The Figure in The Coat of Arms of The University of Borås

– A Short History –
The Peddler, 1713.
Preface
A coat of arms bearing a crown is a royal prerogative. The University of Borås (UB) is an institution of the state and is thus legally entitled to embellish its coat of arms with the royal crown. The coat of arms of the University of Borås has been approved by the National Board for Heraldry.

A distinguishing feature of the Coat of Arms of the University of Borås is the prominent male figure in the centre. This figure symbolises all those peddlers whose trading activities laid the foundation, over a period of several hundred years, for the economic development of the region around Borås known as SJUHÄRAD.

Even today, long after the abandonment of the guild system, the peddler-spirit lives on in the entrepreneurial culture of the region.

This little pamphlet is an attempt to give meaning and substance to what that figure represents.
Peddler-trading in the Sjuhärad region has a history that goes back as far as the times of the Vikings and, in more ways than one, still represents a continuation of old-time Viking expeditions.

True, peddler-activities did not reach out across the seas, nor did they approach foreign continents, but the similarities are nevertheless noticeable. In both cases, it was the farmers who, after the labours of sowing and harvesting, ventured out on extensive commercial journeys. Remaining back at home was the housewife, whose responsibility it was to attend to the affairs of the farmyard and the family.

In the old peasant society, subsistence living was the order of the day and a little of everything was domestically produced to meet the needs of the household itself. In much of the Sjuhärad region agricultural land was poor and infertile and one way of fighting poverty was to exploit the opportunities that the forests offered. The forests provided both raw materials for manufactured products and grazing grounds for animals. Firewood from the forests was the primary source of energy and light through the long, dark winters – and light was a prerequisite for home manufacture of products.

One of the pre-conditions for the existence of medieval peddler trading was the prohibition issued on rural inhabitants regarding the right to trade. This was a right reserved only for residents of towns.

While the peasantry in the rest of the country surrendered to the commercial restrictions imposed on them by the
state, the hardy natives of the Sjuhärad district defiantly persisted with their trading activities. This stubbornness paid off in the end when, during the 1600:s, the rural-based people of Sjuhärad were rewarded with commercial privileges, which entitled them to trade freely practically anywhere in the entire country. This was, however, only on condition that they were registered as residents in the town of Borås, which was granted a town charter in 1622. With the passage of the 1864 freedom-to-trade law, restrictions affecting the rights of the rural population to trade were abolished throughout Sweden. The law signalled the beginning of the end of peddler trading, since, from then onwards, country stores and town-based businesses could compete freely.

Arts and crafts were turning into a specialisation. In the area around Mark, textile items were produced while farmers in the hamlet of Bollebygd made wooden articles, like chairs, for instance. And in the lakeside town of Ulricehamn, the manufacture of tin products flourished (there is still in existence till this day an industry making tin-based packaging material). In the Borås area, the manufacture of tools from iron was quite widespread.

So, in the handicraft cottages and in the weaving chambers all over the Sjuhärad district, more was produced than just for the immediate needs of the family. Home-based production of handicrafts was transformed successively into commercially manufactured handicrafts and the Sjuhärad region became one of Sweden’s early industrial areas.

The master of logistics
At the back of the assortment of wares, there often existed a complicated
understanding of long-distance transport strategies and the peddler was one of the early, knowledgeable precursors of a discipline now known as logistics. Towards the end of the middle ages, cattle farming provided opportunities for barter where domestically produced goods were one side of the bargain. The most important trading route was to the mines of Falun, located some 400 kilometres away. The Crown got much of its income from those mines and oxen were used both as engines, as food, and to make leather ropes. The peddlers drove herds of oxen to the mines, and livestock was exchanged for money and metal. The oxen were of double use, not only as barter tender but also to carry manufactured goods to be sold along the way to the mines.

In the farmsteads on the home front, the metal would be converted into tools of all kinds. Thus, in the coat-of-arms of the city of Borås, is to be found a pair of sheep shears – a symbol of iron manufacturing.

Transportation was carried out by means of oxen and horse-sleds in an almost road-less country lacking in amenities like inns for eating, repose and overnighting; there were no facilities like banks, and highwaymen and brigands lurked in abundance all over.

The wealth builder
In parliament, the elected representatives of the region’s farmers argued often – and passionately - on behalf of the poor inhabitants of Sjuhärad. But the truth of the matter is that the region was anything but poor. In the 17th century, foreign visitors were astonished by the sight of the well-fed and well-dressed inhabitants of the area.
After the disastrous wars waged by King Charles XII, parliament decided in the beginning of the 18th century to impose extra taxes in order to pay the nation’s foreign debts. Of all towns, Borås distinguished itself as being the one that paid the most of the extra taxes. This was quite astonishing as there were almost no houses and no inhabitants in the town; they all preferred to live in the countryside. But in this critical time for the nation they decided anyway to pay their taxes as decent townspeople.

**The initiator**

Through his repeated journeys into the interior of the country, the peddler got a good understanding of the location of markets for different products. Business acumen and a keen sensitivity for product demands were of crucial importance. He became, in essence, a forerunner and a model for the modern market economy.

Commerce, and artwork in all its forms, developed in constant interaction and interdependence with each other. The peddler and the weaver became representatives of a new kind of entrepreneurship, based on a close relationship between production and the market. The women of the Sjuhärad district played a significant role in this development. They were the ones who possessed a knack of knowing what products had to look like, in order to get sold.

In their own way, the peddlers became big employers in their home areas and contributed substantially to the business activity of their respective districts. The travelling salesman, with his bag full of cloth slumped over his shoulder, was the initiator of ushering a new era which helped disentangle the circles of barter trade. Free enterprise is the hallmark of
the peddler, expressed as it was through his opposition to town- and city-based monopoly and by his resistance to restricted trading activity. Because of his proximity to the market, and his firsthand knowledge of it, he acquired a decided advantage in comparison to the privileged city traders who got the worst of the deal in any competition.

The network creator
For housekeeping and domestic economising in the country as a whole, the “västgöte-peddler” filled an important role in his capacity as a distributor of goods and as a salesman; in addition to this, he was a mediator of contacts. His knowledge of people was an indispensable asset in business dealings. Through the trading journeys of the ubiquitous peddlers, a network was created for the spread of ideas on markets and product manufacture.

The market potential benefited the entire population of the community and helped promote professional skills in textile work, which was something to improve upon and exploit when home-based workers were gradually moved over to workplaces in factories. In time the textile industry began utilising the distribution system of the peddlers.

The communicator
The peddler lived in an age when communications were poor and towns were few and far between. Special demands were made on personal qualities such as liveliness and agility, persistence and a propensity to be shrewd and good humoured. While the profession demanded the gift of idle talk and of being quick-witted, it also required the peddler to be able to stand abuse, every now and then.
The peddler – and only the successful one survived – was a clever judge of character and a talented observer; a sociable, humorous and interesting figure armed with a strong sense of reality. In other words, he possessed the characteristics that were to give the natives of the Sjuhärad area the reputation of being colourful and full of initiative. It was these qualities that gave the peddler and the female weaver a place of prominence in the history of the settlements all over the region of Sjuhärad. But the most enduring of contributions of the peddlers is that they have left a legacy of a cultural identity for business and industry, to both the inhabitants and the region, which is still recognised in and beyond Sjuhärad today.

The businessman
Home manufacture and handicraft work was organised on a big scale towards the end of the 1700s by the so-called entrepreneur-contractors. An entrepreneur-contractor could have several thousand people engaged in handicraft work like, for instance, cloth-weaving. The products commissioned by these contractors were in turn then transported and sold by peddlers all over Sweden and Norway. Many of these contractors were farmers in the valley of the river Viskan – one of the few areas of Sjuhärad endowed with fertile soil where farming thrived. As farmers progressed from subsistence living to a money-based economy – with incomes from the export of seed – they generated substantial wealth. They were able to invest this accumulated capital into business activities that were not tied to their agricultural pursuits. Many of the manor-like abodes of the contractors are still to be found in the areas in the Mark region.
Home-industry was replaced by factory production at the end of the 1800s. The power-stations built on the river Viskan were used to supply energy to the spinning mills while firewood from the forests was used to run the steam machines. The peddler often sold textile items but he also hawked weavers’ reeds, carding combs, tin-plate objects, baskets, wooden vessels and glass products. Travelling salesmen were to be found elsewhere in Sweden also, but in no other part of the country was ambulatory trading in domestically produced handicrafts so widespread and so much an integral part of daily occupation as in the settlements of southern Västergötland.

The craftsman and manufacture
Knowledge of commerce and entrepreneurship among peddlers was an important factor in steering Sweden towards becoming a modern, market-oriented society. A great number of shops and department stores, as well as factories and manufacturing companies, were started by the descendants of peddlers and independent entrepreneur-contractors of old. The concentration of the mail order business in Borås and its surroundings, for instance, goes back to the adjustment process that the introduction of free trade precipitated during the latter part of the 1800s. It should therefore come as no surprise that the peddler is a much-appreciated and well-recognised figure in the common heritage of the town.