

**Björnståhls Resa. Europa och Konstatinopel 1767–1779**  
[Björnståhl's Journey. Europe and Constantinople, 1767–1779].  
By Carla Killander Cariboni, Catharina Raudvere, Vassilios  
Sabatakakis, and Johan Stenström.

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For the Kingdom of Sweden, the eighteenth century revolved around seeking ways out of political and economic isolation. After losing the Great Northern War, the country became vulnerable and was in need of new friends and allies. By supporting travellers who would report from their journeys, the country could build up new interests with the world, not only diplomatically but also the fields of economy, culture and science. One of these travellers was the philologist Jacob Jonas Björnståhl (1731–1779), who travelled across Europe. His voyage started in 1767 when he left Sweden and ended in 1779 in Thessaloniki, where he died of illness.

Jacob Jonas Björnståhl was born in 1731 in Näshulta. After studying in Uppsala, in 1761 he graduated with a master's in philosophy and became a docent (a senior academic) in Swedish philology, but after two years, he switched to being a docent in Semitic languages. As the private tutor of the twelve- and thirteen-year-old Adolf Fredrik and Carl Fredrik Rudbeck—the grandsons of the well-known scientist Olof Rudbeck the younger—he started his European journey accompanying them on their study tour. With the support of the Rudbeck family and Uppsala University, he travelled to France, Switzerland, Italy, England, Germany, the Netherlands and the Ottoman Empire, and especially to Constantinople and the monasteries of the Meteoras and other Greek towns. Björnståhl started to report about his experiences with the people he met, the natural environment and local cultures in letters to his friend Carl Christoffer Gjörwell (1731–1811), who was a publisher and royal librarian in the National Library of Sweden. Gjörwell periodically published the letters in five volumes altogether, which included *Tidningar om lärda saker* (Journals of Learned Things, 1768–1769), *Almänna Tidningar* (General Journals, 1770–1772),

*Nya Almänna Tidningar* (New General Journals, 1773), *Nya Lärda Tidningar* (New Learned Journals, 1774–1775) and *Samlaren* (Collectors, 1773–1778) and as a series which was published in a six-volume collection titled *Resa* (Journey) after Björnsthåhl's death. Both the original edition and the six-volume edition became successful.

Besides the analysis of the Swedish traveller's work, the book presents the reader with an image of the late eighteenth-century Northern and Western Europe, of Björnsthåhl and the travel writing of the Enlightenment era. The authors of the current book (each contributing two chapters) come from different branches of the humanities, which results in a comprehensive but sometimes incoherent picture. The consecutive chapters basically proceed in chronological order, but due to the subjects of the chapters, gaps emerge in the timeline. Another aspect of the fragmented character of the volume is the lack of a unified bibliography. Instead, there are bibliographies at the end of each chapter, although there is a general index of persons at the end of the book.

The introduction paints Björnsthåhl's journey with broad strokes and summarizes the history of past research on him and his work. In the first chapter, the literary scholar Johan Stenström draws a picture of the intellectual environment of the 1760s–1770s. There are subchapters discussing travel writing as a genre, the grand tours and published travel letters through eighteenth-century Swedish history and how members of western and northern societies thought about meeting other cultures. Being an important person for Björnsthåhl, the second half of the first chapter describes Gjörwell's life in brief and his role in relation to the *Resa* as Stenström zooms in to the main subject matter, which is contained in the following chapter, "Möten, människor, miljöer" (Meetings, people, environments). For Björnsthåhl, being a Swede was always something to be proud of; he looked for other Swedes and signs or traces of Sweden throughout his tour. With this perspective, Björnsthåhl looked around and reflected on the cultural atmosphere. As a learned man, he sought out other intellectuals; thus, he established good connections with Jean le Rond d'Alambert, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France, Albrecht von Haller in Switzerland, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Germany. Although Björnsthåhl was a philologist, as a former student of Carl von Linné, he also paid great attention to the natural environment and listened to Linné's instructions about what to look out for in a foreign country. He had such great respect for Linné that his impact can only be compared to that of the ruling monarch, Gustav III. Björnsthåhl visited many universities, including the Sorbonne, academies such as the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, and major libraries like the Vatican Library in Rome. He proudly saw how many botanical gardens—like one in Bologna—used Linné's method of systematisation.

Carla Killander Cariboni contributed the second and third chapters. Her chapters shed light on Björnsthåhl as a writer and his style of writing. The chapter “Björnsthåhls *Resa*—Texterna och deras upphovsman” (Björnsthåhl’s *Resa*—The texts and the author) analyses the *Resa*’s structure through his sojourn in France and Italy. Although Björnsthåhl wrote about his experiences in chronological order, the *Resa* itself is not fully chronological. Of the six volumes, the first three contain the eighty-three letters that Björnsthåhl sent to Gjørwell. In the fourth and the first half of the fifth volume, his own diary of the tour is presented. That piece of work was compiled by Carl Petter Blomberg, a pastor who became Björnsthåhl’s friend in Constantinople and maintained connections with Gjørwell after Björnsthåhl’s death. The second part of the fifth volume and the sixth contain those letters which were sent to Gjørwell by other travellers and contain information about Björnsthåhl. In this way, the reader can choose to read according to the types of the texts or completely chronologically. In this chapter, there is an analysis of the structure and schematics of Björnsthåhl’s letters. These analyses lead the reader to the second chapter by Cariboni about what kind of narrator Björnsthåhl was. Was he a reporter or a storyteller? What was important for him? He wrote much about the persons he met—for example, Albrecht von Haller was “a living lexicon with a good heart,” and Le Fardier de Cugnot (who made the first steam-powered chariot in 1769) was a “polite and deep man like Rousseau.” In contrast, Björnsthåhl did not like Voltaire, who he found a bit foolish. Sometimes, Björnsthåhl reported about the women he met in a manner that belied his era. He never described them by their looks but by their learning and refinement. Björnsthåhl did not write much about himself, but from the texts, we can assume he was an obedient person who clung hard to the truth. When necessary, he argued with Polybius and Livius about Hannibal. He can be ironic, as well, but in general, he paints a positive picture of himself.

Catharina Raduvere is a professor at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Lund. Her contribution concerns Björnsthåhl’s meeting with Eastern cultures. The two chapters cover his experiences in Europe and Constantinople. These experiences started at Uppsala University, where he met the Hebrew and Arabic languages. Besides the historical connections between Sweden and the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Björnsthåhl had a thorough knowledge of the travel letters and journeys to different countries of Carl von Linné, who was the most influential man in Uppsala at that time, and whose students ended up visiting many parts of the eastern world (like Peter Forsskål). He met many orientalisks on his journey with the Rudbecks, and they were in England in 1775 when Gustav III requested that he travel to Constantinople. Adolf Fredrik Rudbeck stayed in England, but Carl Fredrik Rudbeck (who by that time had become Björnsthåhl’s closest friend) went with him to the Ottoman Empire. Constantinople proved a difficult experience for Björnsthåhl. He could not master the Turkish language and culture; instead, he stayed largely close to the Swedish legation. He struggled with the Turkish language

and criticised much of the Turkish culture and the mentality of the Turkish people he encountered, describing them as uncultured and ignorant of their own culture. But when he found fault, it was not rooted in any aversion to Muslims, because he favorably compared Arabs to Turkish people, who—to him—were much more cultured and open-minded. Concerning the issue of knowledge transfer, he described the clothes, habits, and beliefs of the people in Constantinople, but he did not explain many Eastern words and terms; he expected the readers of his letters to understand them. Generally, he wrote much about Muslim cultures, but, for example, he included no exact quotes from the Quran. Not much time was spent in Constantinople before Carl Fredrik Rudbeck had to travel to the Levant; therefore, he told Björnsthåhl that he would find a more appealing empirical setting at the Greek monasteries.

The last author of *Björnsthåhls Resa* is Vassilios Sabatakakis, a lecturer in the modern Greek language at Lund University. His two chapters embrace Björnsthåhl's sojourn in Greece, how he described his own work, and how important his job was for future travellers. For Björnsthåhl, this detour was a much better experience than the one in Constantinople. He described the Greek people as much friendlier and more open than the Turks. He could speak Greek with them and had more intellectual experiences. Although Greece was a very poor region at that time, Western knowledge of its history helped build connections with the Greeks. The most interesting part of his journey was visiting the Meteoras, a series of monasteries that were built in the fourteenth century on the steep cliffs of Thessalia. Björnsthåhl encountered much ignorance from the monks of the monasteries—they had not preserved the valuable manuscripts they had in good condition, and many of them were very poorly educated—but he found a couple of monks who were intellectually his equals. With one metropolitan in the Mega Meteoron monastery, he could even talk about Linné, Haller, Boerhaave and van Swieten. In these times, Björnsthåhl also wrote about the Albanian people who were quite unknown to northern readers.

In 1779, Björnsthåhl became severely ill in Thessaloniki, where he died on 12 July 1779, leaving many books and manuscripts behind. He had no family, leaving it up to his friends to manage his legac. Björnsthåhl's writings were very important not just for those who sought the travel journals but indirectly for the whole of Greece. He was one of the first travellers to describe the Meteoras and the circumstances of the Greek people. Later, travellers like William Martin Leake, François Pouqueville, and Robert Walpole used and referred to the translations of the *Resa*, helping to shape the opinions of Western countries that supported Greece in its wars of independence in the 1820s.

