

ORDENS KRAFT

Politiska eder i Sverige 1520–1718

with an English summary

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Abstract

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Political oaths were widespread in medieval times, but all over Europe their use dwindled in the early modern period, resulting in the institution being dismantled in many states. In previous research, this decay has been explained by pointing to the emergence of the state in this period, through processes such as bureaucratization, nationalization, and confessionalization, and, later, secularization. However, as some oaths are still in use in modern state systems, the swearing of them seems to be compatible with modern – bureaucratized, nationalized, and secularized – states. If nothing else, this indicates that the standard model for explaining changes in European oath-taking must be questioned.

The main purpose of this dissertation is to analyse why political oaths were used in Sweden in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as to explain why the usages changed. It is argued that oaths were performative means of instilling trust in a political relationship. Trust was accomplished by an oral utterance, during which the swearer claimed the position of a trustworthy subject. The study encompasses not only how the force of oaths was created, but also how uncertainty regarding the subject's trustworthiness was handled, by examining its usage in coronations, rebellions, wars and political meetings.

The dissertation has four conclusions. First, not only the use of oaths but also the oath event itself underwent changes during the period studied, leading to changes in its performative force. Second, the shaping of the oath event depended on the degree of uncertainty in the specific political relationship. Third, while in the sixteenth century oaths were used to establish trust in political relationships, in the seventeenth century they were re-directed to establish control. Fourth, the shift from trust to control reflected the rise of a written political culture. When political relationships shifted from being characterized by presence and personal contact, to being characterized by distance and impersonal delegation, written oaths were better suited to the situation. Ultimately, the written form transformed the action, for the ability of a political oath to instil trust was linked to its orality. What a written oath could do, though, was help establish control.

Keywords: Oath, trust, control, orality, written culture, performativity, early modern, Sweden, uncertainty, coronation, war, rebellion, political culture.