

The Body of Christ and the Pearl of the Baltic Sea – Past and Present on Gotland.

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First a note on a terminological difficulty. I am not quite sure what to call the people living here in ancient times, or indeed today. The original inhabitants are in Swedish called "gutar", i.e. "goths", and their language "gutamål" or "gutniska", that is "gothic" but it is certainly not the same language Wulfila used in translating the Bible into "gothic", although the two are of course related. Even today a person born here out of two gotlandic families may be called a "gute", especially if he or she is able to speak the native tongue, although not many people do so nowadays. A "gotlänning" is a wider term, indicating that you at least are born here, but maybe not from pure gotlandic stock. Such a person may speak "gotlandic", the very distinctive dialect of the island but in principle the common Swedish language with some peculiarity in wording or pronunciation. I will now instead use the term "gotlander" in the same sense as the word "shetlander" is used in English dictionaries i.e. "a native *or* inhabitant of Shetland/Gotland", that is, not differentiating between the natives and the rest of the inhabitants.

No one knows when Christianity first came to Gotland. Probably much earlier than the first period we have any evidence from, which is the 11th century. What we do know is what was written down in 1220s in the Law of the Goths, "Gutalagen". It contains an appendix, called "Gutasagan", "the saga of the Goths", and just as with the famous Icelandic sagas, the word "saga" doesn't mean fairytale, which it does in modern Swedish, but simply "tale", "history". It contains a very simplified version of the christianising process. It says that "the gotlanders although heathen themselves sailed in merchant ships to all countries, both heathen and Christian. The merchants took note of Christian customs in Christian countries and some of them were baptized and brought to Gotland Christian priests."

When did this happen? We don't know. The gotlanders had certainly been in close contact with the continent already in Roman times. Many findings on the island testifies to this. But on the other hand we know that the vikings didn't have sailing ships as early as that. The oldest known Swedish sailing ship comes from a boat burial on the Estonian island of Ösel and dates from the 740s. But after that it is certainly possible that gotlanders travelled as far as their known Danish and Norwegian relatives. And *they* also travelled to Gotland, possibly on their way to the east Baltic region and to what is today Russia, a name derived from the vikings coming from the coastal region north of Stockholm, "Rus".

But we are approaching a more definitive date in the next passage from the Gutasaga:
I will read it first in medieval gothic:

Sípan gutar sagu cristna manna síþi þa lydu þair guz buþi oc leþra manna kennu tocu þa almennilica wiþr cristindomj miþ sielfs wilia sinum vtan þuang so et engin þuang þaim til cristnur Sípan en menn orþu almennilica cristnjr þa gierþis kirchia annur alandi j altingabo han war fyrstj j miþalþriþiungi .

This means: "After the Gotlanders had seen the customs of Christian men they listened to God's commandments and accepted the Christian faith of their own free will and with no coercion, so that no one forced them to be Christians. When christianity had been widely accepted they built the second church on Gotland in Atlingbo. This was the first in the middle thridding."

Two things strike one here and both of them have Western connections. The first is, that the Christian faith was fairly rapidly accepted. Probably there were discussions at the althing, that is the parliament of the island. This is exactly what happened in Iceland where the althing accepted the new faith in the year 1000. This was certainly well known here and the Gotlandic conversion, as we shall see, must have followed soon after, although I must admit that this can't be directly verified in the Gutasaga. The second piece of information that reveals Western connections is the word "middle thridding". Gotland has from this early Christian period right up to the present day been divided into three thridings, each led by a rural dean. You will meet two of them at the Bishop's dinner on Monday evening. The word "thridding" means of course that something is divided into three parts. The first germanic land to be so divided to my knowledge is Yorkshire, with its West, East and North thridding, although the word itself has been transformed into "riding" later on. Yorkshire was of course in itself part of the Danelaw, the part of England ruled by North germanic peoples up to the fall of York in 954. We can rest assured that not a few gotlanders had been there during this period and maybe also got inspiration from England when it came to church administration. In fact, the Swedish word for country parish, "socken", may very well have been borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon "socn", although I know that the timetable for the formation of rural parishes in England is a very disputed subject.

Now to the dating of this period in Gotland. The Gutasaga continues: "A short while hereafter Saint Olof, the king, came while fleeing from Norway with his ships to the harbour known as Akergarn. There he stayed for a long time." This should be the winter of 1029 to 1030. King Olof Haraldsson, in England mostly known through one of his earlier

exploits when destroying London Bridge, then went back to Norway in the hope of regaining his realm from the Danish king, but failed and fell in the famous battle of Stiklestad on July 29th 1030. Only two years later he was proclaimed a saint and remained the most popular local saint in all Scandinavia for the rest of the Middle Ages. Apart from trying, although not without executing a certain amount of force, to christianize the Norwegian population he was not, it appears, a very saintly person. In fact he was such a brutal man that many of his own kin didn't want to have anything to do with him. But a saint he nevertheless became.... With his death ended the viking period in Scandinavia. Most of the land and population was by this time Christian and Christian kings ruled over larger and larger tracts of land, like present day Denmark or Sweden. But not over Gotland!

Now we will approach one of the most important features of this island, or land, the land of the Goths, because it was to all purpose a republic of free peasants. The "Gutalagen", doesn't even mention the king, any king. In that respect Gotland was very much like Iceland, but whereas Iceland over the centuries developed into a quite hierarchical society where poor peasants had to relinquish their land to higher ranked people, Gotland remained an astonishing democratic society. Quite unique in fact. For instance there was no nobility here, at all, nor great landowners. Although Gotland on its own initiative started to pay tribute to the king of sviones, i.e. the land around Lake Mälaren in central Sweden, already in the 9th century, which we know through a travel report by the Anglo-Saxon Wulfstan, this did not have any immediate impact either on Gotlandic society as such or on its ability to enter into commercial agreements with foreign powers. Among many other things, this means that the parishes, the "socken" in Gotland, remained a legally free entity right up to modern times, and that the *althing* really could represent the people of the island without nobelmen or kings interfering.

I have dwelt at som length on this subject because it is vital for the understanding both of the christening process here and the Church structure as such, and not only during the Middle Ages but also in much later times.

Now back to King Olaf! The "Gutasagan" claims that the king was pivotal in establishing the faith in the island. Later historians have very much doubted his importance but the timing is probably right. I seems to be true, that the building of churches accelerated from this time on. The first ones were undoubtedly built of wood. Unlike in Norway not one of these early churches have stood the test of time but we do have several planks, sometimes ornated which facilitates dating, which shows that at least some, perhaps most, of the

parishes really had church buildings at this early date. The oldest standing church is probably the one in Garde, with an inner ceiling perhaps as old as the late 11th century. Otherwise it is the 12th century that saw the building of no less than 94 parish churches in the countryside, of which 92 are still in use, and at least 15 in Visby, plus some monastic buildings, of which the magnificent ruins of the cistercian abbey in Roma still testifies. The population was probably much the same as today, which means that Gotland could boast at least 110 churches for say 50 - 60 000 inhabitants, which is probably also pretty unique.

When I spoke of Western influences it should for the record also be noted that there surely also were Eastern ones. A few churches, the one in Garde and the splendid church of Källunge, contain byzantine, probably Russian, painting, dating to around the year 1200. As a matter of fact, I will not say much more about the church buildings themselves right now, since we will spend most of tomorrow visiting some of them and talking a lot more about them. But I have to add, and this is very important, that all the churches in the countryside were built and payed for by the peasants themselves. Here in Visby we have churches that belonged to the dominicans, the franciskans, the Danish king, German merchants – the present day cathedral – and the bishop of Linköping, among others. But in the countryside people owned their own churches, and ran their businesses, and the priests came from local families and their sons often inherited the incumbency and the church to go with it from their fathers – yes, we are far away from Rome!

I mentioned the bishop of Linköping. He was also the bishop of Gotland, as a matter of fact. The gotlanders chose him themselves, according to the Gutasaga. This happened in the 1120s, the same decade the see of Linköping was established. The bishop was supposed to travel here regularly for visiting the parishes and some medieval bishops did, but many didn't, and the gotlanders were probably all the more happy for it. So, in most respects, the abbot of Roma and the rural deans governed the Church here for some rather peaceful centuries, while the Gotlandic economy flourished and Visby grew and grew to become one of the most important towns in the Baltic sea, with lots of mostly German merchants settling here. In the early period, Gotland was also almost certainly the base for crusades to the still heathen livians, latvians and estonians.

The 13th century is regarded as the golden age of Gotland. More than a hundred churches, as we heard, were under construction or being rebuilt in the new gothic style and vast amounts of church artifacts were imported from the continent, although many also were produced locally. I once saw an estimate of the cost for churchbuilding in England during the 11th century of 60% of the GNP. It must have been something like that here one and

two centuries later.

A tax list from from the beginning of the 14th century lists 1500 farms on the island. Most of them existed already during the late Iron age and almost all of them exist today but when the Black death struck Gotland in 1350 perhaps 10% of the farms were laid waste. The Black death did not hit Gotland as hard as some parts of the mainland, probably because of the islands decentralized structure, but almost half the population died, one believes. This and the Danish invasion in 1361 mark the end of the Golden age. The church in Gammelgarn was probably the last to be completed, or almost completed. We will go there tomorrow.

The year 1361 also marked the end of the free peasants republic of Gotland. For almost 300 years, till 1645, Gotland was now a province in the realm of Denmark. The Swedish kings didn't acknowledge this fact until the treaty of Stettin in 1570, and right up to this year Gotland continued to be part of the Diocese of Linköping. Maybe because of this somewhat ambivalent situation the Danish crown never treated Gotland as part of the motherland but merely as a sort of colony, like Norway, the Faroe islands or indeed Iceland. This, and the very unstable political situation in the region all through the 15th century, also brought with it a sharp decline in the economical fortunes of the island. From having been one of the richest parts of the Baltic region it became quite poor. Even if Visby continued to be an important town with a useful harbour, the larger ships of the new era could easily bypass Visby on their ways to the eastern Baltic region and Russia.

And then came the Reformation! Unfortunately not very much is known about what actually happened here but we shall bear in mind that it was instigated from Denmark, where the reformation in general was much more brutal than in Sweden. Now I will read a rather long quote from *The Cronica Guthilandorum*, written in Danish with Gotlandic accents by Hans Nilssön Strelow, a priest and later superintendent both under Danish and Swedish rule. His book was published in Copenhagen in 1633 and is the most important source for the older Gotlandic history. He writes:

"In the year 1530 came the Honorable and Noble Hendrick Rosenkrantz to Gotland to have the island as a fiefdom given by his Majesty. In his time the evangelical reformation occured but it is to be lamented and not praised that in the beginning of the reformed school, not only gold and silver and other precious things used in the papal heresy, like clothes and other such stuff, were removed from churches and monasteries, but also a terrible destruction, which was of no use, took place, and beautiful buildings, and

magnificent buildings and religious houses, where famous people and families were buried, were ruined, so that nowadays only horses, cattle and pigs live there. He laid the house of God waste and barren, unnecessarily burnt books and letters, written with great industry and effort, destroyed pictures and paintings. Only the pigs rummaged there."

As you could hear, this pillar of the Lutheran church during the time of Lutheran orthodoxy, didn't have a high opinion of the reformation process itself. Nor did in fact the citizens of Visby. They tried to protect the precious objects Strelow mentioned, took them from the churches, objects no doubt once payed for by their ancestors, and hid them from the authorities, but we know that the Danish lords in the end managed to confiscate most of it. A modern estimate is, that at most 1 % of the medieval objects is still in existance. Nevertheless we are comparatively fortunate here on Gotland, since many things in fact have been preserved. For instance we have 60 % of all 14th-century retables north of Italy. In England for instance there are only one or two left from this early period.

The period between 1525 when an army from Lübeck occupied Visby, laid some of the churches in ruin and also as it happened burnt the municipal archive, which means that we have very few documents from earlier periods preserved, and 1572, when the Danes made Gotland a superintendenture directly under the Danish crown, is indeed a very chaotic time for the Church here. The last catholic bishop of Linköping, Hans Brask, visited Visby in 1527 before sailing to exile in Danzig. When contacts were broken with the see of Linköping the level of education fell drastically and a long period of decline began. It should and must be noted that the medieval Church in Sweden was in very good condition and very well managed before the reformation and that it took at least 200 years to mend the damages done during the reformation period.

We will now take a leap to the year 1645, when Denmark lost large parts of its territory to Sweden, among them Gotland, gains which were further augmented three years later when Sweden in the Westphalian peace treaty also established its hold over large parts of Northern Germany, which gave Gotland once again a very central position in the Baltic region. When Gotland returned to Sweden the aforementioned Hans Nilssön Strelow was superintendent, and a very good one at that, who managed to steer a clear course between Gotlandic national feelings, the still quite danishminded clergy and the new Swedish authorities. After his death in 1656 the King put a harsher man in his place, Johannes Brodinus, with the clearly articulated wish, that he should finally make Gotland a part of the Church of Sweden. He was as could be expected only moderately successful in this endeavour. Still the clergy insisted that their sons ought to inherit their incumbencies and

that at least gotlanders should be preferred to mainlanders. Due to such strong opposition, Brodinus didn't even succeed in recruiting a Swedish priest to the cathedral here in Visby.

After a brief interlude 1676-79, when Gotland was recaptured by the Danes, the king (which was the new king Charles XI, not the one in Strelows days, Charles X) sent his brightest young clergyman, Haqvin Spegel, to Gotland. He came from humble origins, grew up in Blekinge and Scania, still parts of the Danish realm, and had been superintendent over the army in Scania during king Charles campaign there, when still a young man. He was subsequently to become bishop in Skara, in Linköping and finally archbishop in Uppsala, but for five years, between 1680 and 1685 he devoted his energy to putting the Church in Gotland in good order and in trying to introduce the Swedish church manual and Swedish hymns, of which he wrote many himself. He also visited all the parishes in Gotland. His protocols from these visits mostly make a sad reading. One must bear in mind, that whilst Sweden was at the height of its political powers and a really important player in North European politics, the country as such was bitterly poor. When Spegel came to a parish he could find that it owned one old Danish hymn book, one Bible and perhaps nothing more, and that most parishioners were poorly informed about the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The churches themselves were mostly in quite bad shape, although also much was being done to modernize their interiors during this period, as we shall see. In fact, many splendid baroque pews and pulpits testify the the wish of the population to beautify the churches also under harsh economical conditions.

Some of the priests were well educated in Copenhagen or Greifswald in Pomerania, at that time an important Swedish university town, but others were definitely not. Discipline was often slack and many priests had a drinking problem, as had indeed their parishioners. On the plus side was the educational system. The Danes had started schools in most parishes and children flocked to them to learn at least to read and write. The problem was to get competent teachers for them and Spegel devoted much work to raising the standard of education but with inadequate funding there wasn't really much he could do about it. The country was also full of homeless and destitute people as a result of the many years of war. Spegel spent much time researching the history of Gotland and wrote a book on this subject, which wasn't printed until the beginnings of the 20th century, and has sadly never been reprinted.

When we have passed the terrible plague years of 1710 and 1711, when again a significant part of the population perished, things began to look slightly better. In fact, the Swedish government all through the 18th century worked on the improvement of the Gotlandic

agriculture and industries. Apart from farming products mainly stone, timber and tar were exported in large quantities from Gotland. Especially the beautiful Gotlandic limestone was in high demand, not least in Stockholm. The late 18th and early 19th centuries are sometimes called the “silver age of Gotland”, whereas of course the high middle age is the golden one. In 1772 the king Gustavus III transformed the superintendence into a proper diocese and made Gabriel Lütkehan bishop, on par with all the other bishops in the Church of Sweden. Of course Visby was then, as it is today, the smallest of the dioceses.

The 19th century, this diocese as elsewhere in Sweden, was marked by the rise of several evangelical movements. In Swedish they are collectively called “väckelsen”, meaning “the awakening”. There were all the usual ones here, baptists, methodists and even a sprinkling of mormons, but more importantly there were larger movements peculiar to Sweden, like The Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, and many others. Today three of the most important of them, The Mission Covenant Church, The baptists and the methodists have merged into a church called the Equmenia-church. Some of you may remember that I at the time wrote an article on this event in “The Window”. But as peaceful as ecumenical relations in general are in Sweden, the more complicated could they be when the evangelicals and baptists first came here. Emigration from Sweden to first of all the USA escalated from the middle of the century right up to World War I. Many years of a large increase in population together with many bad harvests in a country like Gotland where 80% worked in the agricultural sector fuelled the desire to seek a happier destiny elsewhere. During the most intense period of emigration 20% of all young people left for each five-year-period. Emigration was most intense from the southern part of Gotland, also the part where the evangelical movements were strongest, as they indeed are today. That emigration to the USA and evangelicalism go together is of course to attribute to the fact that this religious inspiration to a large extent came from America and during the first years also from England. In 1915 7% of the population were members of a so called free churches, and if you to the actual registered members add their children, you may come to the conclusion that between 10 and 12% of the population belonged to these churches and movements. The great majority of them would of course also still be members of the Church of Sweden.

One must in all honesty say that many, perhaps most, priests in The Church of Sweden and even the bishops at the time, at least here on Gotland, were rather positive in their approach to these newcomers on the religious scene, recognizing their value not least when bringing religious education to the people. Just like in England and Germany this

had also been made possible through the creation of Bible societies which for the first time in history made the private reading of the Bible possible also for people with limited means. On the other hand, there also were priests less than sympathetic and rather unpleasant clashes between baptists and the established church have been reported from some parishes in the south of the island.

Nowadays, of course, the ecumenical climate is very good between the larger denominations. In Visby we have the Ecumenia church, The Pentecostal church, the Salvation Army and a bit further from the centre of Christianity Jehovah's Witnesses. In the countryside the same plus a Swedish church called "The evangelical free-church", in all essence also a Pentecostal movement. There is also a thriving Roman-Catholic congregation here in Visby with a lovely modern church not far from here. There are also a few orthodox and apart from Christians, some Thai Buddhists, a small Bahai community and of course moslems of different persuasions, although no mosque has as yet been built.

Now, let's look at the present situation. The structure of the church in Gotland, with many small parishes and around 40-45 priests serving was quite intact from late medieval times right up to the 20th century. In 1962 a great structural reform affected the whole of Sweden and for the first time also Gotland and the number of incumbencies was reduced to twenty. In the year 2000 the Church of Sweden was formally separated from the state. Previously, for instance, the government appointed the bishops. On the other hand, one can't say that the separation is complete, since there is a special law for the Church of Sweden, and the political parties still have a strong influence over the management of the church. On the definite plus side though, we get a lot of financial help for the upkeep of the church buildings and it is also the state that collects the church tax. The latter one, or we should rather say the membership fee, is quite high on Gotland, because of the many churches and graveyards and few inhabitants to share it. At present the fee here is approximately 2% of the gross income of each member. This means that not a few people leave church every year on financial grounds. At present at a rate of 1% a year. This is of course very troublesome for us and one of the reasons that we keep on with structural reforms. During the last ten years or so, we have reduced the number of incumbencies to 12. Today altogether 30 priests work and live here, which means that there is one priest for every 2000 inhabitants, whereas in more densely populated parts of Sweden the figure is one for 5000.

Secularization has hit Sweden hard. Together with parts of Eastern Germany and the Czech republic Sweden is certainly one of the most non-religious countries in the world.

But of course there are still many Christians around and here on Gotland the attachment to the parish church and what it means is still quite strong, which makes it very rewarding to work here, I think.

As I said, the Diocese of Visby is by far the smallest in the Church of Sweden. In older days it would have been quite impractical to let it be part of one of the larger mainland dioceses, as the experience of the Middle Age tells us, but of course with modern communications voices have been raised now and the for a structural reform also on the diocesan level which would certainly have meant the end of Visby as a separate diocese. The solution found was in fact quite another one. Visby was made the diocese also for the Swedish parishes abroad. There are around 40 of these and the bishop of Visby divides his time between Gotland and the rest of the world. It also means that Visby in a way had regained its position as an international centre. Here many international church conferences are held, like indeed this one. We are especially proud of the number of conferences held here during the last three decades under the title of Theobald, bringing together representatives of the Lutheran, Roman-Catholic and Orthodox traditions around the Baltic sea. The next one will be here in Visby in 2018, and a smaller one in Stettin in Poland next January.

To sum up: although the The Diocese of Visby might appear small and insignificant, for us who live and work here, it is on the contrary a very dynamic place with one foot in an old and in many ways traditional agricultural society and the other one in the midst of all the transnational movements that so much affects the world of today. I sincerely hope that you will all enjoy and benefit from your stay here!

