the new instructions for the Council came in 1625 and 1626, Banér was appointed head of the Royal Chancellery, making him ultimately responsible for the Council's decisions. Banér simultaneously held many offices and their combination meant he had significant personal agency. He was even able to act independently of Axel Oxenstierna and he used this rare freedom to plot his own agenda between different political camps. Per Banér was also a hard-working man who rarely missed a meeting, but by the end of 1632 he fell ill and never fully recovered. His work ethic became less important, he became indecisive, and he developed a negative approach to almost everything.¹⁰³

Claes Fleming was appointed into the Council same year as Per Banér. He was also very active, but in many ways the total opposite of Banér. He was a firm supporter of Axel Oxenstierna and was in charge of the capital Stockholm (*överståthållare*). He worked hard to upgrade the look of the city

by renewing the city planning, legislation and market regulations. But at the same time his primary responsibility was to develop the Swedish navy; and even though he was a busy man, or perhaps because of it, he had an eye for business. He secured himself the privilege of manufacturing the swords the army required, for example. To give himself more freedom and personal agency, he wisely decided to remain politically neutral within the Council of the Realm, and yet at the same time he was very actively present in the meetings. Fleming also belonged to Gustavus Adolphus' inner circle, and many times it was his duty to transport not only the king, but also the queen. This gave him almost constant access to the ruler, and royal proximity was a great source of agency in early modern society, of which Fleming was no doubt aware. One thing that describes Fleming's strong belief in his own personal agency is that he resigned by choice from the Council of the Realm, but he died only a few months later at sea, in the war against Denmark. The news of his death was hard for many residents of Stockholm, because he was very popular.¹⁰⁴

The workload of councillors began to grow in the beginning of the 1620s and increased dramatically from 1626 onwards, when the Council started to meet almost on a daily basis. The whole culture of being a councillor changed. This transition was especially hard for those 14 councillors who had been appointed before the 1620s. Two of them, Bo Ribbing (1560–1640) and Erland Bååt (d. 1628), were already so old that they were no longer actively participating in meetings of the Council.¹⁰⁵ Three of them, Jacob De la Gardie (1583–1654), Carl Gyllenhielm (1574–1650) and Nils Stiernsköld (1583–1627), were also rarely present because they were away at war.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Gustaf Stenbock (1575–1629) and Gabriel Bengtsson Oxenstierna (1586–1656) were absent from the council meetings because of foreign policy diplomatic assignments;¹⁰⁷ while Filip Scheiding (1578–1646) and Claes Horn (1583–1632) were only able to make the meetings from time to time as they were taking care of local assignments. This means that from the old guard, only four members (Abraham Brahe, Magnus Brahe, Gabriel Gustafsson Oxenstierna (1587–1640) and Johan Skytte (1577–1645)) were left as active members of the Council. All four were very highly educated and quite capable of taking care of official governmental business. Gabriel Gustafsson Oxenstierna was like a carbon copy of his brother Axel Oxenstierna in terms of his work ethic, and earlier he had played an important role in the diplomatic negotiations with Denmark.¹⁰⁸ Together with Per Banér and Claes Fleming, these six men formed the core of the domestic administration and because they were in places where they could really influence things, they had more room to act as they saw fit, which was a lot in the hierarchical system. In other words they had substantial personal agency. Perhaps the clearest point in common for these men was having a good connection to King Gustavus Adolphus.

Johan Skytte had been the king's teacher throughout Gustavus' adolescence, and that had created a strong emotional tie between the two. But because, relatively speaking, Skytte was an upstart, it also created rumours that he was the illegitimate son of Charles IX. Indeed, the connection to Charles and later to Gustavus was the source of Johan's agency, and because

of his wide reading he became a very skilled office-holder. His area of responsibility became law and foreign diplomacy, which were both very important matters to the king. Even Charles IX trusted Johan; but it was his son Gustavus Adolphus who appointed him to the Council of the Realm in 1617 at his coronation ceremony. Johan Skytte had one skill in which he particularly excelled, social relations and rhetoric. Gustavus Adolphus had given Johan the task of taking care of the kingdom's treasury without any formal appointment and he did a good job, but this arrangement meant Johan was totally at the king's beck and call, so when Gustavus Adolphus died, Skytte lost the agency he had formerly enjoyed and gradually slipped into the margins of power.¹⁰⁹

Gabriel Gustafsson Oxenstierna was Johan Skytte's opposite in many ways. Gabriel's agency came from family networks and like his brother Axel, he was a hard-working man at a time when this was much needed in an office-holder. Gabriel was the commander of the castles in both Stockholm and Uppsala, which were really important positions in the kingdom and gave him high prestige among the higher nobility. That position together the family background was the source of his agency and he liked the freedom of the job. But in 1624 came new instructions, and Gabriel no longer had the same degree of freedom in the job, so he decided to resign. Even his contemporaries said that Gabriel lacked social skills when he acted as mediator between the king and nobility. Like his brother, he believed that the kingdom came before the Estates and perhaps precisely because of this, he was used many times in diplomatic missions.¹¹⁰

By the time the interregnum was over and Christina (1626–1689) took charge of Sweden, the Council of the Realm had secured its position as a powerful part of the administration.¹¹¹ Before Christina councillors had always gone to the king to give counsel, but with Christina it was now the other way round. She was forced come to them for counsel, but this did not last for long. Christina played the high nobility at their own social network game rather than enter into open warfare with them. That is, she quickly created a large group of loyal supporters around her by ennobling lots of people and placing new people in the administration. She also started to make decisions outside the Council of the Realm with the help of her new secretaries. She also increased the number of councillors, to dilute the power of the original Council until by the end of her reign there were 48 councillors in Sweden. By the end of her ten year reign, she had appointed 45 new councillors.¹¹²

Christina's successor, Charles X Gustav (1622–1660), did not appoint so many councillors, but immediately after his death, the second interregnum started with nine new councillor appointments and a pattern similar to the first interregnum followed.¹¹³ The last Swedish king that ruled together with the Council of the Realm was Charles XI (1655–1697), and he turned totally against it, finally replacing it in 1680 with the less powerful Royal Council.¹¹⁴

From personal influence to collective practices

The seventeenth-century Swedish councillors testify to the birth of a profession,¹¹⁵ even if this is in a premodern sense of the word. Their predecessors in the sixteenth century had been, in practice, provincial magnates uttering their advice on important matters only when asked by the king. After the 1620s however, they became a collective and permanent body of officials, running state affairs in a regulated and stable manner, living in Stockholm and working in their own official chamber in the Royal Castle.

However, as we have seen, the first shoots of change revealed themselves in the reigns of Eric XIV and John III. This began with the kings attempting to reorganize central government and then, from the 1570s onwards, the councillors too, trying to create more permanent and efficient institutions. These attempts often turned into a power struggle between the high aristocracy and the sovereign, as the king experienced the aristocracy's stronger role to be a direct threat to his own authority. The attempts of individuals alone were not enough to reform structures of the state; what was needed was a favourable context created by a variety of factors. This happened in the early seventeenth century, after some 50 years of trying.

Nevertheless, the change in attitude among the aristocracy in the 1570s is remarkable in itself. Up to this point, councillors had been reluctant to leave their landed properties and undertake burdensome work duties. Although Gustavus Vasa persuaded them to take up permanent service, it proved only temporary. Most of the aristocracy (and indeed the Council) clung to their traditional role as great men living in their countryside manors. They sought sources of influence that were separate from the king, each in their locality rather than in cooperation with the king at the centre of the state (where, in contrast, they had little agency).

The agency of councillors in the late sixteenth century took the form of giving collective advice to the king in a powerless manner, seeking and suggesting new forms of central government, mostly in vain, engaging in political writing, and finally, for some of them, taking part in plotting against the ruler, as other means proved insufficient. There were attempted or suspected coup d'états in the reigns of Gustavus Vasa, Eric XIV, John III, Sigismund and Charles IX, and a few of them even proved successful. All of this testifies to the unstable nature of central politics in the realm.

A characteristic feature of the traditional, personal rule of the king and his advisors was a lack of clearly defined roles. There were no clear boundaries for personal agency spelled out within the system. The law and mandates did not give clear definitions regarding the tasks of the councillors, nor define limits for their agency; thus it was constantly being tested and redefined. It was shaped through personal interaction, on a case by case basis. Personal abilities thus played a key role here: the limits of agency expanded or decreased depending on the councillor's abilities, as well as his status, social network and relationship to the king. This bargaining on one's influence was part and parcel of the everyday working life of councillors.

As long as relations between king and Council were not clearly defined, there was a constant struggle to achieve the necessary power balance. At its

worst, this resulted in the execution of councillors as the king would try to secure his position. Then, suddenly, the executions came to an end in 1605.

The question over who makes the decisions, the king alone or in consultation with the nobility, was gradually solved in the seventeenth century as a central administration was established. From the 1620s onwards, the Council of the Realm became the head of the administration. It became a truly administrative Council and a “corporation of civil servants”. The king’s position was established as a sovereign completely beyond the reach of the rest of the aristocracy. At the same time, Sweden was engaged in European wars, and it became the Council’s task to run the kingdom’s domestic issues while the ruler was fighting enemies abroad. With new administrative rules, the agency between king and councillors was now clearly defined in legal terms.

It seems obvious that death sentences were connected to disputes over the organisation of the central administration in the sixteenth century, and that they ended just as the administration was satisfactorily reorganized and the king’s power secured at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The state-building process evidently required a shift in administrative practices from those defined by personal agency to those defined by an agency clearly framed in institutions and laws.

The big changes in Sweden’s state formation happened in the early decades of the seventeenth century as the time was ripe for this change: the internal crisis had been mostly solved and the focus now shifted to foreign policy. The new king, Gustavus Adolphus, and his loyal chancellor of the realm, Axel Oxenstierna, shared the same vision about what had to be done. If Sweden, as a relatively small nation, wanted to be a strong player in European politics, the only way to build an outstanding army from minimal resources was to have a highly effective administrative machine to collect funds and men.

Piece by piece, Axel Oxenstierna and the king reformed the administration, especially at the central level. New collegia took care of the core areas and were led by members of the Council of the Realm. Together with the king, the councillors were monitoring the decision-making process within the new governmental institutions. For the first time, councillors had a clear mission instead of a vague role as the king’s advisors. Instead of being a group of individuals who should give their personal view of matters, the Council became an institution: a permanent entity that was collectively consulted by the monarch as a matter of course.

By transforming themselves from a military asset into being also the sovereign’s civil servants, the nobility created a situation where expertise became a necessary part of office-holding, and combined with an annual salary this also became an early form of profession. A clear sign of this transformation of the Council from being various powerful individuals to a collective group is the use of space: previously the Council of the Realm had physically gone to meet the sovereign, but when Christina of Sweden took charge of her realm, it was she who went to meet the Council in their official chamber and discussed matters with them as a collective.

In the first few decades of the seventeenth century, councillors who had previously been a constant threat to the monarch, now became loyal servants of the realm. Of course councillors still had their own agendas and used their position at the top of the society to increase their own power against the other Estates and within the nobility itself. But in the end, it was better to have a secure position within the central administration at the top of society than take a chance to reach ultimate power at a very high risk.

The research on which this publication is based was funded by the Academy of Finland (grant no. 137741).

NOTES

- 1 See for more, *Approaches and Perspectives* by Petri Karonen and Marko Hakanen.
- 2 Richard Bonney, *The European Dynastic States 1494–1660. The Short Oxford History of the Modern World* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991), pp. 334–345.
- 3 See for more, *Approaches and Perspectives* by Petri Karonen and Marko Hakanen.
- 4 Jan Samuelson has listed councillors from the years 1523–1611 and analyzed their family relations and places of residence from this time. Kurt Ågren made an unpublished database about councillors' family relations from the years 1602–1647. Similar to Ågren, Björn Asker has examined seventeenth-century aristocracy, starting from the nomination policy and role of kin relationships in it from the years 1640–1680. Ulf Sjödelldell has also applied a database in his analyses that concentrate on the transformation of the Council of the Realm into the Royal Council. Ulf Sjödelldell, *Riksråd och kungliga råd. Rådskarriären 1602–1718*, (Gleerup: Västerås, 1975); Kurt Ågren, Rise and Decline of an Aristocracy. The Swedish Social and Political Elite in the 17th Century, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 1: 1–4, 1976, pp. 55–80; Björn Asker, "Aristocracy and Autocracy in Seventeenth-Century Sweden. The Decline of the Aristocracy within the Civil Administration Before 1680", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 15: 1–2, 1990, pp. 89–95; Jan Samuelson, *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde? Det svenska frälsets ekonomi, politik och sociala förbindelser under tiden 1523–1611*. Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis 77. Lund: Lund Universitet, 1993).
- 5 Diana K. Jones, "Researching groups of lives: a collective biographical perspective on The Protestant ethic debate", *Qualitative Research* 1(3) (2001); Krista Cowman, "Collective Biography". In: Gunn, Simon, Faire, Lucy (ed.), *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
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- 7 Marko Lamberg, "Prosopografian mahdollisuuksia". In: *Keskiajan avain*, (Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society, 2008), pp. 230–232.
- 8 See for more, *Approaches and Perspectives* by Petri Karonen and Marko Hakanen. See for instance Erkki Lehtinen, *Hallituksen yhtenäistämispoliittikka Suomessa 1600-luvulla (1600–n. 1680)* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1961); Marko Lamberg, *Dannemännen i stadens råd. Rådsmanskretsen i nordiska köpstäder under senmedeltiden*. Monografier utgivna av Stockholms stad 155 (Stockholm: Stockholmsiaförlag, 2001).

- 9 Kristoffers landslag. Schlyters utgåva (SSGL 12), digital publication, Konungxbalker VIII [http://project2.sol.lu.se/fornsvenska/01_Bitar/B.L1.A-KrL.html], accessed March 27, 2015.
- 10 SAOB: Svenska Akademiens ordbok, "rätrådighet", accessed June 30, 2015. See also for one example, SRA AHTs1, Arvid Tawast to John III 29th of April, 1590, Kurjala: "will Jag ware Eders Kong. Mtt, rätrådi- och trogen".
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- 13 Hans Gillिंगstam, "Rigsråd (Sverige)". In: *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid från vikingatid till reformations-tid, band XIV* (Helsingfors, 1969), pp. 230–233; Herman Schück, "Riksdagens framväxt: tiden intill 1611". In: Stjernquist, Nils (red.), *Riksdagen genom tiderna* (Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag & Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, 1985), pp. 7–19; Herman Schück, *Rikets råd och män. Herredag och råd i Sverige 1280–1480* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2005), pp. 123–125; Björn Asker, *Hur riket styrdes. Förvaltning, politik och arkiv 1520–1920* (Stockholm: Riksarkivet, 2007), p. 53.
- 14 Gillिंगstam, "Rigsråd (Sverige)", pp. 230–233; cf. Schück, "Riksdagens framväxt", p. 15.
- 15 Torbjörn Eng, *Det svenska väldet: ett konglomerat av uttrycksformer och begrepp från Vasa till Bernadotte* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2001), pp. 75–76; Lars-Olof Larsson, *Arvet efter Gustav Vasa. En berättelse om fyra kungar och ett rike* (Stockholm: Prisma, 2005), p. 53; Harald Gustafsson, "A State that Failed? On the Union of Kalmar, Especially its Dissolution", *Scandinavian Journal of History* 31 (3/4) 2006, p. 209; Dick Harrison, Bo Eriksson, *Norstedts Sveriges historia 1350–1600* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2010), p. 109.
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- Finnish Historical Society, The Finnish Literature Society, 1986), pp. 197–211; Gustafsson, “A State that Failed?”, pp. 210–212; Bo Eriksson, *Svenska adelns historia* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2011), pp. 163–164.
- 20 Christian Naumann, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt, 1866 & 1875), pp. 106–117; Emil Hildebrand, Oscar Alin, “Företal”, *Svenska Riksdagsakter jämte andra handlingar som höra till statsförfattningens historia. Första serien: tidevarvet 1521–1718, avd. I: 1521–1544* (Stockholm: Svenska Riksarkivet, 1887), p. x; Eino Jutikkala, *Suomen talonpojan historia. Toinen, uudistettu ja lisätty laitos* (Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society, 1958), pp. 97–99; Schück, *Rikets råd och män*, pp. 17–18, 123–129. For their mutual development, see Nils Ahnlund, “Ståndsriksdagens utdaning 1592–1672”, *Sveriges Riksdag I: 3*. Red. Nils Edén (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 1933); Tor Berg, “Riksdagens utveckling under den äldre Vasatiden 1521–1592”. In: Edén, Nils (red.), *Sveriges Riksdag I: 2*. (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 1935); Schück, “Riksdagens framväxt”; Schück, *Rikets råd och män*.
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 - 24 Naumann, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, p. 100; Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, pp. 265–266; Edén, *Om centralregeringens organisation*, p. 7; Lars-Olof Larsson, Eva Österberg, “Vasatiden och stormaktstiden”. In: Behre, Göran, Larsson, Lars-Olof, Österberg, Eva, *Sveriges historia 1521–1809: stormaktsdröm och småstatsrealiteter* (Stockholm: Esselte Studium AB, 1985), pp. 46–47; Asker, *Hur riket styrdes*, p. 53.
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 - 26 Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, p. 265; Gillingstam, “Rigsråd (Sverige)”, p. 232.
 - 27 Gillingstam, “Rigsråd (Sverige)”, p. 232.
 - 28 Bonney, *The European Dynastic States 1494–1660*, p. 335.
 - 29 Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, pp. 262–263; “den finaste eller mest lysande blomman af adeln”; Ulf Sjödel, *Infödda svenska män av ridderskapet och adeln: Kring ett tema i Sveriges historia under 1500- och 1600-talen* (Lund: Gleerup, 1976), pp. 12–13; Database of Councillors of the Swedish Realm, 1523–1680 [http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:jyu-201710043922]. Eds Marko Hakanen & Ulla Koskinen.
 - 30 [http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:jyu-201710043922].
 - 31 Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, p. 264, footnote 3; Edén, *Om centralregeringens organisation*, p. 17.
 - 32 Samuelson, *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde?*, p. 121, tabell 19; [http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:jyu-201710043922].

- 33 Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, p. 266; Herlitz, *Grunddragen av det svenska statskicketets historia*, p. 77; Wilhelm Tham, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia I: 2. 1560–1648* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt, 1960), pp. 9–11.
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- 37 *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, A–Stålhammar (SBL) (Stockholm: Riksarkivet, 1917–2013) (Ivan Svalenius), Sten Eriksson (Leijonhufvud) [<http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/11175>], accessed May 26, 2015; SBL (Georg Landberg): Per Brahe [<http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/18053>], accessed March 10, 2015; Bo Eriksson, *I skuggan av tronen. En biografi över Per Brahe d.ä* (Stockholm: Prisma, 2009), pp. 133–258.
- 38 After issuing them with death sentences in an improvised court session, Eric XIV personally killed Councillor Svante Sture in Uppsala castle on 24th of May, 1567, and ordered the deaths of his two sons, two other noblemen and finally his own tutor, the Frenchman Councillor Dionysius Beurraeus, who was also Master of the Bursary (*räntemestare*). SBL (Jan Samuelson): Svante Sture [<http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/34643>], accessed March 13, 2015; SBL (Georg Landberg): Dionysius Beurraeus [<http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/18140>], accessed May 21, 2015; Lars O. Lagerqvist, *Svensk historia* (Stockholm: Svenska institutet, 2001), pp. 48–49; Larsson, *Arvet efter Gustav Vasa*, p. 52; Harrison - Eriksson, *Norstedts Sveriges historia 1350–1600*, p. 544; Eriksson, *Svenska adelns historia*, pp. 164–165.
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- 46 Edén, *Om centralregeringens organisation*, p. 161; Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, pp. 300–308.

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- 49 Ericson Wolke, *Johan III*, p. 120.
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- p. 56; Lindegren, "The Swedish 'Military State'", p. 308; Schück, "Riksdagens framväxt", pp. 45–50; Samuelson, *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde?*, pp. 35–36; Larsson, *Arvet efter Gustav Vasa*, pp. 273–277, 347; Harald Gustafsson, *Nordens historia. En europeisk region under 1200 år* (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur, 2007), p. 103.
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- 64 Ahnlund, "Ständsriksdagens utdanning 1592–1672", pp. 51–57; Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, pp. 367–368; Fagerlund, *Finlands historia 2*, p. 77; Karonen, *Pohjoinen suurvalta*, pp. 105–106, 113.
- 65 His father Sten was brother to Margareta Erikdotter Leijonhufvud, Gustav Vasa's second wife and mother to John and Charles. [<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:jyu-201710043922>].
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- 67 Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, pp. 369–371.
- 68 Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, p. 388; Mirkka Lappalainen, *Susimessu. 1590-luvun sisällissota Ruotsissa ja Suomessa* (Helsinki: Siltala, 2009), pp. 259–261.
- 69 SBL (Tor Berg): Hogenskild Bielke [<http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/18165>], accessed March 13, 2015.
- 70 Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska*, p. 268; Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, pp. 428–431.
- 71 Charles IX had also planned to appoint six members from the Estonian nobility, but had to give up because of strong resistance from the Estates. Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, p. 429; Michael Roberts, *The Swedish Imperial Experience 1560–1718* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 93. In 1609, the Swedish higher nobility stipulated that every councillor had to be native Swedish and a knight. Severin Bergh, *Karl IX och den svenska adeln 1607–1609* (Uppsala: Akademiska boktryckeriet, 1882) p. 106. The first foreign-born councillors were appointed by Queen Christina, but overall the number of foreign-born councillors remained very low. There were only six in the seventeenth century. Sjödell, *Riksråd och kungliga råd*, p. 25.
- 72 Naumann, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, p. 101; Hildebrand, *Svenska statsförfattningens historiska utveckling*, p. 262, 268; Nils Edén, *Den svenska centralregeringens utveckling till kollegial organisation i början af sjuttonde århundradet (1602–1634)* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1902) p. 5; Herlitz, *Grunddragen av det svenska statsskickets historia*, p. 77; Roberts, *The Early Vasas*, p. 429.
- 73 Samuelson, *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde?* p. 122.
- 74 [<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:jyu-201710043922>].
- 75 SBL (B. Boëthius): Göran Boije, [<http://sok.riksarkivet.se/SBL/Presentation.aspx?id=17885>], accessed February 17, 2015; KB (Veli-Matti Syrjö) Göran Boije, [<http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/kb/artikkeli/522/>], accessed February 17, 2015; Mirkka Lappalainen, *Suku, valta, suurvalta. Creutzit 1600-luvun Ruotsissa ja Suomessa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2005), p. 100.

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- 80 Charles IX was also suspicious towards family networks and tried to limit family connections in the Council of the Realm. Bergh, *Karl IX och den svenska*, p. 106.
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