Frustration and Revenge? Gotland strikes back - during the long 15th Century, 1390’s -1525.¹

1. Agenda

After having enjoyed increasing prosperity from the time of the Viking Age, the overseas commerce of the Gotlanders and the Visby traders began to decline sometime around the beginning of the 14th century. Navigation and ships improved, trade routes changed. Waves of unrest and pestilence around 1350, followed by the Danish violent conquest 1361, slowed down business even more. In the following years the Danish king rigorously contested Hanseatic supremacy at sea, but was definitively beaten 1370. Then the lines of royal succession became blurred both in Denmark and Norway, as well as in Sweden. The following rumbling and warring for the Scandinavian thrones, with Mecklenburgers and Hanseats actively involved, further reduced Gotlandic/Visbyensic positions in Baltic Sea matters. Finally in 1402 the Gotlanders were compelled to lease out their centuries-old trading station (Faktorei) Gotenhof in Novgorod, i.e. their pivot point on the lucrative Russian market, mercatura ruthenica, to the newly emergent Reval/Tallinn.

Questions: Could the subsequent dramatic history, beginning with the arrival of the Vitalian Brethren in the early 1390s on the island, and ending with Lübeck’s sacco di Visby 1525, be defined as outbursts of Gotland frustration and attempts at come-back, even revenge? Can we identify a line of continuity whereby this prolonged 15th century is essentially a continuing story, instead of a rhapsodic chain of single, more or less ad hoc-events?² In short: We know quite well what happened. But how shall we explain it? Can we - by cautiously addressing the question of minds and thoughts of the 15th

¹ To the memory of a great friend of Gotland then and now, professor Erik Lönnroth, Göteborg, 1910-2002.
century Gotlanders - recognise a previous commercial sea power, a former *thalassocracy*,\(^3\) striking back?

2. Sources, literature, aim

The sources for the following deliberations are the usual Gotland, German, Scandinavian and Baltic publications for the Baltic Sea area in the Late Middle Ages.\(^4\) Also, the basic literature is nowadays well received internationally.\(^5\) By re-shuffling these well-known decks of cards, this article aims more at creating insights and understanding (*Verstehen*) for long lines of history than to discover mere bits of facts as supplements for what nevertheless remains insufficient knowledge.

3. The protagonists

Three prominent historical-political “players” on Gotland of the late Middle Ages are the island itself, the town and the castle. By implication these represent the seafaring farmers, the Visby burghers and the captains of


\(^4\) Hansisches Urkundenbuch (HUB), Hanserecesse (HR), Regesta ordinis Sanctae Mariæ Theotonicae (ROSMT), Danish and Swedish Diplomataria, (DD resp SD), Danish and Swedish Scriptores (SRD resp SRS), Sveriges Traktater (ST), Stiftes (BSH), „Lief-, Est- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch (LECUB), Akten und Recesse der Livländischen Ständetage (A&R), contemporary chroniclers, esp. Detmar of Lübeck, the 14\(^{th}\) and 15\(^{th}\) century Pfund- and Palgeldbücher of Lübeck resp. Danzig.

Visborg castle. In strict chronological order, this analysis should have begun with the role of the Gotlanders, from time immemorial. Then, in about 1160, the Visby burghers stepped onto the scene, eager and ambitious, even aggressive. Finally, from the beginning of the 15th century, we would have dealt with the captains of the castle. But for reasons of disposition, we will do it the other way round.

To set the historical context, however, let us note the prolonged armed struggles and bloody fighting on and around the island in the 1390s, in 1408, in the beginning and at the end of the 1440s, in the 1480s, at the very beginning of 16th century and especially in the early 1520s, up to the Visby devastation by the Lübeckians. Clearly, the warring parties wanted to gain power over town and island. To what end? To master the strategic position in the middle of the Baltic Sea? To gain control of the island’s natural riches (wool), its possible tax and import/export revenues (salt, herring, iron, arms)? Pre-emptively to keep enemies away? To some degree these were all considerations. There was also some motivation to pacify the tumultuous island itself, as will be discussed, but the predominant goal was to rule surrounding waves and sea.

The Vitalian Brethren

The upsurging Vitalian Brethren began their mass privateering in the early 1390s while the Swedish throne was at stake. They acted in the service of the Duke of Mecklenburg and for some years supported his beleaguered Stockholm with victualia, vegetables. They soon developed an attractive, self-propelling movement of their own and spread widely into the North and Baltic Seas.⁶ Bergen was captured in 1393; Malmö and Gotland with Visby

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were taken in 1394, and they also got foothold in Livland. Visby, where the strongly fortified Kruttornet (Powder Tower, still *in situ*) commanded the port, became one of their main operative bases. In 1395 they formally switched allegiance and began to support Queen Margarethe of Denmark.

Turning from official privateering to rough piracy, their Gotland wing was led by Sven Sture, a Swedish mercenary of some status. On behalf of the queen he had three fortifications erected on the island: Slitehus and Lojsta in Stånga parish and Hallbros in Västerhejde. The youngest biographer of the Hanseatic League, Stephan Selzer (2010), even compares their holdouts to later more (in-)famous pirate nests on Jamaica and Madagascar.\(^7\)

In 1396 the Mecklenburgers arrived from across the sea and erected Landescrone/Vivesholm close to Klinte. But for another two years the rest of the island and Visby remained in the hands of Sven Sture and his swarms of Vitalians. They attacked ships ad hoc at sea and in harbours wherever. Consequently, they became a public nuisance for all friends of regulated commerce, i.e. the Hanseatic League and its well-organised part-time business partner, the Teutonic Order in Prussia, the war machine par préférence of the whole Baltic Sea region. The engagement of the martial Teutons was to prove fatal for the Vitalians.

*The Teutonic Order*

These German knights forced the Vitalians from the island in a first wave in 1398, had the Vitalic fortress burned and remained on the island until 1408.

The always well-fortified Teutons, cf. their centre Marienburg/Malbork in Westpreußen/Poland, then laid the foundation for Visborg castle, just south of Visby town wall. It is mentioned for the first time 1408: *dat buwent*, and is well depicted on the “Kutatavla” from 1618 in Fårösund parish church. Visborg emerged as one of the strongest fortresses in Scandinavia and remained so until Danish forces blew it up in 1679.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) S. Selzer, Die mittelalterliche Hanse. WBG Darmstadt 2010, p. 71.

However, after the knights had left the island, swarms of Vitalians returned and re-established themselves, remaining into the 1420s, once again disrupting Baltic Sea navigation, trade and business.

In this context, one might wonder where all the skippers with know-how, crews, soldiers, artisans and all the labourers working for at least a generation at the bases of the Gotland Vitalians have come from, if not mainly from the island itself. The Vitalians seem to have had little trouble for decades to recruit groups of willing and competent locals.

The Visborg Captains
The first captains (hövitsman) of Visborg castle were Jösse Eriksen (mentioned in 1410, in the early 1430s infamous in Sweden during the Engelbrekt-rebellion), Marquard Steen (1412), and above all Trudgot Has (1420, 1425, 1427, 1437): miles et capitaneus tocius Gotlandie, qui maximum partem castri Wisborg fectit.9 To finance the immense construction, the captain in 1412 on behalf of the inter-Scandinavian king, Erik of Pomerania, levied an enormous tax on the inhabitants, 1110 silver marks pro year, a 1000 % rise.10

Ex-king Erik of Pomerania, 1438/39-1448. At the end of the 1430s, king Erik of Pomerania was expelled from both his Danish and Swedish kingdoms and withdrew to – Visborg, as captain and governor of the island. He immediately started to use the castle as a base to attack old enemies at sea. His energetic and clearly vengeful undertakings against mainly Swedes, Danes and Hanseats are extensively referenced in sources and well known scholarly literature. Like his followers on Visborg, he united or rather suppressed town and island to support his endeavours.

The Axelsson (Tott) brothers, 1449-1487. King Erik’s successors in Visborg were the aristocratic brothers Olof, Philip and Ivar Axelsson Tott (1449-1464-1487). In 1451, Olof systematically started to stop and capture Swedish and other vessels and to ravage the Swedish east coast between

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Kolmården and Kalmar. His Gotlandic fleet became instrumental in chasing away king Karl Knutsson from Sweden in 1457.

Together with another brother, Åke, who resided far away on Varberg castle in northern Halland, and a fourth brother Erik, residing in Viborg castle in Carelia, the Axelsson brotherhood carried out several political and joint naval actions on the Estonian/Livonian coasts and in the Neva river estuary. One could also mention Olof’s repeated actions in favour of some bishop-elects in Estland/Livland, as well as his support of the Gotland community permanent claims against Reval because of Gotenhof (cf. p.1). Also, the Axelssons’ intensive engagement in the so-called Stamer-, van der Velde- and Wolthusen- conflicts in Livland should be mentioned here, as well as their closing of the Neva river 1462 to the detriment of the Hanseats, not to forget their joint naval attack on Old-Pernau 1472 and the close military collaboration between Viborg (Erik Axelsson) and Narva 1476, etc.

Clearly, Ivar and Erik used their Visborg and Viborg positions and hinterlands to bear down on Estland/Livland and eventually to cut in on the lucrative mercatura rutenica, via Neva, Novgorod etc.

For some years Erik (1457-) and Ivar (1468-) were even in positions to aspire to supreme political leadership in the civil war-ridden Scandinavian Union of Kalmar. In the mid-1480s it became clear that Ivar, on peripheral Visborg, was going to lose the struggle for power against his young Stockholmian relative Sten Sture s:r, Administrator of Sweden. He then suddenly returned his hitherto independently administrated fief, Visborg and Gotland, to the hands of the Danish king.

Consistent with his book of accounts 1485-87, Ivar commanded 3 barque-ships, i.e. lesser vessels for battle and transports, 1 caravelle and probably 2 other ships. He employed skippers of international origin, 9 of them are known by name, and, depending on season, employed between 211 and 78 pageants, most of them foreign soldiers.

After the self-governing Axelssons, the following captains of Visborg allocated the island’s ordinary resources to the service of the Danish crown.

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Jens Holgersen Ulfstand, 1487-1509, is mainly known as builder and owner of spectacular Glimmingehus castle in southern Scania. He was also the creator of the Danish Royal Navy (1497-) and made it to Danish commander at sea, befaldningsman, later anfører and then rigsamiral, to encounter the Swedes. Before that he had taxed the peasants into a status of revolt, to the effect that a Royal Commission had to swing by and arbitrate. Notably, he married into the Axelsson Tott-clan, which certainly boosted his career. In 1501 he sailed out from Gotland, struck hard on both the Lübeckian fleet and the Swedish coast and fleet and was appointed Danish rigsråd 1505. In 1508 he again ravaged the Swedish archipelago off Söderköping.

Laurens Schinkel, 1509-1517, had once served as a page under Ivar Axelsson on Visborg, and later turned out a great Danish admiral like Jens Holgersen. He started his career 1509 on Visborg by immediately warding off an attack by a Lübeckian fleet. And then, with the resources of the island behind him, the importance of which he stressed several time in Copenhagen, he, like his predecessor, went on playing a leading part in the subsequent Danish maritime history.

Sören Norby, 1517-1525, ends the line of energetic Visborg captains. He is perhaps the best known of them all, the one and only condottiere in Scandinavian history. Admiral of King Christian II and Captain of Gotland and General of the Baltic Sea, as he called himself, was a tough customer for any enemy, not least the young and aspiring King Gustavus I Wasa of Sweden. Already in 1514 Sören had inherited the flagship of the Danish Navy, Engelen, from Admiral Jens Holgersen Ulfstand. Then, for a period the Kaiser Karl V of Habsburg himself supported Sören’s Visborg-based political ambitions. Courting Christina Gyllenstierna, young widow of former Swedish Administrator (riksföreståndare) Sten Sture j:r, Sören in the early 1520s even nourished ambitions to the Swedish throne.

In the Visborg perspective, Sören fortified the coasts of Gotland, sailed out and captured Lübeckian vessels and subjugated the towns of Sölvesborg in Blekinge and Åhus and Landskrona in Scania. He also beleaguered
Sören Norby’s account books for 1523-24 reveal the command of some 750 soldiers, 90 cavalry and 50 lifeguards, *drabanter*. He personally owned warships and also commanded King Christian II:s Royal Navy. Evert Melefors (2003) gives a detailed account of Sören’s ships: *4 myn herres jakter: Barchen, Sassen, Uglen, then lile redersjakt*, then many well-equipped warships like *Kravellen, Gripen, Holken, The Greifswald kreyer, 2 Lübeck kreyers, Kaspar, Klenelusen*. In 1523 he captured 15 ships. However, according to his biographers Lars J. Larsson (1986) and Evert Melefors (2003), one should not exaggerate the results of Sören’s privateering. His guns were old-fashioned, his plans over-reaching, and he did not possess as much captured goods in Visborg as he bragged and boasted.12

**Common denominators?** Once again: Which are the possible denominators behind the almost incessant actions at sea of those adventurous Scandinavian noblemen? How much of their Baltic sea politics was family-related or personal, how much political, how much common Gotlandic?

To be sure, account books and annals and other medieval vernacular sources never mention the state of mind of the actors. But to carry through their intentions, the Vitalians already from the 1390s, as well as the whole line of Visborg captains, must permanently have had access to similar revenues and resources, like affluent taxes, ever new contingents of skippers, soldiers, artisans of different *métiers*, lots of sailors but also land-based support of all sorts. One must also take for granted, that the captains inherited essential knowledge about their position, like management, staff, networks etc. from their predecessors, a micro-line of continuation.

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Yet, the story of these colourful Gotlandic protagonists of the long 15th century is not new. We can read about them in somewhat myopic detail in the oeuvre of the great Hugo Yrwing.\(^{13}\) Lately Gun Westholm centred her broad delineation on the dramatic year of 1361.\(^{14}\) But surely, there must be a line of continuity to be discovered here, all through the long, pulsating 15th century?

4. Preconditions as an attempt to explanation

We have noticed a Gotlandic capacity to more or less permanent interference into Baltic Sea area matters, even as we close in on the epoch of the beginning of Atlantic trade and founding of nation-states in northern Europe in the late 15th century. That ability presupposes certain combined long-term resources. They are easily divided into long- and medium term geographic, material, demographic, commercial, human, spiritual, traditional, abstract, etc. prerequisites.

It is evident that our 15th century protagonists must have leaned on a firm common base, namely on the island itself with its steady administrative centre of the All-thing (Gutnalthing) in Roma\(^{15}\), on the Hanseatic town of Visby with its diligent merchants and artisans, but above all on the resources of the fortified castle and fief of Visborg (1408-), residence of the almost independent captains (hövitsman), who also were governors (länsherre) of the island. Surely, personal and family ties contributed, like political connections and networks in Visby and on the island itself, as in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Lübeck, Danzig/Gdansk, and Reval/Tallinn. For periods the personal tactical/martial skills of Vitalians and captains (Olof Axelson, Jens Holgersen, Laurens Schinkel, Sören Norby) mattered decisively.

\(^{14}\) G. Westholm, in Gotländskt Arkiv 2007.
Lost greatness and prosperity

According to Sven-Olof Lindquist’s brilliant study (1984) on Gotland’s medieval taxation, the Gotlanders had succeeded in paying extremely low fares to their Swedish kings through the 14th century – until 1412, actually.16 Their taxes were about four time less than in the Mälar Lake area. The result of this combination of low expenditure on one hand, and Gotlandic and Visbyensic centuries-long entrepreneurship, via Reval/Tallinn to Novgorod and to Lübeck, and even off to London and Brügge, resulted in a most remarkable accumulation of wealth and personal fortunes on the island and in Visby.

The human factor

My point, for further discussion, would be to identify the human factor behind the aforementioned protagonist-led dramatic events at sea of the 15th century. Or, in other words, what did then remain of former political greatness in the minds of the Gotlanders, experienced farmers, seamen, traders, sailors, fishermen, hunters, adventurers etc, as they were? Would it be possible to implicate feelings of great loss, humiliation, frustration, anger, maybe even revenge among Gotlanders and Visby burghers after the late 14th century decline; thereby also preparedness for action, in one way or other, to recapture past glory; namely, under the leadership of new strong masters on the Visborg castle?

The sea-faring Gotlanders. What did it look like around the Gotlanders in the 15th century? What could they possibly have seen, heard, experienced? The countryside territorial organisation around the Roma All-thing still functioned meticulously. Every day, the Gotlanders could admire great churches and monasteries with particular exteriors and costly interiors. As they happened to pass Katlunds, Bringes, Stora Hästnäs or the other dozens of stone farmhouses or vicarages, they got a clear vision of what prosperity in the countryside looked like. They saw Visby, if not directly as flourishing as earlier, but still looking very good, with almost a dozen sky-

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high cathedrals, remarkable two- or three-storey stone-houses, monasteries and nunneries, the city wall, the harbour, the busy marketplaces, all of it constructed on a very tiny territory below the klint. They could meet wealthy foreigners in the streets; listen to German, Russian and other languages. Above all, they could hear stories and personal memories of past glory, remembered and told by old men and women, priests, monks, nuns, and other learned people.

Like on Iceland, with a similar free farmer society, we must simply presume memorizing traditions in those Gotlandic families, where it was important to preserve family or common records of the past. No doubt, the Gotlandic judges, provosts, priests, nuns and monks must have been able to read and write. The Visby Franciscans kept Annals throughout centuries. As the infamous Taksteinar case 1274 in Lärbro and the 15th century Katlund family in Grötlingbo show, certain families exercised local power and hegemony, based on wealth, position and tradition. One would immediately expect some oral history tradition here. Some of the families, even long after 1525, continued to practise more limited sea-faring traditions, for instance by sailing to Ösel and Swedish-speaking NW Estonia. On Ösel you can still visit the villages Kotlandi (local genitive form of Gotland) on the west coast, and Suur- and Väike-Rootsi (Big- and Small-Sweden) southeast of Kuressaare. As his account book (1485) tells, Ivar Axelsson kept people from Ösel in his service at Visborg.17

This medieval Gotlandic farming, seafaring, foresting, fishing, hunting and cattle-breeding free population lived off some 1.500 single farms spread all over the island. The excavations at Fjäle in Ala reveal modest inland living standards from the 6th to the 14th century. Special meadow (lövängar) harvesting techniques are still practised. Many enough of the coastal farmers were co-owners of ships of different calibres, also for the open sea. Before the drying-out of vast moors in 19th and 20th centuries, small rivers connected inland and coastland, for instance at Paviken.

More important, as Dan Carlsson has shown since decades by now, the medieval Gotlanders profited from dozens of well-sheltered natural harbours around the straggly coasts: Gamle hamn on Fårö, Lickershamn,

17 E. Melefors, ed., Ivar Axelssons räkenskapsbok... Visby 2003.
Snäckgårdsbaden, Gustavsvik, Visby, Gnisvärd, Paviken, Ridanäs at Fröjel, Barshalder, Bandlunde and Boge.\(^{18}\)

At least from the Viking Age on the sea-faring farmers had been able to form networks across the Baltic Sea, especially in Novgorod and beyond, even to Constantinople and the Caliphate, later also in Lübeck (Artlenburg 1161), in Riga 1211 and in Reval/Tallinn which they helped to found and build in the 1220’s, even in London and Brügge.

The islanders were generally baptized in the 11\(^{th}\) century. They formed an egalitarian\(^{19}\), well-organised social and judicial body under *Gutalagen*, or *ius gutorum* (c.1220), ruled by the aldermen of the Gotlandic All-thing in Roma and later also by the provosts.\(^{20}\) The Gotlanders even possessed an intriguing founding myth, a Book of Genesis of their own, *Gutasagan*.\(^{21}\)

In those days, mainland Swedish big landowners and military/political chieftains and church leaders were living in relatively modest wooden houses. Simultaneous toponymics on Gotland, like Stenstugu, Stenstugards etc, indicate that dozens of these Gotlandic overseas-trading farmers built grandiose stone-houses. In fact, they also used vaulted granaries. Some of those farms still remain *in situ*, like impressive Katlunds in Grötlingbo, Fredarve in Vamlingbo, Bringes in Norrlanda, Lauks in Lokrume, Sojdeby in Fole *et alii*, and town-inspired Stora Hästnäs close to Visby, just to mention the most spectacular ones.\(^{22}\) As Stora Hästnäs, also Vatlings farm in Fole still demonstrates the dwellings of wealthy medieval Gotlandic merchant-farmers. The fact that the living standards of local priests could be as advanced, is shown by the remnants of for instance Lau and Tingstäde vicarages.


\(^{19}\) As strongly emphasized in the oeuvre of former *landsarkivarie* Tryggve Siltberg, Gårdar, mark och människor 1413–…. In: GA 1986.


\(^{21}\) Historia Gotlandiae. In: SRS, III:1, p. 9 f.

Some 1050 hoards including 166 100 silver coins from the Viking Ages have been found in Gotlandic soil. The latest and up to now the most spectacular one, Spillings in Othem, found 1999 and published 2008, brings 67 kg of pure silver and contains about 14 300 almost exclusively Arabic coins. Together with other artefacts like the 2000 penannular brooches for the male dress, 1750 animal-head brooches for the woman’s dress, over 10 000 beads, at least 585 spearheads and imaginations as on the picture-stone Ihre in Hellvi, these hoards, whatever their origins and reasons, substantiate solid, explicit international wealth. These numbers will probably grow in the years to come.

Hundreds of open-air burial mounds, stone cairns, stone circles, labyrinths and elegant stone ships from bygone epochs surely inspired the phantasy of the islanders. And big, brightly coloured (even pre-) Viking Age runic and picture stones, like Bro ojkar, and the ones still standing at Stenbro in Sproge and Änge in Buttle, vividly reminded by passers of bygone days. Even if some of these big and flat-cut stones were buried into church walls and floors, like in Ardre, no one had yet thought of putting them into a museum, be it in Bunge open-air museum or the Gotlands fornsal in Visby. They belonged to everybody’s everyday ambience.

The gigantic hideout Torsburgen in Kräklingbo, almost a kilometre in diameter and twice the size of Visby, where according to Gutasagan one third of the island inhabitants once upon a time hid themselves, and several others, like Grogarnshuvud at Östergarn and Herrgårdsclint in Gammelgarn, carried their own dramatic imaginations and memories. A full dozen fortified towers (kastaler) on the coasts, like Kruttornet in Visby, Fröjel, Sundre, Öja, Gammelgarn, Lärbro and many others, together with the fortified church at Bunge, all of them mainly from the end of the 12th century, bear witness of expected attacks from oversea. They also speak out on the fiercely independent state of mind of the islanders.

Their still functioning 92 stone churches, there were even 94 parishes in the Middle Ages, are found from Bunge in the north to Sundre in the south. According to meticulous Carl von Linné, who toured the island in 1741, the ruins of the Cistercian monastery in Roma (1164) formed the most luxurious cowshed in Sweden.  

Talking about past properties, it should be noted that the Roma Cistercians for centuries possessed a warehouse of their own in Reval/Tallinn and several coastal villages east of it, around the manor Kolk/Kolga.

In the beginning, the countryside stone churches were built in Romanic, later in Gothic, and finished in mixed Romanic-Gothic style. Some of them, like Dalhem, Gothem and Lau, achieved almost cathedral-size. Including their rich exterior and interior decorations, professionally sculptured portals, wall- and glass-paintings, imported German or Dutch altar shrines and relics, sculptures, equipment like golden hostia and stunning baptismal fonts, these churches impress every modern visitor.

The Gotlanders’ East-Germanic language was never, NB, a mere “Swedish dialect”. It still is a very special language. Even today mainland Swedes have problems understanding its words, diphthongs and intonation. It remains a rich language, in vocabulary and idiom, and keeps differences between northern and southern island dialects.

By the way, no Gotlander was named Sven, Björn or Ulv like other Scandinavians. They carried names of their own, like Botair, Gairalv, Härryd, Vivil, Hegbjarn, Rodvisl and Austain for the men, and Ailikn, Botaid, Botvi, Bydny, Bödvild, Hailvi, Rodiaud etc. for the women.

Parallel with other incoming international currencies, the islanders, as lately elaborated in detail by Nanouschka Myrberg (2008), from 1140 on minted their very own moneta Gutorum seu Guthlandie, another sign of the

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self-esteem, independence and pride of the islanders. Like the coins of Visby, the gotar, gwundeske, they were used way into the 15th century, even later.

In a word: we have no problems at all to find embracing factors expressing and boosting a specific Gotlandic identity of the 15th century.

_The Visby burghers_

The burghers of Visby first co-operated, then competed with the farmers in the overseas trade, finally outsmarted and overrun them, both on the foreign markets and at home. And so Visby popped up as a contemporary 12th-13th century phenomenon to Lübeck. Accommodating to continental urban way of life, Visby was led by the town council, formed by a local body of international merchants. Visby’s _Gründerzeit_ ended with the consecration of the German cathedral S:a Maria in 1225. The town’s development is closely connected with the German High Middle Ages’ so-called _Drang nach Osten_, as mittelniederdeutsch-speaking merchants spread all over the Baltic Sea area and beyond. Step by step they organised and confirmed themselves in the expanding Hanseatic League, for centuries dominated by Lübeck. The range and reach of the Hanseats, with a political/military culmination during the decades after 1370 and a starting slow, gradual stagnation and decline in the 15th century because of inner split and outside pressure, is a well-known story.

In the 13th century to the beginning of the 14th, at least, it was almost a condition _sine qua non_ for every skipper sailing out from the west for the ports of Tallinn or Riga, or even beyond, to bunker in prosperous Visby. And vice versa.

Until this day, the town has well preserved its 13th century features, in town planning, system of streets, and all sorts of grey limestone buildings. In many houses the toilets were flushed with flowing water. Towards the

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end of the 13th century, competition between farmers and burghers led to the construct of the excluding city wall, some 3-5 meters high and almost 2.5 km long.

The commercial success of the burghers also resulted in a dozen of big, impressive, mostly Gothic cathedrals inside the wall, within just a stone’s throw from each other, making up today’s picturesque veduta of Visby. They all constitute natural components of modern Visby: S:t Hans, S:t Per, the Franciscan S:ta Katarina (formerly also a nunnery), S:a Maria, S:t Lars, Drotten, S:t Clemens, S:t Olof, Helge And, S:a Gertrud and S:t Nikolaus, the Dominican one, within city limits and below the klint all of them, and the S:t Göran hospital just north of the wall. The walled harbour, a town hall, a spectacular pharmacy and several guild houses completed the picture.

One can only speculate about the enormous incessant input behind this stunning output.

In short: For centuries Gotland with Visby remained a vital and an extremely wealthy commercial and cultural amalgamation in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Therefore, we have no difficulty at all imagining how strongly everyday accessible and domestic heritage could influence and impress the common Gotlander. We are referring to the language, the pre-names, a founding myth, a political/judicial system with a common law of their own, their Roma All-thing leadership, buried and still accessible fortunes in forms of Arabic silver coins, a line of defence towers along the coasts, functioning currencies of their own, old burial mounds for the imaginative phantasy, almost hundred stunning Roman/Gothic stone churches plus dozens of stone farm buildings all over the island, big and small runic and bright picture stones still in situ at some cross-roads, etc., together with stories told about this inheritance. All this must altogether have contributed to the identity, self-esteem and even insular pride of the medieval - NB - independent and free Gotlander; especially if one adds the impression of the riches of urban, continental, international Visby.

Certainly, the average Gotlander was hardly in a position to ponder and to reflect on all this. He probably had other things to do. But, on the other
hand, he must have had access to much more, insights, thoughts, traditions and ideas far beyond the scope of our narrow 21st century imagination.

Since most of the Gotlandic/Visbyensic wealth had been accumulated by generations, without foreign disturbance, and relied on shipping, in overseas contacts and commerce, we do not hesitate to identify Gotland/Visby as a, maybe unconscious, but still a thalassocracy, at least to the mid 14th century. The image of a stable farmers’ republic with its own striving Hong-Kong does not seem too far-fetched.

It is no coincidence, that the 14th century affluence of the island was almost proverbial for contemporaries, as substantiated in Lübeck as well as in central Sweden. The chronicler Detmar of Lübeck pictures the situation by stating that on Gotland, the pigs ate out of silver-trays. And the author of the Swedish rhyme-chronicle of the 15th century is the one to tell us about the legendary amounts of gold and silver (osägligt Gull ok Sölff) looted off the land in 1361 by king Waldemar IV of Denmark. A century later, in the mid 16th century, Olaus Petri as an able historian first explains the bygone wealth of Gotland and then, word by word, repeats the chronicler’s statement about king Waldemar’s abundant booty.

After that, in a chronological order, in the latter half of the 14th century (cf. p. 1), we recognize the gradual Gotlandic/Visbyensic, even Nordic political decline. However, in the last decade of the century, the Vitalians, the Nordic Union of Kalmar (1397-) and the occupation of the island by the Teutonic Order 1398-1408 created new essentials to determine the Gotlandic long 15th century - the strong Visborg castle was erected, a veritable turning-point in the decades to come (cf. the Protagonist chapter, p. 3 f).

5. Conclusions: Frustration and revenge?

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33 Yes, there is a qualitative difference between „chronicler“ and „historian“. Olaus Petri, Svenska Crönekan (thet var i förtijden ett mächta rijk land, ty det had varit Stapulen i Östra siön ... låt kung Waldemar föra alla rijkedomar tådan af landet, osäjeligt Guld och Sölff...). In: SRS I:2, Upsala 1818, p. 270.
Neither before the 1390s, nor after 1525, can we discover Gotland/Visborg-centered large-scale violence at sea. Therefore, we have no problems identifying a line of continuity, a “long 15th century”, as far Gotland is concerned. Accordingly, we can proceed from the hitherto prevailing notions of ad hoc delineations of the century, to a more structured version. It is disposed along actions at sea, which seems to be a more normal and profitable way to study the history of an island.

In this long 15th century, the island, and especially the Visborg castle, turned out to be a more or less permanent centre for privateering, piracy, maritime expeditions and pure naval warfare in several directions across the Baltic Sea. Its captains and governors over Gotland were Scandinavian top brass, energetic Danish administrators, determined inter-Scandinavian aristocrats and vigorous Danish admirals. Even an inter-Scandinavian ex-king used the castle and island for almost ten years as his headquarters and as a base for his comeback in politics and revenge at sea. Generally, from the end of the 1430s, the powerful captains of the castle often enough championed and spoke for the other two medieval actors on the island, the farmers’ community and the Visby council. Thereby he commanded and represented the joint forces of Gotland.

The Vitalians, already from the 1390s, had mobilised Gotlandic resources, and probably local contributions too, to build their three fortifications, to man them and to operate their ships as well. The erection of Visborg castle (1408-) cost generations of Gotlandic taxpayers fortunes, the tax was raised 1000 % and stayed so until the 1470s. The building process itself employed the population as construction workers for decades. The self-sufficient castle captains then used the island tax-levy, its commercial/political networks and regenerating manpower to implement whatever goals and whims of their own, at sea and across the sea. Subsequently we can speak of a more or less united Gotland under Visborg leadership, at least from the times of ex-king Erik of Pomerania, 1439-.

But did this 15th century Gotland really “strike back”? That notion presupposes feelings of lost greatness, frustration and revenge. Could it be so?
Evidently, we will never be able to recapture reminiscences of passed wealth, fortunes and glory in the minds of the 15th century Gotlanders. Even less can we substantiate or prove how the past Gotlandic/Visbyensian ambience could have influenced local mood, attitudes and initiative. But on the strength of interdisciplinary historical knowledge, backed by common sense and cases of analogy, we have emphatically argued for a more vivid and thorough understanding (Verstehen) of the long lines of Gotlandic medieval history. That has in fact been the main purpose of this article.

However, we know well how the wealth of medieval Gotland was accumulated from the Viking age on. It was enhanced through generations, boosted century by century. Eventually, it became perceptible, well spread over the island and present on an everyday basis, certainly impressing visitors, friend and foe alike. Add to this Visby skyline and town wall, the international wheeling and dealing within town limits, and you have the picture, the idea: Since all this wealth was based on shipping, on the sea, high medieval Gotland/Visby with a good margin qualifies for our modern concept – a thalassocracy, a sea-power, a peaceful one. The amassed Gotlandic affluence even became proverbial internationally and should be regarded as a strongly supporting cause for king Waldemar IV to attack and thoroughly loot land and town in 1361.

The memories of this former greatness just could not have died out in a mere 3-4 generations, as all these splendid reminiscences remained around, day by day, year after year. Certainly they were explained by the older generation, they had to be. And one can easily presume bonfire and candlelight stories full of vivid nostalgia, especially during the long winter in a traditional farmers’ society. But also among learned men and women, in the town as well as in the countryside vicarages and monasteries. Moreover, e silentio we have to imagine both rural and urban traditions and customs here, long forgotten.

Came the 15th century and – an astonishing Visborg castle, with its forceful captains, leaders at inter-Scandinavian top-level, with plans of their own, in brief a dynamic factor in the politics of the whole Baltic Sea area. Like their Vitalian predecessors, the captains depended on the island and partly on the town. Island and town depended on the captains.
Robust analogies and multilateral arguments for continuity of mind advocate for the idea that Gotlandic 15th century support for the captains was also founded in nostalgia and by frustration about the disparity between lost greatness and the reduced presence, above all among young men. And therefore, gathering around the promising captains, even feelings and expressions of revenge, of striking back should be expected. How else could Vitalians and captains alike have recruited all their followers, decade after decade? Of course we cannot be certain what they thought and felt, but taking into account what we do know, we can well imagine.

Clearly enough, during the Axelsson-regime on Visborg, especially from the end of the 1450s to the end of the -70’s, we can trace obvious attempts at restoring an independent and more militant thalassocracy on the periphery of the Kalmar Union. The plan of the Axelsson brotherhood was to rely on the castles Visborg on Gotland and Viborg/Viipuri in Carelia and jointly to fork in on Estland/Livland, the mercatura ruthenica flow via Neva and the Gulf of Finland glimmering in the distance.

Whereas the Axelssons mainly pursued family interests, ex-king Erik, like the Vitalians and Sören Norby in his later years, acted for their own, Jens Holgersen, Laurens Schinkel and Olof Axelsson in his younger years for those of their Danish king. All of them used Visborg (except the Vitalians) as their naval base and Gotland’s economic and human resources as their action fundaments.

The idea of unity and continuity of frustrated and revengeful Gotland striking back at sea in the long 15th century, is very definitely possible, if not obvious. The mindscape of lost greatness of a former mercantile thalassocracy must, as we imagine, have carried along enough factual, imaginary and emotional substance to turn up only a few generations later as a contributing explanation to the dramatic chain of Vitalian- and Visborg-led events at sea, before the Lübeckians brutally stopped it all in 1525.