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THE EUROPEAN FRONTIER

Clashes and Compromises in the Middle Ages

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Medieval Gotland – Churches, Chronologies and Crusades

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Megalomania

Is it a snail, which has crept out of its shell? Is it a barn for storage of butter for the European Union? No, it is the church of Källunge on Gotland (Fig. 1). Here a small Romanesque church in the countryside has been extended with an enormous Gothic chancel which is far bigger than the rest of the church building¹. The intention was to renew the whole body of the church, which would then have been one of the largest on Gotland. But the plan was never completed. Foundations were laid outside the old Romanesque walls, but then the building process ceased. Something put a halt to this ecclesiastical megalomania.

The church of Källunge may be an extreme, but far from the only example of "Capellas Imperfeitas", as the churches could be called after an uncompleted chapel in Portugal. On Gotland there are 11 "pack-saddle churches", where a large chancel bears witness to interrupted ambition. There are 11 "torso-churches", where a blocked up arch reveals that a tower or a nave was projected (as at Västergarn). And there are 12 "hump-back-churches", churches with old low towers, where the renewal process was stopped². All such uncompleted churches are in the countryside with none to be found in Visby.

Between 1100 and 1400 Gotland was transformed more radically than maybe any other region around the Baltic Sea. If Europeanisation in the Middle Ages is associated with stone buildings, towns and churches, then Gotland indeed became European. But this excessive development was interrupted. Intense building activity decreased and finally stopped. A mighty wind had swept over the island leaving stone churches, stone houses, an impressive stone wall and a lot of building sites, but the work was discontinued. Today Gotland has become the island which attracts not only medieval archaeologists, but thousands of tourists every year, who admire those memorials either still standing or ruined from an earlier Golden

Age. And such a quantity of monuments inspires reflection.

Rise and fall

Why did the Roman Empire fall? What happened to the Mayan culture? Why did Constantinople fall? What happened to Habsburgian Spain? Why did the British colonial Empire dissolve? Why did the Soviet Union collapse? And what happened to "the Swedish model"? Yes, every time a so-called high culture, civilisation or empire has crumbled there are both curiosity and fear as to why. Could it happen to our own civilisation, our own life? Philosophers, historians and archaeologists have thought and written on the perishable nature of cultures, civilisations and great powers for as long as philosophy, history and archaeology have existed - from Herodotus to Edward Gibbon, and from Oswald Spengler to Paul Kennedy³.

The world is full of uncompleted buildings, scientific works, novels, symphonies and paintings, which show that time, money or ability have been insufficient, or that the relentless need for such items has changed as time passes. If nothing else, then war, plague or death can suddenly put an end to such ambitions. Utopian intentions are confronted by down-to-earth realities⁴. Some architectural examples from near and far are:

The church in Skanör at the Scanian herring market acquired a new large chancel, which became higher than the nave. Traces in the masonry show that building was intended to continue. Thus the unfinished renewal of the church may bear witness to the diminished importance of the herring

1. Hegardt in SvK Gotland II, 1935, 207ff.; Svahnström 1964; Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991, 181ff.

2. Roosval 1945, 311ff.

3. e.g. Culbert 1973; Kennedy 1987; Tainter 1988; Thomson 1998.

4. cf. Wienberg 1986, 219f.



Fig. 1. The church of Källunge.

market. However, it is remarkable that the dendro-chronological date for the chancel at about 1440 put the building far later than established opinion sets the time for the decline of the market⁵.

In Siena, Tuscany, in 1339 the town council decided to enlarge the cathedral, but the plans had to be abandoned. A new large nave was to be erected, while the chancel and nave of the old church were to be converted into a transept for the new church. In competition with Orvieto and Florence the cathedral of Siena would then be the greatest in western Europe. But after a series of problems such as unstable construction, enormous expense, crop failure, attacks and the collapse of the town coun-

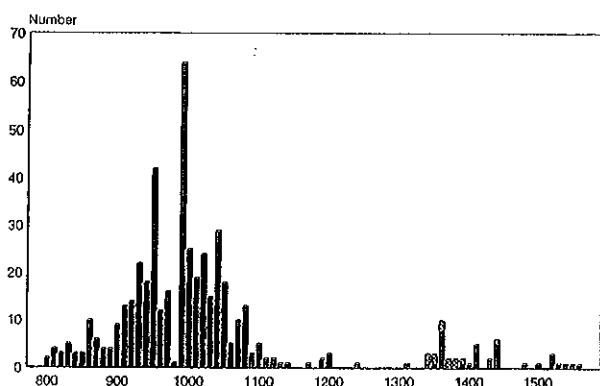


Fig. 2. Number of hoards pr. decade on Gotland during the period 800-1570. After Jonsson 1997.

cil - the ambitious building programme closed down in 1357⁶.

The cathedral in Beauvais, France, was planned to be the highest so far, but now stands as a mutilated giant. The chancel was erected with vaults to an incredible height, but after a collapse in 1284 building work stopped. Also another building campaign came to an end after a collapse, namely when the central tower fell down in 1573. Techniques were still insufficient to meet celestial ambition⁷.

Finally there is the cathedral of Cologne, Germany, where building which was begun in 1248 finally halted in 1560. By then only the chancel and the transept were roofed, and the southern tower's lower third constructed. The Renaissance had made the architecture of the cathedral unfashionable, there was less money available, and the Reformation created a crisis in the Catholic Church. The cathedral, however, was completed between 1842 and 1880 partly with reference to preserved drawings, but also to symbolise the new German Empire⁸.

But back to the medieval megalomania of Gotland: how should the rise and fall of Gotland be understood? Or, in other words, why did the church of Källunge get such a gigantic chancel? And why was the church never completed according to plan?

From silver hoards to stone churches

Gotland is rich in hoards from the Viking Age. From the period c. 800 to 1140 there are around 700 hoards, especially of silver and with some gold (Fig. 2). Two-thirds of all silver coins from Viking Age Sweden are found on Gotland. It is estimated that the original number of hoards must have been between 2000 and 8000. Silver was buried or hidden on farms. But here there is less agreement - there are as many interpretations as to how the silver came to be in Gotland, why it was buried, and why it was not retrieved as there are explanations for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire: did the silver come from trade, plunder or pay? Was it

5. Ersgård 1988, 117ff.

6. McIntyre 1992, 91ff.

7. Murray 1989.

8. Wolff 1986, 7ff, 93ff.

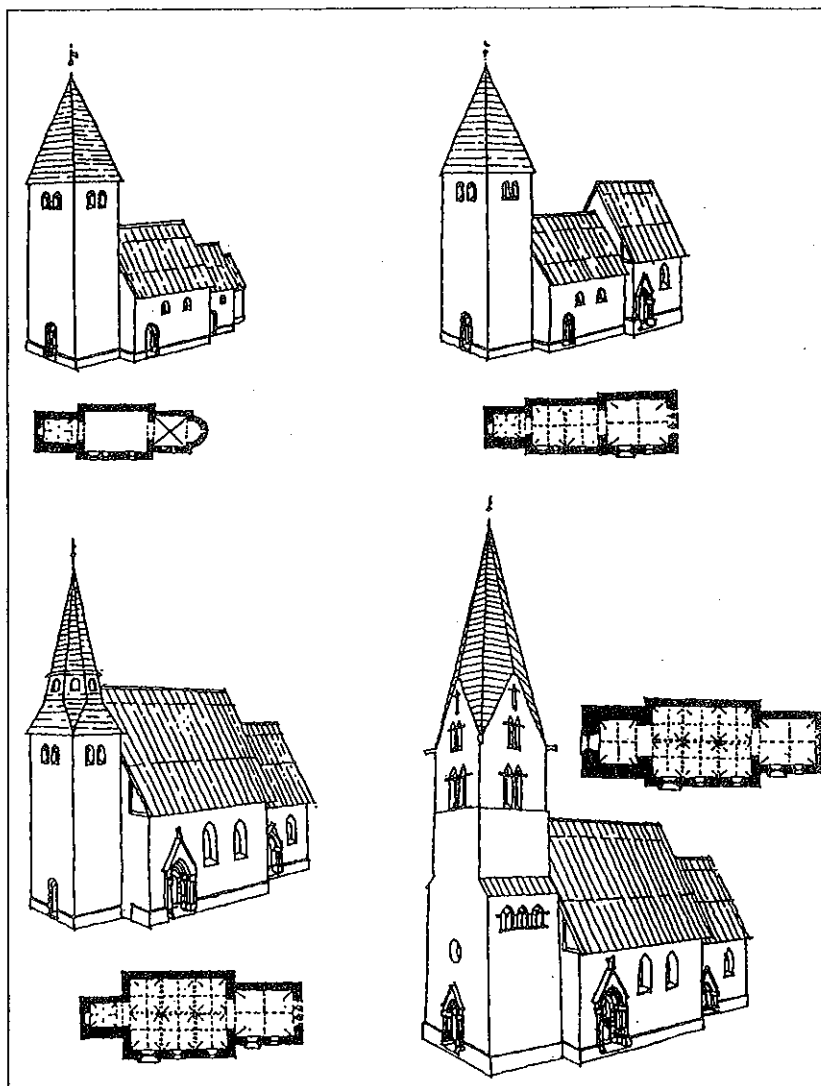


Fig. 3. The church development on Gotland during the Middle Ages. After Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991.

buried because of war, as savings or as an offering? Does the silver represent trade capital, raw material, bridewealth, a "primitive" economy or just good conditions for preservation?⁹

In medieval Gotland the situation is different. Material culture is used as a measure of wealth, and even when the hoards decrease, it is generally agreed that there is continued prosperity and the creation of surplus. Prosperity is reflected in enormous amounts of building activity between c. 1150 and 1350. And the surplus originated from the central position of Gotland in the passing trade across the Baltic Sea. In other words: trade is the explanation, and building is the measure¹⁰.

Medieval churches are well known to all those who visit Gotland: 16 churches in or near Visby,

95 in the countryside, as well as the monastery of Roma and its five chapels. Most of these churches were rebuilt and enlarged several times (Fig. 3). And they were richly decorated with stone sculptures, wall-paintings, stained-glass and other furniture, as well as having many gravestones. They could be seen as the most advanced or elaborate churches in all of Scandinavia¹¹.

In Visby 200-300 medieval stone houses are documented, of which around thirty are preserved

9. Stenberger 1958, 307ff.; Östergren 1989, 23ff., 235ff.; Burström 1993.

10. e.g. Westholm 1997.

11. Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991.

to their original height, with the Old Pharmacy as the most monumental example¹². However, the number of stone houses originally in Visby may have been as many as 600¹³. Medieval Visby was surrounded by a town wall, which at its fullest extent was about 3.4 kilometres long, with no less than 29 groundtowers and 22 or 23 saddle-towers¹⁴. In the countryside outside the town wall there were about 175 farms with stone houses, of which Great Hästnäs and Kattlunds are well visited examples. 17 towers are known on Gotland, with the Powder tower becoming part of the town wall. To this can be added several stone portals and gatepost stones¹⁵. The great majority of the churches are preserved, as is most of the town wall, while many of the stone houses and towers are rebuilt, ruined or demolished.

Thus, prosperity was created through trade and spent in building in medieval Gotland. Any conflict or clash in research regarding this is about why and when this boom declined.

From God to Erik of Pomerania

Unfinished churches, deserted stone houses in the countryside and ruins in Visby have appealed to the curiosity of people through the centuries. Explanations for the decline have been many. Even God has had to take some responsibility, or, to quote the governor's wife from the Netherlands in c. 1525: "Once Visby was the most distinguished trade town on the Baltic Sea, and now it lies in ruins, which is the will of God. With this He wants to demonstrate that there is nothing on this earth upon which one can rely with certainty"¹⁶.

Apart from this reference to God there have been five significant explanations for the decline of Gotland, which are: 1) trade, 2) civil war, 3) plague, 4) invasion and 5) taxation. And often a cocktail is mixed, containing a number of explanations, so as if not to forget any combination of factors¹⁷.

Historians have emphasized trade as a decisive factor. Thus the school teacher Alfred Theodor Snöbohm wrote in "Gotlands land och folk", that it was "the case that trade looked for new routes which no longer touched Gotland, and it was that which was decisive, through depriving Visby of its role as a trade centre, in bringing about the fall of the town"¹⁸.

Regarding a date for the decline, from written sources Hugo Yrwing and later Detlef Kattinger

have pointed to a gradual decline in the participation of Gotland in passing trade in the 1250s or 1270s and into the 14th century. The reason for this decline was competition from other towns, in particular Lübeck, Riga and Reval/Tallinn. In 1286 the first ship passed the island without mooring. The coast of Gotland or Visby was no longer used as a harbour, when large cogs could sail along the coast of the eastern Baltic or directly across the Baltic Sea. Financially strong German competitors forced firstly Gotlandic trading farmers, and later also merchants from Visby, out of the market, and were helped in this by conflict between town and countryside¹⁹.

In 1288 a civil war broke out between Visby and the Gotlandic countryside. The background to the conflict probably centred around the erection of the town wall, which marked an urban identity by separating the town from the countryside both materially and mentally. It also made it easier to impose duty on products from the countryside. The art historian Johnny Roosval first stressed the importance of the invasion by Valdemar Atterdag, but later regarded the civil war as the turning point in weakening the position of trading farmers. In both cases he referred to the decline or cessation of church building as part of his argument²⁰.

The most common explanation for the decline is invasion in 1361 under the leadership of the Danish king Valdemar Atterdag. In one or more battles his army slaughtered a large number of badly armed people from the countryside, both young and old, while the citizens of Visby looked on from behind the safety of their wall. The citizens of Visby surrendered later, and may have been heavily taxed, although retained their privileges.

This invasion has provided a rich source of legends, which, since 1984, provide the background

12. Falck 1982, 186; 1990, 87; Engeström 1986, 301.

13. Engeström 1988, 139.

14. Eckhoff & Janse 1922-36; Falck 1995.

15. Svahnström 1953; 1976; Qviström 1995; Prah 1996.

16. Tortzen 1961, 5.

17. e.g. Lagerlöf 1975, 35; Öhrman 1994, 94, 116ff.; Westholm 1997.

18. Snöbohm 1897, 146f., p. 171 quotation.

19. Yrwing et al. 1960; Yrwing 1978a, 138ff.; 1986, 62, 117ff., 143ff, 191f.; Kattinger 1992, 138f.

20. Roosval 1911, 200f; 1950, 41.

for the popular "Medieval Week"²¹. The extortion provides a dramatic peak to this event, based on its portrayal in the famous historical painting of 1882, "Valdemar Atterdag extorts contributions from Visby", by Carl Gustaf Hellqvist. The painting has a central position in the exhibition of the Middle Ages in Visby's museum, and is frequently to be found illustrated in history books and on postcards²².

The medieval archaeologist Bengt Thordemann also expresses this view very strongly in his book "Invasion på Gotland 1361". Thordeman, who examined mass graves at Korsbetingen outside the walls of Visby, wrote in the shadow of the Second World War: "From the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages (Gotland) rose to wealth and cultural refinement without parallel along the Baltic Sea, but then the country was thrown suddenly into a struggle for which it was unprepared, and which almost destroyed in one stroke what had been built up over centuries. The 27th of July 1361 is the date in the history of Gotland, which must be remembered more than most"²³.

In two inspiring articles in the 1980s the cultural geographer Sven-Olof Lindquist gave a somewhat different interpretation of the decline. First and foremost he rejects trade as an independent variable. For trade to succeed it is necessary to invest in harbours, defence and ships. Lindquist argues that the reason Gotlandic farmers could participate in the profitable fur trade was relatively low taxation. Gotland taxes were far lower than on the Swedish mainland. This low level allowed farmers to accumulate capital which could be re-invested in trade. And it was only when king Erik of Pomerania built a castle at Visborg in 1412, and raised the taxes ten times or more, that conditions for Gotlandic trade and prosperity were destroyed. Thus, according to Lindquist, Gotland flourished during the whole of the 14th century, but in different ways. The participation of farmers in passing trade was replaced by local trade between Visby and the countryside. Lindquist sees the prosperity of the 14th century illustrated by the relatively few, but substantial church rebuildings, with the chancel of Källunge as an example. The reason that such building stopped was the Black Death, which arrived in Visby in 1350. As a consequence of the diminished population, wages rose to levels where citizens and farmers were no longer able to

pay the craftsmen. Only the monasteries in Visby could afford to continue building²⁴.

God, trade, civil war, invasion, plague or tax - they are all reasonable explanations, even if the will of God is difficult to judge outside (or even within) a religious universe. However these explanations are also typical of their time: God's will as a living reality in the 16th century; trade as a dynamic factor against the background of present-day experiences; civil war as a constant threat to general welfare in the light of the conflicts between, firstly, peasants and nobility, and later workers and employers; the plague as a sudden and deathly catastrophe, again made topical by the AIDS-epidemic; the continual risk of invasion along the Swedish coast, at one time from Baltic pirates, later from Denmark or Russia, then Germany and most recently the Soviet Union; and taxes as a social threat in line with the political critique of the high Swedish tax burden since the 1970s.

As a Danish archaeologist in Sweden, who has observed the dismantling of the Swedish model, it is time to suggest another explanation which makes the Gotlanders themselves bear some responsibility. But first it is necessary to take a closer look at the chronology used in Gotland, because it is in confrontation with the sources, set against building trends, and not in reaction to purely theoretical ideas, that the most convincing explanation will be ascertained.

Chronologies

Without reliable dating to demonstrate which phenomena are contemporary and which follow each other, it is not possible to describe and interpret change. Thus, the tiresome but definitive problem is that of chronology. However, the conditions for defining relatively narrow time periods are much better on Gotland than in most other regions. Churches there are characterized by outstanding building phases, which can be arranged in a stylistic sequence. There are also dates in written sources, and dendrochronological samples have been taken. But the source value of the dating

21. Säve 1959-61, II, 438ff; Jonsson 1990; Gustafsson 1998.

22. Rudnert 1989; 1991, 175ff.

23. Thordemann 1944, 5.

24. Lindquist 1984; 1988.

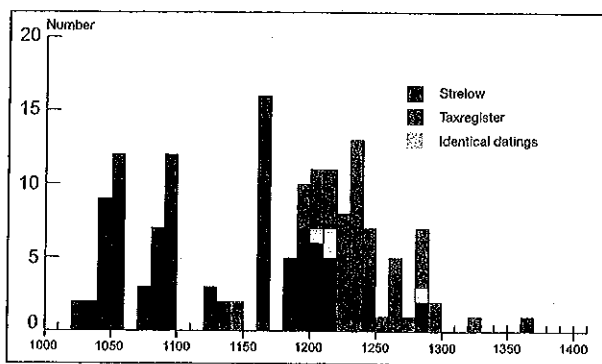


Fig. 4. Church building on Gotland according to datings in Strelow 1633 and the tax register in the Visby-version from 1585.

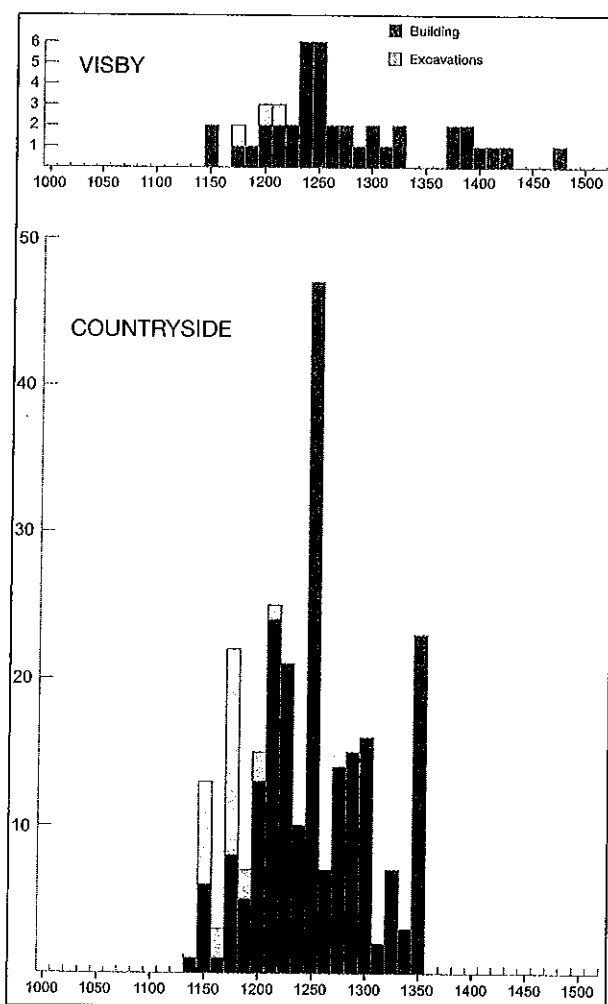


Fig. 5. Church building on Gotland according to art historical datings: a) Visby; b) Countryside. The diagram shows the number of churches pr. period, where building (erection, rebuilding or additions) took place. Also building only known from excavations or f. x. reused portals are included. Drawn on the basis of information in Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991.

from texts is unclear. The stylistic dating from art history comes with a sidelong glance to both the dates in the written sources and the known historical development. Also the dendrochronology is much debated. With closer examination the chronology on Gotland is revealed as a colossus with feet of clay.

In the "Cronica Guthilandorum" of 1633, by the Dean Hans Nielsson Strelow, dates are given for the churches on Gotland²⁵. These may well originate from older records. They are remarkably early, and may, if they are correct, represent a first generation of wooden and stone churches. A few later dates occur in a medieval tax register, which is known in two versions, the Linköping-version from the beginning of the 16th century, and the Visby-version from 1585²⁶. If these dates are reliable, they may refer to stone churches and their rebuilding phases.

Thus with the help of a couple of written sources it is possible to construct an absolute chronology for church building (Fig. 4). But the reliability and meaning of the dates are much debated, as their origin and accuracy remain uncertain. Confusing variations occur in the many transcriptions, just as there are also obvious mistakes. And it is not unambiguous as to which events, building phases, consecration or visitations each year might represent²⁷.

The art historian Johnny Roosval provided the basic work on dates using traditional stylistic analysis in "Die Kirchen Gotlands"²⁸. These have been revisited by Roosval himself and by Erland Lagerlöf and Gunnar Svahnström in their survey "Gotlands kyrkor"²⁹. The art historical view of building activity in standing churches has been summarized by Sven-Olof Lindquist in a diagram³⁰. Church building will be presented here using almost the same principles (Fig. 5), but divided regionally into Visby and the countryside, and with the use of additional information from

25. Strelow 1633.

26. SRS III 2, 290ff.; Steffen 1933, 55ff.

27. Lundmark 1925; Roosval 1933; Thunmark-Nylén 1980; Kyhlberg 1991, 145ff.; Wase 1995.

28. Roosval 1911.

29. Roosval 1950; Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991.

30. Lindquist 1984, 145ff., fig. 5; 1988, 46ff., fig. 4.

the latest edition of "Gotlands kyrkor"³¹.

However, behind these stylistic dates can be discerned others from Strelow and the tax list, along with continuous attempts to harmonise the differing sources. There is a tendency to date building phases in relationship to an established historical framework, so construction work is often projected as occurring before or after years such as 1288, 1350 or 1361.

New methods of dating are necessary, which are independent of established historical dates, stylistic analysis and other historical events. During the last decade a great number of dates have been published by two dendrochronologists, both of whom have been working on Gotland. But the reliability and meaning of their results have been discussed for several reasons: the results are not always in agreement, direct errors have occurred, accurate information on the contexts of the samples may be missing, and the new dendrochronological dates sometimes deviate radically from those provided by art history³².

The dates for the church of Källunge illustrate the problems of such a chronology: Strelow suggests the year 1072 and the tax list of 1209, while there are no dendrochronological dates as yet. The date for the Romanesque nave has varied between 1209³³; c. 1100-50³⁴ and 1072³⁵. And the date for the mighty chancel shows just as large a span - "after the beginning of the 16th century"³⁶, c. 1390³⁷, "first part and middle of the 14th century"³⁸, c. 1305³⁹, around 1288⁴⁰, before 1288⁴¹ and the 1270s to 1288⁴². Most definitive is a booklet by the art historian Gunnar Svahnström, who considers the erection of the chancel was begun around 1300 and interrupted at the latest in 1316, as it was then used for burials. Foundations for a continuation of the work should have been laid in the 1340s, but building finally ceased in 1350 or 1361⁴³. But is this latest, most thorough estimation the most reliable?

For the present there are two chronological points of departure regarding church building on Gotland as a whole - one based on some dubious written sources, and the other on stylistic studies, also influenced by those same written sources.

Strelow and the tax list together indicate church building with more intense periods of activity c. 1030-60, 1070-1100, 1130-50, in the 1160s, and then continuously between 1180 and 1300 with a peak in the 1240s.

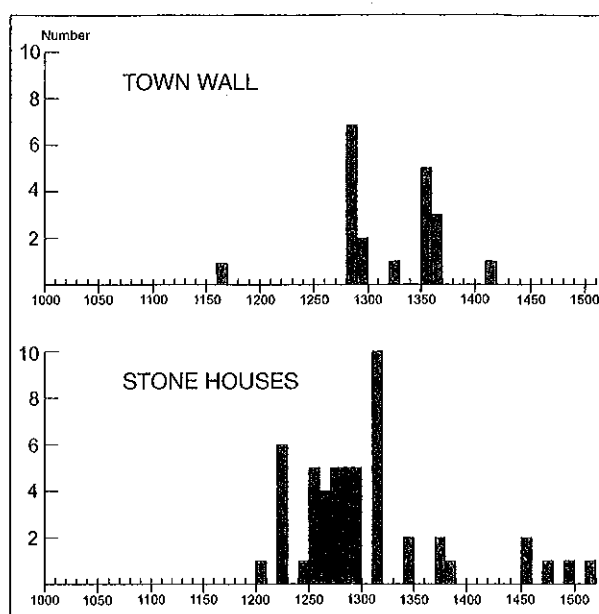


Fig. 6. Dendrochronological datings with waney edge: a) From the town wall of Visby inclusive the Powder magazine, whereas datings from rescued timber, built-in houses and a gun are sorted out; b) From stonehouses in Visby. Drawn on the basis of Westholm 1998, but the datings of Bräthen are rectified.

Art history shows differences in church building programmes between Visby and the countryside. In Visby building was ongoing at stone churches more or less continuously between c. 1150 and 1325 with a peak around 1250. Building was revived (at Drotten, St. Catherine and St. Nicholas) after c. 1375 and ended in 1423 (the raising of the

31. Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991.

32. Bartholin & Kriig 1992; Bräthen 1995; 1998a; 1998b; Lagerlöf 1997; Lindqvist 1997; Bartholin 1998; Westholm 1998; notice that the datings by Bräthen, which are older than 1370, shall be rectified by adding 9 years cf. Bräthen 1998b, a fact which was not known to Lindqvist 1997 and Westholm 1998.

33. Brunius 1865 II, 226.

34. Roosval 1911, 100f.; Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991, 181.

35. Hegardt in SvK Gotland II, 1935, 214.

36. Brunius 1865 II, 226.

37. Lundberg 1940, 571.

38. Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991, 181f.

39. Roosval 1911, 187ff.

40. Roosval 1950, 135.

41. Söderberg 1966, 147.

42. Hegardt in SvK Gotland II, 1935, 225.

43. Svahnström 1964, 6f.

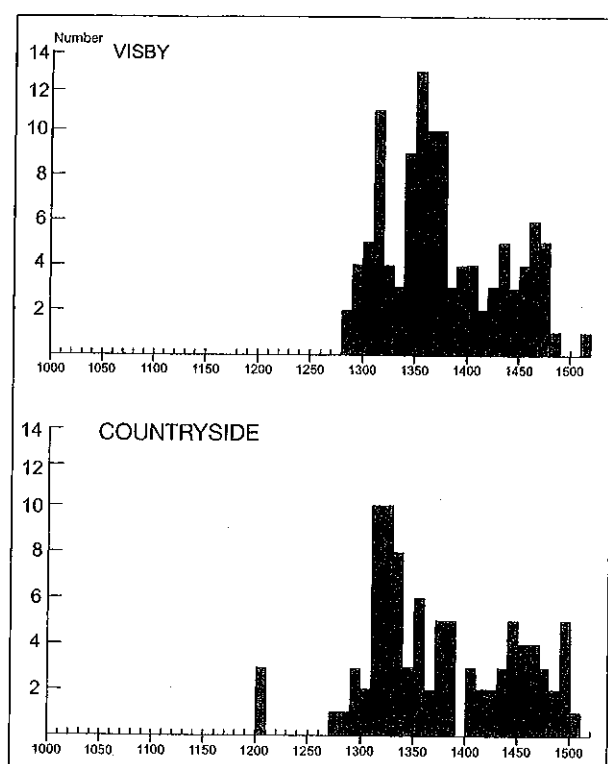


Fig. 7. Grave slabs on Gotland with inscribed years: a) Visby; b) Countryside. Drawn on the basis of information in Lindström 1892-95.

western tower at St. Mary). After this only a chapel (St. Gertrude) was built c. 1475. In the countryside there was building at stone churches between c. 1140 and 1350, after which it totally ceased, having reached its climax around 1250, with further considerable activity around 1275 to 1300 and then 1350.

According to Lindquist the amount of building around 1350 may be overestimated. Because a key-monument, namely the great Mary chapel at St. Mary in Visby, has been re-dated from 1349 to the early 14th century, several dates connected with the so-called "Egypticus-master" have been dislocated⁴⁴. The dendrochronological dates for the church tower at Lärbro, which should belong to this group, are given as 1340-42⁴⁵, showing that dates of around 1350 cannot be discarded so easily.

Ideas about church building might be supplemented with the new (rectified) dendrochronological dates from Visby (Fig. 6). The town's Powder Tower can be dated to 1160-61, the same year as the Artlenburg-treaty⁴⁶. The town wall was later

enlarged several times. There are no dates for the Seashore Wall, but the Country Wall was erected with some gate towers around 1280-1300, then was heightened and acquired ground and saddle towers in the 1330s and between 1350 and 1370. Stone houses with their rebuilding phases can be dated to the period between 1200 and 1520, with the majority built around 1240-1320⁴⁷.

To compare the dendrochronological dates of towers and stone houses in the countryside might be of interest, but up to now, only a few are known such as the tower in Gammelgarn (1211), the house at Bringes in Norrlanda (c. 1242), and the house at Lauks in Lokrume (1367-73)⁴⁸.

According to Lindquist the decline in church building shortly after 1300 is the result of the enlargement of Visby's town wall. During the fortification campaigns most stone masons should have left the ecclesiastical building sites in the countryside to work on the town wall instead⁴⁹. But with the new dates it can be established that town wall reconstruction in the later decades of the 13th century and the middle of the 14th century coincided with increased building activity at country churches.

Finally, providing an additional source are the many preserved grave slabs in churches, where incised years secure dates. With the help of information from "Anteckningar om Gotlands medeltid" by the geologist Gustaf Lindström, a preliminary picture of the chronology of the grave slabs can be drawn and divided into those from the town and the countryside⁵⁰. Then it can be established that gradually, as building activity decreased, the number of slabs increased (Fig. 7). The majority of dated slabs are from the 14th and 15th centuries. Apart from a few around 1200 they occur in the countryside from 1274 with a peak around 1310 to 1340. In Visby they occur from 1289 with a peak

44. Lindquist 1984, 146; 1988, 46ff.; cf. Svahnström 1978 in SvK Gotland vol 175, 162ff.

45. cf. Bartholin 1998.

46. A dating from the third floor to the winter 1151-52 + 9 years cf. Bråthen 1995, 32f., 105.

47. cf. Lindqvist 1997 and Westholm 1998, but with a rectification of the datings by Bråthen.

48. Bråthen 1995, 54ff, but rectified.

49. cf. Lindquist 1988, 48.

50. Lindström 1892-95 II, 37ff.

in the 1310s and around 1340 to 1380. But interpretation of these grave slabs will have to wait for a while.

In looking at these diagrams it seems that the years to be highlighted in any study of the decline and fall of Gotland from an architectural perspective are not 1412, 1361 or 1350 because the decisive dates must be at turning points, where rise turns into decline. In any such perspective of church architecture, the turning point is around 1240-50, and in a perspective of stone houses in Visby during the 1270s or around 1300. Thus the turning point (or rather the turning points), are a long time before Erik of Pomerania, Valdemar Atterdag or the plague's arrival on the island. Instead there is a focus on the decades around the civil war with its cultural and military clash between the town and the countryside.

War-economy

If the explanation is not trade, civil war, plague, invasion or taxes, then what is it? There are two elements, that is crusades and churches: the rise and fall of Gotland coincide with the development of the crusades in the eastern Baltic. And the impressive building on Gotland was not only a measure of prosperity, but also hampered other developments. Whereas Sven-Olof Lindquist referred to taxes, which prevented an accumulation of capital and with that the possibility of investment in trade, excessive investment in church building may also have clogged up the system.

The boom for Gotland is normally linked to the central position of the island in a peaceful far-reaching trade network, especially of furs from Novgorod/Russia in the east to Lübeck/Germany in the west. But it is striking how the Golden Age of Gotland coincides with the crusades across the Baltic Sea⁵¹, which themselves are only one among several expressions of a common European boom and expansion in the 12th and 13th centuries.

At the time of the Wendish crusades 1147-85 the first stone churches are seen on Gotland. But it is during the Estonian and Livonian crusades of 1198-1290 and the Prussian crusades of 1230-83, where most of the eastern Baltic and Prussia were conquered, that building on Gotland increases enormously. Gotland differs here from most regions in Scandinavia, in the fact that Romanesque country churches in stone were renewed, and stone

houses were built both in Visby and the countryside.

Hitherto only a few scholars have touched on this perspective and always just briefly. The historian Adolf Schück wrote in "Boken om Gotland", that "The first heydays of Visby were intimately connected with the »crusades«, which started after the end of the 12th century against the heathen tribes along the Baltic coast (Finns, Carelians, Estonians, Livs, Letts, Curonians and Preussians)"⁵². Johnny Roosval wrote in the same book about neutrality, trade, even arms trade between the Gotlanders and the heathens, saying that "All this contributes to an explanation for the excellent economy of the country parishes, which significantly helped development of the glorious arts."⁵³ The archaeologist Gert Magnusson has compared Visby with the arms producer Bofors. Gotland may have been a large exporter of weapons to the heathens and to support this view he mentions letters from the Pope, and the find in Smedjegatan in Visby in the 1920s of a layer with around 7500 m³ of smithing slag, corresponding to 10,000 tons of iron, which can be dated to c. 1150-1250⁵⁴. Recently the historian Nils Blomkvist has arrived at almost the same conclusion as Schück: "in my opinion the Swordsmission and the trend towards war were in many regards the reasons for the substantial growth of Visby in the beginning of the 13th century"⁵⁵.

It is documented how the crusaders and pilgrims used Visby as a base on their way to and from the eastern Baltic. Here the fleets of the crusaders could gather, be equipped and pass the winter. Archbishop Andreas Sunesen, who was one of the leaders of the Danish conquest of Estonia, visited Visby, as did Bishop Albert of Riga who may be connected with the octagonal church of the Holy Spirit (or St. Jacob)⁵⁶. The monastery of Roma acquired large estates in Estonia⁵⁷. But when a legate from the Pope came to Visby in 1226 to preach for the crusade, neither the Danes nor the

51. survey in Christiansen 1980.

52. Schück 1945, 188f.

53. Roosval 1945, 302.

54. Magnusson 1989; 1995, 67ff.

55. Blomkvist 1997, 56.

56. Yrwing 1978b; Gallén 1982.

57. Wienberg 2001, 273f.

Gotlanders were interested. The observations of this legate may be the reason why Pope Gregorius IX issued a letter in 1229, with further reminders in 1230, in which he demands that the Bishop of Linköping, the Abbot of Roma and the Dean of Visby should ban Gotlander merchants from trading with or otherwise assisting the heathen peoples (Karelians, Ingrians, Lapps and Vods) along the Gulf of Finland and the trade route to Novgorod. It appears that the Gotlanders had sold weapons, horses, ships, provisions and other commodities to these heathens⁵⁸.

Neutral Gotland could profit from both sides in the crusades, from both Christians and heathens, but gradually, as the Baltic Sea became a Christian lake, this favourable position diminished. Thus the civil war of 1288 may have had its basis in the competition over a shrinking market between town and countryside. And if Visby with its many Germans had taken a more active part in the crusades, while the trading farmers from the countryside continued exports to the heathens, then there was a further reason for conflict⁵⁹.

Towers towards Heaven

The political situation on Gotland in 1288 and beyond was characterised by rivalry. In spite of the peace agreement supervised by King Magnus Ladelås, town and countryside continued to compete to build the largest and highest structures. But where the town gave priority to its wall and towers, the countryside squandered resources on its churches. It is the suggestion here that it was church building and their adornment which finally bankrupted the trading farmers. Thus, where Lindquist refers to taxes as hampering the accumulation of capital, and thereby the possibility for investment in trade, excessive investment in churches is here seen as responsible.

If the farmers on Gotland had not used so much money on large chancels, high towers, enormous portals, windows, sculptures, and paintings, they would have stood a much better chance in competition with Visby and the German merchants. They should have spent more of their surplus, not on churches, but on an infrastructure, with harbours and larger ships. Considering their fatal defeat in 1361, they should also have invested more in modern weapons and armour. But here care must be taken to avoid too much speculation contrary to the facts.

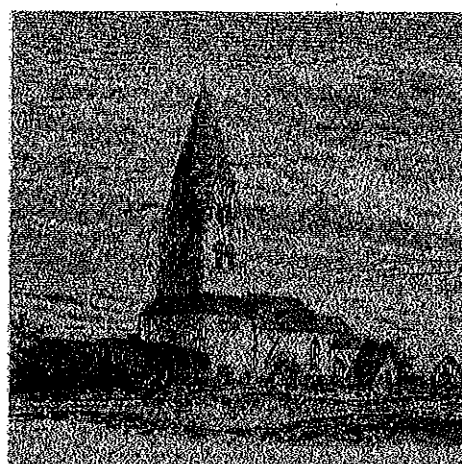


Fig. 8. Rone church also called "Lang Jaku", i. e. Long Jacob, from its 60 m high tower and the patron Saint Jacob. The tower dates mainly from c. 1350. Wooden engraving in "Ny Illustrerad Tidning" 1872 after SvK Gotland (1973) vol. 150.

For indeed they did spend much money. The Gotlanders transformed their churches into everything the Cistercian leader Bernard of Clairvaux had once condemned back in the 12th century. The churches became too high, too long, too wide and contained too many elaborate pictures, which then would draw attention away from piety⁶⁰. Consider the enormous church of Lau, or the mighty towers stretching towards Heaven in Dalhem, Rone (Fig. 8) or Öja. Consider the stone sculpture at Stånga and the cross in Öja. Think about the church tower of Vamlingbo, which once must have been the highest on the island, and about the many stone houses in the parish. Not least, consider again the chancel in Källunge, where the number of farms served by the church was only 12. This is megalomania! Maybe it was logical within a medieval universe with a deeply religious mentality, but it is insanity if you want to be competitive in an early capitalist market around the Baltic Sea.

In the very same decade as the citizens of Visby built mighty towers on its town wall, the farmers (and the rector) in Lärbro invested in a marvellous church tower⁶¹. In both cases building might sym-

58. DS I 253, 254, 255.

59. cf. Westholm 1988, 17.

60. Wienberg 1999, 25.

61. SvK Gotland II, 1935, 93ff.; Bartholin 1998.

bolise a Heavenly Jerusalem - Visby with its towers and crenellated walls, and Lärbro with its octagonal plan. But undeniably, the protection afforded the storehouses by the town wall was more potent and practical than the splendour and symbolism of a church tower. Or, to quote Johnny Roosval: "One seems to hear energetic propaganda by the German members of the council for the erection of a town wall, while scoffing at the waste of resources on new, large churches with strange portals in the countryside"⁶².

Why then spend so much in church building, church sculptures, church furniture and church paintings? It could be an "old fashioned" mentality juxtaposed upon a more "modern" economy. It could be an old Gotlandic mentality of gifts, offerings and honour, where status was not related to the accumulation of money, but to thrift, and gifts to allies as well as the gods. An old paradigm meets a new economic rationality. It could also be symbolic competition or rivalry between the market town of Visby and the market land of Gotland - building more and more, higher and higher - in a fruitless attempt to maintain an urban culture⁶³. Or, as folklore tells of the old man from Hoburg in southern Gotland when he heard what others would bring as godfathers' gifts: "No way that I should bring the least!"⁶⁴.

This interpretation may be a reminder of the debate about the collapse of the Mayan culture. One of the many explanations for that has emphasised an imbalance between agrarian productivity and the construction of monuments. The decline in productivity led to the erection of more monuments to placate the gods, which worsened the situation until it ended in rapid decline. Consequently, with an imbalance on Gotland between trading profit and church building, the continuous decline in profits meant still higher church towers to please God, which only worsened the situation, until it too ended in total decline. But this model is by no means new: the economic historian Robert S. Lopez claimed, in the periodical "Annales" back in 1952, that cathedrals were an economic embarrassment. Thus the building of the cathedral in Beauvais became a burden to the development of the town⁶⁵.

But maybe all models and explanations are superfluous because the boom may actually have continued according to the many dated grave slabs from the 14th and 15th centuries?⁶⁶ But no! Grave

slabs are testimonies to pragmatic change. As building work declined, stonemasons had to find a new market. Their products had to be cheaper than buildings. Grave slabs would always find buyers. After the crusades a new and larger market opened up for exports fashioned in limestone. All the way around the Baltic Sea (except in heathen Lithuania) Gotlandic baptismal fonts are found⁶⁷. The people of the Baltic Sea no longer needed swords, but fonts!

Gotland and Europeanisation

A final word is needed regarding Gotland and Europeanisation. The Golden Age of Gotland occurred when the island chose a neutral position, a "third way" between west and east, between Christians and heathens. Gotland could ride high on the booming war economy, which existed around the Baltic Sea in the wake of the crusades. On the one hand Gotland welcomed crusaders and pilgrims, and on the other it sold weapons to the enemy. Gradually as the coast around the Baltic Sea was Christianised, the position of Gotland became untenable, and decline became inevitable. When the war economy suffered a downturn, conflict over a shrinking market arose between town and countryside, and the maintenance of old traditions within the countryside clogged up its economy.

With the Christianisation of Gotland accumulation of silver in the ground was replaced by buildings above ground. Europeanisation meant that, the silver of Woden on the farm was succeeded by gifts to the church of Christ⁶⁸. But the fundamental mentality remained unchanged. And just as the late hoards were fewer, but larger⁶⁹, so the later church buildings were few, but large, denoting crisis. The farmers who insisted on such continued investment in the religious sphere undermined their own material base. The higher the towers stretched towards Heaven, the lower Gotland fell in prosperity.

62. Roosval 1945, 303.

63. cf. Qviström 1995, 42f.

64. Sæve 1959-61 I, 51; cf. Söderberg 1966, 147.

65. Lopez 1952; criticized in Murray 1989, 47ff.

66. cf. Staecker 1999, 259.

67. cf. Landen 1993, 50.

68. cf. Zachrisson 1998, 216f.

69. Östergren 1989, 24f.

Europeanisation in the form of military and religious expansion around the Baltic Sea gave Gotland a Golden Age. Economic rise and fall in itself is a means to focus on the tragic changeability of history. It serves as a warning against building beyond one's means from a moral point of view. In admiring the advanced urban culture of Visby and the splendour of the Gotlandic churches, it is also necessary to remember that the money for their construction came from the bloody wars in the eastern Baltic.

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