

FINDING ATLANTIS

A True Story of Genius, Madness,
and an Extraordinary Quest
for a Lost World

David King



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HARMONY BOOKS
NEW YORK



Like a physician dissecting in his anatomy theater, Olof Rudbeck cuts open a map of the modern world and reveals the secret history of Sweden. Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and many other well-known figures of antiquity sit around the dissection table like students. The philosopher Plato strains to take a closer look, and the scholar Apollodorus strains his head in surprise. Ptolemy, who is so often criticized by Rudbeck for faulty geography, looks away in disgust.

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TO SARA

*If you are ever in a gathering of your friends
and want to get some attention, wait until a suitable
pause occurs in the conversation and then toss out the phrase*

“Well, how about Atlantis?”

—HENRY M. EICHNER

INTRODUCTION

May 16, 1702

MOST OF UPPSALA was in flames. Strong winds had carried the fire swiftly through the winding alleys of wooden houses. Shortly after midnight, it seemed as if fire rained from the heavens. And now, with the brigades unable to reach the old town, the blaze threatened to turn the cathedral, the castle, and the rest of the university into little more than embers and ash.

As legend has it, a lone figure was seen scaling a building in the path of the ever-rising flames. When he reached the top, the roof already alight, he started to shout orders to the panic-stricken townsmen. His baritone voice rang out over the roar, and his long gray hair blew amid the sparks. There was no doubt about it: this was the seventy-two-year-old professor of the university, Ole Rudbeck.

Only five years before, the Stockholm royal palace had burned to the ground. Along with it, the country had lost untold treasures. Rallying the terrified below with word and deed, Rudbeck wanted to do everything in his power to prevent a repetition of this catastrophe. But suddenly a messenger arrived with the news that Rudbeck's own house would soon be engulfed in the flames.

The professor was advised to make haste to his home; there was still time to remove select valuables. The townsmen who shared the front lines of the battle also encouraged Rudbeck to go, but the old man refused to abandon his position. Instead, he made his own horses available so that his neighbors might salvage their belongings.

After fourteen exhausting hours, the unlikely firefighters had managed to control the blaze. Despite the ruined bell tower, the collapsed roof, and a lake of water on the inside, the cathedral had been saved. The castle and the university had also just barely survived the inferno. The old professor, however, was not so fortunate. He had lost almost everything he owned.

UPPSALA CATHEDRAL WAS one of the oldest and largest of its kind in Scandinavia. It had long served as the site for the coronation of kings, the consecration of archbishops, and the resting home of saints. Above all, it was a beautiful place of worship. It was ethereal and sublime, adorned with lofty spires and pointed arches, elegant stained glass, and an ornately carved altarpiece.

But there was also something unusual in the cathedral. Reasoning that this was the safest place in town, Rudbeck had chosen it as a repository for his works in progress. Among this vast collection lay one of the most extraordinary theories ever put forth about the ancient past.

Rudbeck had spent the last thirty years of his life on an adventurous hunt for a lost civilization, and he was convinced that he had found it in Sweden. What a marvelous discovery it was! Celts, Trojans, Etruscans, Amazons, and the inhabitants of Atlantis were all one and the same people, who in the dimmest mists of antiquity had emerged from a land of ice in the far north. In fact, many of the great mysteries of history and mythology could be explained by Rudbeck's lost civilization. This was perhaps the most spectacular reassessment of the ancient past ever to be accepted by the learned world. It was also, on that night, at the mercy of the flames.

What follows is the remarkable story of this man and the work he risked everything to protect.

ALTHOUGH ALMOST COMPLETELY unknown today, the name of Olof Rudbeck once cast a spell over his contemporaries. His vision drew enthusiastic applause not only in the twilight of the Swedish empire but also in the dawning of the European Enlightenment. Rudbeck was greatly admired at the court of Louis XIV, proposed as a member of the Royal Society in London, and celebrated in cafés, salons, and academies across the cosmopolitan Republic of Letters. Avid readers were Leibniz, Montesquieu, and the famous skeptic Pierre Bayle. Even Sir Isaac Newton wrote to request a personal copy of the work.

The name of this “wondrous” book was *Atlantica*. Rolling off an Uppsala press in 1679, it outlined Rudbeck's discoveries in some nine hundred pages of Latin and Old Swedish. Hidden inside was a curiosity cabinet of dazzling speculation, rigorous argumentation, and commanding erudition. The style mirrors Rudbeck's own personality: strong, hurried, and full of charm.

But the project was expensive, and the costs were soon spiraling out of control. Complicating matters further, disgruntled professors formed powerful coalitions to sabotage Rudbeck's efforts. He would be forced to endure everything from petty humiliations to vicious attacks, which included not less than censorship, scrutiny by an Inquisition, and one of the bitterest lawsuits of the day.

Meanwhile, discoveries continued to pour in at an alarming rate. Rudbeck was finding so many “unbelievable things” that he dreamed of publishing a “small addition.” By 1702, *Atlantica* had swelled to four and a half colossal volumes, and many scholars believed this work had revolutionized the understanding of the ancient past. Rudbeck was proclaimed the “oracle of the north.”

So, when I came across these volumes, it was like stumbling upon an enchanted world. It reminded me of my first encounter with ancient myth, many years ago, when my grandmother gave me a copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. Rudbeck's *Atlantica* had all the heroic quests, fabulous lands, and endlessly imaginative creatures of Hamilton's book, and it evoked the same sense of wonder and excitement. But, remarkably, it gave the timeless tales an unforgettable transformation.

From Mount Olympus to Valhalla, Rudbeck traced almost all Greek, Norse, and Egyptian traditions back to an original home in the far north. Chasing down clues to this lost golden age, he brought to his work the deductive reasoning of Sherlock Holmes and the daring spirit of Indiana Jones. He excavated what he thought was the acropolis of Atlantis, and sent students on scientific expeditions to the land he believed was the Kingdom of Hades. He retraced the journeys of classical heroes, opened countless burial mounds, and consulted the rich collections of manuscripts, monuments, and artifacts streaming into his country as a result of Swedish victories on the battlefield.

Now, three hundred years later, the story of Rudbeck's adventure appears in English for the first

time. It is an epic quest that at every turn shows a bizarre combination of genius and madness. The book takes us back not only to the castles, courts, and peasant villages of the seventeenth century, but also to a world of *lively* imagination. Rudbeck's vision is as stunningly bold as it is beautiful and surreal.

Yet it is much more than just a journey through a dreamy landscape. As I came to understand, the story has much to teach us about our own search for enlightenment. It dramatically illustrates how our greatest gifts of mind and spirit can become unexpected perils—and lead us to create our own spectacular monstrosities. At the same time, it is an inspirational tale that affirms the enormous potential for human achievement in the face of staggering obstacles. There is indeed much to learn from entering the strange world of Olof Rudbeck, the last of the Renaissance men and the first of the modern hunters for lost wisdom.

PROMISES

My dear fellow, life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent.

—ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES*

SOME FIFTY YEARS before the great fire, Olof Rudbeck had arrived as a young student at Uppsala University. This was in the cold and dark winter of 1648, just in time for the enthusiastic celebration that would soon erupt on the Continent, marking the signing of the Peace of Westphalia and an end, it was hoped, to thirty years of the most vicious fighting that Europe had ever known. War, famine, plague, and plunder had decimated the populations, spreading misery everywhere the armies marched. Now the clang of church bells and the clatter of court banquets might replace the roar of cannon and the cries of suffering. Musketeers fired joyous salvos into the air, and soaring bonfires were lit to commemorate the news. The festivities were especially lively in Sweden, already “drunk with victory and bloated with booty.”

Uppsala University was at this time the jewel in the crown of the Swedish kingdom. Although the university had fallen into disuse a few years after its establishment in 1477, the state had realized its enormous potential as a training ground for the new Protestant Reformation and reopened it with royal flair. Young people came from all corners of the realm to learn the theology and acquire the intellectual rigor required to enter the Church. The university also attracted the scions of the great aristocratic houses, sons of the landed and titled families who waged Sweden’s wars, administered the empire, and served the Crown in countless other capacities. King Gustavus Adolphus, the famed “Lion of the North,” had envisioned just such a role for Uppsala University. He had endowed it with the means to realize it as well, even filling its empty bookshelves with many magnificent collections looted from an almost unbroken string of victories on the battlefield.



Bird's-eye view of seventeenth-century Uppsala, with its castle, cathedral, and university.

Rudbeck was neither a nobleman nor an aspirant to a career in the Church, though he was thrilled at the same to enter the halls of Scandinavia's oldest university. This was understandably an exciting place for a young man. Despite repeated efforts of the authorities, students flocked to the taverns as much as to the lecture halls. Entertainment options ranged from dice to duels. It was already becoming common for students to carry swords, and sometimes even pistols. New brothels opened to meet the increasing demand, and other institutions emerged to serve the changing times, such as the university prison. Housed in the cellars of the main university building, the prison was rarely unoccupied.

Rudbeck's interests, however, lay elsewhere. Ever since he was a boy, he had enjoyed finding his own way. He sang, he drew, he played the lute, he even made his own toys, including a wooden clock with a bell to strike the hour. Adventurous and independent, Rudbeck yearned to experience the world for himself. In fact, as a ten-year-old, Rudbeck had eagerly tried to follow his older brothers to Uppsala. His father, however, would not allow it, convinced that he was not mature enough to handle the freedom of the university.

Standing tall and giving the impression of no small confidence, Rudbeck was a spirited, highly impressionable youth with short dark hair, broad shoulders, and a barrel chest. He walked, or rather strode, with the air of someone who fearlessly plunged into his latest passion. His imagination, at the time, was fired by the study of anatomy. This was an especially attractive subject for bright, ambitious students. Kings and queens had showered favors on the talented few they chose as royal physicians, and indeed the newly established post of court physician had raised the status of the doctor from its previously undistinguished connotations. Enthusiasm for medicine as an intellectual pursuit peaked when an Englishman named William Harvey published a small Latin treatise in 1628.

Harvey was one of those elite court physicians, serving King James I of England. In his classic *De Motu Cordis et Sanguinis (Dissertation on the Movement of the Heart and Blood)*, Harvey claimed that the heart was a muscle that pumped the blood at regular intervals, or pulses. The vital fluid circulated throughout the body, with the arteries carrying it away from the heart and the veins returning it there. With these propositions, Harvey had revolutionized the study of medicine. One Oxford doctor and fellow of the Royal Society claimed that these findings were more significant than the discovery of America because they threw centuries of medical belief into uncertainty. Great physicians everywhere now wanted to confirm, refute, or refine Harvey's propositions.

It was in this climate that Olof Rudbeck entered the medical school at Uppsala. His head was full of ideas, his curiosity almost boundless. He could not wait to be turned loose to investigate for himself the mysterious invisible world underneath the skin. But unfortunately the university had very little to offer. Rudbeck's supervisor was too busy for him, preferring instead to spend time in the alchemy laboratory trying to change various substances into gold. More challenging still, it was difficult to gain access to the necessary equipment. When acquiring human bodies for observation and dissection was a difficult task even for a professor, what could a student do?

One crisp autumn day in 1650, Rudbeck strolled down to the market, a bustling square jammed with carts, stalls, and stands. There were stacks of cheese, slabs of butter, and fish, gutted and stretched out. Gloves of fine goat-hair and warm wolfskin coats also competed for attention. Rudbeck's eyes, however, fell on two women, rough and splattered with blood, as they butchered a calf. There, in the raw dead flesh, Rudbeck saw something peculiar. There was a milklike substance that seemed to emanate from somewhere in the chest, not so delicately split open on the old bench. His curiosity was

piqued, and an idea suddenly struck him. With the enthusiasm of someone who had long enjoyed taking things apart and tinkering to see how they worked, Rudbeck asked if he could cut on the carcass.

The women must have been surprised, to say the least, at this young man's request. With the permission granted, Rudbeck borrowed the knife, forced the thick, lifeless aorta to the side, and then separated it from the surrounding red mess of muscle and tissue. He followed that curious milk-like substance along, finding a sort of vessel or duct that carried a colorless liquid. By the time he traced back to the liver, the dark purplish brown organ undoubtedly destined for dinner fare, he knew he was onto something big.

Rudbeck had discovered nothing less than the lymphatic system. The colorless liquid was lymph, a tissue-cleansing fluid vital to the functioning of the body's immune system. Among other things, it absorbs nutrients, collects fats, and prevents harmful substances from entering the bloodstream. He not only discovered this system but also correctly explained its functions in the body.

This episode clearly shows a resourcefulness that would long be a hallmark of Rudbeck's approach to problem-solving. As William Harvey improved his knowledge of anatomy by investigating the deer bagged by King James and the royal hunting parties, Rudbeck the student relied on the successful meat trade of Uppsala's butchers. Over the next two years, probably working in a dingy makeshift shed by the river, Rudbeck set his dissection table with a veritable smorgasbord of discarded delicacies. He cut, nipped, hacked, and examined, performing hundreds of dissections and vivisections to refine his practical understanding of the body's cleansing mechanisms.

Rudbeck's explanation of the lymphatic system was indeed a major discovery in the annals of modern medicine—the first, in fact, to come from a Swedish scientist. It was also a fulfillment of William Harvey's theories of the circulation of the blood, which were then still fiercely contested. In distant Uppsala, the young Rudbeck, not even twenty years old, had confirmed one of the greatest medical discoveries of the day.

WORD OF THIS remarkable student spread quickly through the Swedish kingdom, and soon reached its colorful queen. Like Greta Garbo, who played her in the film, Queen Christina has intrigued historians just as she fascinated her contemporaries. She was young, barely twenty-six years old, and somewhat shorter than medium height, with thick, curly, dark brown hair often tied with a simple black ribbon. Her voice was soft but deep, and her eyes piercing. Whenever she was displeased, it soon became abundantly clear, the queen's face darkened like a "thunder cloud." Eight years of power had accustomed her to doing exactly as she wished. Controversy, though, was never far away.

Rumors had long circulated that the Swedish queen was a nymphomaniac, a lesbian, a man in disguise, or perhaps a hermaphrodite. After all, when she was born, the midwife first took her for a boy, and even told the king that he had a new son. The hermaphrodite belief was dispelled only when a team of international experts, restoring her grave in the 1920s, decided to take a look. The queen, then confirmed, had indeed been a woman.

Despite all differences of opinion, her admirers and critics agreed on one point: Queen Christina attracted some of the best and brightest of the day. During her short reign, a motley collection of cavaliers, ladies, libertines, and scholars streamed to her court. Perhaps the most famous of these was

René Descartes. There was probably no thinker of the day more idolized than this French philosopher.

Indeed, when he arrived in Stockholm, Descartes soon found himself taxed by Queen Christina's enthusiasm for early-morning lessons in the new thought, and equally burdensome demands to compose ballets for entertainment in the evening. The Frenchman, overworked and exhausted, succumbed to an unusually cold winter in Christina's unusually cold castle. He died in February 1650, after shivering through five miserable months at court (though his skull, it turned out, stayed in the country almost two hundred years longer; it had been secretly removed and replaced with a substitute and was not reunited with his body in France until 1821).

It was now Olof Rudbeck's turn to come to Queen Christina's court. She was much impressed by his anatomical work and sent an invitation for the student to present his discoveries to her in person. On a beautiful spring day in 1652, Rudbeck arrived at the royal castle in Uppsala.

Set majestically on the highest hilltop, the castle overlooked the town barely a stone's cast away from the cathedral. Construction of the castle, begun by King Gustav Vasa in the 1540s, was still unfinished. Only two sides of the desired square had been completed, and the surrounding hillside was overgrown with weeds. On the inside, though, the castle was decorated with treasures including paintings, tapestries, statues, and almost anything else of value that Swedish armies could pack up in chests and carry back to the north.

Like many distinguished guests before him, Rudbeck marched up to the castle, climbed the stone steps, and entered the great hall. As the court looked on, the twenty-one-year-old demonstrated his medical discovery. Queen Christina was dazzled. She never had to tap her fan in impatience, or play distractedly with her spaniels. She just sat transfixed on her crimson velvet cushion with eyes aglow at the spectacle. The courtiers saw a new rising star, and the queen did too. By the end of the day she had offered Rudbeck a royal scholarship to continue his studies at Leiden University. He left the castle, his ears ringing with praise and his head spinning with anticipation.

SWEDEN WAS, at this time, one of the most powerful countries in the world. Despite its small population, thinly scattered throughout the kingdom, Sweden had burst upon the scene in 1630, the year of Rudbeck's birth, with some dazzling victories in the Thirty Years' War. King Gustavus Adolphus's army was praised as the best in the world, and his advanced, modernized bureaucracy was, as one observer put it, the envy of France. By the end of the war in 1648, and Rudbeck's eighteenth birthday, Sweden had emerged with France as the guarantor of Europe's peace.

Swedish territory then encircled the Baltic Sea and its sweet-smelling pine forests, its flat, marshy heaths, and its foggy pebble beaches. The blue and gold Swedish flag was raised in Finland, northern Germany, the modern Baltic states, and as far away as Cabo Corso on the African Gold Coast. There was even a "New Sweden" confidently planted in America on the Delaware River, including today's Trenton and Philadelphia.

Rudbeck's country had never been more powerful or more influential. Exports boomed, and its merchants, at first mostly Dutch immigrants, dominated some of the most lucrative trades of the day. Sweden was Europe's unrivaled producer of copper and iron, and of the manufactured products that relied on these materials, such as cannon, cannonballs, and lightweight, quick-loading muskets. Landed in its Baltic dominion produced timber, hemp, flax, pitch, and tar, no small advantage in a warlike

world just coming to appreciate the advantages of sea power. One Danish historian has compared the Baltic Sea in the seventeenth century to the Persian Gulf in the twentieth: though much of the region was undeveloped and remote, it was the source of scarce raw materials absolutely central to the functioning of the world at the time.

The capital of the kingdom, Stockholm, had grown rich controlling this trade, already boasting a stunning panorama of buildings, bridges, and water that would later earn it the name “Venice of the North.” The docks were bustling, too, with men unloading crates into the warehouses along the seafront. Horses drawing carriages clip-clopped down the cobblestone lanes, passing the fine buildings, the noble estates, and the brick churches with copper spires. Down in the center of the capital, tucked away in the Old Town, stood the Stockholm Banco, preparing, in just a few years, to issue the world’s first modern paper currency. All told, diligence and decadence went together in creating the period Swedish historians call the “Age of Greatness.”

But the small wooden huts clustering in the shadows of the towering mansions were reminders of another side to Sweden’s imperial age. For every laced-up, velvet-clad courtier enjoying Italian perfumes, there were many others who toiled under brutal conditions. As many as 90 percent of the population were peasants, squeezing out a tenuous existence on small homesteads, or bound under steep feudal obligations on large manors. Less fortunate still were the many victims of the recent wars. Armless veterans begged in the streets, and legions of orphans roamed in search of food. In desperation, many women became prostitutes, and some people joined the rogues hiding out in forests, preying upon the secluded roadways.

Olof Rudbeck had grown up in this environment of power and poverty. His home was Västerås, then one of the largest towns in the country, and visibly prospering from the “great quantities of copper and iron, digged [*sic*] out of the mines.” At the very center stood the cathedral, a restored Gothic structure with a long, tapering spire rising high above its surroundings, and in fact, at that time, the tallest in Sweden. The town also had a castle and even its own curious “wizard” who once, it was said, “made wings and flew, but broke one of his legs.”

Västerås also had Sweden’s first senior high school, founded by Rudbeck’s father, Johannes Rudbeckius, a former field chaplain who had risen to be one of King Gustavus Adolphus’s favorite bishops. He was a man of extraordinary energy and presence, with a high forehead, narrow-set eyes, and a long, thin face that ended in a long white beard. Courageous and stubborn, he was not known for tolerating any nonsense. In the words of one observer, he would rather go to the stake than stand down from his principles.

Clashes between the strict father and the somewhat carefree son were bound to occur. Once, as a young boy, Rudbeck received new dress clothes. They were quite a sight, with cuffs on the arms and shiny new buttons in the front. He had never had clothes like this before, as all his previous garments fastened on the sides with hooks, and the sleeves were slashed rather abruptly. Rudbeck was so pleased that he put them on and paraded around in the courtyard, feeling, as he said, as handsome as the pope in Rome. He played on his toy horse, pretending to be a gallant Spanish cavalryman. His father, however, happened to be looking out the window from his study. He marched outside, pulled out his knife, and cut off all the buttons and cuffs. The boy was immediately sent inside “to sit on his bottom.”

Since no vanity of any form was permitted in the household, Rudbeck was forced to wear his hair

short and cropped around the ears in the seventeenth-century equivalent of a bowl cut. This not only was unfashionable but must have made his head seem unusually elongated. Some of the richest aristocratic schoolboys took to teasing him with the nickname “Olle Bighead.” This was a lasting memory, and he sought solace in biblical reminders about the transitory nature of riches.

The importance of biblical lessons was stressed early and often in Rudbeck’s family. Not only his father, who had mastered Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, some said, as well as his Swedish, but also his mother, Malin Rudbeckius, born Magdalena Carlsdotter Hising. The daughter of a priest, she organized daily lessons for the family. She had read the Bible cover to cover at least seven times, and impressed many with her memory. Whenever anyone cited a passage, she could usually name its exact location, chapter and verse.

Malin Rudbeckius was actually the bishop’s second wife; he had married her in 1620 after his first wife died. She was quite young, some twenty-two years younger than her husband, making Rudbeck’s mother—eighteen at the time of the wedding—one of the youngest women in Swedish history to be the wife of a bishop. It is hard to believe she gave birth to eleven children in only twelve years. Rudbeck was the ninth in the family, and particularly close, it seems, to his mother. Cheerful and merry, with a good sense of humor, she was the “glittering sunshine” of Olof Rudbeck’s childhood.

Some of Rudbeck’s most pleasant memories of his youth probably involved the garden. The bishop was an avid horticulturist, enjoying his summer expeditions into the countryside hunting for wildflowers, and handling each delicate petal with an awe worthy of God’s creation. Rudbeck’s father planted the rosebushes and fruit trees at Västerås high school, and created Sweden’s first teaching garden. It was probably his father’s passion that sparked Rudbeck’s interest in the world of flowers.

Despite the many differences, there is no doubt that Rudbeck loved and respected his parents. Sadly, both passed away too soon, his father dying in 1646, and his mother following three years later. Rudbeck lost his first guardians, teachers, and champions. Neither parent lived to see their son’s triumph, let alone the spectacular discoveries that lay ahead.

ORACLE OF THE NORTH

Hide not your Talents they for use were made

What's a Sun-Dial in the Shade!

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

IN THE AUTUMN of 1653, Rudbeck seemed destined for a brilliant career in medicine, and thanks to the queen's enthusiasm, he would have the chance to study at Leiden University in the Netherlands. This was the Holland of Rembrandt, the Dutch East Indies Company, and the period that historians call its golden age. At this time the Dutch were the world's foremost merchants, financiers, shippers, and seafarers, as well as its leading anatomists. As Lutheran theologians looked to Wittenberg and Calvinists to Geneva, Leiden was the uncontested center for modern anatomical training.

Once in the town of cobbled lanes and misty canals, Rudbeck allowed his imagination to roam freely. He studied anatomy under the leading authorities, Professors Johannes van Horne and Johannes Antonides van der Linden, admiring the university's relaxed atmosphere. Leiden's medical school was remarkably independent of the clergy, the theology department, and the state. What was unthinkable in Sweden regularly happened in Leiden. In the infamous anatomy theater, *human* bodies were sliced open, cut up, and disemboweled before a packed audience.

Rudbeck was soaking up this atmosphere, eager to experience everything that the town had to offer. Even a stroll by the docks could prove instructive. He tended to act on impulse, and became quickly absorbed in new interests. Holland's long history of fighting to reclaim the land from the sea had given its people talents for constructing all sorts of technical devices, from waterworks to windmills. Feats of Dutch engineering, such as sluices, harbor cranes, and timber saws, thoroughly impressed the visiting Swede.

There was another place Rudbeck came to enjoy: Leiden's famous botanical garden, founded in 1587 and full of a bewildering variety of rare and exotic plants brought back from Dutch voyages to the East and West Indies. Rudbeck had never seen many of these flowers before. The tulip, for instance, was the reigning "monarch of flowers." Brought from the frontiers of the Ottoman Empire, its slender stocks exploded into flaming scarlet swirls streaked with the purest white—just one of the seemingly unlimited number of variations that delighted the senses.

In this splendid half-acre retreat, the sweet scents overpowered the stench of the canals, and Rudbeck could hardly contain his excitement. He was learning about new flowers, their ideal growing conditions, and their many uses everywhere from the kitchen to the apothecary. He could also hardly avoid thinking of his father, and how he had lovingly collected flowers for his small teaching garden at Västerås. How Rudbeck must have yearned to share his experience in Leiden among the many

beautiful and curious new plants brought back from the other side of the world.

As his stay was winding down, Rudbeck's anatomical discoveries, and a dispute with an esteemed Danish professor who claimed to have discovered the lymphatic system first, had made his name famous throughout Europe. It seemed that everyone wanted a piece of the promising star, and offers of employment poured in from many places. He was offered the position of field surgeon with the Swedish army, and the prestigious post of city physician in Stockholm, at the heart of the empire. Also, a prominent Swedish count wanted to hire Rudbeck to be his personal engineer, while the Dutch tried to persuade him to stay in the Netherlands. Even the French ambassador approached Rudbeck with a tempting offer to serve the king of France. At only twenty-three years of age, the world beckoned for Olof Rudbeck. But he politely declined the kind offers. For now, he could think of nothing he would rather do than return to Sweden and cultivate a botanical garden of his own.

HAVING ARRANGED FOR some eight hundred new seeds and bulbs to be shipped back from the Netherlands, Rudbeck was ready for what he had come to regard as the "most sweet and innocent" of human pursuits. All he needed was a plot of land. And this brought him in touch with an old acquaintance, Mrs. Helena Gustafsdotter Lohrman.

Five years earlier, when Rudbeck first came to Uppsala, he had rented a room from Mrs. Lohrman, the wife of Uppsala's mayor, Thomas Lohrman. Not much is known about her other than that she was one of Rudbeck's early and most significant admirers. When Rudbeck's mother died in 1649, it was Mrs. Lohrman who generously came to his aid. Rudbeck's small family inheritance was divided among the many children, and his share was soon gone. Mrs. Lohrman made it possible for Rudbeck to stay in school. It is likely that in return he tutored the Lohrman children, including their precious daughter, Vendela.

Now that Rudbeck was back in town with his bags of seeds, Mrs. Lohrman offered him a small patch of land on the central Svartbäcksgatan for his garden. There Rudbeck went to work, preparing the beds, scattering the seeds, and, with characteristic vigor, waging war on the weeds. He was also waiting for his professorship, which Queen Christina had earlier offered him.

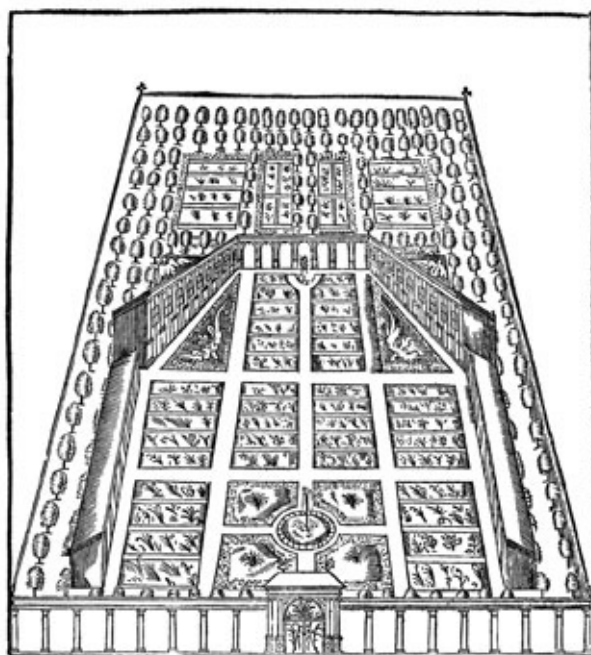
The problem was, however, that Queen Christina was no longer in a position to make good on her promise. Since Rudbeck's dissection at the castle, Queen Christina had stunned the world, this time even more than usual. She had converted to Catholicism, renounced the Swedish throne, and moved to Rome, where she allegedly rode into town dressed as an Amazon warrior.

With the queen's abdication went the generous patronage, the lively court, and, unfortunately for Rudbeck, the many influential courtiers who had known and admired his talents. And so Rudbeck worked and waited, already showing signs of his almost inexhaustible optimism. He passed the time tending to his plants and looking for new specimens for his ever-expanding garden, which he fondly called his "firstborn son."

Rudbeck's garden was laid out, like many gardens of the day, in a geometrical pattern, with classical Ionic columns adorning the outer wall. A central gate marked its entrance, and immediately ahead sprinkled the cool waters of a small fountain. Regular, straight lanes divided the garden into symmetrical, boxlike flower beds splashed with shades of amber yellow, bloodred, pure white, and soft orange.

Tradition has it that something else was blossoming in Rudbeck's fragrant garden. Rudbeck had known Mrs. Lohrman's daughter, Vendela, for quite a while now, though probably not all that well, as she was only eleven years old when they first met. But now, seven years later, Rudbeck saw a beautiful and refined lady. Mrs. Lohrman had taken up the habit of strolling in the garden, and to Rudbeck's delight, Vendela accompanied her mother more and more frequently. Perhaps it was here, along the perfumed pathways, lined with roses, carnations, and lilies all blooming in their seasons that the two fell in love. With the help of Vendela and his garden, Rudbeck was conquering what could very well have been a long, lonely year of uncertainty.

In the late spring of 1655, Rudbeck was finally offered a position in the medical faculty at Uppsala University. It was only part time and adjunct, and much humbler than any of the offers he had received in the Netherlands, but he was glad nonetheless. Indeed, on the very day of his appointment on Midsummer Eve, Rudbeck married Vendela Lohrman.



Rudbeck boasted that his botanical garden was the second largest in Europe, surpassed only by Louis XIV's gardens at Versailles.

Did Vendela know what she was getting herself into? Did she know that sharing her life with Rudbeck would mean sharing his passions? And that this would in turn mean sharing her house with her husband's stacked paper boxes of seeds, his collection of tobacco pipes, and his indoor gardening ventures, like the cinnamon tree on the ground floor? Did she realize that other rooms in their house would be cluttered with his lutes, paintings, axes, and homemade fireworks?

Almost one year after their wedding, the newlyweds had a terrible scare. Vendela was pregnant with their first child and started experiencing severe pains. Seventeenth-century medicine was, at the best of times, ill equipped to handle unexpected difficulties: primitive anesthetics, crude instruments, and a myriad of hygienic risks. Women and infants alike died far too often when troubles in childbirth got out of control. For the young couple, too, the situation was critical, and something had to be done.

Although an adjunct professor of medicine, Rudbeck would have had almost no contact with surgery. Nevertheless, he used the skills gained from his many dissections, and performed some so

of surgical maneuver that removed a dangerous obstruction in the birth canal. Older histories called it a Caesarean section, though modern studies have preferred to qualify the position considerably, showing that this was more likely a cutting away of swollen tissue that blocked the opening of the uterus. At any rate, Rudbeck's operation was a success. Both his wife and son survived, and his contemporaries marveled, ranking it a curiosity of the times. Letters came from France, Germany, and the Royal Society in London requesting further details of the procedure. Rudbeck, it seems, was neither eager to answer their specific questions nor keen to stop the escalating rumors of his medical achievements. Their son was aptly named Johannes Caesar Rudbeck.

At this time, too, authorities recognized the young professor's talents, and he rose like a rock through the ranks of the university hierarchy. He was promoted to assistant professor, then full professor, and by 1661 he had been selected to be rector, the highest position at the university. Although expectations were certainly high, no one had any idea of the outburst of energy soon to be unleashed.

ABOUT TWELVE MILES outside of Paris, Louis XIV was busy turning his father's modest hunting lodge into a palace worthy of the "Sun King." Some thirty thousand workers labored around the clock to complete the complex of gardens, fountains, and ponds, and of course the enormous palace itself. A fusion of classical dignity and Baroque splendor, Versailles was the epicenter of a country greatly influencing culture on the Continent. What was later said about the Revolution was already applicable to this fashionable trendsetter: "When France caught a cold, Europe sneezed."

Scandinavia was certainly not immune to the rays of the Sun King and his court. Young dandies were everywhere opting for a more gilded look, complete with powdered wigs, lace scarves, and silks as colorful as peacocks. The cuffs ruffled more, and the French tricorne was placed on the head, politely raised. Paint and perfume, gloves and handkerchiefs, snuff boxes and walking sticks were added for good measure.



Uppsala's skyline was characterized by the royal castle, the cathedral, and also, after the early 1660s, Rudbeck's anatomy theater.

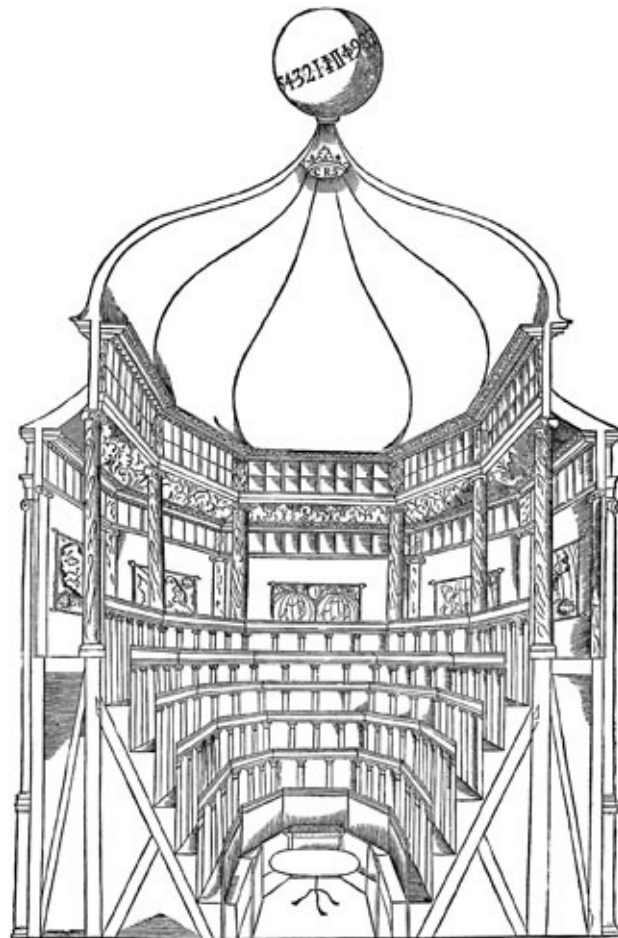
Whims of fashion changed all around him, but Olof Rudbeck kept to his old ways. He preferred a simple black coat, white collar, and knee-length breeches. This attire would have been the height of fashion around 1650, but, as with his long hair, which now flowed naturally onto his shoulders without the benefit of a powdered wig, Rudbeck looked increasingly outdated and drew more and more attention for his old-fashioned manner.

He probably appeared a bit eccentric, though in a charming sort of way. His eyes gleamed with him

of mischievousness and flashed with his exuberant love of life. His face was somewhat elongated; his cheeks were rosy. Thin, butterfly-wing whiskers perched above his mouth. His voice was a deep baritone of phenomenal strength, and his laughter often filled the room with mirth.

Happily, Rudbeck had taken up his position as rector of Uppsala University. Over the next few years, vitality and exuberance would permeate almost everything he touched. After his pioneering work with the lymphatic system, Rudbeck went on to build an impressive anatomy theater. He actively participated in its construction, from drawing the designs to hammering in the nails, and the building was praised for its architectural wonders. Not least of these was the way in which he managed the lighting so that it focused on the dissection table at the center, yet avoided casting shadows that would obscure the view from anywhere in the octagonal auditorium. For special occasions, Rudbeck brought out his collection of skeletons, mummies, and even specimens of human skin.

The anatomy theater was actually only one of the prominent landmarks that the city owed Rudbeck's efforts. Another was a special institution designed to attract young Swedish aristocrats who might otherwise be tempted to study abroad. This was an elite academy that exercised the body as well as the mind. Built by Rudbeck in 1664–65, this Collegium Illustre had in only a couple of years enrolled fifty-five students who fenced, danced, and rode with skill and flair. Fluent in French, they worked zealously to perfect the gentlemanly arts. This program survived until the late nineteenth century, when the building was torn down and its prime real estate used to house the university administration.



Rudbeck built the anatomy theater in the middle of Uppsala, just opposite the cathedral and atop the main university building.

Some contemporaries believed Rudbeck had been born under a lucky star. From the anatomy theater to the botanical garden to the elite exercise academy, visitors could not fail to see his legacy all around town. There was also an apothecary laboratory, a community house to provide free food and shelter to the poor, and a workshop that harnessed the town river to power several machines simultaneously. When his term as rector expired, a new position of curator was created, and Rudbeck was named one of its first officers (along with two others). The multitalented professor had indeed exerted a profound influence over his beloved town and university.

But all that was about to change. By the end of the 1660s, the economy had started to falter. The Swedish copper coin took a nosedive in value, and income from university properties went in a startling decline. This meant that salaries at the university were often delayed, and in some cases even unpaid. Professors started to look back in anger at the ambitious builder of the previous decades. They whispered in the shadows, grumbled in the corridors, and increasingly brought their discontent out into the open.

All these issues, still unresolved, were soon to explode. They would also be transferred onto a new battleground, where they would rage with even greater ferocity. In the midst of the chaos, Olav Verelius, a colleague and an expert on the Vikings, came with a request: he wanted Rudbeck to draw a couple of maps of ancient Sweden to accompany his forthcoming edition of a Norse saga. As Rudbeck set out to help his friend, he found something that dramatically changed his life.

REMARKABLE CORRESPONDENCES

Just amusing myself by indulging in fantastic dreams. Toys! Yes, I suppose that's what it is—toys!

—FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKI, *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

IT WAS THE *Hervararsaga* that Olaus Verelius brought to his friend. Set in the dim and misty past, this was a fantastic tale of a sword named Tyrfing. Hammered in the hidden forges of two talented dwarves, this was the “keenest of all blades,” never failing to render its wielder victorious while shining all the time with the radiance of the sun. Tyrfing was something of a Norse Excalibur, a magical sword fit for a Viking King Arthur. There was, however, one important qualification: the sword carried a nasty curse. Once drawn, it had to take a human life, and then return to its scabbard still warm and red. Generation after generation suffered from the bitter truth that this irresistible sword with the golden hilt brought untold violence and misery.

In the late 1660s, many unreservedly ranked this *Hervararsaga* as one of the oldest and most impressive texts illuminating Sweden’s distant past. What a thrill it must have been to pore over this treasured manuscript and prepare its first-ever publication. And to adorn it with the most up-to-date and valuable scholarly accessories, Verelius asked Olof Rudbeck to make a map of the many places mentioned in the saga.

This may seem like a strange favor to ask of a medical doctor. But Rudbeck had earned a reputation for producing high-quality maps. He excelled at sketching the mountains, hills, and rivers of the countryside, and then reducing them to a series of lines and dots on a flat surface. Measuring with great concern for precision and calculating with a single-minded patience, cartography was virtually an extension of Rudbeck’s skill in technical areas. His curiosity and his own love for discovery moreover, helped him understand the value of a good, accurate map. Many officials requested Olof Rudbeck’s services, including no less than Carl Gustaf Wrangel, one of Sweden’s most feared generals during the Thirty Years’ War.

But this time, when Rudbeck accepted the offer, no one could have known what this curious little manuscript would mean for Uppsala’s distinguished professor.

“It was like a dream,” he later recalled. Behind the story of the cursed sword, the deadly runic magic, and the wild, howling berserks whipped into a furious rage, Olof Rudbeck saw many strange parallels between the Norse world and what he remembered from classical Greek traditions. And through the manuscript, in fact, were many “remarkable correspondences.” Kings, queens, customs, and places—far too many features in this late Viking saga struck with a peculiar resonance.

What exactly it was that first captured Rudbeck’s attention and launched him on what would be

lifelong quest may never be known. His earliest notes on the search do not survive, and the first draft of his work was later destroyed. The list of possibilities is extensive. For instance, as Rudbeck combed the saga looking for material for his map, he would have encountered some extraordinary information. The very first line in the manuscript noted a beautiful kingdom that once flourished in the north of Sweden, called Glasisvellir. This may not at first sound even remotely classical, but when translated from the Old Norse *glaes*, “amber,” and *vellir*, “rolling landscape,” it would be something altogether different.

The Glasisvellir were the “Glittering Plains”—a name that would have evoked the brilliant and shining Elysian Fields of classical mythology. According to the oldest of the ancient Greek accounts, the Elysian Fields were the great plains at the end of the world where the mild, cooling breezes blew and its inhabitants lived what the ancient poet Homer called “a dream of ease.” Now, too, in this old manuscript of the *Hervararsaga*, there were provocative images of a place in the far north that seemed to have more in common with those joyous fields than just their name.

As in the classical Elysian Fields, the fortunate residents of the Norse Glittering Plains enjoyed a happy existence, living to a great age and effectively banishing sickness from the realm. They were also, like their classical depictions, keen sportsmen who enjoyed tossing a goatskin back and forth—that is, when they were not reveling in the dances, songs, and feasts along the soft meadows and meandering riverbanks. Indeed, the Norse wrestled on the Glittering Plains, just as the classic Greek warriors fought for fun in the Elysian Fields.

Located beyond Gandvik, literally “the Bay of Sorcery,” the Glittering Plains flourished in a mythical landscape that included yet other features that sounded familiar from classical mythology. There were the violent neighbors of Jotunheim, “the land of giants,” who recalled the Greek stories of the large, fierce creatures that waged war on Zeus and the Olympian gods. In Norse mythology, as Rudbeck would soon learn if he did not know already, the giants also fought relentlessly with Odin and the Aesir gods. Further, the king of the Glittering Plains was introduced in an evocative way. “A mighty man and wise,” King Gudmund held out against the forces of chaos and barbarism, ruling over a kingdom whose inhabitants reached such an advanced age that outsiders believed that “in his realm must lie the Land of the Undying, the region where sickness and old age depart from every man who enters it, and where no one can die.”

Wisdom, strength, longevity—all these factors made the northerners in the Glittering Plains seem like a blessed people, and their home a fabled “Land of the Undying.” Could this golden age kingdom really have existed, and could it have possibly been related to the Elysian Fields of classical mythology? For that matter, could this utopian civilization of the far north have had anything to do with the land of the Hyperboreans, another blessed people of classical mythology who were said, by their name suggests, to live somewhere “beyond the north wind”?

Whatever it was that first captured Rudbeck’s attention, it virtually sounded a call to action. Ideas swirled in his head, and “for some peace of mind,” he said, he had to “put pen to paper.”

ONE DAY RUDBECK showed his notes to his friend Verelius, the eccentric but undisputed authority on Scandinavian runes and Norse sagas. Recently appointed to a brand-new post as Sweden’s first and for a long time its only “Professor of the Antiquities of the Fatherland,” Verelius was charged with the responsibility of seeking out old manuscripts, gathering them together, and promoting anything “th

can serve to enlighten the deeds of the ancient past.” In this respect, he had found his scholarly niche. He lectured widely on Swedish history—its runes, its Viking sagas, and many other aspects of the pagan past. Despite the fiery patriotism that heated up his accounts, Verelius’s lectures have been described as some of the most pioneering and erudite given at Uppsala University in his time. Unfortunately, though, as he lamented, this was usually only to the benefit of three or perhaps four students who made it to the early-morning lecture in the otherwise empty hall.

Rudbeck’s notes were hastily written, as he put it himself, “not polished, or even once read all the way through.” But Verelius was greatly pleased, and he praised Rudbeck’s “many excellent conclusions and exemplary deductions.” In a letter written much later, shortly after Christmas 1677, Verelius described his own reaction to Rudbeck’s work. He had been particularly impressed with the rich proposals for bringing order to the chaos of Swedish history. These outlines could in fact build the foundation for a true chronology of ancient Sweden, something he admitted “up until now we have never hoped to establish with any certainty.” Rudbeck, he added, “has taken it much further than I have ever expected.”

As he also cheerfully noted, Rudbeck had succeeded in “correcting” many errors that often prevailed in the image of the Swedes abroad. This was a reference to the medieval Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, whose colorful early-thirteenth-century account of the far north showcased the heroics of Sweden’s archenemy, the Danes (and by the way, Saxo’s history includes our oldest account of the misfortunes of Prince Amled, elaborated centuries later in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet* or *Prince of Denmark*). Composed in a lofty Latin that even drew praise from no less a stylist than Erasmus of Rotterdam, Saxo’s work dismissed many parts of Swedish history with the haughty disdain of a man at the center of a powerful Danish kingdom looking down at the backward periphery.

To Verelius’s mind, the implications of Rudbeck’s work were vast: if he was correct, he would have uncovered some major problems in Saxo’s influential history. The Swedes could finally expose some errors enshrined in the standard histories, sickening “lies” that had long offended Swedish sensibilities.

Pleased with the prospects of such a work, Verelius asked Rudbeck to speak with another authority, Professor Johannes (Johan) Loccenius. This was a stern, scholarly man, a former Royal Historiographer and a renowned expert in Swedish antiquities. Called over from Germany in the middle of the century, Loccenius had emerged as one of Uppsala’s prized scholars. He lectured regularly on ancient authorities such as Livy, Tacitus, and Cicero, and he seemed to be a man who, in modern parlance, “lived completely for science.” After Loccenius took up the history of his new homeland with a burning passion, his ambitious histories earned him praise for producing Sweden’s “first truly critical work.” A tireless scholar who trudged through the material slowly and cautiously, building his way to reasonable conclusions, Loccenius had earned his reputation as one of the greatest living experts on ancient Scandinavia.

When this scholar first saw Rudbeck’s notes, he was also visibly delighted. The seventy-year-old Loccenius burst into tears of joy and expressed his wonder: “How many times have I and other historians read [these texts] and never realized that they referred to Sweden.” As he put it, Rudbeck was working on an unparalleled project; in fact, it was unlike anything Sweden had ever seen before.

RICH IN IMPLICATIONS, Rudbeck’s “remarkable correspondences” were especially thrilling in the vibra

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