Hjalmar Mörner’s Military Background, a New Beginning in Rome and *The Real Belisarius*

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1627–30(?). Oil on canvas, 90 × 75.4 cm. Purchased with funds from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous 2019. Nationalmuseum, NM 7538

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ACQUISITIONS/HJALMAR MÖRNER’S MILITARY BACKGROUND AND THE REAL BELISARIUS

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Fig. 1 Hjalmar Mörner (1794–1837), French Grenadier in Battle, signed 1825. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 36.2 × 45.8 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2020. Nationalmuseum, NM 7547.
Belisarius and the neoclassical legacy

The most famous interpretation of the subject is surely Jacques-Louis David’s (1748–1825), painted in 1781. David’s painting was infused with strong resentment towards political and societal inequality, and particularly towards rulers who treated their subjects not only unjustly, but cruelly, here symbolised by the treatment meted out to Belisarius. Falsely accused of treason, the successful Byzantine general Belisarius (c. 505–565) had been severely punished by his emperor Justinian I (c. 482–565), being blinded and forced to beg at the gates of Constantinople. However, by the time of David’s students in the late 18th century, the content of the subject was gradually shifting towards more general feelings of empathy, tinged with a strong sense of pathos, as in the works of François Gérard (1770–1837) and the Swede Per Krafft the Younger (1777–1863), who painted their versions of it in 1797 and 1799, respectively. Many artists of the late 18th century developed a kind of generic depiction of Belisarius, not unlike popular contemporary renderings of society’s poor. Certain attributes directly associated with Belisarius’s former status, though, were almost always present, such as the soldier’s helmet he used to collect alms.

By the 1820s, over the course of more than 50 years, the subject had been interpreted in quite a variety of ways, and it has to be asked: were there really any new, interesting takes on it for succeeding generations of artists in the 19th century? It did not fit in well with the emerging Romantic movement, not least because it must certainly be considered one of the bleaker motifs of antiquity. With new art movements like that brewing in Europe at the time, why would any artist in the process of establishing themselves in Rome be drawn to this subject? Well, apart from it being quite an established, “malleable” historical theme, there may possibly have been other explanations for Hjalmar Mörner’s choice and particular interpretation of the subject.

A military background

While a military background had previously been important for the emergence of artistic talent in Sweden, in the early 19th century it quite suddenly became much more significant in a variety of artistic fields. Two generations of painters had dominated the arts in that country in the second half of the 18th century, consisting primarily of either French artists, or Swedes trained by French – or in some cases British – artists and often working in their artistic proximity. These painters continued to dominate in the first decade of the 19th century. However, when the last artists of this generation died, something of a vacuum arose. In part, this helps explain the emergence of the military-trained artist in the 1810s and 1820s, now covering a broad range of fields. This was of course also a time of great political upheaval in Europe. In Sweden, the Gustavian dynasty was ousted and the Bernadottes were installed on the throne. Jean Baptiste Bernadotte (Charles XIV John, 1763–1844) was himself a professional soldier and he surrounded himself with men with a military background. He would also encourage artists with a military training.

Hjalmar Mörner had participated in the king’s campaigns in Germany in 1813–14, fighting in the battles at Grossbeeren, Leipzig and Bornhöft. He had been educated at the Karlberg military academy, which included classes in drawing, but had also studied drawing for a short while in the preparatory classes (Principskolan) of Stockholm’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts. After the war, he probably suffered from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder. He chose to concentrate on his art and travelled abroad, reaching Rome in 1818.

A new beginning

On his arrival, Mörner was taken care of by the Swedish sculptor Niklas Byström (1783–1848), who had acquired the Villa Malta on the Via Pinciana. Byström’s home became a focal point of the Swedish artistic community in Rome at the time, now dominated by artists with a military background, such as Mörner and Olof Södermark (1790–1848). Although expected, at least in part, to paint subjects drawn from military history, Södermark would primarily become known as a portraitist, while Mörner came to excel in particular in depictions of genre subjects, intended for print and often laced with a somewhat laconic humour. The few known military-historical subjects that Mörner painted after his arrival in Rome include a depiction of contemporary warfare, which in its vividness probably reflects the artist’s own direct experiences from the battlefield (fig. 1). In this work, his fraternisation with German and French artists active in Rome at the time also seems evident – among them, Jean Victor Schnetz (1787–1879), who, though very much an academic painter, assimilated new artistic movements to a greater extent than Mörner. Intermingled with the quite realistic depiction there is, in addition, a touch of Romantic pathos, although the work is perhaps only a study for a larger projected battle painting. It is quite different from Mörner’s paintings of historical battles, which seem static, representing a mere continuation of the achievements already reached in the preceding century.
ACQUISITIONS/HJALMAR MÖRNER'S MILITARY BACKGROUND AND THE REAL BELISARIUS

The Real Portrait of Belisarius the Shepherd
In some respects, Mörner’s Belisarius (fig. 2) can be said to straddle several artistic, and also political, currents in Rome at the time, especially when one considers the artist’s personal circumstances. Firstly, it seems self-evident that, as a military man, Mörner would be intrigued by the subject of Belisarius and its background. Secondly, as a developing portrayer of genre subjects, it would be natural for him to choose – in addition to the lives and customs of ordinary locals, as well as of highwaymen and the less fortunate in society – a classical theme that could incorporate a somewhat similar kind of drama or pitying pathos, or at least one located in a similar kind of setting.13

Like works by other contemporary artists in Rome, Mörner’s studies of locals, though naturally coloured by an outsider’s fascination with the exotic, were still developing in a somewhat more realistic direction. Further underlining the connection between Mörner and Schnetz is the fact that, in this case, they both portrayed the same model. In the Villa Vauban Museum, Luxembourg, there is a painting by Schnetz, formerly in the collection of Louis Philippe (1773–1850), which shows the same elderly man, dressed in the same way as in Mörner’s Belisarius. However, Schnetz’s portrayal of this model makes no allusion to antiquity and is simply called Le vieux pâtre italien (fig. 3).14 What Mörner obviously does with his interpretation of Belisarius is to fuse a study of the realistic, commonplace features of an ordinary elderly citizen of Rome with the lofty neoclassical subject, perhaps reflecting an actual inspired and novel way of looking at the relationship between a model and his or her use in representing the subject.15 At the same time, though, the work perhaps consciously or unconsciously reflects a somewhat impatient, even bored, feeling towards generic neoclassical representation, using a model in this fashion. This is underlined by the work’s somewhat curious and studied title, “Il vero ritratto di Belisario pastore”, The Real Portrait of

Belisarius the Shepherd, inscribed in full by the artist in the top left-hand corner of the painting. In what sense did Mörner view this as the real version of the subject? Was he implying that the man portrayed, perhaps a poor blind shepherd in real life moonlighting as a model, could in fact represent in himself the pathos of Belisarius reduced to the state of a beggar? Or was he in fact being somewhat ironic about the pretensions of the subject, juxtaposing a contemporary commoner with one of the foremost figures of antiquity?

While there is none of Mörner’s typical caricature to be found in his depiction of the elderly blind man, interpreted in this way the work still retains some of the wry humour that the artist usually reserved for his drawings and lithographs depicting the populace of Rome and Naples, later

Fig. 2 Hjalmar Mörner (1794–1837), The Real Belisarius, signed 1821. Oil on canvas, 50 × 61.5 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2020. Nationalmuseum, NM 7572.
culminating in the work he produced in England at the end of his career. The painting seems to exude the melancholy and fatigue that both the military man and the artist Mörner must have felt at the time, perhaps mulling over and processing memories of war, the personal implications of its aftermath, and the doubts he harboured about his worth as an artist. It thus differs from his usual work, and yet perfectly bridges the gap between his drawings and lithographs and any pretensions he may possibly have had to produce grander work on classical themes.

Notes:
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
5. See, for example, Göran Alm, Franskt blev svensk: Den franska konstnärsfamiljen Musreliez i Sverige under 1700-talet, Lund 1991.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
11. Winqvist 1972, vol. I, pp. 37–42. French Grenadier in Battle (1925, Nationalmuseum, NM 7547). In the background of the painting The Battle at Grossbeeren (1922, Collection of His Majesty the King of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf), there are some similar scenes, but naturally executed with less detail.
17. Winqvist 1972, pp. 36–42.

Fig. 3 Jean-Victor Schnetz (1787–1870), Old Italian Shepherd, 1822. Oil on canvas, 160 × 110 cm. Villa Vauban Museum, Luxembourg.