Maritime heritage and modern national identities in Scandinavia, circa 1900–2020

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Abstract
The Scandinavian nations are maritime nations but this does not mean that ‘maritime’ is a natural and conscious component of modern national identities in Scandinavia. National identities are shaped by diverse historical narratives and experiences, and they fluctuate in time and space. The contributions to this forum attempt to answer the question of to what extent modern national identities in Scandinavia incorporate such a maritime component. They study this question from the perspectives of Swedish naval officers and popular music culture, Danish maritime heritage culture and maritime labour, and Finland’s naval diplomacy.

Keywords
Labour, maritime heritage, national identities, naval diplomacy, popular music, Scandinavia

The Scandinavian nations have been, and continue to be, maritime nations. Situated in northern Europe between the Baltic and North Seas and the Atlantic, they consist of peninsulas and islands and archipelagos, and they access long coastlines. This position between the land and the sea has shaped the Danish and Swedish, as well as Norwegian and Finnish, past and present. Denmark is one of the leading shipping nations in the world, and Norway has its offshore oil, fishing and shipping industries. Finland and Sweden lost much of their shipping quite recently, but still the bulk of their trade is carried out by sea. Does this mean that Scandinavian nations perceive themselves as maritime nations? This forum on maritime heritage and modern national identities in Scandinavia attempts to provide some answers to that question. The answers are both more complicated and more ambiguous than the geographical setting suggests

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because perceptions and understandings of modern national identities differ at the societal and individual levels – different groups, classes and individuals perceive their national belonging in different ways.

Similarly to other European nations, the process of nation-building in Scandinavia took place over the long nineteenth century. It was strongly affected by different national historical experiences. The Swedish and Danish narratives of nation-building were shaped by the losses of territory and power status: in Sweden’s case, by the loss of Finland in 1809 and, in Denmark’s case, by the loss of Norway in 1814 and of Schleswig and Holstein in 1864. In both cases, the nation-building processes were about finding a new place for the defeated and diminished state and nation. In Finland and Norway, nation-building was related to narratives of emancipation from the authority of other nations. In Finland, this was a story about cultural emancipation from Sweden and independence from Russia. This process was completed in December 1917 with the declaration of an independent Finland. In Norway, the nation-building process was shaped by its struggle against the enforced union with Sweden. The union was peacefully dissolved in 1905.

The following four contributions pose the question of to what extent modern national identities incorporate Scandinavian maritime heritage, and they answer this question from varying perspectives – those of naval officers, the shipping industry, popular music culture and diplomacy.

Anders Ravn Sørensen’s article compares the foundation of the Danish Maritime Museum in 1914 in Elsinore with the construction of the spectacular new museum building, opened in 2013, in the same town. In both 1914 and 2013, large Danish shipping companies played a key role in funding the museum. The Danish shipping industry perceived that supporting this maritime heritage institution was an important factor in influencing the Danish public, as a vehicle to shape the image of shipping and maritime trade as major components of Denmark’s economic success and contemporary welfare. The ambition was also to appeal to the population and attract potential labour to the sector. Interestingly, the push by the shipping industry took place in 1914 and 2013, when Denmark was indeed ‘sailing’ on the crest of two waves of globalization (1860–1914 and 1990–2008). The strong support of the Danish Maritime Museum by the shipping sector illustrates an attempt to cultivate perceptions of national identity from above.

Another similar, but also different, attempt to influence national identity from above in a sea-friendly direction is discussed in Andreas Linderoth’s article. Linderoth studies how the Swedish naval journal Vår Flotta (Our Fleet) characterized Swedish identity as maritime identity. The contributions to the journal were mainly written by Swedish naval officers and aimed at a readership interested in naval issues. As such, the journal’s content related foremost to issues and themes revolving around the Swedish navy, but often also commented on issues of national character and identity. The contributors to Vår Flotta recurrently addressed what they perceived as typical Swedish traits and characteristics – and how these traits related to and were formed by the sea and naval practices. The journal propagated the idea that experiences of life at sea toughened the spirit and built a strong character, which were desirable features of Swedish national identity. Such Swedishness was, of course, a stereotypical trope with little connection to reality. It expressed the contributors’ consistent ideal of Swedishness, which changed little over
the period of the study (1905–1939) – decades of great political and economic upheaval in Sweden and Europe.

Henrik Arnstad’s article is also about Swedish maritime identity after 1900. It offers a perspective from below, more closely related to the real experience of life at sea. Arnstad describes the boom in the culture of sailor songs in Sweden from around 1920. This surge was intrinsically connected with the enormous popularity of one singer-songwriter – Evert Taube (1890–1976). Taube’s influence on this genre of popular music was due to both his undeniable artistry and his personal experience as a seafarer. Nevertheless, his songs also provide a very romantic and idealized image of life at sea – something that has attracted Taube’s audience to this day. Taube’s songs depict the ‘typical’ Swedish seaman; they construct an image of Swedish maritime identity in contrast to other sailors and nations, and address a key component of Swedish modern maritime identity. In addition, Arnstad stresses the fact that the music business – Swedish gramophone companies – both promoted and made large profits from the boom in sailor songs. The genre’s popularity only diminished in the 1960s with the arrival of Anglo-American popular music.

Andrea Rizzi’s article on the Finnish school ship Suomen Joutsen presents a case study of Finnish naval diplomacy in the 1930s. For centuries, naval diplomacy has been a tool to promote the political and economic interests of fleet-sending states. Flying the flag was a way to display naval prowess and indicate the possibility of its use. In this sense, naval diplomacy related more to foreign policy and less to national identity, and it has been the policy of great powers. Finland declared its independence from Russia at the end of 1917 and, only in 1930, in the aftermath of the Great Depression, did it acquire a training vessel, which was renamed the Suomen Joutsen (Finnish Swan). Between 1931 and 1939, the Suomen Joutsen undertook eight voyages, calling at ports in Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, and North and South America. The purpose of these voyages was threefold. First, Finland wanted to ‘fly the flag’ to show that it was a young and ambitious nation wishing to establish international relations across the world. Second, the aim was to present Finnish export products and potentially open new markets abroad, as exhibitions were organized on board the ship and contacts were established with businesses in the ports visited. Third, and perhaps most interesting from the point of view of national identity, the purpose was to meet with Finnish expatriate communities. There was a considerable number of Finnish immigrant communities in the United States and Canada – an outcome of the same migration waves that brought millions of Europeans to the Americas. The Suomen Joutsen’s visits to ports in the United States provided an opportunity to establish contacts with these communities. The visits were covered extensively in the local press – for example, during the Suomen Joutsen’s stay in New York. Such visits improved and strengthened the positive image of Finland as a progressive independent nation in the family of world nations.

These four case studies illustrate how maritime heritage connected to and cultivated national identities in Scandinavia from above – through strategic initiatives such as ‘flying the flag’ expeditions, journals and museums – and from below – through the everyday, mundane consumption of popular music. The studies also show that although the maritime components of national identities have many different forms, they are by no means nationally unique. Evert Taube is indeed a Swedish artist, but popularized shanties
and sailor songs can be found in Denmark as well as in Norway and Finland. The story of
the foundation of the Danish Maritime Museum in Elsinore in 1913 resembles the motiv-
oticeation behind the foundation of the Swedish Maritime Museum in Stockholm in 1938,
which was also supported by the country’s shipping industry. And we can find many
examples of Sweden’s and Denmark’s naval vessels ‘flying the flag’ in the nineteenth
century. These different maritime components of national identities illustrate the diversity
of maritime heritage in Scandinavia, and also a multiplicity and diversity of modern
national identities, in comparison with the hegemony of the nineteenth-century inland
and peasant nationalism.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or
publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this
article.

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