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To Coin the Language of Absolutism

Language and image in the medallic history of Gustav III

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In 1746, a crown prince is born. He grows up as the personification of fortune, and manifests his royal qualities repeatedly. He travels far and wide, visits various places and institutions—always eager to learn and to encourage. With distress he sees the agony and suffering of his people, bowed under the yoke of domestic political conflicts. After ascending the throne, he repeatedly tries to resolve the political conflicts in order to pave the way for the concord that the Fatherland so desperately needs. Time and time again, however, these attempts at unity are thwarted by the discords of the four Estates* of the Diet*. Finally, he takes matters into his own hands and redeems the Fatherland and the Swedish people by a glorious coup d'état. Liberty and the citizen are rescued. His reign is filled with heroism, enlightened thoughts and edifying reforms. Commerce and industry are encouraged, as are the sciences and the arts. In war, the ancient Swedish glory is revived. But this brilliant reign ends in horror, as the King—to the immense grief of his subjects—falls victim to an assassin's bullet.

This could be a possible résumé of the medallic history of Gustav III, the subject of this article. The project—ranging from the early 1780s to the dawn of the nineteenth century—involved a grand apparatus, including Sweden's most eminent artists and scholars and a considerable part of the treasury. The reign of Gustav was to be portrayed in a series of medals, and two volumes containing engravings of the medals and historical texts about the

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1 This article emanates from a recent study within my thesis on the problems of legitimacy during the late Swedish absolutist monarchy.
events celebrated on them. The project was never completed—several medals were never struck, and the engravings were never published. Nevertheless, the material constitutes an interesting source concerning the struggles for legitimacy during the period of late Swedish royal absolutism.

The Eleventh Hour of Royal Absolutism; a Question of Legitimacy

The all-embracing objective of my dissertation is to analyse the efforts of the Gustavian* regime to establish and maintain its legitimacy. The period of interest opens in 1772, when Gustav III ended the Age of Liberty* (c. 1720–1772) by replacing the rule of the Diet with augmented royal power.

The Age of Liberty is of great significance for the problems of legitimacy of the Gustavian regime. The period witnessed fundamental economic, social and political transformations. From the 1680s to 1720, Sweden—like most countries of contemporary Europe—was ruled by an absolute monarch (the Caroline* regime). In 1720, the King's powers were considerably reduced by the Diet, which at the same time commensurately increased its own powers. The Diet came to dominate the political system. The political development of the eighteenth century can thus be portrayed as a pendulum, swinging from royal absolutism, to rule by the Diet, and then in 1772 back to royal absolutism.

It would be wrong to exaggerate the democratic tendencies of the Age of Liberty. From an eighteenth-century perspective, however, the Swedish system of Diet rule formed an advanced alternative at a time when Europe was dominated by absolute monarchs.

During the Age of Liberty, the forms and contents of Swedish political life was transformed. In the traditional political arena, new groups entered

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2 The intended title of this publication was *Skäde-penningar öfver de Förnämsta Händelser som tillhöra Konung Gustaf III:s regering* (Engl. *Medals on the Most Prominent Events During the Reign of King Gustav III*).

3 Problems of legitimacy existed during the Caroline regime as well; see for instance Åsa Karlsson's article on the tax-reforms of Charles XII. For political conflicts and problems of legitimacy during the Age of Liberty, see Karin Sennefeldt's article.

and new ideas of liberty, freedom and so forth were put forward. Outside
the traditional political arena, the process of restructuring the public sphere
 gained momentum and political activity increased through various media in
 society. This development was intensified by Sweden's first Freedom of the
 Press in 1766. Members of society could and did behave in ways that had not
 been possible earlier—the old "subject" started to give way to the new "citizen".

The period of interest for my dissertation closes in 1809, when a new
form of government supplanted Gustavian absolutism.

Between these two upheavals, in 1772 and 1809, there was an interregnum
characterised by tension between the struggles for legitimacy of a basically
feudally organised political system and a society undergoing fundamental
change. The consequences of the events of 1772 were the growth of a political
system whose seed was sown in the seventeenth century in a society where
novel political conceptions and new political behaviour gradually took root.
The late eighteenth century was not only the age of the citizen, but also the
age of liberty, justice and equality. Within the scope of this process, the "new
citizen" entered the stage, bringing the demands for economic, social and
political emancipation. This is the complex of problems that I have
characterised as the Eleventh Hour of Royal Absolutism. Confronted with
this societal movement, the absolute monarchy faced ever-growing prob­
lems in legitimising the political system and social organisation that it rep­
resented. The prerequisites of legitimate rule changed, and new strategies
were needed.

As a complex, the Eleventh Hour of Absolutism is not uniquely Swed­
ish. Rather, it is a Western phenomenon. Historians such as Jacques Godechot
and Robert Palmer have characterised the decades before and after the turn
of the eighteenth century as an Atlantic Revolution and an Age of Demo­
cratic Revolution. In state after state—in varying circumstances—absolute
monarchy as a political regime was replaced by systems based on other prin­
ciples. The period outlined above is the Swedish version of the revolu­tion­
ary age. The French example is well known, while the British version is

5 In a recent thesis, M. Melkersson studies the ideological changes in the political elite from
1600s to the 1800s. The importance of the Age of Liberty stands out. Staten, ordningen och
friheten, Uppsala 1997.
6 The restructuring of the public sphere is theoretically discussed by Jürgen Habermas in Borgerlig
offentlighet, Lund 1988 (Engl: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Cambridge
1989).
7 J. Godechot Les révolutions 1770-1799, Paris 1965; R.R. Palmer The Age of the Democratic Revo­

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growing clearer as new research unravels a similar crisis. Janet Polasky's study on the conflicts between the Habsburg monarchy and Brussels indicates a similar problem.

In analysing these problems in Sweden, I use analytical concepts such as ideology, political language, self-image, rhetoric and symbols. Concerning the importance of images and language, I have been much inspired by research on the late ancien régime in France. Keith Baker, for instance, states that maintaining political legitimacy is to a large extent a question of maintaining linguistic authority, "both in the sense that public functions are defined and allocated within the framework of a given political discourse, and in the sense that their exercise takes the form of maintaining that discourse by upholding authoritative definitions of (and within) it".

A central question concerns the relationship between the ideological transformation of society at large and the ideological construction expressed through the political language of absolutism. By linking the conceptual construction of the regime to the political discourse at large, my aim is to uncover a struggle for definitions. A struggle where the regime tries, on the one hand, to preserve the traditional concepts of power, and, on the other, to capture the emerging concepts and values of the time in order to formulate a language capable of generating and upholding legitimacy.

The Medallic History of Gustav III; the Project

When Gustav ordered a medallic history of his reign in 1782, he adopted a traditional and much used form of propaganda. A product of the Renaissance, the art of the medal soon evolved into a mighty propaganda weapon in the hands of the monarchs of Europe. Especially after the histoire métallique of Louis XIV, monarchs, from Britain in the west to Russia in the east, had medals struck to glorify themselves and their reigns. The art of the medal

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10 K. Baker Inventing the French Revolution, Cambridge 1994, passim, quote pp. 17–18. The study sets out to analyse the ideological context of the revolution, and the gradual disintegration of the monarchy's justifying language and definitions.
was—like so many other art forms—transformed into a political art, used for political glorification and justification.

These medals and medallic histories can be characterised as panegyrics on the princes whose lives and reigns they describe. Another aspect of the medal as a medium, was its function of recording/controlling history. Through medals, official definitions and interpretations of events were established. As a material for studying the political language and ideological foundations of regimes, the medals are thus of the highest relevance.\(^{12}\)

The project with the medallic history of Gustav III employed a large apparatus. Gustav acted himself as the omnipotent head of pyramid-shaped organisation; nothing was done without his approval.\(^{13}\) Baron Fredrik Sparre functioned as a co-ordinator. The Royal Academy of Belles-Lettre, History and Antiquities—in 1786 reorganised into something of a medallic academy—was highly engaged in the work of inventing medals, led by its Secretary, Gudmund Johannes Adlerbeth who also wrote the historical texts for the volumes of engravings. The medals were struck by prominent Swedish medallists, particularly Gustaf Ljungberger and Carl Gustaf Fehrman. The likewise prominent engraver Jacob Gillberg made the engravings.\(^{14}\)

Of an intended total of 110, 68 medals and 86 engravings were completed.\(^{15}\) A complete set of historical texts exists.\(^{16}\) The broad time span for the project was 1782 to 1803 (when the last co-ordinator died). By examining the accounts of the project, however, this time span can be reduced with the lion's share of the work being done from 1782–95.\(^{17}\)

In view of the way in which the regime intended to use the medals as a means of communication, the volumes of engravings are of especial importance.

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\(^{12}\) When P. Burke studies the fabrication of Louis XIV, medals are important, *En kung blir till*, Stockholm 1996 (Engl. *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, 1992); in L. Marin's study of the representative framework of the same prince, the medals are likewise accorded considerable attention, *Portrait of the King*, Basingstoke 1988. This is the case in Swedish research as well; in the analyses of K. Johannesson, *I polstjärnans tecken*, Stockholm/Göteborg/Uppsala 1968, and A. Ellenius, *Karolinska bildideer*, Uppsala/Stockholm 1966, on propaganda and images during the Caroline era, the medals are important.


\(^{14}\) Alm 1998, pp. 8–9.

\(^{15}\) The topics of the 110 medals can be divided into six categories: 16 medals on events of warfare; 9 on foreign policy and relations; 8 on dynastic events; 23 on domestic policy; 34 on reforms. Alm 1998, p. 17.

\(^{16}\) ATA: *Adlerbeths hist. beskr.*, sv. texten I–II.

\(^{17}\) Alm 1998, pp. 10–11, Appendix I.
As the figures above show, the completed engravings are more numerous than the actual medals. It is clear that the primary aim of the project was to complete and publish the volumes of engravings.\textsuperscript{18} This should be understood as a communicative strategy. As a medium, the engravings were not only more physically available to a larger audience but the propaganda messages of the medals were also made more explicit through these volumes. Numismatic symbols and Latin texts were interpreted and translated in explanatory notes accompanying the engravings. In the historical texts—one in Swedish and one in French for each engraving—the events portrayed on the medals were described, making the propaganda of the medals not only more explicit, but also more exhaustive.

The Language of Absolutism

The analysis of the medallic history of Gustav III distinguishes four central concepts: concord, liberty, public safety, and citizen. These concepts should be understood as elements in the ideological–conceptual construction of the regime. The concepts and the rhetoric that expressed them were intended to define the regime in a way that could generate legitimacy.

The four elements can be traced back to what I have referred to as ‘the myth of the coup d'état’, a myth that sought to define and justify the political changes of 1772.\textsuperscript{19} The fundamental message of this myth—that Gustav rescued Sweden and the Swedish people—is displayed on one of the three medals commemorating the coup d'état (Pl. 1). The reverse side shows a dramatic scene from antique mythology, where Perseus rescues Andromeda from the horrible sea monster. The meaning of this allegory is obvious. Perseus represents Gustav who with death-defying bravery saves Sweden/the Swedish people, represented by Andromeda, from the threatening monster, i.e. the traumas of the previous regime. The legend of the medal—Redeemed through my courage, whereby she might be mine—makes the allegory complete: the King saves his people, whereby the union of King and people is rehabilitated (ac-

\textsuperscript{18} Alm 1998, p. 7. The publication of the volumes was planned in 1788 and in 1798.

\textsuperscript{19} Alm 1998, pp. 20–23. The concept of myth is understood in accordance with Burke 1996, p. 21, as a "story with symbolic meaning". The dimension of true–false is irrelevant; myths should be understood as stories that offer meaning and justification.
cording to the saga, Perseus married Andromeda after saving her).\textsuperscript{20}

The four elements specify exactly what Gustav had saved.

The first, concord, is fundamental to the definition of the existing order. The King is intimately associated with concord, while the Diet is connected with discord. The previous government is denigrated. During the regime of the Diet, the medallic history tells us, discord dominated political life and society. This discord is presented as the root of many evils: the political process was slow, the subjects suffered hardship, and the industrial structures were in a state of decay.\textsuperscript{21}

In sharp contrast to this, the King is presented as the guardian of concord. This ubiquitous dichotomy of concord–discord forms an argument for the “new order”. It is applied to not only the Diet of the Age of Liberty, but also to the Gustavian Diet. The Diet is made out to be a constant threat to concord, while the King is its sole guardian. One medal concludes this rhetoric particularly well—the medal recording the King’s actions as Crown prince during the Diet sessions in 1771 (Pl. 2). It was tellingly titled “The King’s efforts to unite the parties”, and shows Gustav as Minerva Pacifera, offering with one hand the olive branch of peace to Sweden, while using the other to “depress the spirit of Discord, recognised by his snake-nested hair and burning Torch”.\textsuperscript{22}

Looking to the second element of the official definition of the regime—liberty—the medal recording the new Constitution deserves special attention (Pl. 3). It shows the image of Liberty, symbolically leaning against a pillar constituting the fundamental laws of 1772. The legend reads: \textit{The lasting Liberty}.\textsuperscript{23} Liberty and the new political order are thus symbolically connected.

The rhetoric of liberty is a recurring theme on many medals. This should be understood as an attempt to attach the positively charged concept of liberty to the existing order. New conceptions of what liberty was all about were appearing in the political discourse of the time. The regime had to make it clear for everyone to see that liberty existed in the reign of Gustav. This was a problematic task, however. In the eyes of the opposition, Gustav was in no way a representative of liberty, but rather one of tyranny.

\textsuperscript{20} UUB: \textit{Skåde-penningar öfver de...}, nr 23. M.A. trans.
\textsuperscript{21} Alm 1998, pp. 23–25.
\textsuperscript{22} UUB: \textit{Skåde-penningar öfver de...}, nr 16; ATA: \textit{Adlerbeths hist. beskr.}, sv. texten (I), nr 10. M.A. trans.
One particularly intricate dilemma was the fact that liberty had become intimately associated with the power of the Diet in the political language of the Age of liberty, while the power of royalty was rhetorically contrasted as unfree. This connection had to be dissolved; liberty had to be wrested from the Diet and attached to the power of the King.

The medal mentioned above is actually concrete evidence of this struggle. The medal has an interesting past. When an attempt to increase royal power was thwarted in 1756, the Diet had this specific medal struck to celebrate the coup's failure and the continuance of lasting liberty. The fact that Gustav had an identical medal struck, with a few adjustments, to define the new political order must be understood as an attempt to capture the concept of liberty and attach it to the princely rule.

The attempts to demonstrate the spirit of liberty also take the form of medals celebrating the emancipatory aspects of the royal reforms—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of commerce and so forth.

The third concept in the official definition of the Gustavian regime is public safety. Under the sceptre of Gustav, the message follows, the Fatherland and his subjects are safe and prosperous. The rhetoric of public safety follows two lines of argument: the present state of security and prosperity, and the King's importance for this state of security and prosperity. The latter forms an argument justifying princely rule, whereas during the previous rule of the Diet—the medallic history aims to show—Sweden was neither safe nor prosperous. In the hands of a caring and nurturing King, however, things have changed for the better. Within the image of Gustav as the nurturing King, the medallic history demonstrates his efforts to create and uphold the security and prosperity of his subjects. The medal recording the King's visit to Finland (Pl. 4)—where the King is depicted as a "young hero" shielding Finland (a woman on her knees before him)—is an illustrative example of this nurturing image.

Three areas of the activity of the nurturing King stand out: the judicial security of his subjects, their economic prosperity through commerce, trade

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24 Skuncke 1993, pp. 10-12, 119-120.
25 KMK: exhibition case of medals, Frihetsstiden.
26 Alm 1998, pp. 32-34.
28 UUB: Skåde-penningar öfver de..., nr 38.
Pl. 1-5. Reduced size. (1) The myth of the coup d'état. The medal commemorating the coup d'état with a sense from antique mythology, where Perseus rescues Andromeda from the sea monster. (2) The rhetoric of concord. Minerva Pacifera offers an olive branch of peace to Sweden and depresses the vile spirit of discord. (3) The rhetoric of liberty. The image of liberty, symbolically leaning herself against a pillar with the fundamental laws of 1772. (4) The rhetoric of security. A young armoured hero protects Finland, represented by the women by his feet. (5) The rhetoric of the citizen. The image of Victory with the civic symbol par excellence in her hand – the oak garland. KMK: Åa 2, Fotografier av svenska kungars medalje;, Gustaf III. Sådespenningar öfver de Fornämsta Händelser som tillhör Konung Gustaf III:s regering.
and agriculture, and finally the prosperity of Swedish science, scholarship and culture.  

The King is thus defined as the guardian of concord, of liberty and of the safety and welfare of his subjects. The fourth element adds another aspect of princely rule—that of the citizen. One of the three medals on the coup d'état shows the image of Victory. In one hand she holds a palm leaf, and in the other an oak garland—the latter a civic symbol. The legend reads The greatest, won without bloodshed, and the exergue specifies the victor: For the salvation of the citizen (Pl. 5). The restoration of princely rule is thus defined as the citizen's salvation. In the following section, a more detailed study will examine the attempts to define and capture the concept of citizen.

The Struggle for Definitions; the Citizen

The proclamations of the salvation of the citizen in 1772 belong to a civic rhetoric that takes on various expressions in the medallic history. In the arsenal of symbols used, for instance, we find civic symbols such as the oak garland. Secondly, the concept of citizen is used to describe the members of society. Finally we find its application in the image of Gustav as a Citizen–King. He is not only the saviour and defender of the citizen; he is a citizen himself. His speech to the Estates in 1771, where he presents himself as “the first citizen” is depicted in the historical texts that followed the engravings, and on the medal recording his return from a spa, the usual name and title on the obverse side has been replaced by the words King and citizen.  

This civic rhetoric is interesting. In the political rhetoric of Caroline absolutism we find no corresponding references to the citizen. In the political rhetoric of Gustavian absolutism, on the other hand, the citizen forms a part of the conceptual construction. What makes it interesting, is that it belongs to a context of ideological and discursive change. The late eighteenth century has been characterised as the age of the citizen. The perceptions of

32 The Latin text reads CIVIS PRINCEPS, which is the nearest equivalent to “the first citizen”. From the explanatory text, however, we learn that the intention was to translate it to “King and citizen”. ATA: Adlerbeths hist. beskr., sv. texten (II), nr 106. M.A. trans. These civic proclamations have interesting allusions to Roman emperors such as Augustus.
Man as societal creature changed; the old “humble subject” made way for the “new citizen”, who was attributed with authority and independence. These changes concern conceptions of the relationship between those in power and those subjected to it. It was the “citizens” who characterised themselves as public opinion and submitted demands for political, economic and social emancipation. The proclamations of the King as a citizen among citizens, as found in the medallic history, could—viewed in this context—imply a more equal relationship between King and subordinates and an acceptance of the authority proclaimed by the “new citizen”.

That, however, is not the case. The image of the relationship between King and people does not express an equal relationship between a Citizen-King among citizens. The meaning and usage of the concept of citizen that emerges from the medallic history of Gustav III is, on the contrary, very problematic.

First of all, the civic rhetoric in no way dominates the image of the relationship King–people. Rather, it is subordinate to and exists within a more traditional rhetoric of subordination and paternalism. Gustav is presented with paternalistic metaphors as a "Father of the Realm" who displays the “attention of a Father” to his people. Inversely, the people’s relation to the King is described as humble and subordinate. The subjects of the medallic history demonstrate over and over again their love of and loyalty to the King and to the authorities. The love is often expressed in connection with the King’s absence and illness—during which he is met “by his subjects’ joy”, followed by “the sighs of all his subjects”, and so on—and in connection with dynastic events. The loyalty is often woven into these recurring declarations of love.

Within the scope of these panegyrics around the person of Gustav, emerges an image of the King as anything but a citizen among citizens. In all his princely and fatherly authority he is presented as something of a personification of the subjects well-being. When he travels to the spas of Italy, the legend of the medal states For Your prosperity which includes the Public

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prosperity, and when he returns it is described as *The return of Fortune. When the King returned*.\(^{37}\)

Secondly, there is no marked contradiction between the concepts of “subject” and “citizen” in the royal language. At first glance they appear to be used more or less synonymously—citizen is used alongside subject to describe the members of society. The concept of citizen is, furthermore, not used exclusively in connection with social class (as reserved for landed and/or educated groups). When the establishment of a workhouse in Stockholm is commemorated, the pitiful wretches inside are called “poor citizens”, while those landed individuals who contributed to its establishment are called “noble-minded citizens”\(^{38}\). The socially separating adjectives are thus added to the noun, rather than that the noun itself used to specify social affiliation.

There is, however, some point to the use of the concept of citizen—citizen and subject are not interchangeable concepts. One can hardly picture Gustav presenting his *coup d’état* as the “salvation of the subject”. Or that in his address to the Estates he would have referred to himself as the “first subject”. Or—for that matter—that he would have had himself hailed as “King and subject” when returning from the spas of Aachen.

This ambivalence between the rhetoric of the citizen and of the subject must be understood as a conscious tactic in a specific context. After entering the political language by mid-eighteenth century, the concept of citizen underwent—as Jacob Christensson has shown in his dissertation—“a gradual and conflictious change” within the scope of a larger discursive metamorphosis.\(^{39}\) Having been a rather empty concept, “citizen” became the concept of the day during the Age of Liberty. The fact that the citizen is present in the language of Gustavian absolutism must be understood in this context. The concept was too positively charged to be neglected. There was an urgent need to demonstrate outwardly for all to see that the citizen could exist and flourish under the sceptre of Gustav. The regime had to capture the concept and the idea of the citizen—in to formulate and uphold an authoritative definition of what the citizen was that could be attached to the existing order.

The continuous transformation of the idea of the citizen in the public sphere, however, paved way for an increasingly radicalised and politicised definition of what a citizen was—a transformation that, in the long term,

\(^{37}\) UUB: *Skårde-penningar öfver de...,* nr 71 resp. 74. M.A. trans.

\(^{38}\) ATA: *Adlerbets hist. beskr.,* sv. texten (I), nr 31. M.A. trans.

\(^{39}\) Christensson 1996, p. 126, refers to this transformation as a "politicised war of definitions".
posed a serious threat to the regime’s legitimacy. Christensson characterises the civic ideal that developed in the late 1780s and all the more so in the early 1790s a “citizen of liberty and equality”. With inspiration from the French Revolution’s citoyen and the American Revolution’s citizen, Swedish publicists sought the true essence of the citizen, and found it in the spirit of liberty and the strife for equality. Within the scope of this conception, demands for political participation were put forward—the new citizen was a political citizen. This radicalised and politicised concept of citizen threatened the existing order. There was—in Christensson’s words—“a rebellion against Gustav’s perverted concept of citizen”. An illustrative example of this rebellion is found in the writings of the publicist Thomas Thorild. The following passage comes from his magazine Den Nye Granskaren (The New Examiner). Notice the rejection of Gustav’s pretensions to the title of “first citizen”. The first citizen, according to Thorild, is someone else:

O! Can God’s own endless Might keep Liberty in the soul of a coward? Come let Us set up a tribunal of the People. That is where he who really is the first Citizen presides. In all Societies on earth, no other true and impartial Tribunal than it and its image can be found.

Jacob Christensson is primarily interested in the conflicts between different representatives of the Swedish Enlightenment, but he also touches upon what he characterises as “Gustav III’s proud civic project”. He construes this project as an attempt to uphold a concept of citizen dating from the Age of Liberty, where patriotism formed the core. Christensson’s interpretation has a lot of substance—although I would rather refer to the project as “The late royal absolutism’s necessary survival project”. It is not specifically a question of Gustav III, but rather the struggle of an obsolescent political system for survival. The connections with the concept of the Age of Liberty must not

43 The image of the Citizen-King is, for instance, present in other countries. The propaganda image of Louis XVI as “le meilleur citoyen” (Engl. “the most prominent citizen”), is related in V. Gruder “The Bourbon Monarchy: Reforms and Propaganda at the End of the Old Regime”, in The French Revolution and the Creation of a Modern Political Culture, vol. 1, Oxford 1987.
be exaggerated, however. The civic rhetoric of the Gustavian regime might have been a relic from that time, but after 1772 there was an urgent need to modify this concept and to attach it to the restored princely reign.

My interpretation of the concept of citizen that is articulated in the medallic history follows a dual definition. The citizen in the language of the Gustavian regime denotes the *good subject*, and his goodness consists in, on the one hand, his being a *patriot*, and on the other his manifest *loyalty to the King*. Interpreted thus, the conceptual confusion of the medallic history becomes altogether logical. Let me clarify this by returning to the application of the concept of citizen on the subordinate population and on the King.

When are the subjects referred to as citizens? We find citizens in the Royal Patriotic Society, whose activity contributes to “the welfare of the public and the fatherland”. In 1773, a year of failed harvest, we find citizens loyally adopting the King’s example of helping the distressed in the provinces. Likewise loyally following the King’s fervour for the public welfare are the “noble-minded citizens” who contributed to the establishment of the Stockholm workhouse, and who in 1783—also a year of bad harvest—contributed to the relief of the distressed.44 The patriotic fervour and loyalty to the King are the recurrent qualities of Gustav’s apolitical and harmless citizen.

When does Gustav proclaim himself citizen? When is he a Citizen-King? The answer is, when he demonstrates fervour for the Fatherland (patriotism) and when he is loyal. His loyalty is directed to the people. His loyalty contains of living up to his duties as King of his people. He proclaims himself as “first citizen” when he tries to rescue the Fatherland and the Swedish people from the brink of the abyss. He is also hailed as *King and citizen* when, according to the inscription on the medal, he “has preserved and defended public and private liberty”—that is, when he sacrificed himself for the well-being of the people and the Fatherland in war. The King is thus presented as an exemplum—a role model for the citizen.

To conclude: the civic rhetoric served a specific purpose. The citizen was a concept with a positive charge that could not be neglected, but which, simultaneously, posed a potential threat to the regime. It had to be captured and attached to the conceptual construction, while at the same time the subordinate relationship had to be maintained. An attempt, thus, to define and disarm the *new* citizen, and simultaneously uphold the *old* relationship between King and subject.

Divinity Lost?

Finally, I would like to shift the focus away from ideological elements that can be found in the royal image, to one that cannot be found, although there is good reason to expect it to be present. A central element in the ideological constructions of the absolute monarchs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the theocratic idea of the connections between the King and a higher divine order. The King was seen as chosen by God and was answerable only to God (the King as a *vicarius dei*). This element was an important part of the self-image of the Caroline regime. It appears repeatedly on the medals of Charles XI (1660–1697), for instance.\(^{45}\)

In the medallic history of Gustav III, however, the theocratic element is absent. There are examples of religiously coloured rhetoric, but that rhetoric is rather an expression of general piousness than explicit justification of the King’s power using religious arguments.\(^{46}\)

One should not make too much of this—it is possible that the theocratic lines of argument can be found in other forms of propaganda. In the medallic history, however, that specific element—formerly so important—has been pushed aside. This is an illustrative change in the self-image of late absolute monarchy—arguments founded on religion were no longer convincing; they had lost their capacity to justify.

Furthermore, the religious element is a recurrent theme in the problems of legitimacy in late eighteenth century Europe. There is abundant research on the pre-Revolutionary process of desacralisation of the Bourbon regime in France.\(^{47}\) Another interesting example is, as mentioned earlier, the conflict between the Habsburg monarchy and Brussels during the 1780s and 1790s. In the rhetoric of the revolutionary dissenters in Brussels, the idea of a connection between God and King was broken, but the religious ideas persisted. Instead of justifying royal power, however, they formed arguments in the revolutionary struggle against it.\(^{48}\)


\(^{48}\) Polasky 1982, passim.
Summary: the Language and Image of Gustavian Absolutism

The attempts of the late absolute monarchy to create and maintain a justifying political language can be analysed in the medallic History of Gustav III. Two aspects of this problem of legitimacy have been put forward.

By examining how the regime intended to use the medals as propaganda, the attempts to confront the changing forms of political communication in society can be studied. Through the transformation of the public sphere, the preconditions for communication changed radically. Ever larger groups in society began to take an active part in political life—not only within the traditional political arena, but also outside, in an ever-widening public sphere. Using the medallic history as its medium, the Gustavian regime sought to enter and communicate in this public sphere. The fact that the medals—during the seventeenth century perceived as an effective propaganda medium—were never themselves the primary aim of the project, but rather the volumes of engravings, indicates that the propaganda had been adapted for more efficient use in the communicative system of the late eighteenth century.

The second aspect concerns the content of the medallic history. How did the regime define itself? How was the re-established princely rule justified? The analysis of the medallic history gives four concepts: concord, liberty, security and citizen. These concepts are understood as elements in a conceptual—ideological construction, aimed at defining and justifying a political system in a period of changing political conceptions and values.

This ideological construction—its formulation and mediation—should be understood within the specific form of struggle for legitimacy that faced the late eighteenth century monarchy. The discursive transformation that occurred in the public sphere created an urgent need to uphold a discursive authority.