

Summary

Two Kings of Sweden: Gustav and Christina

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Two Kings of Sweden: Gustav and Christina explores King Gustavus II Adolphus' public and private life, including his vision for Sweden as a European power, his marriage to Queen Maria Eleonora of Brandenburg, and his death at the Battle of Lützen during the Thirty Years War. Gustav's history is followed by an analysis of the life and reign of his daughter, Christina, who he insisted be raised like a boy and crowned King of Sweden. During her brief reign, the "Girl King" studied under the world's best known teachers and philosophers, she played a role negotiating the pivotal Peace of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War, and she ruled during Sweden's only colonial endeavor in the New World, the New Sweden Colony (1638-1655) in the Delaware River Valley of the Mid-Atlantic. Examining the themes of power and gender reveal the personal and political complexities involved in how these two Kings of Sweden governed in the age of empire.

King Gustav worked closely with Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna, a high nobleman from a well-respected Swedish family. Together, they restructured the government and revitalized Sweden's organizational, economic, and military powers. Gustav's military legacy as "The Lion of North" was earned on the bloody battlefields of the Thirty Years War, where he led his troops in a fight to preserve Protestantism and expand Sweden's primacy in the Baltic. Sweden emerged as a Great European Power with considerable political influence. When Dutchman Willem Usselinx approached King Gustav in 1624 about beginning a Company for trade in the new world, Gustav was primed to the idea of expanding his empire. Gustav's private life offers further insight into the identity of this mythic King. His restless marriage to the chronically depressed Queen Maria Eleonora, who could not overcome the tragedy of experiencing multiple miscarriages, was a source of constant concern and stress. Gustav's death at the Battle of Lützen in 1632 nearly destroyed Maria Eleonora, but Christina would bear the brunt of his absence.

After a traumatic birth, Christina endured mental torment and physical abuse at the hands of her disappointed mother, Maria Eleonora. Virtually parentless at 6 years old, Christina's family was made up of teachers, politicians, and people from the Royal Court assigned to care for her. Her passion became studying history and government, literature and languages. As King, Christina was encouraged to hone what were considered typically masculine traits of leadership: education, sport, and military proficiency. As her personal sense of masculinity entrenched itself in her identity, Christina began to display a preference to dress and act as a man socially. Letters reveal Christina's physical attraction for a Lady of the Court named Ebba Sparre, and a romantic relationship between the two women was likely. The quagmire of marriage beleaguered Christina's reign from before her official coronation in 1650. Christina viewed marriage as a reduction of her power and she was disgusted by the idea of childbirth. These two basic components of a conventional queen's royal duties—to marry and reproduce an heir—were intolerable to Christina. After all, how could she be a powerful King if she were somebody's wife? It was not possible. Christina abdicated her throne to her cousin Karl Gustav (King Karl X Gustav) in 1654. She immediately converted to Catholicism, a religion she had explored for many years, and she lived the rest of her days in Rome.