

**Jonas M. Nordin.** *The Scandinavian Early Modern World, a Global Historical Archaeology.* Routledge, London and New York 2020. ISBN 978-0-367-34807-6. 308 pp.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429328176>

Some years ago, I was focused on studying the earliest phases of Northern Swedish mining history, where the military campaign of Danish-Norwegian troops in 1659 marked the end of the Nasafäll-Silbojokk silver mining complex. Now, after reading Jonas M. Nordin's latest volume, I have a brighter and more comprehensive understanding of why it happened. The seemingly insignificant mining place in the inaccessible middle of nowhere had political, economic, and personal impacts on the global network, which sealed its fate. This is one of the strengths of the book. It aims, and succeeds, in weaving together numerous threads of events and actions of people, places, and things to provide a clear and understandable global view of the role of Scandinavia and Scandinavians in the early modern world.

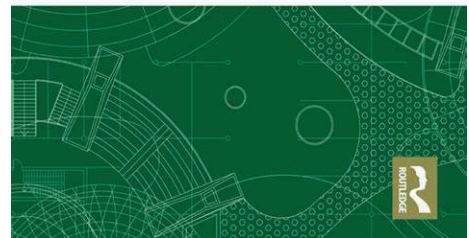
Nordin's objective in this book is to place Scandinavia into its position in the early modern global world, and I think he nails it well. This is an important contribution, as the author points out in the preface of the book. Scandinavian early modern history has been studied extensively, but the active role of Scandinavians in early modern globalization is a story rarely told. The book is built around about 20 real individuals who lived and influenced the Scandinavian world from the late 16th to the mid-18th century – *the long seventeenth century* – and were, as the book illustrates, intertwined with each other in many ways. Nordin takes the reader on a tour of the Scandinavian 17th century world from Asia to Africa and America to Sweden and back, with cargo full of copper, iron, sugar, weapons, and slaves. But the book is not just about Scandinavians influencing various parts of the world; it is also about people from various parts of the world influencing Scandinavia.



## THE SCANDINAVIAN EARLY MODERN WORLD

A GLOBAL HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Jonas Monié Nordin



The book consists of a total of nine chapters, including the introduction and conclusions, and five interrelated case studies. The Scandinavians discussed in this book are mostly Danish and Swedish, but Scandinavia itself is a much larger concept than how it is considered today. Nordin includes the eastern provinces of Finland, Karelia, and Ingria, as well as the southern Baltic regions of Pomerania and Bremen-Verden, in seventeenth-century Scandinavia, not forgetting the Danish North-Atlantic realms of Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. In other words, Nordin constitutes Scandinavia as a period socio-cultural - political entity, not as a geographical concept. Nordin also brings northern Sápmi, the northern areas of Fennoscandia inhabited by various Sámi populations, into the discussion as a region of its own and not just as the northern peripheries of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. This perspective is very welcome in the history of northern Europe. In general, Nordin is careful to avoid methodological nationalism in his narrative and emphasizes the multitude and breadth of Scandinavian societies, as well

as any other societies discussed in this book, highlighting the importance of this perspective in obtaining a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of history.

Chapter 1 presents the context and theoretical perspectives of the book, untangling the key concepts of the discussion. Nordin, like many other historical archaeologists before him, derives his approaches from the seminal work of Charles Orser and the four haunts of the modern world. However, the author's clear aim is to provide an in-depth criticism of Euro- and particularly Anglo-centricism in the discussion of modernity and modernization by bringing Scandinavia and the meaning and importance of distant and seemingly distant parts of the world into the development process of the modern world.

After an occasionally somewhat burdensome and information-rich but absolutely necessary and clarifying theoretical and contextual setup, the ships are launched, and the Scandinavian voyage is ready to begin. First, Chapter 2 takes us from Copenhagen to Tranquebar, India, via a quick visit to the arctic Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland. In this chapter, Nordin vividly narrates the early Danish colonial encounters in the North Atlantic arctic region and how it influenced the lives of native populations both at a societal and individual level.

After the European quest and contest for arctic resources, particularly whale oil, the journey heads towards the tropical waters of Southeast Asia and the undertakings of the newly founded Danish East Indian Company. As mentioned, Nordin has built this book around a selection of different people living in the scope of early modern Scandinavia. Here, we are introduced to a young Danish nobleman named Ove Gjedde – one of the main characters of this story – a person who will appear many times in the following pages, illustrating the entanglements of the European world during that period.

The Danish endeavors in the waters of southern India, merely as pawns in the game of local rulers against Portuguese dominance, resulted in a handful of colonies and left behind plenty of material culture accumulated through successful trade. However, in this phase, we leave the South Indian waters with Ove Gjedde and sail back to Scandinavia, passing through

Copenhagen to Norway, where Gjedde, along with his newly wedded wife Dorte Urne, began to build a career in the growing northern metal industry. The 17th century was an era of metals, and the Scandinavian countries played a significant role in the period's metal industry. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce us to this theme.

The worn classic expression notes that all roads lead to Rome. In 17th-century Europe, one could say the same about Amsterdam. Amsterdam was definitely the focal hub of all European global trade during this period, and thus, the northern metal industry cannot be discussed without mentioning the Dutch. Hence, Nordin introduces us to a handful of new key players in the book: the de Geer family, the Momma-Reenstierna brothers, and the Walloon charcoal maker Márten Monier. The first two, although of Dutch origin, were true cosmopolitans of the period, while Márten Monier, again, was just one of the many members of the early modern mobile labor force who moved to Sweden to work in the growing Scandinavian metal industry. However, with the Monier family, Nordin gives this book a very personal touch and adds another dimension to the entanglement of connections, not just through space but also through time, as the author himself is a direct descendant of the Monier family.

In Chapter 4, the journey after metals continues further north, deep into the arctic Sápmi, and explores the colonial encounters with the northern Sámi peoples. The Sámi people had been settling the northern parts of Scandinavia for centuries and had been in active contact in trade with various directions in northern Europe. The quest for copper and silver brought them in the middle of the European modernization process and colonial forces. As Nordin emphasizes and argues in this volume: "Modernity, in the shape of growing control, colonial ideologies, and the construction of indigenous peoples as the 'Other', was not only a discernible process in the colonial practice of the powerful Western European powers but a praxis played out all over the world in slightly different shapes and forms."

After extracting the precious metals – silver, copper, and iron – from the Scandinavian soils, the products are loaded onto ships that sail out into the global waters. Chapter 5 jumps onboard the Kalmar Nyckel and heads west towards America, exploring the Swedish short and less

successful period as one of the North American colonies in New Sweden, present-day Delaware. In this chapter, Nordin builds an illustrative narrative of the development and network of relations of the Swedish New Sweden colony and its influences on different peoples, including the Native American population. It becomes quite evident that, in the end, the whole New Sweden project was more of a market play by Dutch investors seeking a greater foothold in the promising American trade fueled by the demand for Swedish copper.

Chapter 6 leads the reader to the inevitable gloomy topic of early modern colonialism – West Africa and the transatlantic slave trade. Scandinavian countries have not been the first to be implicated when discussing the main players of the European slave trade. However, Scandinavian powers and people had their part in it, and Nordin does not hesitate to bring it out. Chapter 6 presents the actions of Danish, Swedish, and other European actors in the West African Gold Coast, the establishment of forts and harbor towns as hubs for organized trade of copper, iron, gold, and slaves. The last voyage of the book follows the slave ships back to the American continent over the Atlantic and anchors in the Caribbean Islands – the Danish West Indies and the sugar plantations of St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas, where Scandinavian colonial history lasted until the early 20th century. The journey ends back home, in northern Sweden and Sápmi, with a brief discussion of the Europeanizing (a concept that the author is actually critical of) of the North, and a short conclusion on Scandinavia in early modern colonialism and modernity.

The rich narratives and Nordin's writing style make this book pleasant to read. There are moments when one even forgets that one is reading a scientific text. The numerous case studies, personal histories, and the incorporation of multiple levels and perspectives, not to mention the extensive research material employed to construct a holistic perspective on the topic, are impressive. This must have been an enormous task to undertake. The book not only illustrates well the Scandinavian actions and influence in the turmoil of *the long 17th-century* early modern world but also exemplifies the networks and interrelations of different players from the national to individual level in the development

process of global modernity. While reading this book, one is inevitably reminded of the classic butterfly effect – just as the flap of a butterfly wing can cause a hurricane on the other side of the world, West African trade contacts can lead to the destruction of a minute distant silver mine in the arctic Sápmi.

The archaeology and history are well balanced in the discussion. Each main chapter begins with the background and introduction of key characters and ends with an archaeological perspective on the material culture. Nordin utilizes a variety of material culture to interpret and connect history, archaeology, anthropology, and geography of the Scandinavian early modern world. This includes not only archaeological artifact finds but also paintings, maps, museum collections, architecture, and landscapes, among others.

Nordin aims to position Scandinavia within its context in the early modern world, and I think he succeeds well in this task. As he notes in the beginning of the book, the discussion of the early modern world and the development of colonialism has unfortunately been too Anglo- or Franco-centered. From this perspective, Nordin's approach is more objective. I feel that he manages to take a more global and versatile view of the process. If I really need to pick something to criticize, there are sometimes tones of modern social criticism observable in the discussion, which brings the author's subjective perspective along. However, this is not in any way disturbing. Nordin's contribution is thus a very welcome addition to this field of research. Although it focuses on Scandinavian endeavors during *the long 17th century*, it manages not to be Scandinavia-centered but highlights the actions and influences of Scandinavia and Scandinavians within the early modern global world. A book definitely worth reading.

Risto Nurmi  
Post doctoral researcher,  
Archaeology  
University of Oulu,  
Finland  
[risto.nurmi@oulu.fi](mailto:risto.nurmi@oulu.fi)  
[https:// doi.org/10.61258/fa.130761](https://doi.org/10.61258/fa.130761)