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BERNADOTTE REVISITED, OR THE COMPLEXITY OF A LONG REIGN (1810-1844)

Jean-Marc Olivier
Université de Toulouse 2-Le Mirail
Laboratoire Framespa (UMR 5136)

Abstract: Although rather unexpected, Bernadotte, Maréchal of Napoleon, is more well-known in Northern Europe than in France. His participation at the Battle of Leipzig, on the side of the allies, constitutes "treason" for many French historians who are unaware of the fulfillment of his destiny as sovereign of the kingdom of Sweden-Norway until 1844 and as founder of a dynasty. The restricted access to the Royal Swedish Archives partially explains this gap in our understanding of Bernadotte, who became Charles XIV Jean. An analysis of his personal documents, which are entirely in French, reveal, however, his significant achievements in pacification of the region and in development over the long term. Furthermore, a significant portion of the collection consists of files relating to economic and social aspects of his reign. A systematic examination of these documents is underway, and is progressing rapidly.

Résumé : *Bernadotte revisité ou la complexité d'un long règne (1810-1844)*

De manière assez inattendue, Bernadotte, maréchal de Napoléon, est mieux connu dans le Nord de l'Europe qu'en France. Sa participation à la bataille de Leipzig, dans le camp des alliés, constitue une "trahison" pour beaucoup d'historiens français qui ignorent l'accomplissement de son destin comme souverain du royaume de Suède-Norvège jusqu'en 1844 et comme fondateur d'une dynastie. L'accès limité aux archives royales suédoises explique partiellement cette méconnaissance de Bernadotte devenu Charles XIV Jean. L'analyse de ces documents personnels, totalement en français, révèle cependant une véritable œuvre de pacification et de développement dans le long terme. Ainsi, les dossiers relatifs aux aspects économiques et sociaux occupent une large place dans ce fonds dont l'étude systématique progresse rapidement.

Bertrand de Lafargue had a passion for Norwegian history, and in particular its struggle for independence. Collecting a great deal of information on the subject over several years, he provided some conclusions in an article on the subject of the equestrian statue of Bernadotte in Oslo.¹ The latter had become crown prince of Sweden in 1810 under the name of Karl Johan and had conquered Norway in 1814, in compensation for the loss of Finland which had been abandoned to the Tsar. In doing so, Bernadotte put an end to the first attempts of Norwegian independence, and reigned from 1818-1844 over the double monarchy of Sweden-Norway, whose union he symbolized.

¹ Lafargue (Bertrand de), « À propos d'une statue équestre du maréchal Bernadotte, roi de Suède-Norvège : une intrusion ambiguë dans l'histoire norvégienne », in Bertrand (Michel), Cabanel (Patrick) et Lafargue (Bertrand de) (dir.), *La fabrique des nations. Figures de l'État-Nation dans l'Europe du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Les Éditions de Paris, 400 p., pp. 75-96. The statue was built in 1875.

Thus, Bertrand Lafargue presents Norwegian emancipation as a long struggle against the dynasty of Bernadotte. Although he recognizes certain qualities of the founder of this lineage, overall he insists much more on the weakness of the tie linking Bernadotte to the Norwegians. Noting the considerable amount of space given to the equestrian statue of this sovereign, he stated, « Through this statue, Bernadotte came to incarnate, in himself alone, the parliamentary and democratic monarchy to which the Norwegians are strongly attached, whereas he was undeniably the herald of an aristocratic and militaristic monarchy... »²

Nevertheless, Bertrand de Lafargue was also willing to admit that Bernadotte was a complex individual, and that the latter did possess a sincere affection for his new countrymen on the other side of the mountains. De Lafargue had planned a research project to discover the reasons for Karl Johan's popularity in Norway through analyzing his private archives, which have been conserved by the royal family in Stockholm. Illness, however, prevented him from ever starting this research. Since I had already worked on nineteenth-century Swedish history, I decided to pursue the examination of this archival treasure- 265 cartons- with the help of several Master's students. This brief article presents some of the preliminary results of this work, based on these documents as well as the historiography, and often confirms Bertrand de Lafargue's intuitions about the cleverness of Bernadotte-turned-Karl Johan, as well as his problems. One of the most important conclusions to be drawn from this preliminary examination of sources involves the re-assessment of French biographies, which have often been rather partial or biased towards the Maréchal of the Empire turned King of Sweden. Authors outside of France have taken a more balanced approach, fascinated by his unusual destiny. In addition, Bernadotte's personal archives, containing a considerable number of speeches, reports, audiences, and letters, enable us to construct a more realistic, and less polemic, understanding of this historical individual.

1) Traitor, Gascon hero, or Great Figure missing from the pages of a deficient French historiography?

Bernadotte was the subject of a multitude of biographies even before his death. The Napoleonic memoir writers—Marbot, de Ségur, or Savary—were very harsh with him, bearing considerable resentment against him for having taken up arms against Napoleon. Les Cases, and his *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, published in 1823, inspired a great many other biographies which accused Bernadotte of treason against France. The book by Léonce Pingaud, printed in 1901, belongs to this vein of research.³

In the same manner, Karl Johan also inspired glorifying biographies which represented him as a hero of the Napoleonic campaigns. This group of works, just as one-sided as the previous one, was headed by Count Gustaf Löwenhielm, faithful assistant of the King of Sweden-Norway. These panegyrics of Nordic origin are complemented by those of Gascon authors who wanted to eulogize their fellow countryman. For example, Bernard Nabonne, mayor of a small Pyrenean village, wrote his own biography in 1940 of the Great Man from Pau, which

² « Par ce mouvement, Bernadotte en vient à incarner seul une monarchie parlementaire et démocratique à laquelle les Norvégiens sont fortement attachés, alors qu'il était indéniablement le héraut d'une monarchie aristocratique et militaire... », *Ibidem*, p. 88.

³ Pingaud (Léonce), *Bernadotte, Napoléon et les Bourbons (1797-1844)*, Paris, 1901 (new edition in 1933).

was reprinted in 1946.⁴ This tradition of the narrative of « The exceptional rise of a common man from the Bearn » has lasted even until today, with Christian Bazin's work published in 2000 under the title, *Bernadotte. Un cadet de Gascogne sur le trône de Suède*.⁵

However, these biographies alone do not fully explain all the shortcomings of French historiography in terms of the career of Bernadotte. The most well-known specialists of the Empire hardly treat his life or career at all, for example the case of Natalie Petiteau who mentions him only once in her monumental work consecrated to the nobility of the Empire.⁶ The biographers themselves, who have so much to say about his early life from 1763-1814, turn out to be curiously silent on what constitutes, in the end, the most essential aspect: his reign which lasted until 1844 ! Bernard Nabonne, for example, only consecrated around twenty pages to Karl Johan in Sweden out of the 180 pages which make up his book.⁷ Pierre de Pressac, who published a book on Bernadotte in 1942 with Hachette Press, makes short work of his reign in a very brief, final chapter.⁸ Christian Bazin contents himself with writing only sixteen pages on these twenty-six essential years in the history of Northern Europe.⁹

These scholars all ran up against the same difficulty, that is, that the main body of sources on the reign of Karl Johan are found in the royal archives in Stockholm, as was mentioned in the Introduction. Some French authors have used them, but they have not fully exploited the richness of the collection. This was the case with Pierre de Pressac, who only had access to Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte's private correspondence until 1813.¹⁰ Françoise Kermina's study was also limited to his correspondence ; however, this choice can be explained by the nature of her book, which treated the relationship between Bernadotte and his wife.¹¹ Overall, French biographies shed little light on the reign of Karl Johan between 1818 and 1844, even though it is precisely this period which can explain the popularity he enjoyed in Scandinavia. To know more, we have to turn to non-French authors.

2) In Praise of Bernadotte : English, German, and Scandinavian authors

One of the best biographies of Bernadotte available in French is none other than a condensed translation¹² of three volumes, the original totaling 1123 pages, written in English by Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton between 1914 and 1925.¹³ The book's tone is often favorable to Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte. The latter appears humble, an excellent leader of men, opposed to pillaging, cleared of any involvement in the Terror, and appears as an important early rival to Bonaparte. Unlike the Corsican General, it seems the Béarnais refused to compromise himself in political plots, that is, according to Barton. Furthermore, accusations against Bernadotte for his lack of action in the battles of Auerstaedt and of Iéna were supposedly due to Napoleon's orders, the existence of which was later covered up by Imperial propaganda.

⁴ Nabonne (Bernard), *Bernadotte*, Paris, La Nouvelle Édition, 1946 (First edition in 1940), 186 p.

⁵ Bazin (Christian), *Bernadotte. Un cadet de Gascogne sur le trône de Suède*, Paris, Édition France-Empire, 2000, 181 p.

⁶ Petiteau (Natalie), *Élites et mobilités : la noblesse d'Empire au XIX^e siècle (1808-1914)*, Paris, La Boutique de l'Histoire, 1997, 714 p., p. 101.

⁷ Nabonne (Bertrand), *Bernadotte...*, op. cit.

⁸ Pressac (Pierre de), *Bernadotte, un roi de Suède français*, Paris, Hachette, « De l'Histoire », 1942, 255 p., Chapter IX, pp. 228-247.

⁹ Bazin (Christian), *Bernadotte...*, op. cit., Chapter XII, pp. 223-238.

¹⁰ Pressac (Pierre de), *Bernadotte...*, op. cit., pp. 250-251.

¹¹ Kermina (Françoise), *Bernadotte et Désirée Clary*, Paris, Perrin, 1991, 383 p., pp. 363-364.

¹² Barton (Sir Dunbar Plunket), *Bernadotte*, Paris, Payot, 1983 (first French edition in 1931), 381 p.

¹³ Barton (Sir Dunbar Plunket), *Bernadotte, the First Phase 1763-1799*, London, 1914 ; *Bernadotte and Napoléon 1799-1810 ; Bernadotte Prince and King 1810-1844*, London, 1925.

Barton primarily used the archives of the British Foreign Affairs Minister, offering therefore a different vision of the character of Bernadotte. Even the famous accusation of treason, attributed to Napoleon by French memoirists, is called into question by Barton, who cites the doctor O'Méara de Sainte-Hélène, who reported the words of the fallen Emperor: « Bernadotte has shown himself to be ungrateful towards me, because I was the cause of his rise in status; but I cannot say that he betrayed me. He has become Swedish, in a way, and he only made promises that he had the intention of keeping. I can accuse him of ingratitude, but not treason. »¹⁴ In the end, Barton concludes that Karl Johan was in fact very popular in Norway from 1838, more than in Sweden according to the British Ambassador in Stockholm.¹⁵

German biographers, relying on German sources, underline other positive aspects of this Maréchal of the Empire. Hans Klaeber,¹⁶ followed by Friedrich Wencker-Wildberg,¹⁷ insist on his generosity and his honest management of Hanover in 1804-1805. Furthermore, Bernadotte's changing of alliances between 1810-1812 is justified at length by the author, stating that the Napoleonic blockade was counter to the economic interests of Sweden.¹⁸ These German biographies, although interesting because of the new perspective that they offer, are however disappointing in the end for our understanding of the long Scandinavian reign of Karl Johan. Friedrich Wencker-Wildberg only consecrates a small chapter of twenty-four pages to this period, out of a total of 317 pages for the book.¹⁹ In the end, these German and British works complement those of the French authors, but they all have in common the same, major problem: under-utilization, or even ignorance about the existence of, the Royal Archives of the family of Bernadotte conserved in Stockholm. The distance of the Swedish capital, as well as the complex process required to gain access to these documents (the authorization of the King is necessary through the intermediary of his archivist) have, for a long time, discouraged non-Swedish researchers. Furthermore, the fact that all the documents are written in French, since Bernadotte never learned the language of his new kingdom, has also been a significant obstacle. One person, Torvald T. Höjer, has consecrated his life to the study of the man and has written a complete biography of Bernadotte.

This Swedish researcher, the son and grandson of historians, defended his thesis at Uppsala entitled, *Charles-Jean dans la grande coalition contre Napoléon. Du débarquement à Stralsund à l'armistice de Rendsburg*. He then published, in 1939, a first volume entitled, *Karl XIV Johan. Den Franska Tiden* (his French period), which was translated into French and published by Plon from 1943.²⁰ In the preface, the translator underlines the originality of the work: « M.T.T. Höjer, Swedish historian, having obtained access to a very important source of documentation, that is, the archives which are rarely opened to researchers and hardly examined at all until now of the Swedish Royal Family, presents the first volume of a detailed biography of Bernadotte (in Sweden, Karl XIV Johan). »²¹

¹⁴ Barton (Sir Dunbar Plunket), *Bernadotte*, Paris, Payot, 1983, p. 339 (O'Méara, *Napoléon en exil*, volume II, p. 401).

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 372.

¹⁶ Klaeber (Hans), *Marschall Bernadotte, Kronprinz von Schweden*, Gotha, 1910.

¹⁷ Wencker-Wildberg (Friedrich), *Bernadotte. A Biography*, London, Jarrolds Publishers, 1936 (for the translation of the German text into English), 317 p.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 262.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 227-250.

²⁰ Höjer (Torvald T.), *Bernadotte. Maréchal de France*, Paris, Plon, 1943.

²¹ « M.T.T. Höjer, historien suédois, ayant obtenu la libre disposition d'une source très importante de documentation, les archives jusqu'ici à peine et rarement entr'ouvertes de la famille royale de Suède, nous offre

Höjer had at his disposal thus indispensable material in order to analyze the reign of Karl Johan and to furnish the material for two new volumes published in Sweden by P. A. Norstedt & Söner in the 1940s. The French translation of the main part of this work was published by Plon in two volumes,²² which are unfortunately now out of print. The second volume, 701 pages, begins with « The Struggle against Napoleon » and contains long chapters on diplomatic relations and domestic policy between 1812 and 1844. Nevertheless, the work as a whole is written as a traditional, political and diplomatic history, and thus leaves aside almost entirely the economic and social aspects of his reign. His approach can be explained however by the historiographical context of the 1930s, at which time the Annales school had just barely begun to be born in France. However, the royal archives abound with statistical data as well as qualitative reports on the economic situation in the various regions of the two countries, on foreign commerce, the fleet, coinage, agriculture, industries, etc.

3) A more flattering economic and social assessment in the process of being established

After 1945, the dynamism of the Scandinavian School of Historical Economics has compensated for the lacunae inherent in the older biographies, which had often been too political. Lars Magnusson, for example, has shown that the first half of the 19th century was important in Sweden's resulting economic expansion, and he makes reference to the « *longue durée* » of Fernand Braudel from the first lines of his Introduction.²³ When he was contacted a few years ago for his approval of the Erasmus agreement between the Universities of Uppsala and Toulouse, Lars Magnusson strongly encouraged me to further examine the royal archives.

My first exploration of these archives in September 2003 immediately confirmed the richness of the collection. Since then, a project has taken shape to systematically analyze these documents, and I was granted the authorization to consult them which also extended to students carrying out research projects under the direction of professors at the University of Toulouse 2-Le Mirail. There are currently eight studies underway,²⁴ and the first Master's theses based on these documents were defended in September 2005. Subjects relating to social and economic history have been privileged because of the gaps mentioned previously in the biographies of Bernadotte. The abundance of statistical documents, as well as their regularity of production in consistent series, enables such an approach.

In fact, before their recent reclassification by more or less thematic topics,²⁵ the royal archives had been organized by year with a manuscript inventory entitled, « *Catalogue des papiers du*

le premier volume d'une biographie détaillée de Bernadotte (en Suède Charles XIV Jean). » *Ibidem*, p. I (preface of translator Lucien Maury).

²² Höjer (Torval T.), *Bernadotte. Maréchal de France. Roi de Suède*, Paris, Plon, 1971.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. XI.

²⁴ Jérôme Justeau is examining the macro-economic development of Sweden in the first half of the nineteenth century, Sébastien Horion is interested in the treatment of the poor during the reign of Karl Johan, Matthieu Calmels is exploring the different forms of Swedish industrialisation throughout the 19th century, Violaine Teuma investigates the political thought of the new King of Sweden, Marie-Laure Ballan is working on life of the court at Bernadotte's time, Alexandre Nicolas tracks the rise of Norwegian nationalism, Arthur Jullien analyses the economic and diplomatic relations between Sweden and Russia from the end of the 18th century to 1844, and, finally, Anne-Sophie Backé explores the family life of Bernadotte.

²⁵ Carlsson (Ingemar), *Kungens Familjearkiv*, Stockholm, Carlsson Bokförlag, 1994, 228 p. This guide to the royal family's archives, written in Swedish, is more or less complete but does not go into the detail of the dossiers as does the ancient manuscript inventory written in French.

roi Charles Jean (1792-1844). »²⁶ This highly detailed inventory enables us to evaluate the proportion of each type of document (whether political, diplomatic, social economic, court life, family, etc.) Yet, once peace had returned (in 1815), the nature of the archival dossiers changed. Thus, in 1817 (liasse n° 12 according to the former system of classification), among the seventy-five groups or *cotes* identified, other than correspondence, thirty-six concern finances and economy. Somewhat later, the archives of the year 1825²⁷ contain a file of more than twenty pages entitled « *Mémorandum relatif aux rapports de commerce de la Suède et de la Norvège avec la Russie et la Finlande.* »²⁸ In 1828, a « note of what has been done in the kingdom since 1810 » enables us to rank the preoccupations of the King Karl Johan. Among the 88 achievements retained in the archives, forty concern the economy (transportation, industries, agriculture, forests, foreign commerce and finance), twenty deal with military affairs (conscription, clothing, construction of fortresses and warships, arms manufacture), nine treat education, eight with justice, five deal with attempts to improve hygiene, three handle religious books, and three are unclassifiable. Even more than the pragmatism which is confirmed by his speeches and his correspondence, this analysis of subjects reveals the profound basis for Karl Johan's popularity: he worked within a long-term perspective, in order to establish his dynasty on the prosperity of the Kingdom of Sweden-Norway.

Bernadotte's royal archives seem, thus, to support what certain biographers had deduced from more general or more indirect sources. Karl Johan knew how to take advantage of his experience as war leader, minister, and diplomat to establish a lasting peace in Northern Europe, which was an essential condition, according to him, for the development of the « happiness of his subjects. » His private archives relating to his French period²⁹ date back to 1792 and explain the origins of his great management qualities. In fact, whether as a General, or as Governor of Hanover, Bernadotte was constantly confronted with problems of supply, transportation, and the infrastructures of ports and roads. In his practically Saint-Simonian vision of economic mechanisms, exchange is the key to progress. Thus, it is no accident if, out of the forty projects that he undertook between 1810 to 1828, ten concerned roads and canals—the completion of the one uniting the Baltic and the Northern Sea in 1832, the *Göta kanal*, was a resounding success. Karl Johan also launched a project to build a road which would cross the mountains in order to unite his two kingdoms. All of these measures, and the continual determination to assess their results, illustrate a policy of long-term planning.

4) A Sovereign Striving to Found his Dynasty

The consultation of the royal archives demonstrates another character trait of this monarch of French origin : his capacity for work. Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte had everything translated and frequently annotated documents by his own hand. Witnesses, cited by the biographers, often present him in the process of writing in his bed, his legs bent to serve as a writing desk as he had done during his military campaigns. For the year 1825 alone, the king received, had translated, and dealt with a hundred and twenty-five letters from within the country³⁰ and eighty-four letters from abroad.³¹ He also received a number of his citizens in audiences in order to understand their personal difficulties. As such, in March 1837, forty-four audiences

²⁶ This bound inventory, with a red binding, can be found in office n° 18 of the National Archives of Sweden (*Riks Arkivet*) in Stockholm and can still be of great use to French researchers.

²⁷ These documents are now found listed as BFA 162, BFA 163 and BFA 164.

²⁸ BFA 162.

²⁹ Carlsson (Ingemar), *Kungens Familjarkiv...*, op. cit., pp. 35-38, « Den franska tiden », BFA 1 à 50, years from 1792 to 1810.

³⁰ BFA 163.

³¹ BFA 164.

were granted³²; what is more, in January 1844, when Karl Johan was eighty years old and had been seriously ill since the autumn of 1843, he took up again this tradition of consultations from the third of the month, welcoming seven people on the 4th, and holding audience for a total of twenty-one days in the month before giving up his soul to God, exhausted, the 8th of March. His last words, addressed to his only son and heir to the throne, are reported to have been, « Oscar, Oscar, nous nous défendons (we defend ourselves). »³³

Above all, it is necessary to take into account the ease with which this sovereign moved in all types of social settings. Showing his remarkable capacity of adaptation, he won over the Swedish aristocracy by respecting the traditional customs of the Vasa dynasty to the letter, even going so far as to become a devout Lutheran. Yet he was also comfortable among the people, often recalling in fact that he had « eaten out of a mess tin » unlike Napoleon. Inexhaustible, he regularly visited the provinces of his two kingdoms. During a great fire in Stockholm in 1835, he came running and spent the entire night with the firefighters even though he was seventy-four years old.³⁴ He regularly paid visits to Christiania (Oslo) and prepared Oscar for his first official visit to Norway with a long letter of fourteen pages in which he reveals certain constituent elements of his relational intelligence : « ...It is useful for a Prince to speak very little ; it is also in his interest to listen a great deal. That way, he can take advantage of all sorts of counsel ; the good advice is useful in itself, and the bad advice makes the good stand out... »³⁵

Furthermore, Oscar, raised in Sweden since age eleven and speaking Swedish perfectly, was totally adopted by the elderly king Karl XIII and his wife, in the absence of his mother Désirée Clary. Thus, he became Karl Johan's the best ambassador, translating his speeches in public. The more progressive ideas of the young prince made people forget the conservatism of his elderly father, who had the skill to begin announcing that he was nearing his end, due to his advancing age, from the 1820s. The political conservatism of Bernadotte, criticized by many historians including Bertrand de Lafargue, should be re-situated within the European context of the time and understood in conjunction with Karl Johan's constant quest for stability and the perpetuation of his dynasty which he sought. It must not be forgotten that at his accession in 1824, the King of France Charles X still supported the candidacy of the official heir of the Vasas, Prince Gustave, against the Bernadottes. In the end, Charles X sided with his advisors who described the great popularity which Karl Johan and his son Oscar enjoyed, both in Sweden as in Norway.

This level of perseverance, put to the service of establishing the peace and the prosperity of Scandinavia, certainly merited an equestrian statue, all the more since Bernadotte, although sometimes angry, never carried out his threats against the Norwegian Parliament. His wife Désirée enjoyed repeating « that he would never harm a chicken. »³⁶ Such was the closeness he felt to his subjects, admittedly probably by political calculation, but also with a certain

³² BFA 88, list of audiences from 1837 to 1844.

³³ Bazin (Christian), *Bernadotte...*, op. cit., p. 238.

³⁴ Barton (Sir Dunbar Plunket), *Bernadotte...*, op. cit., p. 376 (from the archives of the English *Foreign Office*, F.O., 73/161, 28 juillet 1835).

³⁵ « ...Il est de la prudence du Prince de parler peu, il est aussi de son intérêt d'écouter beaucoup ; il profite alors de toutes sortes d'avis ; les bons sont utiles pour eux mêmes, et les mauvais font ressortir les bons... », BFA, 81, letter of 3 avril 1824, p. 5.

³⁶ John Peter Collett, Norwegian historian and Professor at the University of Oslo, confirms this attitude in his paper given at a conference in Toulouse on 18 November, 2004 and titled « Karl XIV Johan et la Norvège ».

sincerity, which renders the inscription carved on the base of the monument built at Oslo not as ridiculous as it might first seem : « The love of the people is my reward. »³⁷

Jean-Marc OLIVIER
Laboratory FRAMESPA
University of Toulouse 2-Le Mirail

³⁷ Bertrand de Lafargue accompanies this citation with ellipsis points and a question mark in his article cited above, « À propos d'une statue équestre du maréchal Bernadotte, roi de Suède-Norvège : une intrusion ambiguë dans l'histoire norvégienne ».