Alternative Pathways to Complexity

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SECTION 2

Old World Cases
NATION, STATE, AND POWER

Until recently, the archaeological study of past socio-political organization was characterized by a search for the origins and rise of elites, whose quest for power could be characterized as seeking ever-increasing capacity for coercive force. This scholarly preoccupation with power as autocracy or oligarchy created a failure to recognize other forms of authority—more symmetrical distributions of power or nonelite self-governance—even when they were relatively apparent. Over the course of the mid- to late twentieth century, this led to the overall mischaracterization of all power as asymmetrical power, from its advent within small-scale communities to its expression in politically complex societies, ancient and modern (Thurston 2010). While the power of coercive force is amply evident in the recent and distant past, it is only one type of instrument within a spectrum of organizational potentialities recognized by contemporary social theorists. At worst, most archaeological theorists long denied the existence of politically complex societies with egalitarian ideologies; at best they have displayed indifference or doubt that alternative power structures can be detected and studied. As with all orphan domains there have been notable exceptions, among the most important the work of Richard Blanton and his distinguished coauthors, through the initial innovation of dual-processual theory (Blanton et al. 1996) and the subsequent development and application of collective action theory.
It is not easy to find archaeological cases highlighting the power of a non-elite majority, but a useful instantiation of subjecthood and rulership within such a system is the subject of this case study, an example found among the array of ancient North Atlantic nations. By “nation,” I mean a group with historically evolved or socially constructed shared ethnic identity; in northern Europe these sometimes can be documented as coherent entities for as much as a millennium. Over time, these enduring nations were absorbed by emergent states, political constructs whose authors sought overarching legal jurisdiction over defined geographic territories and control of large-scale political economies, based on enforceable obligations for taxation and labor. Such states usually display their own socially constructed identities, often pluralistic, frequently manifest through a politicized conquest mythos of state origins.

The case study below focuses on a sequence in which the early Svear state, expanding outward from central Sweden between the tenth and sixteenth centuries AD, incorporated a region to the south, the Småland Plateau, an environmentally marginal upland: high, cold, rocky, and heavily wooded (figure 8.1). Plateau dwellers lived in a group of small neighboring polities (kingdoms or chiefdoms), had a strongly pastoral economy, and formed tightly knit kin and community groups for cooperative labor, using slash and burn to create artificial clearings for habitation, pasture, and “garden” cultivation in densely forested uplands. The case study reveals that the negotiation of power between nation and state was often violent, yet ultimately led to the formation of a corporate, or collective, state.

Traditional Archaeological Narratives of the State

Older yet still pervasive archaeological models of state formation (e.g., Flannery 1972; Trigger 1974; Webster 1975) tacitly imply or actively proclaim the notion that increasing political complexity is always associated with an elaboration of hierarchy, and always associated with increasing centralization and displays of status and legitimation. This view of state origins (i.e., Knapp 1993; Roscoe 1993) has more recently been challenged (Blanton et al. 1996; Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2009, 2011; Crumley 1995, 2003; Fargher et al. 2010; Fargher, Heredia Espinoza, and Blanton 2011; Feinman 2001; Feinman et al. 2000; Pauketat 2007; Thurston 2001, 2010; Yoffee 2005) by the proposal of alternative organizing principles.
The case study presented here focuses on late prehistoric through early historic Sweden. As in many world regions, beginning in the 1980s, attempts were made to force Scandinavia’s late prehistoric societies into a the traditional “elite hierarchy” model, in which virtually every complex society worldwide was interpreted as harboring centralizing elites on a steady trajectory of attaining more and more power over subjects, who were never explicitly described but implicitly presumed to have given up traditional practices and privileges when faced with variously hypothesized forms of elite “legitimation.” For Scandinavia, while a culture historic framework persisted, materialist-influenced, processualist interpretations were embraced by some (Hedeager 1992; Parker Pearson 1984; Randsborg 1980) and changes in burial treatment, property, and implied social organization were all seen as representing movement toward “progressively unequal social relations” (Parker Pearson 1984:69).

While there is little doubt that the region’s extant nations, their peoples and resources, were compromised by expanding and broadening states, historical and archaeological approaches to this process have long been dominated by narratives presenting an exclusively top-down perspective, interpreting the record as a trail of “events” initiated by “great men” or families. Acknowledging the role of such elites, yet adding to it a bottom-up viewpoint, balances our understanding of such sequences. The inevitability of ever-increasing inequality through time is also questionable for Scandinavia—understandable yet fraught with oversimplification. The region presents a productive case for the

**Figure 8.1. The Småland Plateau.**
application of collective action theory, as Scandinavia’s protohistoric and early historic sociopolitical systems are generally well understood, facilitating the development of more appropriate perspectives.

**Historical Narratives of Modernity: How to Build a State**

Rojas (2005) has discussed the changing historical outlook on the political and economic development of the modern nation-state of Sweden, where recent debate is intellectually situated in studies of the creation and breakdown of the “Swedish Model” industrialized welfare state, with a high standard of living and a caretaker mentalité. Rojas, along with a small number of revisionist historians, notes that there is a traditional historic narrative that stresses individual historic “personalities” and “discontinuities” within this history. These discontinuities include especially the purportedly abrupt nineteenth-century industrialization of a formerly impoverished agrarian state, and the “sudden” invention of a unique type of balanced engagement between government and the governed. The notion of *Folkhemmet*, “the people’s home,” as a metaphor for the Swedish state, is frequently tied to the pre- and post-WWII attempt to create a bridge between communism and capitalism through a modern welfare society (Rojas 2005:7). From this perspective, it is often asserted that this structure was the invention of sociologists during the mid- to late twentieth century, as a social experiment that lacked any basis in reality and was thus malaise-ridden and overdue for collapse by the end of the twentieth century (e.g., Enzensberger 1982; Wolfe 1989). Over the last few decades, this narrative has been challenged by the perspective that the “new model” state was far from the invention of mid-century sociopolitical engineers, or nineteenth-century industrialists, but “the result of a centuries-long historical evolution with no European counterpart” (Enzensberger 1982). New analyses that attempt to follow the state’s trajectory much further back in time examine social traditions, practice, and structuration, and emphasize continuities:

*Folkhemmet* certainly drew ideological strength from modern industrial utopias. However it was based as deeply on the egalitarian and solidaristic ideals of the rural estates, the paternalistic order of the old mining and manufacturing community known as the *bruk*, and on the idiosyncratic relationship between rulers and the ruled which lay deep in Sweden’s history. (Rojas 2005:7–8)

In this newer model, long-term ethnic homogeneity, the strength of the state itself, industrial growth, and technology, all stretching back well into the medieval era, were critical to the twentieth-century *Folkhemmet*, and it
was only the ensuing forces of “immigration, globalisation, prolonged economic stagnation and the information revolution [that] have undermined them” (Rojas 2005:8). With the exception of economic troubles, these forces were largely embraced and tackled head-on by the Swedes, who are attempting, with varied success, to adapt their sociopolitical structure to these new conditions.

Rojas begins his exploration in the fourteenth century, with the so-called Swedish Magna Carta, or Charter of Liberties, and the creation of the Riksdag, a parliament where municipalities and districts had a representative voice in the governing of the state. In the Riksdag, not only nobles but also peasants were present to witness the king’s pledge to obey the law and refrain from excessive taxation. It continued through that century when Sweden, Denmark, and Norway were unified through a negotiated century-long settlement called the Kalmar Union, created by the Danish-born Margareta Valdemarsdotter, and governed by her from 1387 to 1412. This is admirable for a historic view, as such views are so often plagued by shallow time-depths and poor understanding of the nature of social structure, human agency, continuity, and change, and is even more remarkable for Rojas, who is not a formally trained medievalist, but a Chilean immigrant to Sweden and political economist serving as a member of that self-same Riksdag at the time of this publication.

Rethinking Traditional Narratives

The period in Sweden’s history identified by Rojas, and the historians he relies upon (e.g., Österberg 1993), as critical in the creation of the Swedish model begins in 1319 with the Charter of Liberties. A socially situated archaeology tells us that the majority of ancient and modern secondary states are created from a unification of autonomous entities. Some consolidate by passing from alliances, through “consent” or negotiated hegemony (Gramsci 1971) and into a centralized polity with relative ease.

Superficially, then, 1319 seems a good place to seek Sweden’s political origins: an era of negotiated hegemony. But other states begin as unrelated polities or loose confederacies that undergo integration not through consent but via “power” or “force” (Chomsky 2003; Scott 1989, 1990). In fact, Sweden emerged from an expansionist conquest sequence and postconflict reorganization more than 300 years earlier than the fourteenth-century period identified as critical, and it was a process that was torturous for all parties.

The historian Österberg (1993) states that a lack of regional elites and the presence of “ethnic homogeneity” enabled the Swedish state to develop rapidly;
here I believe she errs significantly. The strength and perceived autonomy of regional elites and the marked ethnic differences between the Svear and the local authors of eventual rebellion against increasing absolutism are precisely what led to the restoration of the corporate ideology that appears to have originated in the Iron Age and stretches forward to the Folkhemmet.

Rojas notes that throughout Sweden’s sociopolitical development, a “common link is the tension between freedom and submission that runs clearly across 500 years of Swedish history” (2005:10). This is insightful, yet the timeframe must be extended to at least approximately 1,000 years. If we push the origin of this “freedom/submission” tension back to its real beginnings, we find it in the later prehistoric era, before Sweden’s unification, and its earliest portion studied through archaeologically-framed research.

THEORIZING POWER IN A HIGH-CONFLICT SOCIETY

Courses of political unification often produce sets of unequal power relations within emergent states, when inside their borders they subordinate groups with irreconcilable cultural institutions, religious differences, or ethnic identities, as well as incompatible economies. Such amalgamations often lead to the formation of “high-conflict” societies (Ross 2007) that can experience instability and internal unrest from the legacies left by expedient colonial borders and opportunistic but short-sighted political decisions. Prior to forced unification, such disparate, self-identified groups frequently have coexisted in relative peace, yet as the state begins to enact itself, implementation of ill-considered or purposefully divisive economic or political policies pits them against each other, and hostilities with both material and ideological origins can last for centuries. Frontiers that previously divided once-autonomous regions often fade slowly, or not at all—in some cases becoming more cemented, as borders can simply divide people and territories, but can also “initiate or accelerate the identification or construction of collective identities both in the past and in contemporary societies” (Klusáková and Ellis 2006:xiii). During Sweden’s initial unification, a number of dissimilar groups were brought under a single government, drawing preunification societies into conflict with a centralizing polity that expected them to fall into line as others already had (Thurston 2015). The polities at issue here were not “tribal” entities, as are frequently the object of study in conquest sequences, they were kingdoms, organized in more egalitarian yet politically complex modes. This created tensions equal to but different than those that developed between so-called tribes and states (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992). The clash in early
Sweden, between two kinds of complex political systems, both in terms of their structure and their ideology, is especially interesting.

Most archaeologists working on the topic of states and their development over the last few decades remember the puzzling nature of the “differently organized” society or state (Thurston 2010) and the endless debates surrounding them. Were they states? Were they actually differently organized? Could they be divergent and still be states? Were we just missing something that would reveal them to fall within the normative expectations of the times? When the dual-processual theory of Blanton et al. (1996) was first published, many researchers working with the remnants of differently organized states welcomed it, as it explicitly dealt with the possibility that state structures and modes could vary significantly, and that ideologically egalitarian complex political systems were present in significant numbers in the past. Praised for its ability to model atypical systems, the theory proposed an infinite variety of political modes stretching between the corporate and the network ends of a continuum. A purely network strategy was hypothesized to be dominated by elites with monopolies on power, supported by creating a network of relationships with other elites, and advertised their status with all the trappings of wealth and/or prestige. At the other end lie societies where power is devolved away from rulers toward a more equitable distribution among groups or institutions within society. Such societies are characterized by less elite power, or at least less emphasis on its appearance, display, and manifestation, often with institutions that encourage some level of popular power from below.

Blanton et al. (1996) further posited that most societies are in a constant state of tension between these poles as various groups or interests within society constantly pull its characteristics and ever-evolving traditions toward one side or the other in a tug of war. In this way, envisioning as it did a reshaping and reforming of the “normal” state in a continual negotiation, it resonated with the reexamination of state formation by scholars of the 1990s who were trying to rewrite parts of the archaeological theoretical corpus through the structuration theory of Giddens (1984), the heterarchy concept introduced into archaeology by Crumley (1994), and the resurrection of older ideas in new forms: the house society of Levi-Strauss as reinterpreted by Joyce and Gillespie (2000), and the hegemony concept, both the original “consent” model of Gramsci (1971) and the resistance model of Scott (1990). In this way, at a critical time in the development of political theories on state formation in archaeology, dual-processual theory permitted some convergence between more traditional materialist and processualist views and the increasingly
theoretical interpretations influenced by the postmodern turn. It did so by allowing that ordinary people, using their agency from below, can wield considerable power through their evolving practice; that societies with absolutist and shared power structures can both exist; and that both types of principles can coexist simultaneously within the same society, and that they can shift over time.

In order to understand the mechanisms that might trigger such shifts, using dual-processual theory as a starting point, Blanton and Fargher (2008, 2009) developed collective action theory to more deeply investigate these issues. The mechanisms within ideologically egalitarian states, as well as their counterparts with more absolutist ideologies, are also key to understanding the high-conflict state, and I specifically call these “ideologies” because they are not always realities. As noted in both dual-processual and collective action theories, rulers and subjects often are out of step with their understanding of each other. Heads of state may imagine that they have much more power than they actually do; conversely, so may an autonomous and self-governing subculture overestimate its own ability to hold off a state army. On the other hand, farmers may imagine they have little power when they have enormous collective capacity for fomenting change. These mismatched perceptions may result in long periods of stasis where such assumptions are untested, or in episodes or extended periods of intense and violent conflict, as ordinary people may go underground or defy authority, may conform to or confront authority. The state may despise its own populace, or fear them, or both. The fact that the lower classes are excoriated, ridiculed, mocked, or diminished in ruling transcripts is well understood by historians and historical ethnographers as an indication not only of conflict but of dread (Scott 1990).

In developing collective action theory, the authors move from theorizing a continuum between differently characterized states (autocratic/absolutist networks vs. corporate/collective forms) to investigating the infrastructural qualities that render them into the entities that display such characteristics. Using premodern yet historical states as a proxy for prehistoric or nonliterate cultures, historical clues to a more grounded view of the past are found in the records of law courts, property dispositions, and economic transactions that give us a sense of how such forms might “look” in terms of patterning, material culture, and archaeologically discernible (or theorizable) social processes.

Central to many disputes within high-conflict states is the public perception of elite demands: too many obligations for labor, service, and taxation,
which diminish the citizens’ abilities to work on their own behalf, allocate
time to their own convenience, and make the most of their skills to stave off
poverty or hardship. In addition, a state’s mandate that its people conform to
a preferred set of legal constructs and ceremonial obligations that favor state
actors and conventions can clash with traditional local values.

The Bureaucratized State

Blanton and Fargher (2008, 2009) propose, supported by extensive quan-
tified analysis of premodern states, that the most effective way a govern-
ment can assert its authority is to build organizational structures that
accommodate voice, distribute public goods, and uphold just and fair taxa-
tion. This is accomplished through what Blanton and Fargher call bureau-
cratization, a process that creates effective infrastructural power for the state,
rather than giving its rulers heavy-handed personal or network-style power.
Infrastructural power has the incidental effect of limiting elite ability to
coerce or command with impunity (see also Fargher, chapter 15, this volume;
Mann 1986; Weber 1947).

Taxation

Without deference to formal Marxist theories of political economy, it is
the case that all states must acquire the means of funding their own activities,
operations, and the maintenance of their leadership. This political economy
can take many different shapes and forms. Some income may stem from raid-
ing or appropriation of war plunder. In others, corvée labor may be used to
see that the citizenry produces a yield of consumables or trade items for the
sole benefit of the state, or directly labors with bodies and minds in civic
activities in service to the state—labor that may be materially uncompensated.
Many states, however, either supplement or replace such asset- and income-
generating strategies with the collection of specific tribute or taxes from free
taxpayers. There are different methods for collecting such revenue, some more
successful than others.

To some, the notion that fairness is more efficient than autocracy may seem
counterintuitive. After all, tyrants, despots, and absolutists are the most pow-
erful and successful at appropriating the wealth of the taxpayer, are they not?
Through their extensive cross-cultural analysis, Blanton and Fargher show
that in reality, the answer is actually no. Rather, such regimes create motives
for taxpayers to resist them, by cheating the collector, hiding assets, hiding
themselves to avoid detection, or engaging in outright rebellion.
Thus, while it might be assumed that success in revenue collection is measured by the amount of tax money or tribute a state manages to collect, this is only a part of the picture. The collection should also be easy—in other words, rulers should avoid extraordinary efforts to support tax collecting personnel, and the method of collection should not lead to dissent, which must be dealt with, or disturbances like protests and uprisings, which are expensive to control, and which ultimately may destabilize and overthrow the state—all counterproductive strategies. The costs of collecting revenue already reduced by tax evasion, and of putting down symbolic and/or violent protests by unwilling taxpayers, result in less efficient use and lower total income for the state.

Public Goods

Ostensibly, assets collected for funding a political economy also support the provision of public goods. These services to the public such as law and order, defense, maintenance of physical infrastructure, and in some states, efforts toward social welfare, all have their costs. Conversely, if taxpayers see the offer of public goods, they much more willingly pay the tax, tithe, or tribute. Public goods ease or enhance their way of life and livelihood, and also provide some degree of confidence that they will have recourse against the abuses of petty bureaucrats or systemic unfairness through a legal system or a grievance process. Providing these assurances eases revenue collection and requires far less expenditure of labor and funds on the part of the state.

Voice

Voice entails a forum in which grievances can be aired, local/state obligations can be negotiated, and policies can be challenged. It can be, for example, in the form of large public meetings or smaller audiences with authorities, formal legal challenges to perceived violation of precedent or tradition, or the ability to cast a vote. The mere presence of such institutions goes a long way toward reducing conflict and violence between the state and its constituents.

We may see various scenarios play out either through direct detection of the process, such as an assembly place or structure serving as a legal forum, or law-related activities (specific to the region discussed here: Iversen 2013, Oosthuizen 2013, Riisøy 2013, Smith 2013), or perhaps only by the resulting form of society—revealed through the materiality of large-scale spatiotemporal patterns, and the organization and composition of landscapes, sites, and households that archaeologists are skilled at revealing.
Rationales of Resistance and Rebellion

Where states do not bureaucratize in an effective manner—by offering voice, public goods, and fair tax collection—collective action theory predicts that free taxpayers will evade tax collection, migrate or relocate to avoid surveillance and physical appropriation of their goods or money, organize protests against perceived unfair practices, or violently rebel. The quantitative analysis of premodern states indicates that the theory has great predictive power. Does this also mean that detection of such practices and actions can be indicators of poor bureaucratization and its inherent conditions?

Blanton and Fargher (2009:134) note that “the form taken by a state depends in large part on the outcome of bargains struck between those in positions of state authority . . . and non-ruling groups, especially taxpayers.” We easily recognize this negotiation and the implicit agency of nonelites when we think of famous examples of “power from below”—those such as Wat Tyler’s fourteenth-century English Peasants’ Revolt, or the French Revolution, or any number of disruptive, violent, and sometimes failed, sometimes successful uprisings in historic and current times. Yet when we contemplate prehistoric or largely unrecorded protohistoric periods, our ability to predict—or even imagine—the unseen, undocumented common people of our study areas, we seem far less likely to concede that they had the will, agency, and power to organize and take action. For those of us explicitly studying the relationship between rulers and subjects through time, and the development of each state’s unique set of compromises around “power,” collective action theory gives us theoretical access to the groups, classes, or factions below the ruling class.

Egalitarian (and Other) Ideologies in Late Prehistoric Europe

Because the emergence of European Iron Age political systems is a repeated cycle of balance between power from above and power from below, our understanding of this era has benefited inordinately from all theories, past and current, that deal with varied and alternative sociopolitical organization. The Iron Age is an era variously described as illustrating the “Germanic mode of production” within a Marxian framework (Gilman 1995; Hunt and Gilman 1998), as being heterarchic (Crumley 1995; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Wailes 1995), and as producing “corporate” polities within the “corporate/network” continuum (Bentley and Shennan 2003; Thurston 2001, 2009, 2010) or without reference to a specific theory, a kind of ideologically egalitarian, checked and balanced system (James 1999, 2000; Collis 1997; Hill 1989, 1993). A tradition of deemphasized status and class differentiation was intermittently impacted
by the aspirations of self-promoting elites who used “personal prestige, wealth, power accumulation, aggrandizement, highly individualized leadership . . . long-distance exchange, exotic wealth, princely burials, and . . . status craft goods” (Feinman et al. 2000) to advance their fortunes. Collective action theory is the most recent and sophisticated effort to characterize and situate the social, political, and economic conditions inherent in such frameworks where institutional hierarchies are not necessarily centralized, increasing political powers are not always marked by consolidated control, and ordinary people can figure prominently in political development and sociopolitical ideation.

This case study begins in prehistory and progresses to a protohistoric time when a partial elite transcript is available—a historic record not very detailed, yet indicative of the concerns of rulers. The record of subjecthood, of what it was like to be an ordinary person under the rule of the state, is found only in what James Scott calls the hidden transcript—an oblique indication of the “peasant problem” as inscribed in elite complaints, the creation and enactment of laws around “peasant trouble,” and actions taken by the state to exploit, suppress, or control them (Scott 1990, 1998). Few of these, if any, are written by or described through the perspective of the lower or middle levels of society, yet the indicated state of affairs, the balance of power, is usually not as elites describe for themselves and each other. Elite-inscribed records must always be read with the understanding that they present an instrumentalized version of events and processes (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992, Scott 1989, 1990, 1998; Sewell 2005). Only at the end of the study era do we finally have a clearer direct transcript of nonelite issues and concerns.

The Svear State: A High-Conflict Society in the Throes of Organizational Transition

Before the development of the Svear state over the course of the Iron Age, Bronze Age society in northern Europe (1700–500 BC) exhibited clear distinctions between elite and commoner in both material wealth and symbolic status: large houses, cattle sheds, monumental grave mounds, distinctive long-distance and local wealth items, and restricted access to metals and weapons characterized high-status individuals. Across northern Europe, including Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia, the period closed at around 500 BC with a general collapse of visible elite culture, often interpreted as not simply failure but outright rejection of sharply differentiating organizing principles, followed by an era of social and political flattening, the Early (pre-Roman) Iron Age, marked by the disappearance of obvious status markers, large impressive

If material culture alone is considered, one would think that leadership itself had vanished. When dual-processual theory was first introduced in the 1990s, one of the first applications was to such contexts, using their newfound ability to postulate forms of organization different than those rooted in neo-evolutionary ideas. It was suddenly possible to argue that leaders did in fact still exist, but that they had shifted from network-style status aggrandizers to corporate-style status deemphasizers as society took a more egalitarian-minded turn. As noted, other theories important in this reinterpretation were house society theory (Beck 2007; Chesson 2003) and the heterarchy concept (Crumley 1995, 2003, 2005).

The conclusion that a major sociopolitical shift occurred during the Bronze Age/Iron Age transition, or perhaps that this underlying shift was a large part of what caused the visible material transition (Thurston 2010), is supported by evidence from the historic record. As the Iron Age progressed and contact was established between the Mediterranean and western/northern European peoples, literate Romans and Greeks such as Julius Caesar, Cassius Dio, Diodorus Siculus, Pliny, Strabo, Tacitus, and many others described “primitive democracies” in the Celtic- and Germanic-speaking spheres of the late centuries BC and early centuries AD. Further textual data from the post-Roman era is found in Continental authors such as Jordanes and Procopius.

The persistence of such sociopolitical traditions is discernible in the archaeological record throughout the course of the Iron Age, most strongly in the early Iron Age but continuing into the later Iron Age and the so-called Viking Age despite the redevelopment of more visible and more powerful rulers. Archaeological evidence for this more collective and heterarchical system is seen in an egalitarian or transegalitarian material culture, reduced stratification in sociopolitical and settlement indicators, more egalitarian burial rites (Axboe 1999; Barrett et al. 2000; Earle and Kristiansen 2010; Kristiansen 2005; Smith 2004), and the appearance of assembly-places seen through textual records, place names, and archaeological evidence (Smith 2004; Sanmark and Semple 2008; Semple and Sanmark 2013). These reveal an Early Iron Age society with invisible leadership, developing slowly into those dominated by a political-military elite, yet with strong and sophisticated leveling mechanisms: “checks and balances” from below.

Some social codes and behaviors observed by the Romans continued, albeit in shifting form, in the intervening centuries when there are no textual records, only to emerge again in the documentary sources when literate traditions were
adopted at the introduction of Christianity around AD 1000. These include the heterarchic Iron Age sociopolitical organization frequently discussed by archaeologists (Bondarenki and Nemirovskiy 2007; Crumley 1995, 2003, 2005; González-Ruibal 2006; James 1999; Moore and Armada 2011; Thurston 2009, 2010) with its “stand-alone” power structures: legislative, warrior, and religious. Military leaders required support from an assembly, and leaders and followers had reciprocal obligations: a warlord sustained his fighters (Christophersen 1982; Lindow 1976; Vestergaard 1979), but their support evaporated if they perceived arrogance or avarice (Thurston 2010). Allies elected a paramount to lead collectively against outside threats (Wells 1999:57), but refusal to relinquish power led to sanctioned overthrow or assassination. As clarified by collective action theory (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2009; Fargher and Blanton 2007), the attempt to layer a “strong” form of rulership atop a long-time corporate society can inadvertently lead to the rise of a state with many internal conflicts.

After a more corporate, socially egalitarian, and status-flattened beginning, over time a slow return of more network-style traditions can be traced in the heartland of the later Svear rulers during the so-called Vendel period (ca. AD 550/570 to 790/800), directly preceding the Viking Age. For example, slight status distinctions in central Swedish inhumation and cremation traditions, with pits and small earth heaps or within modest boat-shaped stone settings, developed after AD 550 into more differentiated forms (Ljungkvist 2008). New burial rites include monumental burial mounds of imposing height and over 20 m in diameter, incorporating a central cairn with whole-animal sacrifices and rich, rare material culture. In the Svear heartland, at and around Gamla Uppsala, the protohistoric and historic seat of the Svear dynasty, are three high (ca. 10 m) burial mounds constructed in the mid-sixth through early seventh centuries, dwarfing earlier structures; several others lie in nearby regions.

Yet it is notable that while some elites constructed such monuments, others adhered to the more traditional burial context, a continuation of the smaller mounds and ship settings of the past, some cremated and some inhumed. Ljungkvist (2008) notes that osteological and artifactual analysis of both types of burials—new and traditional forms—show that the number and types of animals sacrificed and the grave offerings were identical, indicating that families of the same sociopolitical and/or economic class were selecting different rituals. This may signal that a newly emerging group, or a splinter group of elites, adopted a more symbolically uneven presentation, emphasizing individual status with unprecedented monumental construction and eventually an increasingly wealthy material culture, reflecting a more divided, uneven, and asymmetrical reality.
By the end of the seventh and eighth centuries AD, not one but two polities existed: the Svear and Götar kingdoms, documented archaeologically and through mythopoetic texts. These saga entities emerge as real political entities in the early historic era. Significant archaeological work has targeted the emergence of the Svear “core” near Stockholm in the Mälar valley, but scholars are only now focusing on the origins of Götaland, which consisted of Västergötland and Östergötland (figure 8.2). At the Skänninge site, militaristically symbolized elites of the early first millennium AD kept compounds near cult-places whose names link them to a götar people. Nearby gravefields at Högby show social stratification developing between the first and fifth centuries AD, culminating in several “levels” of elites with warrior trappings (Helander and Zetterlund 1998; Kaliff 2003). Late Iron Age rulers, sharing power with religious specialists and a public assembly, may have emerged through interactions between important families in Väster- and Östergötland.

Just south of Östergötland, lies what is today called Småland. This area was not initially part of Götaland, rather its borders contained several small-scale political units. Småland literally means the “small lands”: 12 independent socio-political aggregates (figure 8.2), some mentioned as “peoples” in Jordanes’s ethnohistoric Getica of around AD 550 (Mierow 1908). This is reflected in different runestone and mortuary styles following still-extant boundaries between Småland’s härads, administrative units whose borders lie along yet earlier ones. Although there is no textual documentation, historians often assume that Småland’s polities were consistently allied with the Götar, and in their fight to resist Svear domination, the outcome of continuing autonomy suggests that this is plausible.

Ethnohistoric traditions describe hostility and warfare between Svear and Götar, with eventual Svear domination, claimed to have begun with “conquest” around AD 1000. Yet Svear claims of “unification” at AD 1000 are improbable. Swedish historians (Sigurðsson 2006) admit ignorance of how or when unification began or proceeded. In light of the work of Blanton and his coauthors, unification, rather than comprising an “event,” likely was attempted earlier and proceeded longer.

From the tenth century on, Scandinavian legal codes were transcribed to written texts, from oral traditions in which a lawspeaker recited in public to ensure fairness and adherence to the code, leading to historically recorded protests against radical interpolations that increased the ruler’s power and decreased the rights of sub-elites and common people (Brink 2002, 2003, 2004). By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the ting/thing, or assembly, where leaders and later kings were voted in by those eligible to cast a lot, became less electoral.
Figure 8.2. Sweden in the eleventh–twelfth centuries, showing the major regions (Norrland, Svealand, and Götaland–Småland) and the “small lands” of Småland.
and more oriented toward “approval” of heirs, and the selection of eligible men from a large group of hopefuls was replaced by royal patrimony via brothers, then sons. Urban and rural elite-run courts eventually superseded local assembly places (Myrberg 2008; Sanmark 2009; Sanmark and Semple 2008).

The drama that played out between the Smålanders and their ostensible kings has usually been cast in traditional historic terms, identifying individual people or small groups of “aristocrats” as the primary agents of conflict and change. It can alternately be seen as a struggle between two forms of political organization, older more egalitarian forms, and newer attempts at hierarchic, centralized organization, over an entire millennium, as the Iron Age system suppressed quick changes, leading to long periods of tacit or active resistance against attempted unification through “creeping” centralizing change, followed by short, violent struggles when rulers challenged tradition, often unsuccessfully. To understand Småland’s incorporation into Sweden and its role in state formation, we must primarily use archaeology and its allied disciplines to reveal prestate conditions and later courses of change.

Change in Economic and Political Landscapes

The Svear and Götar kingdoms developed out of heterarchic Iron Age societies, where we understand that the infrastructural elements called bureaucratization were well established. As they grew less collective and more network-oriented during the later Iron Age, other regional polities did not necessarily follow suit; many retained a strongly collective nature. During the long stretch of time when the increasingly network-style Svear polity began to conquer and incorporate its neighbors, there were many continuities but also numerous shifts in the organization of the cultural landscape. Some landscape changes are local byproducts of other decisions, while “institutional landscape changes” are planned or encouraged components of political and economic strategies, or responses to broadly experienced demands or opportunities.

Småland is often characterized as marginal and impoverished, but this is largely based on the perception that wealth lies in cereal agricultural production. The Swedish state saw many profitable and productive possibilities on the Plateau. A border region, Småland was the launching pad for Swedish military expeditions against Denmark. Military musters, while drawing from across the state, unequally availed themselves of local manpower. Husbandry provided meat and dairy, horses, wool and leather with regular and military uses, and was also taxable. Large iron deposits destined for use in weaponry lay in ore-rich hills and in malm (bog-iron) found in ubiquitous lakes and swamps.
Forest industries included iron-smelting with blast furnaces fueled by charcoal, manufactured in large charcoaling pits. Tar manufacture was vital to rapidly expanding royal navies.

While the Svear rulers desired the Plateau dwellers’ products and tax revenue, obtaining them was much more difficult. It first required some level of territorial control, which during the state’s coalescence was fictional—the state had no formal presence there before the twelfth century. To collect revenue in an area where little direct control is exercised and the population is spread across a landscape that is well-suited to concealment, collective action theory would suggest that the best way to facilitate state economic policies would be to construct a vigorously bureaucratized infrastructure.

Was bureaucratization the Svear strategy? The official transcript of the medieval era indicates that tax evasion was rampant and state mandates were more often protested or ignored than followed. Farmers frequently murdered tax collectors and other officials, seen in the legal records of “blood money” paid to acquit them of these crimes, as was possible under the laws of the era. There were tax rebellions and uprisings. Complaints were made about the hiding of assets and the difficulties of prosecuting lawbreakers scattered through the deep and dark forests—tactics that might be rational and expected behaviors in the face of network-style lack of bureaucratization. This trend continued, and escalated over the next few centuries.

It might be inferred from both the textual and archaeological records that rather than building bureaucratic infrastructure, the Svear state strategy appears to have taken the path of building a physical infrastructure for the installation of top-down, authoritarian power. In a region where no towns or cities were previously known, centers were established from which authority was exercised. Around 1140, a royal castle was constructed on Visingsö island in Lake Vättern in the heart of the Plateau region, marking the Swedish king’s authority. Visingsö—not the Svear homeland—became the primary royal residence for the next two centuries; it was not a temporary local residence.

A local Iron Age marketplace had long operated at the confluence of the June river and southern Lake Vättern, but in 1282, the state founded a market town, Jönköping nearby, superseding the traditional hub, and soon installed a large garrison. Access south along river roads enabled trade and moved armies downstream to attack the Danes, but also brought them north, and the city was torched and plundered several times, deeply embroiling Småland in warfare in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries.

The Swedish Crown forbade trade between the two states, and commercial activity across the border, a centuries or even millennia-old tradition, was
rendered illegal, leading to the Smålander’s refusal to recognize the Swedish-Danish border at Småland’s southern edge (Andrén 2000). The niche of “forest-dweller” extended from Småland far into the Danish territory of Scania, and allegiance to either state and respect for a largely arbitrary border was far weaker than bonds between forester-pastoralists on either side. During the many Danish-Swedish wars, “farmer’s peace treaties” were enacted. These bondefred were formal written agreements to continue trade, and provide mutual warning against incursions of troops from their own homelands. Actual collusions are documented for both sides (Andrén 2000:317–318; Cederholm 2007). Eventually during the sixteenth century, the “magnate” Brahe lineage controlled the region, building castles like royalty on the mainland and on Visingsö. In the sixteenth century, Catholicism, still cherished by the uplanders, was forcibly replaced with the Lutheran Protestantism adopted by the Svear.

DISCUSSION

Traditionally, in Sweden, the bonde or free farmer had voice in government, but not because power was devolved by enlightened or merely clever rulers, and not because of any state-initiated institutions designed for smoothing the collection of taxes and the orderly control of society. Rather, it was because at the time the state emerged, the free farmer was the state. As noted above, the heterarchical nature of both prestate and early-state Scandinavia, left two-thirds of the governance of society in the hands of nonrulers, or conversely, two-thirds of society that were nonmilitary elites, ruled together, through representation, with their war leaders. While small, private-retinue armies of 200–300 full-time soldiers were kept by rulers, the actual armies of the day were simply levies of farmers and other free men. The kingdoms were divided into administrative units called härads/herreds (Swedish/Danish) or “hundreds”—referring to the number of men, with a proper complement of ships, that was owed to the king in times of war. The ruler would call a levy and the hundred-man would arrive at a levy-place led by local elites. Similarly, the assemblies where local and national leaders were elected or acclaimed, saw the participation of all free men, also rallied and led by local leaders. Until AD 1000–1100, the “yea or nay” was real, in the sense that rival candidates for king were put in or voted out of the job by the votes of ordinary citizens, organized of course by those with influence in the community.

Changes in this system occurred in the manner of a punctuated equilib-rium over the course of the Iron Age, including the early medieval Viking Age or long Iron Age, with long periods of relatively imperceptible change
interspersed with violent eruptions of reorganization. Changes included the transcription of oral law to written, and often subtly altered documents, and the true election of kings by the commons became more aptly described as acclamation or acceptance. The longstanding claims by the commons that kings could tax citizens no more than earlier rulers had taxed their ancestors were met by challenges from above in the eleventh century. Flatlanders fought these trends but eventually were forced to accept many changes (Thurston 2001). This was not always the case for the more territorially segregated uplanders.

The Småland pastoralists shared Scandinavia’s strongly egalitarian, anti-authoritarian ideology and, unlike more accessible populations, were mostly self-governing, even after incorporation into the body of the state.

Collective action theory postulates that if a state is to impose and collect taxes in an orderly manner, without inviting protest or social upheaval, it must first bureaucratize. The principals—rulers and their immediate proxies—must develop a set of rules, laws, codes, and expectations for how its agents—in Sweden, a force of royal sheriffs, bailiffs, and fief-holders—carried out state imperatives among the populace. In many instances the commons had the ability to properly monitor and rein in agents who were abusers, and to address public concerns (Blanton and Fargher 2009:141). In many parts of Sweden by the fifteenth century, representatives of the various farming districts appeared directly before the king to make a public record of their demands or claims. Yet in Småland, because of its late and more unwilling incorporation into the state, appeals were less direct: they were carried out in local or regional venues as if the state had never enacted itself (Cederholm 2007). In many ways, Småland, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, continued to be a separate nation not only in the eyes of the Smålanders but in the perception of the Crown.

When the centralizing agricultural state proclaimed its broad new powers, it came into irreconcilable conflict with tightly knit forest pastoralists who adhered to ancient apparatuses of egalitarianism and who were poorly integrated into any extant protections. In Småland, the system was limited to officially sanctioned tax farming by ruthless royal officials, compounded by the fact that these agents imposed additional taxes and dues on their own, without any central authority, and used brutal tactics to collect them. Since the Smålanders brought their issues only before local courts and not directly to the king, the situation would grow dire. That conflicts arose is not surprising (Blanton and Fargher 2008, 2009). Småland’s identity as a set of autonomous “kingdoms” within a larger state outlasted the unification era: Småland long
represented the yardstick by which Swedish kings could measure the integration of their state. It often became necessary to make an example of them.

Livelihood and Dwelling in a Time of Subjugation

In addition to examining the building of state urban and military infrastructure, as noted above, a program of landscape archaeology has examined local responses to these processes. Of the 12 “small lands,” two have been studied—Tveta and Vista—which border Lake Vättern and Visingsö Island with its royal seat (figure 8.2). Both were coherent political and administrative units in prestate and state times. I have conducted archaeological research in four settlement districts (figure 8.3) that exhibit coherence and continuity, because they represent contexts at “ground zero” to royal authority, and then at ever-increasing distances from central state authorities: the island of Visingsö, where the Swedish monarchs made their full-time permanent home; the nearby and unusually (for the Plateau) agriculturally rich Skärstad Valley; the more distant, smaller Bredestad Valley; and the iron-rich region south of Jönköping town, the Södravätterbygden. These four locales likely had different relationships and obligations to the state, thus differentially reflecting its impacts. All contain sites dating prior to, during, and after state formation and expansion. This work is ongoing, but some preliminary conclusions may be drawn.

Livelihood

The study of complex land-use history and shifting labor organization can aid understanding of Småland’s development. It is clear from the juxtaposition of finds at upland archaeological sites that one of the main strategies used by the inhabitants was “occupational pluralism”—the constant combining and shifting of resources, processing technologies, and land/labor rights and strategies. McCann (2000:486) notes that:

occupational pluralism represents a strategy for family survival in a marginal world of work. It is a response to those situations in which no single activity provides an adequate income to meet family needs. To this end, contributors to the family’s economic welfare might follow a number of seasonal activities—some subsistence, some that earn cash—as they try to gain a modicum of well-being.

While McCann goes on to say that in the current day and age, this often fails, leading to the disintegration of families and communities, in Sweden’s
uplands it was a centuries-old way of life that was successful, and is still successful, even in current times. On the Plateau, it long comprised livestock raising combined with small-scale cultivation, charcoaling, iron production, woodworking, tar-manufacture, and arboriculture.

There are also proxy data for changes in workforce organization, labor-intensive strategies historically interrelated with proximity and kinship among pastoralists (Fratkin 1989; Grandin et al. 1991). Enormous stone heaps from

**Figure 8.3.** Four study blocks with varying proximity to the royal establishment on Visingsö Island.
clearance, accomplished with *svedjeburk*, or slash and burn, thickly dot even tiny clearings, some formed into long, high field boundaries that stretch off into the forest or crest over hilltops. They have been dated by OSL and carbon-14 to waves coinciding with the 1000s–1100s, the 1100s–1200s, and the 1300s–1600s periods (Häggström 2004). Montelius (1953:42) noted that nineteenth-century *svedjebruk* “required so much labour that a single farm could hardly undertake the clearing . . . Felling was a heavy job, but most hands were needed . . . to prevent the fire from spreading . . . Several farms—ten or so—joined together in a common clearing [in addition to] individual clearings.” In the 1600s and probably earlier, formal “associations” of 2–4 large households (Vestbø-Franzén 2005) of about 10 persons each (Jansson and Kristensson 2004) cooperatively swiddened, planted, and later herded and grazed the fallow, also cooperatively. Some sites reveal the creation of terraces, not for cropping but simply to create a platform for daily activities on terrain impossible to otherwise build upon.

The pastoral labor pool was increased through household cooperation, “borrowing children,” or hiring workers (Sieff 1997) to facilitate herding, milking, and foddering; well, byre, and corral construction; animal droving and marketing; and cultivation. Interherded species require different grazing and watering regimes, thus their own habitual “tenders” (Arhem et al. 1981; Coppock et al. 1986; Cossins and Upton 1988; Fratkin and Smith 1994).

The study of production technologies reveals whether skilled, unskilled, or mixed labor was used. Iron production requires skill plus hard labor; charcoal-ing and tarring, less skill. Changing economies may point to changing work-forces. In the well-studied Bergslagen north of Småland, blast-furnace operations, similar to those of slightly later date in Småland, are found beginning around 1150, where iron and steel were produced in well-documented peasant cooperatives (Florén et al. 2003:78), exemplified at the archaeological sites of Lapphyttan and Vinarhyttan. Metal production at increasingly higher levels was of utmost importance to the Crown, and the legal status of the “free miners” was outlined in special legislation from the king, acknowledging and regulating the cooperative nature of organization by granting industrial charters and forbidding a blast furnace from being jointly owned by more than eight households, while individual smiths were responsible for the quality of iron that they themselves decarburized (Gordon and Reynolds 1986; Magnusson 1984, 2002, 2009). Finds at Lapphytten are consistent, revealing exactly eight twelfth-century refining hearths in the immediate vicinity of the smelting operation (Magnusson 1984:61). This traditional collective ownership, which had both communal and individual attributes, continued forward through
the medieval era, exemplified in the fourteenth-century Kopparberg charter, indicating that shares of the mine were proportional to ownership of smelters (Rydberg 1979).

Thus, archaeological and paleoecological data tell us that cooperative organization and occupational pluralism continued to be the main strategy for the forest farmers of Småland during their contested unification with the Svear state. The economic impact of the state, direct or indirect, may be seen in the intensification of agropastoralism and forest industries through the series of colonization waves into ever-higher and more difficult terrain. Pollen, animal bones, and settlement remains tell of behavioral changes, but only indirectly of social transformations.

**Dwelling**

Across much of Scandinavia, recognizable settlement foundation waves are sometimes broadly apparent, to the point where they are almost assumed. In Småland, these waves and phases of organizational and demographic response are somewhat unique, and must be seen in the face of changing conditions. Toponym studies, correlated with thousands of archaeological investigations, are a reliable general indicator of site foundation eras in Scandinavia (Agertz 2000; Brink 1984, 1990). Villages still extant today were recorded by the 1200s–1300s in cadastral registers, as were those abandoned after recording. The place name (Brink 1984, 1990) denotes the foundation of the archaeological “original” settlement, usually within sight of the historic (modern) village locale. These sites, including those abandoned prior to recording with no modern analogues, are found through soil chemical and pedestrian survey.

There were several expansions before the Svear conquest, similar to broad changes across Scandinavia usually interpreted as small foundation waves representing slow population growth in a region without much available farmland for expanding extant villages. In general, these correspond to Roman Iron Age sites (AD 1–400), Migration-era or post-Roman sites (AD 400–550), the Vendel period (AD 550–800), and the Viking Age (AD 800–1050).

While it is important to understand the pan-regional generalities of these settlement waves, it is also important to note that Småland differs significantly. Across Scandinavia, a huge wave of “hamlet foundations” is linked to tax increases around AD 1000–1100 as multiple states emerged, many interpreted as “planned” settlements. These small villages of several farms share the place name suffix –torp, sometimes abbreviated to arp/up, meaning “new settlement dependent on an older settlement.” In Småland it is a distinct but unusually patterned phase; among the four study blocks it occurs significantly only on
Visingsö island, and may correlate with the twelfth-century establishment of the royal residence on Visingsö rather than the late Viking Age. Indications are that few were founded further afield, which may show the era’s meager extent of state power or lack of obedience to state will.

Place names unique to the region are plentiful. Highly dispersed one- or two-farm sites with the suffix *-hult* form a large colonization, mostly of the 1200s, coinciding with the establishment of Jönköping. A wave of similar sites ending in *-ryd* appears to have begun largely in the 1300s. *Hult* and *ryd* mean “artificial clearing” and are more apparent and very numerous in the upland valleys and dense forest areas far from the royal island and town; they continued to be founded through the 1500s. The Black Death impacted the region in the later fourteenth century, but a new expansion beginning around 1500, seen especially in the dating of field-clearance cairns, may correlate with the rise of Swedish-Danish warfare and military supply needs, as well as the introduction of the Brahe family’s direct local rule in the region.

The difficulty of enforcing tax collection, labor obligations, and new unpopular religious practices (here, the introduction of Lutheranism) in dispersed settlements has been noted by archaeologists, historians, and ethnographers in many global contexts. Examples include Scott’s (2009) well-known examination of the evasive strategies of the hidden, dispersed peoples of upland Southeast Asia; the practices of colonial-era Maya, about whom the Spanish complained frequently (Farriss 1985:218); similarly early Spanish-colonial frustrations in Tiwanaku (Bandy and Janusek 2005); and countless others.

*Dwelling, livelihood, and change*

As frequently inferred by archaeologists, foundation waves of many small, dispersed sites additionally suggest intensification and increased efficiency, a degree of autonomy, egalitarian principles of land tenure, and perhaps attempts at concealment (Drennan 1988; Emerson 1997; Peterson and Drennan 2005), despite the move into higher and higher valleys with ever-worsening conditions for the pastoral agroeconomy. This view is borne out in numerous ethnographic studies (Bentley 1990; Blarel et al. 1992; Hassane 2001; Netting 1989; Tan et al. 2006; Udo 1965).

Each successive wave of these later upland expansions pioneered into higher and higher elevations, from 200 masl, to 250, to 300, to 350 and higher—from valleys with soil to those with almost no cover over bedrock—more hidden but also more difficult to occupy and cultivate (figure 8.4). While pioneers may have been practicing forestry-related commercial activities, they were
also carving out their daily subsistence, which would have been much more difficult at high elevations than in the lower-lying upland valleys.

The relative magnitude and distribution of such pioneering suggests moderate to significant intensification. Areas close to the royal residence had planned *torps*, perhaps established by decree for direct royal support, accounting for some of this expansion. However, *hult* and *ryd*, names almost unknown outside Småland, suggest that the major push came from perhaps a local movement from “below.” In some areas, such as the Södravätterbygden south of Jönköping town, close to the Taberg iron-ore region, such settlement intensification was surely related to industrial production: wood and charcoal are proxies for the production of iron and tar, and dateable charcoaling features show sharp increases in number and size through time.

**Figure 8.4.** Detail of Skärstad-Ölmstad Valley showing changing landscape use from the Iron Age to the Medieval period.
“THEY DEFENDED THEIR RIGHTS”

Blanton and Fargher assert that states should effectively offer voice, public goods, and fair tax-collection procedures to taxpayers in order to avoid conflicts, implying—in the neutral tone of theoretical language—that a “rational state” should see the benefits of such arrangements. They do, however, carefully call such a system of government a “sociocultural construction” (Blanton and Fargher 2009:141), which for this case study must be strongly emphasized. The phrase, “They Defended Their Rights,” is translated from the work of Cederholm (2007), a contemporary Swedish historian, who makes especial note of the fact that the system of collective government long preceded the state in Sweden, and it was not the rulers who offered it, but the farmers who demanded they adhere to it. Despite the more negotiated conditions elsewhere in Sweden, the Swedish Crown effectively continued to treat the Smålanders as a conquered territory with clearly separate origins, perhaps because the Smålanders themselves in some ways insisted on it.

Blanton and Fargher define resources drawn from outside the state as “external revenues”; it is possible that Småland, conquered yet still in early modern (and recent) times oft-conceptualized as remaining apart, was treated as an external revenue source. Most conflicts between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, between rulers and subjects, were over the outrageously high cost of war, and the taxes and other burdens related to it. Since Småland was on the border, it was unduly impacted by violence, burning and laying waste, rape of women and girls, the extraction of resources, and calls for mustering soldiers from local settlements. It is possible that the rest of Sweden benefited from the Crown’s treatment of Småland as a colony of sorts rather than a province to which appropriate governance should apply. The Smålanders, through their extreme reluctance to participate in the state and their inward-turned political stance, may have exacerbated this. Given the brutal nature of tax collection, and the lack of recourse enjoyed by other regions through direct lines of communication with the Crown, tax evasion, rule-breaking, and strategies of concealment from state surveillance are predicted by collective action theory as rational responses to an oppressive state.

In an entirely prehistoric context it might be difficult to prove that outcomes were as violent as we know they were, but archaeologists should not fear suggesting such courses. While it is plausible that the expansion waves and their marginal locales simply show extreme pressure from the state to pay higher taxes, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also record the most conflicts over tax evasion. A sequence fraught with tension concluded in a dramatic cascade of events that cemented, rather than ended, the place of
the corporate tradition and its practice of shared governance and collective action.

After King Gustav Vasa raised taxes sharply, banned cross-border trade with Denmark, and banished rurally cherished Catholicism in 1542 (Cederholm 2007; Hallenberg et al. 2008; Katajala 2004), Niels Dacke, an impoverished local sub-elite who had already paid blood money for killing a sheriff over the heinous practices associated with tax collection, appears in historic texts as a general, riding in command of a farmer army against the state. Dacke’s rebellion (Dackefejden) spread throughout southern Sweden and along the Danish border, and Vasa’s army of foreign mercenaries was massacred by crossbow-armed farmers in the dark forests and steep, rocky terrain, where their military tactics were useless. Vasa, who was himself put in power by an earlier farmer army, signed a peace treaty with Dacke, who raised the ban on trade, lowered taxes, and restored the Catholic church, according to local desires. When Vasa broke the treaty and the commoner’s forces were decimated, Dacke was wounded, outlawed, and died on the border of Småland and Denmark in 1543, and his family was executed shortly after.

Despite the ultimate failure of the historic figure, Dacke, the corporate mode of governance fared far better than the rebel leader. After the Dackefejden, Vasa stepped back from the taxation practices that had inspired the Smålanders’ rebellion and paid special attention to their complaints. He and his descendants deferred frequently to the farmers who brought issues before the Crown, to ensure the security of the throne (Hallenberg et al. 2008). One might say that while the Smålanders may have been paying more tax than their ancestors, their final expansions and intensifications may have been ones that were of little direct benefit to the state. In other words, later kings of Sweden began providing access to the collective and reciprocal structures found elsewhere in Sweden, which had been modified from Iron Age practices and continued in an Early Modern form. This was what the Smålanders had agitated for, and the reason they initiated violent conflict. While the upland farmers had to accept the less powerful version of “voice,” the state also accepted a lower level of taxation and control—a final negotiated reciprocal arrangement that in many ways follows a continuous thread to the present.

CONCLUSIONS: RETHEORIZING A “CEMENTED” RECORD

Kingship, over the course of the study period, was emerging from a hierarchical and weak structure, developed during the more corporate, collectively oriented Iron Age, in which rulers were elected and had more limited power.
After AD 1200, and especially during the 1300s–1400s, there were attempts to create legislation to increase royal power at the expense of the aristocracy and the commons, often using certain tax exemptions for the upper classes, which encouraged nobility to coopt local producers. In the 1500s, modeling their aspirations on the political and economic power of continental kingship, there was a push toward absolutism.

Blanton and Fargher have argued that bureaucratization—the building of organizational structures providing or accommodating voice, distributing public goods, and collecting taxes justly and fairly—is necessary if rulers determine that they must collect, or increase the volume of, revenue. In the absence of these institutions, the theory postulates that people will migrate, evade tax collection, organize demonstrations, or rebel.

The Småland case study offers insight into these processes. The small kingdoms or chiefdoms were already politically complex in the Iron Age, displaying a strongly corporate structure that provided voice in the form of the assembly, public goods in the form of the reciprocal obligations between chiefs/kings and their supporters, and fair and just collection that was apparent in the voluntary nature of tribute given for their support. The social code that permitted warriors to abandon an unpopular warlord and seek out another, and the ability to overthrow or assassinate overbearing leaders, was a leveling mechanism insuring the perpetuation of the system.

As the centralizing Swedish state moved into Småland and attempted to collect taxes, there was no process of bargaining or negotiating with the locals to accommodate their Iron Age traditions and achieve their cooperation by offering them voice or benefit of public goods. Instead, hired ruffians and tax farmers were used to oppress the populace and coerce tax collection. From the cross-cultural perspective of Blanton and Fargher’s work, such tactics are weak and lacking in infrastructural power. A ruler may claim absolute powers, but fail to produce results when the commoners are in revolt and his own tax collectors are violently abusing local people and robbing the state by imposing personal taxes that are still collected in the name of the king, thus blackening the reputation of the ruler as trustworthy. It was not until the products of the Plateau became vital to state objectives that rulers realized how much the revenue was needed, and how weak the state’s power in the region actually was. The Smålanders on the other hand, as predicted by collective action theory, acted rationally by evading taxes, migrating away from royal surveillance, and eventually fomenting uprisings. The defeated state responded by shifting from coercion to strategies for achieving cooperation, which lie at the roots of modern democracy in Sweden.
These phenomena were not unique to central Sweden but were endemic in all Scandinavian regions where similar Iron Age traditions preceded the Medieval state. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Norwegian chieftains fled to Iceland, which became a republic in AD 930, pointedly having no inherently hereditary leadership, about which the sagas said, “only the law is king.” To the south, as Scania was incorporated into Denmark, protests and eventually tax rebellions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were aimed at overturning changes instituted by the new, broader powers of kings, and in Denmark itself, an eleventh-century tax rebellion resulted in the ruler’s death (Thurston 2001). Later rulers met the same fate over perceived unfairness and mistreatment of the populace, banishment of sub-elites who challenge their authority, and especially over taxation. Royal dynasties were pressing for more powers, but those invested in the older system strongly resisted.

The remarkable corpus of theory espoused by Blanton and his coauthors help us to understand the roles of both rulership and subjectionhood along the continuum of government as a dynamic, recursive process, the materiality of which can be studied archaeologically, and the parallel social aspects newly retheorized with implications for past and current contexts.