

Skeletons in Armor Revealed by Digging

Archæology

By EMILY C. DAVIS

The famous battle of Visby, July 27, 1361, about which history says so little and legend says so much, is at last being understood as the result of scientific investigation at the site of the battle.

Legend declares that when the Danish King Valdemar III wanted to besiege the prosperous and strategic city of Visby, capital of the Island of Gothland, he first went disguised as a merchant to the city and laid siege to the heart of a romance-seeking maiden, the daughter of a prominent goldsmith. Foreign merchants were an everyday occurrence in the busy trade centers of Visby, and the spying king was unsuspected. The goldsmith's daughter, captivated by the merchant's love-making, discussed with him the strong and weak points of the island's defenses, whereupon the merchant sailed away on business.

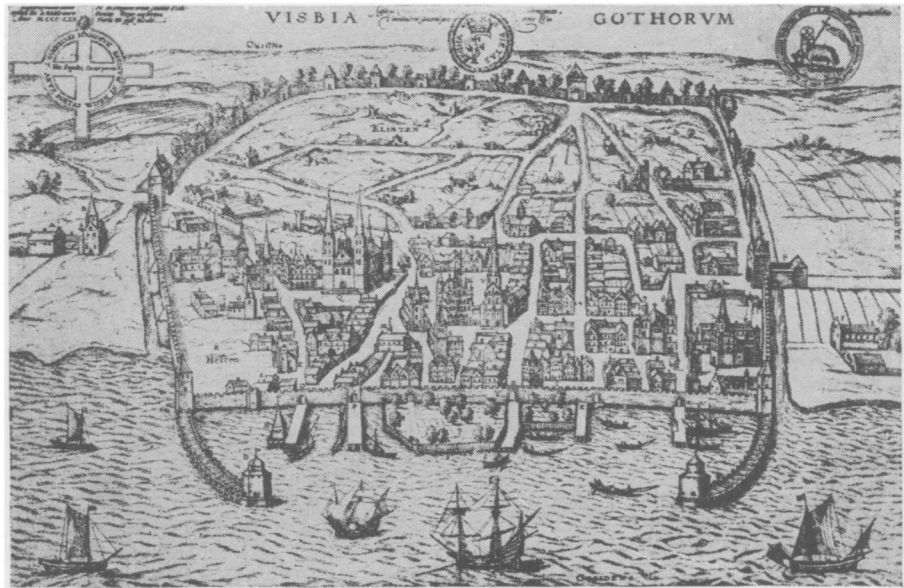
In due time he returned—with an army—and the island and its capital city fought for their existence. Legend says that the meadow outside the walls of Visby ran red with blood. Even in the streets blood flowed in torrents as far as the Baltic Sea, which was thereby colored red. When Visby fell, the conqueror Dane broke a gaping hole in the city wall and rode through instead of entering by the gates. Legend also says that Valdemar gave no more thought to the goldsmith's daughter, but took interest only in having three huge beer vats set in the market square, with orders that they be filled with gold and silver before sunset lest the city be burned as forfeit.

The unhappy goldsmith's daughter was identified as the cause of the city's downfall, and was walled alive in a tower, the Maiden's Tower, which can be seen by tourists at Visby to this day.

How much of this is fact and how much poetic inspiration has remained a mystery. No event has been more richly woven into romantic tales in all Gothland's eventful history. But the story has remained one for storytellers, handed on by word of mouth, added to and embroidered until no one can say where fantasy ends and history begins.

At some time or other a stone cross was set up in the meadow to mark the battlefield and the date. In terse Latin it says:

"In the year of our Lord 1361 on the twenty-seventh of July, there fell



VISBY in its glory, shown on an old map

before the gates of Visby at the hands of the Danes the Goths here buried; pray for them."

No one knows when the cross was carved and placed there, or by whom. But the stone holds the only written record of the battle, except for the bare historic facts that the Danish king did besiege Visby and plunder it.

But now archaeologists have dug into the field outside the walls and have found there remarkable evidence in proof of a dramatic siege. Dr. John Nihlen, well-known Swedish archaeologist, who has just visited this country, said that last summer there have been unearthed at the battlefield the skeletons of hundreds of fighters who were killed and buried in huge common graves.

Here lie the bodies of warriors in chain mail, rare survivals of medieval armor, for chain mail is one of the durable looking objects that has vanished almost entirely since its day. Here are bodies not only of strong fighting men, but also of women, cripples, children, the last defense of the city's militia. Those that died were buried hastily, fearfully, for the weather was hot and there was alarm that plague might add its terrors to those of siege.

It was not until 1905 that archaeologists first set to work to see what could be done to dig up the unwritten history of the encounter. The Swedish archaeologist, Dr. O. V. Vennersten, who conducted the first investigation, assumed that the battle raged

where the memorial cross stands, and there he began to dig. It was soon shown that he was correct in his calculations, for a tremendous common grave was opened, and skeletons in armor began to be discovered. By different stages the excavations have since been continued, with many difficulties. The fallen soldiers were tossed down into the common grave helter skelter, in the most disconcerting disorder. Since there had been no time for regular funerals, only big pits had been dug, and in these the dead had been thrown without even the removal of their armor. To extract any of these skeletons and their rare medieval armor from the swampy earth proved an exceptionally delicate task, and yet one for a sturdy constitution. Only hardy workers could endure the digging, for the earth formed by the decay of organic material and the naturally moist earth spread an almost unbearable stench.

After 1912, sixteen years have gone by without further investigations of Visby field until this past summer, 1928, when Dr. B. Thordeman set to work with newer and highly improved methods with brilliant results.

Hundreds of new skeletons have been found, and medieval military equipment and weapons have been unearthed, Dr. Nihlen stated. And an excellent survey of the huge war grave can now be obtained.

"Some of the rich finds have already been examined in museums and laboratories," he (*Turn to next page*)

Skeletons in Armor Unearthed by Digging—*Continued*

reported. "In this connection a Swedish scientist, Prof. E. Clason, has done the principal work and through him we have obtained numerous interesting details of the encounter which for so many years has occupied popular fantasy and legend makers.

"The soldiers involved were apparently well equipped. Around the skeletons of several of them were found coat-of-mail hoods which are still well preserved after five centuries, but which were not sufficient to protect their wearers. Around the shrunken skeletons it was also possible to discern chest plates and well-forged iron bands, coat-of-mail sleeves, and armored gloves. In this way an excellent opportunity is offered for studying more closely the military equipment of the Middle Ages, about which previously little has been known.

"Of weapons only a few have been discovered. These it had been obviously impossible to save before the corpses were thrown down into the common grave. A few arrow-heads of iron have been found. These were embedded in the skulls so deeply that it had not been possible to extract them quickly during the battle and therefore they had been allowed to remain in the bodies.

"Many of the skeletons taken from the muddy grave were fearfully mutilated. Broken bones furnish clear evidence that the fight was conducted with a high degree of fury. On one skull it was possible to count as many as fifteen wounds, on another thirteen. In many instances noses had been cut off. Sometimes ears were cut so close to the skull that traces of the cuts could be seen in the bones. On the lower extremities there were a great number of cuts. They had apparently been the least protected parts of the bodies. A mortal combat between embittered enemies—that is what the remnants here found give witness of."

Some curiosity has been expressed as to whether the bodies found here are those of the Danes or of the native Gothlanders. All the clues indicate that it is the remnants of the defeated inhabitants which have now been brought to light.

"Inquiries of Prof. Clason in this respect have been of great significance," Dr. Nihlen said. "Through his examination of the skeletons he has been able to demonstrate that among the bodies buried here at least nine were women, and furthermore a large number were cripples and invalids. He has also proved that almost a third of the 130 individuals

which he examined were the skeletons of either aged people or else the very young. This army, whose fallen were buried near the cross outside Visby, had an odd make-up. In addition to men capable of bearing arms, it was composed of old men and boys, cripples and women. This could hardly be the mighty Danish army which had landed a few days before under the command of King Valdemar. What has been discovered under this battlefield is therefore nothing but the remnants of the militia hastily gathered when the Danish invaders landed on the island."

That the weak, the old, and the lame should have gone out against the Danish king is evidence that the struggle was as bloody and desperate a fight as the legend has insisted. It was a bitter cup for the Gothlanders that the Danish king should add King of Gothland to his title. But the title was as eagerly coveted by Valdemar on his side, and he had reason to fight desperately for it.

The island of Gothland has been called by historians the Crete of the Baltic, because during several centuries of the Middle Ages Gothland occupied the same high cultural and political rank in Northern Europe as Crete once held in the Eastern Mediterranean. Trade, above all, gave Gothland its position of power. The great trade routes between the Orient and the west had here in the Baltic Sea one of their most important meeting points. During the Viking Age, from about 800 to 1050 A. D., nearly every farmer on this island was a ship owner, and with his own boats made trade expeditions to foreign ports. But during the Middle Ages, from 1050 to 1500 A. D., the only city on the island, Visby, gathered all these lines of trade into its own hands and became one of the leaders of the Hanseatic League.

It was inevitable that the powerful cities of the trade league should have enemies, and Visby had many. One of the most virulent was the powerful Valdemar, who made the daring resolution to crush Visby forever. His encouragement to his soldiers when he set out on this mission is said to have been that he would lead them to a place where there was gold and silver aplenty, and where even the pigs ate out of silver troughs. With his large and eager army he sailed to the island and defeated the hastily collected peasant army, unused to battle tactics.

Visby surrendered, and saved its

homes and shops and churches from the flames by stripping them of their treasures to meet the conquerer's demand. The beer vats were filled by sunset, as required, but when Valdemar withdrew he put Danish governors over the island.

Even then Visby was not completely crushed, but her commercial prosperity had suffered a mortal blow. Her wealth had been shown to be but feebly protected against marauders, and her people brave but helpless in time of emergency. The losses caused her strength gradually to ebb away.

While the Danish king sacked Visby, his subordinate officers treated the other settlements on the island in a similar manner. An inscription in a church at Fide in the southern part of Gothland summarizes the events of the day in Latin as pithy as a modern headline: "The temple has been burned, the people slain, and fall wailing before the sword."

Finally, Valdemar gathered his warriors and leaving probably more than a thousand dead Gothlanders, he set sail for his home country with his coveted hoard of gold and silver. But accounts state that a storm arose at sea and his ships sank still laden with their heavy treasure. Valdemar himself escaped.

An incident which occurred during the excavations in 1912 has gone down into the modern record of Visby's most famous battle. The digging at the battlefield attracted the special interest of the German Emperor, William II, who that year visited the island. It is said that the Emperor came to visit the excavations on a day when an entire heap of skeletons had been revealed and one could see grinning death's heads inside of rusty helmets, as well as chopped off legs and other mutilations.

The scientist in charge, Dr. Vernersten, immediately placed himself at the disposal of the Emperor and explained the finds. As he pointed out the various details he decided to give the Emperor a lesson from the past, and said:

"Here you see, your Majesty, how frightful are the consequences of war. I hope you will remember."

Onlookers expected that the Prussian ruler would become angry, but instead he broke out into laughter and made a humorous little speech in reply. As a proof of his thanks for the lesson he awarded a decoration to the brave Swedish archaeologist.