

SPOTLIGHT ON A REGION

Knowledge on the Nordics

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Visions of the Öresund Bridge, 1865–2023

1 April 2020 by Francesco Zavatti

Summary

The Öresund bridge between Denmark and Sweden has been key to the realisation of a cross-border region across Sjælland and Skåne, and it also links the Scandinavian peninsula with continental Europe. It was completed in 2000 with the involvement of local, regional and European actors, although its inception reaches back in time to the nineteenth century. A globally renowned icon, it is a symbol of many and sometimes opposing things, including Nordic cooperation, the solving of real or imagined crimes, freedom of movement, and the policing of borders in times of crisis. Nonetheless, it is undeniably a positive image of cross-border relationships.

The *Öresund* bridge in Swedish (or *Øresund* bridge in Danish) is in fact partly a rail and road bridge and partly a tunnel, spanning the Öresund (or “The Sound”) between Denmark and Sweden. The opening of the bridge to traffic in 2000 had a huge social and economic impact on both Denmark and Sweden. The short ride encouraged the flow of manpower, goods and services, with the number of daily commuters growing from 3,291 in 2000 to 18,000 in 2010. The bridge is a tangible product of a vision of the Öresund region, comprising Sjælland and Skåne, as a transnational region with the cross-border cooperation and exchange that this implies. This vision has been pursued since at least the 1960s by local politicians, institutions and entrepreneurs. Realising it, however, has been rather a long and convoluted journey, presenting challenges that still exist today.

The Öresund in the nineteenth century

Prior to the nineteenth century, with the exception of some periods of peace between Denmark and Sweden, the Öresund was most obviously charac-

terised as a militarised border. In 1814 the Peace of Kiel brought the hostilities of the Napoleonic wars to an end, however, and the steamboat *Caledonia* started regular trips between Malmö and Copenhagen in 1828. The first proposals for establishing a fixed link across the Öresund were made during the second half of the nineteenth century. Advancements in technology and investment in educating engineers in the Nordic countries demonstrated that realising such a titanic enterprise was possible, despite the costs being immense and the advantages modest. However, sea transportation won over new technology as it remained the easiest, cheapest and most secure way of travel and communication. The technological wonders of bridges and tunnels, lyricised by engineers and businessmen alike in the nineteenth century, were not sufficient to disregard the expertise in sea navigation which had been developed over centuries.

With the development of railways, the sea (and particularly the Öresund together with the Great and Little Belts, which separate the three main Danish land masses of Sjælland, Fyn and the Jylland peninsula) became an obstacle to ambitions to connect Scandinavia with the continental railway network. The first proposal for establishing a railway tunnel under the Öresund was submitted by Swedish engineer Claes Adelsköld to the King of Sweden Karl XV in 1865. At that time, the Second Schleswig War and the absence of a fixed link from the island of Sjælland to the continent were considered sufficient reasons to turn down the proposal. Other similar projects, such as Rudolph Liljeqvist's underwater railway tunnel between Helsingør and Helsingborg (1889), were also assessed as being too expensive or useless. The steam ferry lines continued to be the preferred means of transport for passengers, goods and railway wagons, all of which were shipped via special ferries on the longer Trelleborg-Sassnitz route.

The car gave new impetuosity to bridge plans

In the twentieth century, the automobile gave new impetus to the development of a rail and road infrastructure in the Nordic region. For example, in 1935, the Little Belt Bridge connecting the Danish island of Fyn with Jutland was inaugurated. It comprised of railway tracks, two carriageways for motor traffic and a pedestrian walkway – and it meant that the continent was one “sound” closer.

Gustaf Evers and Ture Norder, both engineers educated at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, were the first to present a project for a bridge with two car lanes between Helsingør and Helsingborg in 1935. The following year six giants of the Danish and Swedish engineering and construction industries, led by Danish engineer Rudolph Christiani, proposed

two bridges: a combined rail and road bridge which connected Malmö to Copenhagen via the island of Saltholm, and a bridge over the Great Belt. The Swedish and Danish governments turned down the proposal because the infrastructure was too risky in the context of rising international tensions during the second half of the 1930s. The 16 unexploded bombs found in the Öresund during the construction works of the 1990s later proved that their concerns were well grounded. After 1940, further proposals were put forward to neutral Sweden from Nazi-occupied Denmark and turned down for similar reasons.

A post-war vision of Nordic cooperation

At its first meeting in Copenhagen in 1953, the Nordic Council indicated that the construction of the Öresund bridge would be a primary goal, in order to promote intra-Nordic mobility and shorten the distance between the Scandinavian peninsula and the continent. In 1954, the social democratic governments of the two states established a bilateral delegation to verify the technical and economic feasibility of the link. The delegation obtained expertise from a wide range of scholars on traffic forecasts and the geological composition of the seabed, for example. At the same time, bilateral teams of entrepreneurs and politicians based in different cities were competing to promote and advocate their projects for a fixed link in relation to the surrounding region. Their hope was that the region could become the new entry point to the Scandinavian peninsula – with all the opportunities for development this would bring with it. By 1959, nine proposals had been submitted to the Öresund delegation. Despite these bids, it proved difficult to obtain conclusive answers to the delegation's many questions, making it challenging for the politicians to make the final decision to realise the project.

Various groups in society opposed the project. Firstly, farmers from Skåne complained – most vocally in the 1950s – that arable land would slowly disappear with the development of the bridge's associated infrastructure and housing. Secondly, there was a rise in environmental consciousness at the end of the 1960s. Several associations for the protection of the natural environment in Sweden and Denmark lobbied against over-exploitation of land, questioning the consequences that newly built infrastructure, overpopulation and traffic would have on the natural environment, human health and the quality of life around the Öresund. Finally, the debate on the fixed link also created tension between regional and national actors in Sweden. Regional actors in Skåne were reminded on more than one occasion by the national government that a possible fixed link was intended to satisfy the exigencies of international mobility, not only of local traffic. During the 1970s political

parties to the right of centre, which were staunchly opposed to the project, made electoral gains in both countries, and the international oil crisis further prevented consensus. Consequently, from when the delegation was originally established in 1954, it had to restart its assessments again at the beginning of nearly every decade.

The realisation of the vision for the Öresund region in the 1990s

The project was finally ratified in the early 1990s, although the context was challenging even then. The economic crisis in Sweden created an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding the country's access to the EU. These tensions added to the environmental protests against the project, which had been going on since the early 1970s and had contributed to making the Öresund bridge a rather divisive issue.

The vision of the Öresund region's economic potential won out over these concerns, however. The hope of increasing the volume of bilateral trade and of establishing the Öresund as one of the main industrial, cultural and tourist districts in Northern Europe ultimately convinced the political and economic establishment of Skåne and Sjælland to think in terms of regional and cross-border cooperation, rather than in the traditional terms of two separate countries. Filling the gap at the heart of the new region with a fixed link became pivotal to this vision.

The realisation of the project was helped by the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT), which had laid the groundwork in the 1980s. It appeared that large European industries could influence the situation where local, regional and national initiatives, at both the private and public level, could not. The ERT lobbied Swedish and Danish politicians and the European Commission, as well as implementing a far-reaching advertising campaign aimed at making the public more receptive to the idea of the need to fill the "missing links" between Europe and Scandinavia with good infrastructure. Part of its wider proposal was the "Scandinavian link", which included the projects for the Öresund bridge, the Hallandsås Tunnel and the Swedish portion of European highway 6. The ERT had sufficient capital and the lobbying and marketing know-how to align regional, national and international interests. The regional entrepreneurs and most local institutions sided firmly with the ERT, joining newly constituted interest groups which supported establishing a fixed link and injecting capital into developing the Öresund region concept.

In 1991, the Danish and Swedish parliaments issued a bilateral agreement on the construction of the Öresund bridge. In 1993, the Öresund Consortium, or *Øresundskonsortiet*, a joint venture between the state companies

Svedab (Sweden) and A/S Øresundsforbindelsen (Denmark), chose a design. It was to be a two-level bridge designed by Danish architect Georg Rotne for ASO Group, also a joint venture between private firms from Britain, France and Denmark. In 1995, the construction work bid was won by Sundlink Contractors HB, a Swedish-German-Danish venture. The costs for the link's construction, covered by a loan of four billion euros from the Danish and Swedish states to *Øresundskonsortiet*, would be repaid from the fees levied for crossing the bridge.

The Öresund bridge as an icon

Not only has the Öresund bridge successfully connected Sweden and Denmark since 2000, but the Danish-Swedish thriller TV-series *The Bridge* (*Bron/Broen*, 2011–18) has turned it into a globally renowned Nordic icon. The bridge's economic, societal and cultural benefits still appear to be clear, particularly compared to other visions for regional projects that have fallen by the wayside, such as the Øresund Committee and the Øresund University. The bridge has led to many new opportunities. For example, in 2005 many Danes moved to Sweden and commuted daily to work in order to escape rising property prices in Denmark. A Danish labour shortage in the mid-2000s led Danish employers to recruit Swedish workers. Even the economic crisis of 2008 did not significantly reduce the number of commuters.

The bridge's real and imagined synergies of cross-bordering are not always positive, however. The increased number of refugees in 2015 was a staunch reminder that the Öresund bridge remained a physical border between two states. Many refugees preferred to apply for asylum in Sweden rather than Denmark, but many of the 163,000 people who passed through Denmark on their way to the Öresund bridge were initially registered there rather than in Sweden (under the so-called Dublin rules which dictate that asylum seekers are registered in the first European country in which they arrive). In September 2015, the Danish government decided to suspend this registration, a decision which outraged the Swedish government and led to an extended period of increased document-checking by Swedish police on trains and buses crossing the Öresund. Since then, the Danish police have sporadically implemented border controls, for example, due to security worries in late 2019, during the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 and because of concerns about criminal gangs in 2023.

Despite challenges such as these, the Öresund Bridge undoubtedly remains a great feat of engineering and cooperation, which also makes a practical difference to people's everyday lives. Its history illuminates intersecting local, regional, national and international cultural and social processes, and

its iconic presence is a reminder of the vision that drove its realisation: a cross-border region which allows freedom of movement not only in the Nordics but also elsewhere.

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