

# A brief history of pearls and pearl production in Scandinavia.

## Part I: From Vikings to the Renaissance.

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### Introduction

The technology and knowledge to identify gemstones and pearls is in constant development driven on by the continuous development of new treatments for gemstones and new and improved methods for the manufacturing of synthetic materials. Another factor is customer demand that shifts with different trends and increasing awareness and interest in the origin of gemstones and pearls. There is an increasing demand for origin determination; something that just a few decades ago was very difficult to determine if there were no clues that were seen by magnification. With today's large selection equipment for various kinds of chemical analysis and, in the case of pearls, DNA testing opinions on geographic origin is often possible to establish (Strack 2015). The consequence is that the techniques also can be used to determine origin in older gemstones in antique jewellery. Something that may add value to a piece of jewellery but also can help explain trade routes or whether a certain mine or material were known at a specific time and place.

To meet with an increasing demand on origin determination and to confirm proveniences in older jewellery there is a need for knowledge on materials, mines, products and producers that no longer have any significance on the market. Concerning pearls one example is the Russian historical production of fresh water pearls (Strack 2015). Another example of obsolete freshwater producers is the Scandinavian countries that during parts of the last millennia produced a majority of pearls in Europe but where production decreased significantly from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century until it was banned in all Nordic countries during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The European pearl mussel was first described by the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus in 1758 in the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of *Systema Naturae*. Linnaeus named the mussel *Mya Margaritifera* and eventually the Latin name became *Margaritifera margaritifera* after Christian Fredrich Schumacher in 1817 had recognised the genus *Margaritifera* and replaced Linnaeus "Mya" with "*Margaritifera*". *Margaritifera margaritifera* have been known from several European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Great Britain, Check republic, Germany and Austria. *Margaritifera margaritifera* have also been known from Poland and Denmark but there have been no documented mussels in Poland since the 1930s and the latest documented observation of the mussel in Denmark was in 1974 (Strack 2015; *Margaritifera margaritifera* 2018).

### Pearls in Scandinavia until the 17<sup>th</sup> century

From the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century onward there are several written sources on pearls in Sweden, a result from the growing interest in pearls from the Crown. The increasing interest in pearls from both a superficial and economical perspective resulted in stricter control of both pearl fishing and the pearl trade in Sweden. It was with King Gustav I, known as Gustav Vasa that the crown started to show an interest in pearls and pearl fishing and it is from the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century we start having official proclamations concerning pearls and pearl fishing in Sweden. As Finland at the time was a Swedish province the proclamations also concerned Finland as well as the parts of Carelia that today is part of Russia. Finland and specific places in Finland are mentioned several times in the 16<sup>th</sup> century proclamations from the king. Pearl mussels are also shown on the Carta Marina from 1539, one of the earliest documentation on the existence of pearl production in the Nordic countries.

There are several finds of freshwater pearls dating to late Iron Age but most of the pearls are supposed to have been imported by the Vikings. In the earliest finds of pearls they are often used together with beads made from gemstones and glass. Often there is only one or two pearls on a piece of jewellery containing dozens of beads made out of various other materials (Wärmländer & Wähländer 2012).

There are several freshwater pearls found during excavations of the Viking age town of Birka at Björkö in lake Mälaren (Arwidsson 1989). The pearls in two of the objects (Object 107001; Object 448608) are believed to be domestic (Johansson 1997; Johansson 2005). The pearls are dated to the 9-11th centuries and were found in graves with bodies that had been cremated together with their jewelry. The cremation process has damaged much of the jewelry making it very difficult to find any clues on the origin of the pearls.

In non cremated graves in the Vivalden gravefield in Funäsdalen in the province of Jämtland, further north in Sweden several freshwater pearls dating to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century have been found. The graves have been attributed to south Sami culture and might indicate an early use of pearls by Sami people (Zachrisson 1997; Object 107036; Object 1166737). It has not been possible to confirm if the jewellery in the graves was made by Sami people or have come into their possession through trade. I have not been able to find any other objects associated with Sami culture containing pearls from the medieval or early modern eras. I have neither been able to find any written documentation supporting any early Sami use of pearls.

It is somewhat logical that the Vikings might have found pearls in mussels as they sometime used the shells for ornamental purposes (Arwidsson 1989; Fransson 2011; Object 107001). It is also logical that some early findings of pearls are suggested to have Sami connection as it is the northern half of Sweden that have had the largest mussel populations and where a majority of the Swedish pearls have been produced (Zachrisson 1997; Awebro & Öberg 2001).

Very little is known about domestic pearl production in Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries during the Middle Ages. Some medieval artefacts containing freshwater pearls have been preserved in collections but the origin of the pearls is uncertain. If we as an example on a medieval artefact with pearls use a mitre that is now in the collections of the Historical Museum in Stockholm several questions arise. The mitre is embroidered with hundreds of small freshwater pearls and was made at a nunnery in Vadstena around the year 1100. It is made from reused textile with enamelled plates from an earlier mitre of Italian origin. The mitre was used until the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century and was repaired and adjusted several times during the medieval age (<http://www.linkopingshistoria.se/medeltid/1400-tal/>). Another example is an altar frontal donated by Märta Lydekadotter Stralendorp to the cathedral of Uppsala in 1452 that dates back to the medieval age and used to contain a large number of freshwater pearls (Object DIG 011813).

These examples suggest that there was knowledge of pearl stitching in Sweden since at least the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. It would not have been possible to keep up pearl stitching activity without a steady supply of pearls.

The nunnery in Vadstena is known to have produced ecclesiastical objects such as clothes for bishops and rosaries for several hundred years and many items are still in various museum collections. A lot of beads were used for the rosaries and many of them were imported while others were made out of domestic materials. During the Middle ages there were pearl producing mussels in many rivers in Sweden, including Svartån not too far from Vadstena,

where extensive pearl fishing is documented from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward (Nilsson 1940) but it is not possible to determine whether the pearls used were local, from other parts of Scandinavia or imported from other parts of Europe where the pearl river mussel *Margaritifera margaritifera* occurred and pearl fishing was going on (Object 96338; Zachrisson 1997; Regner 2017). Examples on European countries where pearl fishing have a long history includes Russia, Scotland and the Iberian peninsula (Strack 2015). What we do know from the many objects with pearls from the medieval age is that pearls were used and they were popular especially within the ecclesiastical environment but also royals and the nobility used pearls for decoration. As we will see there was an increased demand from the crown when Gustav I seized power in Sweden in the 1520s.

When Gustav I seized the power in Sweden in the 1520s he soon started to make efforts to match the royal houses on the continent when it came to clothes and jewellery. This resulted in an increasing demand for pearls for decoration of everything from clothes to the Kings crown (Candréus 2013). From the early 16<sup>th</sup> century we start to find quite many objects with pearls in museums and ecclesiastical collections. It is also from the 16<sup>th</sup> century that we find the first written documentation on pearls and pearl fishing in Sweden. In a letter from 1537 king Gustav I invites Demanth Riiss from Novgorod in Russia to bring pearl fishers from Russia to Sweden to help with identifying potential pearl rivers and give instructions in pearl fishing methods (Gustav I 1/1 1537). The eventual results from Riiss work are not known and to my knowledge Riiss does not occur in any later documentation but the letter proves the awareness of pearls in Sweden.

It was Gustav I who reformed Sweden and turned it into a protestant country. As a consequence several monasteries were closed and the crown confiscated many of the artefacts from monasteries and churches. At one occasion in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century the previously mentioned nunnery in Vadstena, who now had lost all their land and had severe financial difficulties, sold 24 “alnar”, about 14 meters, of freshwater pearls from their stock of pearls meant for decorating textiles (Lindgren-Sandgren 2018). The consequence was that the nunnery could not use as much pearls in their production as before. This did not concern the King as the crown since at least 1527 had pearl stitchers employed for the royal clothing (Candréus 2013).

As mentioned the production of textiles and rosaries used both imported and domestic materials so even though there are many objects containing pearls from throughout the medieval ages in Sweden it is hard to draw any conclusions whether they really came from Swedish mussels or not.

If there is written documentation from the same period as the objects it often helps a lot in determining possible geographic origin. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century there are several kinds of documentation on pearl fishing in Sweden. Most famous is Olaus Magnus *Carta Marina* from 1539 and his *History of the Nordic peoples* from 1555. Olaus Magnus works contains both written descriptions of pearls and pearl fishing as well as pictures of pearl bearing mussels in several rivers in Sweden and Finland. The information Olaus Magnus gives us confirms that pearl fishing was going on and also supports the theories that pearl fishing had been going on for quite some time by then. It was mainly people involved with farming that was fishing pearls during the parts of the year there was less work with farming. Gustav I understands the economical potential of the pearl fishing and in 1544 he orders stricter control of the pearl trade.

On the 11 April 1544 the king sent a letter to the Vogt of the province of Ångermanland Jacob Holst telling him that of the few pearls he have delivered to Stockholm only two or three is good enough to be used and that he is now obliged to buy every pearl he can find (11 April 1544). Apparently the King did not think Holst would succeed as he in another letter two weeks later commission Simon Andersson to search through the northern parts of the country, including Ångermanland, for pearls. The local people are obliged to help him with all he needs on his mission (25 April 1544). The Kings action on the pearl production may have to do with reports from the eastern parts of Finland that Russian traders were buying large amounts of pearls. Gustav I ordered the trade supervisors in the provinces Västerbotten and Österbotten, Simonsson and Vilkeson, to sharpen the control over the trade with pearls and copper and to put a stop to those who trade with the Russians (15 April 1544).

Carta Marina also shows pearl mussels in several rivers in Finland. During most of the last millennia Finland was, until 1809, a part of Sweden. Pearl fishing in Finland have probably been going on at least as long as in Sweden. The Russian Orthodox Church had used large amounts of pearls embroidered on textiles since the 10<sup>th</sup> century and held fishing rights in the north Russian rivers bordering to Finland (Carta Marina; Strack 2015).

In 1561 King Eric XIV told the vogt of Österbotten in Finland that he banned Carelians from fishing pearls in Finland. In the same letter Eric XIV asks the vogt to hire a Swedish pearl fishing craftsman and a few young men for him to teach how to fish pearls. If no Swedish craftsman would be found it would be ok to hire a carnelian instructor (Granlund 1981).

The oldest documentation on pearl fishing in Norway (at the time Norway was a part of Denmark) is about one hundred years younger than that in Sweden and consists of a letter from the Danish king Christian IV who on the 27<sup>th</sup> June 1637 to the Vogt Palle Rosenkrands that the farmers who found pearls had to sell them to the crowns representative. The intention was to make clear that all pearls in Norway belonged to the Danish crown (Taranger 1889). Christian IVs successor Fredrik III employed pearl fishing inspectors and eventually King Christian V made all pearls a privilege for the queen (Larsen 1997).

Apart from Norway there were pearl mussels in Denmark but only in one documented locality; Vardeå in southwest Jylland, a locale that have had no observations of mussels since 1974 though there are no documentation on pearl fishing there until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hedegaard 2018).

The occurrence at Vardeå was before the last observation of mussels considered a relict form and similar isolated occurrences of *Margaritifera margaritifera* is known from other places in the Northern parts of central Europe such as Lüneburger Heide in Germany (Wallin 1942, *Margaritifera margaritifera* 2018).

### Conclusions and suggested further research

It is not possible to determine that pearl fishing was going on in Scandinavian before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the existing written evidence from the 1500s describes an existing activity. The many medieval artefacts containing pearls in various museum collections and archaeological findings from the late Iron Age and throughout the medieval times in Scandinavia confirms a well spread knowledge on pearls. It would be very welcomed with further research on the geographical origin of pearls in Scandinavian medieval and iron age artefacts by building databases with chemical analysis and DNA testing of both the preserved pearls and mussels in rivers we know have been fished for pearls.

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