



# Life and cult of Cnut the Holy

The first royal saint of Denmark

*Edited by:*

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# Gustav Vasa and the Erikmas in Uppsala. A question of the source for political symbolic value<sup>1</sup>

By Henrik Ågren

## Introduction

This article examines religious and political cultural heritage in sixteenth-century Sweden. It focuses on the symbolism that lay behind the choice of location and date when King Gustav Vasa during the early years of his reign held meetings with his subjects to discuss questions like the future of Swedish monasteries (Staf 1935: 68–69) or new taxes (Staf 1935: 83–84). This is best understood from the concept “realms of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*), coined by the French historian Pierre Nora. This term refers to symbols and artefacts evocative of the past, which provide a sense of shared belonging and identity. Originally, the concept primarily referred to specific geographical locations, but any type of object can function as a realm of memory. As examples from France, Nora mentions Joan of Arc, the Royal Court and the Eiffel Tower (Nora 1996: xvii). The present article is concerned with three such realms from medieval and early modern Sweden: the church village of Old Uppsala,<sup>2</sup> Sweden’s only royal saint, King Erik Jedvardsson († 1160) and the ceremonies of his feast day, 18th of May. The argument is that among these three realms of memory, the latter two were the most important for supporting a king’s symbolical status in front of his people, even though that is not the inevitable interpretation.

## Meeting the people in Old Uppsala

Gustav Vasa (r. 1521–1560) is known for facilitating Sweden’s independence from the Kalmar Union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden, initiating the Lutheran reformation in Sweden, and strengthening the Swedish central government (fig. 1). Because of these accomplishments, Gustav Vasa became the king that many later Swedish king has been compa-



Fig. 1: Gustav Vasa, painting by Jacob Bink, 1542. Uppsala University art collection. Photo: Mikael Wallerstedt.

red with as the ideal picture of a good, or at least competent, ruler (Johannesson 1998: 355; Alm 2002: 189). Of course, this picture of a great father of the nation is created by the posterity. In Gustav’s own time, he was just a usurper who challenged both the Danish crown, the church and his own subjects. His need for all sorts of legitimacy was therefore great. During the first decade of his reign, which was a critical period in Sweden’s history, Gustav convened a number of political meetings in Old Uppsala, which was the location of a famous pre-Christian holy site, the royal residence, and traditional site for both regi-

onal and national meetings concerning political and judicial matters. The aim of this article is to analyse the reasons for Gustav's choice of location for his meetings. Could it be that he sought to benefit from its symbolic power as a realm of memory, hoping to be imbued with the gravity of the cultural heritage of the place? Moreover, if this explains his choice of location, the question then is of what did this symbolic power of Old Uppsala consist in the early sixteenth century?

The meetings in Old Uppsala were always convened on a special occasion, namely the 18th of May, or Erikmas, the feast day of the twelfth-century saint-king Erik. He was arguably the most important of Sweden's patrons in the late medieval period, and his bones had been placed in the cathedral of Old Uppsala before being moved when the new cathedral was built.<sup>3</sup> This feast was not only a religious occasion. An annual fair was also arranged in the days around this feast, which served as a good occasion for the king to meet with his subjects. What is notable, however, is that while the fair of Eriksmas was held in Uppsala, the king met with the people in Old Uppsala, several kilometres away.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, was there a certain reason why these meetings were held at this particular holiday?

First, it should be noted that Gustav Vasa did not only hold meetings during Uppsala's Erikmas. In this period, even national political meetings were convened in different places at different times in the year. Stockholm was beginning to be recognised as Sweden's capital, but meetings were still arranged when and where it was practical (Staf 1935). Fairs were convenient occasions for meetings because many people already gathered from near and far.

It seems, however, that Erikmas in Uppsala held a particular significance. Between 1523 and 1532 Gustav Vasa attended and spoke at a number of Swedish fairs. With the exception of the year 1524, for which we have no data, there is only one fair he visited every year: Erikmas in Uppsala (Staf 1935: 54–90). In other words, the king found this to be a particularly suitable occasion for communicating with his subjects.<sup>5</sup>

## Reasons for the choice of meeting place

When considering possible reasons for Gustav Vasa's choice of Uppsala as a meeting place, it is unlikely that size and importance could have been decisive

factors. Uppsala was an important city in the sixteenth century, but its most visited fair was not that of St Erik, but the Disting Fair<sup>6</sup> in January/February (Ljung 1954, p. 148). A comparison over a longer time period also shows that the Disting Fair was the most popular for political meetings between the years 1436 and 1611, with about 50 meetings convened in this period. Eriksmas is in shared second place together with Knutmas in Enköping (January 13th) and Samting Fair in Strängnäs (1st Sunday in Lent). All these three fairs were the locations for 25 meetings each in the period. For Gustav himself, on the other hand, Eriksmas was by far the most popular fair (Staf 1935: 54–132; Åmark 1935–37: 212–21).<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, Eriksmas was particularly important for Gustav Vasa. Uppsala was Sweden's ecclesiastical centre and according to some contemporary historians, it had preceded Stockholm as the country's capital (Magnus 1620 (1554): e.g. pp. 5 & 7). Therefore, Uppsala was a typical realm of memory and it is easy to presume that meetings held there were seen as extra important. Apart from the practical reasons, there were also symbolic ones. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the other dominating fair for royal meetings was Uppsala's Disting Fair.

But why were the Erikmas meetings held in Old Uppsala and not in the new city of Uppsala? Also, for this choice we can find practical as well as symbolic reasons. The main practical reason is probably that for one of the days of the fair, most of its participants gathered in Old Uppsala. This was on 18th of May when the clergy of the cathedral performed a procession, carrying St Erik's relics from their shrine in the cathedral in Uppsala city to the former cathedral of Old Uppsala (Bonnier 1991: 102).<sup>8</sup> It seems likely that those visitors of the fair that were able to would participate in such a ceremony, and consequently bring a significant amount of people to Old Uppsala. This made it the perfect occasion to make announcements. Most people were there to hear them, and if the king wanted a response, he could get it immediately. Another practical reason for the gathering in Old Uppsala may be that it could have been difficult to find a convenient place to gather a great number of people inside the city of new Uppsala, but this is more difficult to assess.

We should, however, not discard other possible reasons for holding meetings in Old Uppsala, namely symbolic reasons. To a modern mind, the most obvious such symbolic reason would be the cultural heritage of the place, reaching back to pre-Christian times. Old Uppsala has a prominent role in Swedish



historical awareness, especially in the province of Uppland. Whether that already was the case in the sixteenth century, and if so, on what grounds, cannot be ascertained. The Swedish historian of literature Kurt Johannesson recounts how Archbishop Johannes Magnus, in his history of the Uppsala Archdiocese, describes a scene between himself and Gustav Vasa in an Erikmas meeting at Old Uppsala (Magnus 1557: 123–124). Johannesson comments: “The site is sacred in Swedish history. Here Swedish kings and archbishops had had their residences since ancient times. The time of the year is also sacred, for this meeting took place on St Erik’s Day” (Johannesson 1982: 90).<sup>9</sup> In other words, there are in Uppsala a couple of realms of memory that allow us to comprehend the symbolic meaning of the context of the meetings presented: one is Old Uppsala as an ancient cult site and royal quarter, and the other is the fame of St Erik and his day.

To modern Swedes, the first realm of memory is the most obvious. We associate Old Uppsala with the pre-Christian period and pagan rituals and religious practices, especially because of the great burial mounds and the histories that are told about them.<sup>10</sup> However, this symbolic value cannot simply be taken for granted as being a part of the sixteenth-century world-view. At this time Old Uppsala was actually not the important symbol for pre-Christian Sweden which it later became. The reason was not that sixteenth-century historians were less interested in searching for a great past than historians of today, quite the contrary. Their concept of history included a Swedish kingdom with traditions from many centuries BCE and with Uppsala as its magnificent capital. The difference was that the interest was directed more towards modern Uppsala than towards Old Uppsala. For example, the ancient golden temple with its famous human sacrifices to the gods Odin, Thor and Freyr, described by Adam of Bremen, (Adam 1984 (1070): Book IV, Chapter 27) was believed to have been situated in new Uppsala. How could that be possible?

When relating how historians between the middle of the fifteenth and the end of the seventeenth century believed that Adam’s temple had been located in new Uppsala, the Swedish professor of intellectual history, Sten Lindroth, claims that the general opinion was that “the place out by the royal mounds supposedly had its short era of prosperity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the new Christian cathedral was located there” (Lindroth 1975b: 311). However, there are reasons to believe that his state-

ment is only partly true and that the picture is far more complicated. By studying the most influential Swedish historical chronicles from the sixteenth century, a strange and contradictory picture of Uppsala’s older history is revealed. We see this contradiction in the treatment of both pre-Christian and early Christian Old Uppsala, when, according to Lindroth, the place was thought to have had its period of greatness. Before discussing the treatment of Uppsala in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, however, it is necessary to give a short presentation of the Uppsala area’s early history as it is known today.

## The early history of the Uppsala surroundings

The location of Old Uppsala has long been an important site. The area is filled with ancient monuments (fig. 2). The most famous are the three big royal burial mounds, *Uppsala högar*, from the sixth or seventh century, but there are remains that indicate that it was a central site even earlier (Ljungkvist 2013: 45; Beronius Jörpeland & Seiler 2017: 441–444). From this time at least up until the Viking era it probably was the residence of some kind of king or priest-king who ruled from a royal manor (Duczko 1998: 21–22; Beronius Jörpeland & Seiler 2017). This king led regular ceremonies gathering many people, in connection with the original Disting Fair and the *Thing (ting)* for the old *folkland* Tiundaland were held (Ferm 1986: 66). In the middle of the twelfth century, Uppsala was declared an episcopal see and the royal manor was given a Christian cathedral as its neighbour. When Sweden became an independent church province in 1164, the place was chosen as the seat for the archbishop (Lovén 2010: 8). Later, the relics of St Erik, slain in 1160 by a coalition of Swedes and Danes, were placed there. His feast was celebrated on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, which still is the name day of Erik in the Swedish calendar (Ahnlund 1954: 114–115).<sup>11</sup>

South of (Old) Uppsala, a port and market place slowly developed into a small town which was called Aros or Östra (East) Aros. Being an important location for trading, Aros gradually came to compete with Uppsala as the main settlement in the area. The king probably owned a lot of the land in the surrounding area and both Tiundaland’s *Thing* and the Disting Fair moved from Uppsala to Östra Aros by the mid-thirteenth century (Ferm 1986: 63; Beronius Jörpeland & Seiler 2017). Uppsala was, in other



Fig. 2: The mounds of Old Uppsala. Photo: Henrik Ågren.

words, becoming less important.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, in 1258 the pope allowed that the archiepiscopal see could be moved from Uppsala to a more suitable location, and that the name should follow the church. Östra Aros was chosen to be the new home for the archbishop and was renamed Uppsala. Thereby, the former Uppsala became Old Uppsala. The translocation took place in 1273, after which the old cathedral became an ordinary parish church (Lovén 2010: 8). In the sixteenth century there was, however, another view of the area's early history, a view that makes it less probable that the site of Old Uppsala in itself was an important realm of memory for Gustav Vasa.

## The concept of Uppsala's older history among Reformation era scholars

We know nothing about what common people of the Reformation era knew or thought about Uppsala's origin. In scholarly works, however, an interesting and strange picture is painted. Sources for older

Swedish history were scarce and unlike the neighbouring countries Denmark and Norway, no great chronicles or sagas covering the time before the fourteenth century were written until the late Middle Ages (Lindroth 1975a: 92). The origin of this scholarly picture is one of these texts, the *Prosaic Chronicle*, anonymously written in the mid-fifteenth century. It states that the ancient, mythical Swedish king Inge Filmersson had his residence in Old Uppsala at "a heathen temple [which] stood upon the Dome hill where Uppsala cathedral is now situated" (*Sveriges krönika* 1868–1881 (1450): 224). Later details clarify that the temple referred to is the one Adam of Bremen described (*Sveriges krönika* 1868–1881 (1450): 225–226). The statement contradicts itself. The positioning of the temple in Old Uppsala is negated by the claim that it was built on the same spot as the fifteenth-century cathedral.

This latter piece of information was picked up by the most influential source of knowledge about Swedish history during the reformation era: *Chronica regni Gothorum* (*Chronicle of the Gothic realm*), written by the Uppsala cleric, Ericus Olai, around



1470. From that chronicle, several prominent sixteenth-century works on Swedish history based their claims. Two of these were the brothers Johannes and Olaus Magnus, who belonged to Gustav Vasa's inner circle before their loyalty to Catholic beliefs forced them into exile (Lindroth 1975a: 289). Johannes, the last Catholic archbishop of Sweden wrote *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque Regibus* (*History of all the Swedish and Gothic Kings*), a national history focused on historical and mythological kings in Sweden from ancient history until the early sixteenth century. Olaus is the author of *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (*History of the Nordic People*), which, contrary to its name, is a description of Sweden in his own day, describing economy, folklore, nature, and so on. Even though this book is not primarily historical, there are some passages that deal with Uppsala's past

Two other history-writing brothers in sixteenth-century Sweden were the reformers Olaus and Laurentius Petri. The former wrote *Svenska krönika* (*The Swedish Chronicle*), which was not condoned by Gustav Vasa, probably because of its lack of patriotic sentiments. Olaus' brother Laurentius, on the other hand, wrote a book by the same name that was more characterised by anti-Danish and anti-Catholic sentiments. Neither book was printed in the sixteenth century but disseminated in hand-written copies (Lindroth 1975a: 280–283).<sup>13</sup>

All of these texts reproduce to different degrees the misconception about the site of the old temple, and consequently of the revered capital of the ancient Swedes. The focus of the authors is (new) Uppsala, but Old Uppsala is not completely forgotten. Ericus Olai is very precise in locating the temple and the royal residence at the site of the cathedral of his (and our) day (Ericus Olai 1678 (1470): 1–5). He also mentions Old Uppsala, where he claims that the royal manor later moved, but explains that name thus: “The same place is, however, now called Old Uppsala, because the archiepiscopal see was situated there. Still, what is now called Uppsala, where both the capital and the archiepiscopal see stands and flourishes, is older than the other” (Ericus Olai 1678 (1470): 5).<sup>14</sup>

All other authors mentioned above are generally less precise when introducing the home of the ancient Swedes. Among them, Olaus Petri gives the same exact location as the *Prosaic Chronicle*, more or less citing it (Olaus Petri 1917 (1540): 11–12). His contemporaries, however, seem to have been a bit bothered by that piece of information, something

that shows in different ways. Laurentius Petri does not give any precise specification at all considering where ancient Uppsala was located (Laurentius Petri 1828 (1560): 18; 25; 37 e.g.). Olaus and Johannes Magnus paint a more complicated picture. Johannes refers to Uppsala without a prefix when he presents the original royal residence, something that points to new Uppsala (Magnus 1620 (1554): 5). However, later on he states that the temple was built in Uppsala, “in a wide and flat place” (Magnus 1620 (1554): 11). That description is more suitable for Old Uppsala, but general enough to be interpreted in many ways. He also mentions royal burial monuments “not far from Uppsala” (Magnus 1620 (1554): 75). If these monuments are the famous mounds, it means a distinction between Old Uppsala and the first, so-called ancient Uppsala. Similar vagueness and contradictions can be found in Olaus Magnus. In one discussion about the contemporary cathedral in Uppsala, he claims that it once was the site of old idolatry (i.e. the temple), but he also states that the cult site could have been located “on certain hills in its vicinity” (Magnus 1909 (1555): 70). In another context he unequivocally states that the cathedral was built on the site of the old temple, but also on a vast plain (Magnus 1909 (1555): 140–142).

These examples show that the sixteenth century had accepted the fifteenth-century description of Uppsala, but that this description caused some confusion. There are further hints about Old Uppsala as an important place, often without mentioning the name. Both Magnus brothers describe a second cult site dedicated to Freyr, one of the gods commonly associated with the Uppsala temple. In this place “not far from Uppsala”, human sacrifices were made in pre-Christian days (Magnus 1620 (1554): 13; Magnus 1909 (1555): 136–137).<sup>15</sup> Olaus Petri, on the other hand, states that the mounds in Old Uppsala “without doubts” (Olaus Petri 1917 (1540): 73) are royal graves, thereby acknowledging it as a place of ancient importance.

The picture of Uppsala's oldest history presented by scholars in sixteenth-century Sweden can be summarised thus: The centre of the old Swedish kingdom was (new) Uppsala, where the temple and the royal residence were located. Old Uppsala had traditions from ancient times as well, but not as old or as important. Ericus Olai states that the cathedral and the royal manor for a while had been located in Old Uppsala, but, according to him, this is not the original central place. In his texts, Olaus Magnus seems to be a bit troubled by the official version of history, as if

he was aware that it was incorrect, or at least disputable. The same awareness may be the reason why Johannes Magnus chose his way of discussing the matter, while Olaus Petri seems less disturbed, and Laurentius Petri simply ignored the problem by excluding exact geographical precisions. Running the risk of over interpretation, I understand the matter to be that the Magnus brothers had some suspicion, at the very least, that Ericus Olai was wrong in his description of Old Uppsala, but they decided to reproduce it nonetheless. Regardless of these doubts, (new) Uppsala was a more important realm of memory than Old Uppsala in the historiographical thinking of sixteenth-century Sweden. So far there seem to have been no symbolic reason for Gustav Vasa to hold meetings in Old Uppsala.

## The site of the cathedral

As mentioned, Sten Lindroth has claimed that it was generally believed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that Old Uppsala's period of glory only lasted a short period, from the establishment of the episcopal see in the twelfth century and to the moving of the see to Östra Aros in the thirteenth. From the excerpts quoted above, Lindroth's claim seems to be correct. To the historians of sixteenth-century Sweden, it was the present-day city that was the location of ancient Uppsala, the original Uppsala, as it were, and not Old Uppsala. On the other hand, it is reasonable to think that in the Reformation era, Christian cultural heritage was more important than pre-Christian cultural heritage. Therefore, Old Uppsala might have had a value as a realm of memory by virtue of being the original seat for the Swedish archbishop.

There is, however, scant evidence that people viewed Old Uppsala in that way either. When it comes to the original location of the cathedral and the archiepiscopal see, the sixteenth-century authors show an even more remarkable inconsistency. There are two details that are relevant for the question of the original location: the founding of the see, including the erection of the cathedral church, and the original location of the shrine of St Erik. Since that shrine was closely connected to the cathedral, the placement of the shrine could also provide a hint about which cathedral church was the original one.

The overall picture is ambiguous to say the least. Johannes Magnus and Laurentius Petri both clearly state that the cathedral church was originally built in new Uppsala (Magnus 1620 (1554): 531; Laurentius Petri 1828 (1560), p. 66–67). Ericus Olai does not

mention the early cathedral, but he states that the relics of St Erik were placed in a church built “where the Uppsala-temple of the three gods stood in ancient times” (Ericus Olai 1678 (1470): 168). The statement clearly points towards new Uppsala from his point of view. Olaus Petri, finally, mentions that both the founding of the cathedral and the early elevation of the relics took place in Uppsala, but refrains from specifying which Uppsala. He does, however, mention the old name for new Uppsala, Östra Aros (Olaus Petri 1917 (1540): 56–57).<sup>16</sup> This could mean that he by Uppsala means Old Uppsala, but that is by no means the only possible interpretation.

There seems to be a general uncertainty about exactly where the cathedral church was originally built, and in some cases there even seems to be an aversion to specify the location. What is noteworthy, however, is that the already indistinct precision regarding the original Uppsala cathedral becomes downright contradictory in the passages where the historians reach the 1270s, when the see was moved. In the case of Olaus Petri, the contradictions are not too remarkable. Since it is possible that he actually meant Old Uppsala when he wrote about the establishment of the diocese, it is no wonder that he tells us that the archiepiscopal see moved from Old Uppsala to new Uppsala in the thirteenth century, especially since he uses the name Östra Aros again (Olaus Petri 1917 (1540): 72). All the other authors more or less clearly placed the original cathedral in new Uppsala. When they therefore describe the moving of the cathedral from Old Uppsala to new Uppsala, they thereby construct a contradictory narrative (Ericus Olai 1678 (1470): 182; Magnus 1620 (1554): 556–557; Laurentius Petri 1828 (1560): 76).<sup>17</sup> This is particularly true in the cases of Johannes Magnus and Laurentius Petri. These two authors openly claim that the cathedral was originally built in new Uppsala, which would make a relocation to the same spot logically impossible. Ericus Olai did not say where the cathedral was founded, which makes his contradiction less obvious. However, by claiming that the relics of St Erik were moved together with the cathedral, he falls into the same trap.

Overall, the picture of how Uppsala's oldest history is constructed seems clear. It is as if the authors feel that the official history-writing, claiming that new Uppsala was the original site of the archiepiscopal see, is questionable and may be incorrect. Yet even so, they choose to ignore these problems as much as possible. When the stories are set in the time when there was only one Uppsala, it is possible



for them to avoid the problem. When the two Uppsala-localities are tied together by the relocation of the cathedral, these sixteenth-century historians have to be more true to the facts, even though that brings about inconsistencies. It is also worth noting that the pre-Christian part of Old Uppsala's history receives greater emphasis than the Christian part, such as the burial mounds, suggestions that the temple and the sacrificial grove *possibly* was located there, and that the pre-Christian royal manor was moved there from its previous location in new Uppsala. Thus, according to the historians of sixteenth-century Sweden, the place for Gustav Vasa's meetings, Old Uppsala, was not considered a place neither of significant pre-Christian cultural heritage, nor of early Christian cultural heritage. In short, to the contemporaries of Gustav Vasa, Old Uppsala was not a realm of memory on account of its distant past.

## Traces of a popular tradition concerning Old Uppsala

It is, however, important to remember that among the chronicles cited above, none of them but that of Ericus Olai could possibly have had any impact on the view of Old Uppsala during the 1520s and 1530s. Olaus Petri's chronicle is supposed to be the oldest of the contemporaries, but it was not finished until in the late 1530s at the earliest (Jensen 2002: 51). The aforementioned chronicles may therefore illustrate how Old Uppsala was understood in Gustav Vasa's

time but cannot be considered to have affected the contemporary understanding of the place. One also has to remember that the circles in which these scholars lived were hardly representative of the wider Swedish populace. Therefore, when the king met with his subjects at Erikmas, we cannot be certain that these subjects shared the views about Old Uppsala's history expressed in the chronicles.

It is possible that the wider populace embraced another view of Old Uppsala than that of the chroniclers, or that the place had a different meaning to them, apart from its role as the ancient capital of the Swedes. Regardless of how history was written in this era, the place had a factual history, a past that may have survived in the collective memory or in traditions. Concerning what we know of Old Uppsala today, it seems more than plausible that some kind of popular tradition about the place existed in Gustav Vasa's time. It was after all an old meeting place, where the Disting Fair, the Tiunda *Thing* and ancient religious celebrations had been held for generations. If such a tradition existed, it may have constructed a realm of memory and thereby given a symbolical reason to hold the meeting at Old Uppsala.

Signs that any memory of these traditions had survived are, however, weak. While there are several place names in Old Uppsala that allude to its distant past, and although some of these names are old, none of them is from the time of Gustav Vasa or earlier. The small mound where Gustav is said to have spoken to the people is known by the names 'Tingshögen' ('Thing mound') and 'Domarehögen' ('Judge's



Fig. 3: Tingshögen (the Thing Mound) at Old Uppsala. Photo: Henrik Ågren.

mound'), but neither of these names is older than the late seventeenth century (Judge's mound: Rudbeck 1689: 373; *Thing* mound: Peringskiöld 1710: 217) (fig. 3). When Gustav Vasa's own historian, Peder Svart, described the meetings, he only called it "the mound, where the meetings are usually held" (Svart 1964 (1560): 173). The name 'Tingsslätten' ('The *thing* field') for the open field south of the royal mounds is even newer, given to the place by the twentieth-century archaeologist Sune Lindqvist, who argued that this was the place for the *Svea thing* in pre-historic times (Wahlberg 1994: 162).

A second element that could point us towards a popular tradition is the richness of physical historical remains in and around Old Uppsala. At least the royal mounds ought to have been a constant reminder that the place had a special history even in the sixteenth century. There are mentions of these remains in different sources, mostly from the seventeenth century. Some of these sources connect the mounds to ancient times and the pagan temple. The three big mounds were occasionally named after the three gods of the temple, Thor, Odin and Freyr, for example by the historian Johannes Schefferus in 1666 and a decade earlier by the Councillor of the Realm (*riksråd*), Bengt Skytte, while guiding the English ambassador Bulstrode Whitelocke (Schefferus 1666: 366; Whitelocke 1855 (1654): 80–81).<sup>18</sup> This is, however, more than a century after Gustav Vasa's meetings. It should also be pointed out that even if there were a connection between the mounds and the gods of the temple already in Gustav Vasa's time, this does not necessarily imply that the temple itself had been located in Old Uppsala.

Furthermore, Professor Johannes Messenius, who probably had more knowledge about old Swedish history than any other person did in the early seventeenth century, seems to have been oblivious of the associations between the mounds and the gods (Schück 1920: 130). Even more revealing is the nation-wide survey, *Rannsakningar efter antikviteter* (Inquiries for Antiquities), launched in the 1660s. In this, ordinary people all over Sweden were asked if they knew about any ancient remains in their local areas and what they believed to be their origin. The reports from Old Uppsala are strikingly poor. Nothing at all is said about the great mounds. Overall, the annotations from the entire parish consist of a few notations about rune stones and some graves. The description of the parish only occupies a few lines in the printed inventory (*Rannsakningar efter antikviteter* 1960 (1680): 81).

Reports from the late-seventeenth century provide little evidence about how people in the early sixteenth century understood their surroundings, whether they gave divine names to some mounds or neglected the same mounds entirely. The evidence can only be used as a reminder that it is not clear that Old Uppsala meant something significant to the general populace in sixteenth-century Sweden. Therefore, to summarise, it is hard to tell how important Old Uppsala was as realm of memory, either for people in seventeenth-century Sweden or in sixteenth-century Sweden. Some hints exist, but none of them are decisive. There are no attributes that suggest old traditions were tied to the sixteenth century. In any case, new Uppsala seems to have had a considerably more profound symbolic value.

## St Erik

In light of all this, it seems as if Old Uppsala's value as a realm of memory had little to do with ancient times. Not because the place was considered to be without an important past, but because that past was heavily overshadowed by the past of new Uppsala. There was, however, one symbol that meant more than anything for Old Uppsala's cultural status in the early sixteenth century. The meetings at St Erik's Fair were held in direct connection to the procession in which St Erik's relics were carried from the new cathedral to the old (fig. 4). It is therefore impossible to neglect what Erik meant for sixteenth-century Sweden.

While the cult of St Erik had begun as a local cult at Uppsala, by the fifteenth century it had spread to



Fig. 4: The shrine of Saint Erik in Uppsala Cathedral. Made by Hans Rosenfälvh in the period 1574–79 and donated to the cathedral by King Johan III in 1580. Photo: Steffen Hope.



large parts of Sweden through resolute propaganda from the archiepiscopal seat. Thereby, Erik became one of the primary patrons, or national saints, of Sweden (Thordeman 1954: 188; Tjällén 2007: 81; Ellis Nilsson 2015: 89; Oertel 2016: ch. 7) (fig. 5). There was also a political side to this process. During the late Middle Ages ‘St Erik’s law’ became a general name for old and good laws. Even more revealing is probably that in several peasant uprisings, for example the Engelbrekt uprising in the 1430s, the rebels referred to St Erik and the principles he represented as their inspiration. He was perceived as a model for a good king and his time as the golden age that the leaders of the uprising tried to recreate (Schück 1917: 15–18; Ahnlund 1954: 137–138; Ågren 2012: ch. 2.2). Later in the century, Sten Sture and other Swedish politicians promoted St Erik as a specifically Swedish instrument of propaganda against the Danish Oldenburg kings (Reinholdsson 1998: 55). A further sign of Erik’s importance is that even Christian II (of Oldenburg) used him to his advantage. After Christian had defeated his Swedish enemies, the council of the realm accepted him as king of Sweden, partly because the councillors were persuaded that he had been appointed according to what was called the law of St Erik, and partly because he was purported to be related to Erik (“Svenska rådets arvsförklar-



Fig. 5: King Erik refuses to accept taxes from his subjects. Drawing by Johan Peringskiöld of a now lost wall-painting in the church of Old Uppsala, printed in his *Monumenta Uplandica per Thiundiam*, Stockholm.

ing.” 31/10 1520: 623–624). Furthermore, Christian sometimes included St Erik (next to God!) when he formally introduced himself, and during a Swedish rebellion in 1517, the king declared war against the rebels in the name of St Erik (Tjällén 2007: 88; Oertel 2016: 239). Obviously, Erik was a very important source of political legitimacy in Sweden for all parts in the many conflicts.

For Gustav Vasa the symbolic value of St Erik was important. By Gustav’s doing, Sweden had left the Danish-lead Kalmar Union. As a result of the power struggles, national awareness became more and more deep-rooted. In that context, St Erik served well as a figurehead. He was not only a Swedish counterpart to the Norwegian and Danish saint kings Olav and Cnut but was also said to have been killed by Danes. Despite the attempts of Christian II, the sixteenth-century veneration of Erik was not merely political, but even anti-Danish or at least anti-Oldenburg (Lovén 2010: 7; Oertel 2016: 260).

The Erikmas as such was also connected to patriotic sentiments. Gustav Vasa’s own historian, Peder Svart, describes how Gustav’s troops were preparing to invade Uppsala in May 1521 during the rebellion against Christian II. The city then wrote to the threatening host, asking the commanders not to interfere with the relic procession to Old Uppsala. To this, the commanders replied that the best aid they thought they could give St Erik was to make sure that the ceremony was supervised by Swedish men and not by foreigners (Svart 1964 (1560): 53–54).

St Erik’s popularity is evident in historiography, too. Johannes Magnus dedicates several chapters to describe Erik’s splendid qualities. His virtues were for example

so numerous and great that even though he was a mundane king and regent, he still seemed to live a celestial and angelic life. [ - - ] Because everything that was just, honest and fair shone from him as from a bright mirror (Magnus 1620 (1554): 528).

When Erik’s subjects brought him his taxes, the king, still according to Johannes Magnus, answered: “I am pleased with what is mine, you should keep what is yours. I care little for your taxes and tributes, your children and grandchildren will need them better (Magnus 1620 (1554): 529).”<sup>19</sup>

The Protestant Petri brothers were both a bit more cautious when describing Erik. Their caution was however only directed towards the truth behind the legend and other stories – especially when they tou-

ched upon Catholic beliefs and practices. When it came to the saint-king himself, they were almost as generous in their praise as Johannes Magnus. Both brothers emphasize and praise Erik's justness, his mildness towards the poor, his hard work for spreading the Christian faith, and his general popularity (Olaus Petri 1917 (1540): 55–56; Laurentius Petri 1828 (1560): 64–67).

Erik was, in other words, the quintessential realm of memory, especially for a new and weak regime. He had every characteristic a good king was supposed to have: pious, just, generous etc. and was obviously seen as a specifically Swedish symbol. Whether Gustav Vasa had any such motives for holding his meetings at the Erik procession or not, it is difficult to think that the occasion did not affect the audience's reception of the messages.<sup>20</sup> There is no information that any of the royal measures were made in the name of the sanctified king, but his ceremonial presence must still have been manifest. One has to remember that Gustav was a usurper, without any legal claims to the throne, and that he, on top of that, had a very radical programme for both church and society. He needed all the legitimisation he could get, and, as has been said, St Erik was the quintessence of royal legitimacy in early sixteenth-century Sweden. There are several examples of how Gustav Vasa tried, on other occasions, to link his own person to that of Erik (*Svenska kungliga porträtt i svenska porträttarkivets samlingar* 1943: 27; Berglund 2007: 184–185; Ågren 2012: ch. 5).

The question of which factor meant the most for the ideological impact of the meetings may, however, still be difficult to answer. Place-person (Old Uppsala-St Erik) or present-past (the processions-Erik's reign and martyrdom) are not easy to separate in this case. Much of Old (and new) Uppsala's symbolic value in the Reformation era emanated from St Erik (Lovén 2010: 8). However, it would be to exaggerate Erik's importance to claim that the saint-king was the only realm of memory. The place was important too, but here it gets a little complicated again.

The celebration of a saint was connected, also in the minds of those who venerated him or her, with the place where the celebration took place, and St Erik-Uppsala was no exception (Ellis 2015: 196). However, Erik was and had always been more associated with Östra Aros/Uppsala than with Old Uppsala (Ellis Nilsson 2015: 190–191). The crucial detail is therefore that his relics were carried in procession out to the old cathedral. It was through this procession that Old Uppsala got its main symbolic value as

a geographical location. The saint and his ceremonies were more important than the burial mounds or similar ancient remains.

The same can be said about the present and the past. Relic processions were common elements of saints' cults, and in the case of St Erik the procession was an annual tradition to celebrate a saint who had died a long time ago. However, the procession was not only a reminder of a historical event, it was also, and perhaps even more so, a significant event in the present. It is probably not an exaggeration to claim that the procession as such meant more to the participants than the concept of Erik as a living, ruling king in the twelfth century. The procession of St Erik's relics is an example of how traditions can be used to soften the difference between past and present. At the same time, traditions of this kind are also important to create and reproduce stability and feelings of community, especially in periods of crises and change (Kammen 1993: 25; Malmstedt 2002: 160; Selberg 2002: 15). Old Uppsala's greatness in the past may in other words have been considered either important or insignificant. Either way, the rites performed in the present were of the greatest importance for the symbolical value of the context.

## Gustav Vasa, St Erik and Old Uppsala

To conclude, there seem to be several reasons why Gustav Vasa favoured the feast of Erikmas as an occasion for holding meetings, and why he favoured Old Uppsala over the new city. Some practical reasons were clearly important. Erikmas was the time of a fair visited by many, where representatives of important families, parts of the country or groups of the population could be found. However, the symbolic setting of the meeting gave extra impact to every message that was delivered there. In the sixteenth century, the meeting place by the mounds did not have the same venerability and historical importance as the city of Uppsala, and not the symbolic value we give it today, at least not judging from available sources. Instead, the cultural reference that certainly was the most influential was the connection to the celebration of the saint and the king of the golden age, Erik.

Were there any symbolic reasons behind the fact that the Erikmas fair in Uppsala was preferred by Gustav Vasa when he addressed his people? Were there any symbolic reasons behind his preference of Old Uppsala as the meeting place? These questions,



asked throughout the article, can in short be given the same answer: St Erik. He was the most important of the realms of memory connected to the meeting. He also tied the place of Old Uppsala and the occasion of the fair together. There is no evidence that Gustav Vasa on these occasions explicitly referred to Erik, like he did in other circumstances or in the same way that Gustav's own name and person have been used later. On the other hand, the king presented his political programmes amidst the glory of the celebrations of the old saint-king. Even though these programmes in the long run meant that the very same cult was exterminated, the opportunity to exploit that cult was too good to pass up.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is a shorter version of Ågren 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The actual name of the place is Gamla ('Old') Uppsala. Normally, names are not translated, but since the meaning of the prefix is central for the article it has been done here.

<sup>3</sup> The royal annalist Peder Svart explicitly states that Old Uppsala was the meeting place at the Erik fairs in 1526 and 1531 (Svart 1964 (1560): 120 & 173. Nils Staf adds 1529, 1530 and probably 1532. (Staf 1935: 76; 81 & 90). In the other cases, no specific place is mentioned, but Svart's choices of words indicate that the meetings were held in Old Uppsala on those occasions too.

<sup>4</sup> According to Ljung 1954: 152, it has been claimed that the fair was held in Old Uppsala (Lindqvist 1953: 56–57). The evidence for this claim is however extremely weak.



<sup>5</sup> This has also been observed by Herman Schück (Schück 1992: 39).

<sup>6</sup> The Disting was an ancient occasion for an annual *thing* meeting, probably connected to a pre-Christian religious celebration. Around that meeting, a fair was gradually established (Ferm 1986: 66). The Disting fair survived the religious celebration.

<sup>7</sup> The exact numbers are disputed. See Ågren 2009: 40–44 for a discussion.

<sup>8</sup> The last known occasion when this ceremony was performed took place in 1521 (Svart 1964 (1560): 53). There is however no reason to suspect that it was the last time it was carried out.

<sup>9</sup> All translations from Swedish to English are made by the author.

<sup>10</sup> See Alkarp 2009 for an extensive discussion of the modern conceptions of Old Uppsala.

<sup>11</sup> When the enshrinement of St Erik actually was performed is unclear, but it was probably after Old Uppsala had become archiepiscopal see. For more information on the early history of Old Uppsala and St Erik, see Sundqvist 2009.

<sup>12</sup> The earlier opinion that it was abandoned is however questioned today. Old Uppsala seems to have been important for the local royal power even when Aros grew as a settlement (Ljungkvist 2013: 59; Beronius Jörpeland & Seiler 2017: 453).

<sup>13</sup> Whether it actually was Laurentius Petri who wrote the adjusted version is not clear (Hall 2000: 36). Since no other author is

known and it is often credited to him, I have here taken for granted that this is the fact. The content is in this case more interesting than the author is.

<sup>14</sup> Quotations of Ericus and of the Magnus brothers (see below) are translated from Swedish publications. The original texts are in Latin.

<sup>15</sup> This place is also mentioned by Laurentius Petri, but without geographical specifications (Laurentius Petri 1828 (1560): 38).

<sup>16</sup> The *Prosaic Chronicle* and Olaus Magnus do not mention either of the subjects at all.

<sup>17</sup> The different presentations are a bit more complicated than I have accounted for here. A more comprehensive account is given in Ågren 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Thor has in Bulstrode's recapitulation been replaced by Tyr and Freyr by the female god Freya. Another interesting fact is that Schefferus thought that Freyr was the first person buried in any of the mounds (Schefferus 1666: 358). Whether Freyr was the same person to Schefferus as to the Magnus brothers or not, this is yet another example of how he was connected to the Uppsala temple.

<sup>19</sup> This quote is almost in every word identical with a passage from St Erik's legend ("Erik den heliges legend på latin, forn-svenska och modern svenska." 1954 (1270): XVIII).

<sup>20</sup> This has also been hinted at by Ahnlund 1954: 131.



