It begins with one of the most significant changes in Swedish State history, or to be precise, when for the first time Sweden was upraised from barbarity by the mighty war and peace-time King GUSTAV Eriksson, a proper king’s chancellery was established, common statutes and ordinances were given in a printed form to the people to be learned and followed, and when, through the earnest endeavours of this honourable king, a beautiful foundation through Oeconomie, Politie and Commerce was laid to a well-established and consolidated State.  

This passage is taken from the prologue to the index of all the royal police ordinances included in the first five volumes of Stiernman’s compilation. The passage indicates the year from which Stiernman’s compilation starts, i.e., 1523. It was indeed this very year when King Gustav Vasa (1523–1560) took his place on the throne and the foundations of the Swedish national state were consolidated. Of course, royal legislation had also been given before Vasa’s reign. Gösta Åqvist has dated the birth of royal legislative powers to the thirteenth century, when Swedish kings started to issue the so called ‘statutes’ (stadgor) or ‘statute legislation’ (stadgelagstiftning). However, it has been argued that these earlier statutes differed from the later police ordinances. They should be considered as pacts concluded together with the king and the great men of the country, i.e., the forming nobility. For instance, in the Alsnö stadga from 1280 King Magnus Birgersson (1275–1290) promised the present great men exemption from taxes in exchange for services or for provision of a cavalryman. Four
years later, in 1284, the *Skenninge stadga* defined the procedure to be followed when issuing royal statutes. However, before Gustav Vasa’s reign, the kings in Sweden were not strong enough, i.e., in terms of centralized power, to enact ordinances independently. As already stated in the first chapter, the emergence of police ordinances in Europe went hand in hand with the formation of modern centralised states.

This chapter will examine royal police ordinances that were issued between 1523 and 1611. However, before any closer study of the ordinances, a brief glance into the political, economic and social life of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Sweden is necessary.

Political life in sixteenth-century Sweden was marked by continuous political and military struggles both internationally and domestically. Throughout the century, Swedish kings were engaged in numerous diplomatic disputes and campaigns with Denmark, Poland and the city state of Lübeck. Most of the controversies were related to control of trade in the Baltic Sea area, especially trading rights over Russian products. An additional cause for disputes with Denmark was the question of the right to the Swedish throne after Gustav Vasa had driven the King of the Kalmar Union, Kristian II (1520–1521), out of the country and assumed the throne himself. This had occurred with the economic assistance of Lübeck. On the domestic plane, Gustav Vasa’s rule was further burdened with provincial uprisings – sometimes by the nobility, sometimes by the peasants. After Vasa’s death, his sons and their heirs battled over the Swedish throne.

Although not personally interested in matters of religion, Gustav Vasa initiated the Reformation in Sweden. Vasa’s motives were political and economic. He wanted to break down the political union between the Catholic bishops and the nobility. Gustav Vasa was also in desperate need of funds in order to pay back his debts to Lübeck which had helped him be enthroned as king. In 1527, in the Diet of Västerås the nobility agreed to the king’s demand to confiscate church property in favour of both the crown and the nobility. This confiscation was justified by the Lutheran doctrine that all church property was the people’s property.

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