

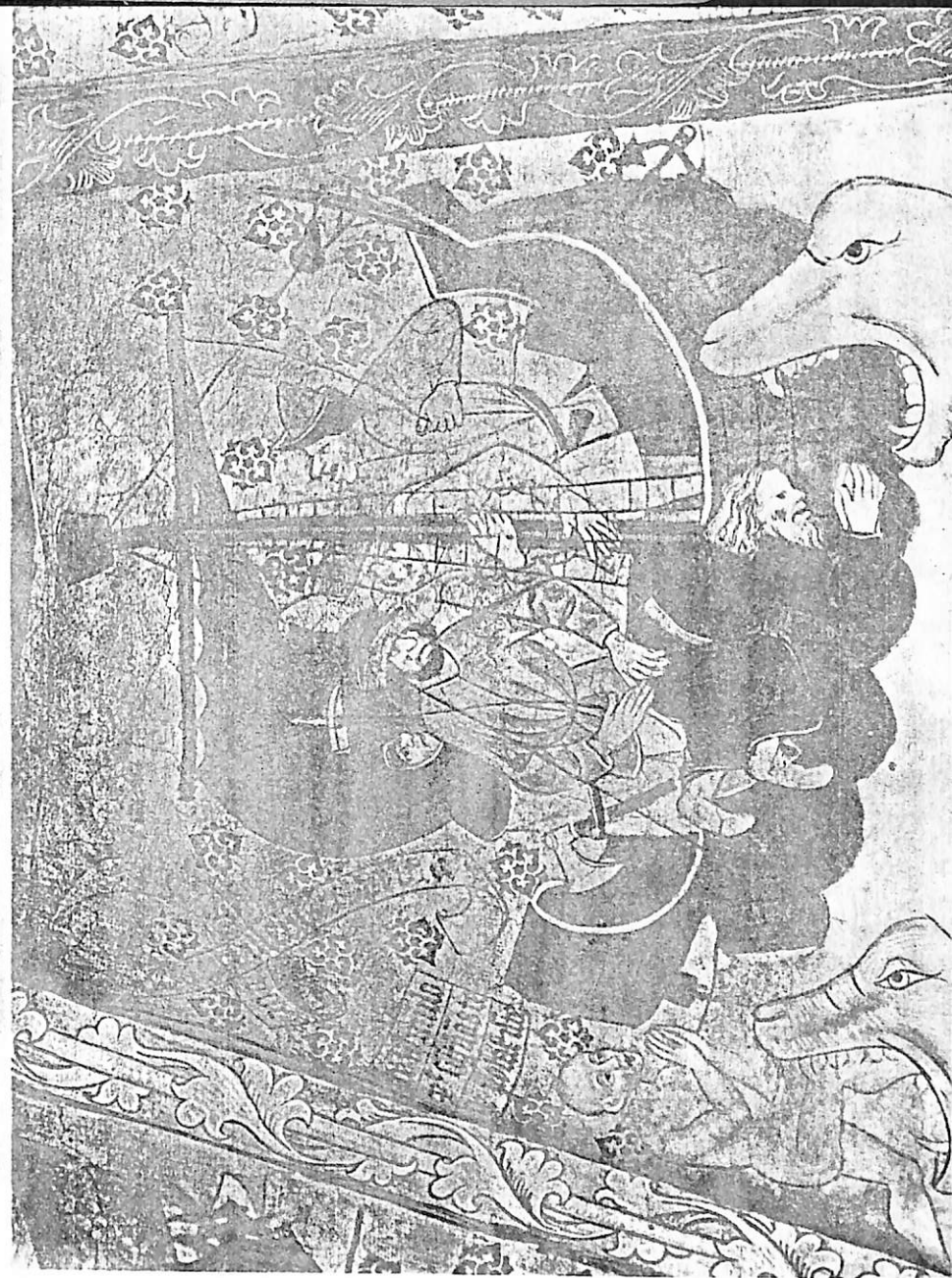
Saint Birgitta

c 1300-1375

Saint Birgitta of Sweden has left her mark on the whole of Scandinavia, where the religious houses founded by her Order formed important centres of devotional life in all its aspects. Birgittine houses were also established in many other European countries, where some of them still exist. But their real home has always been in the north, where they constituted an inner Nordic circle of study, authorship, and the exercise of piety during the last centuries of the Middle Ages.

Ever since the time of Sverker the Elder, monasteries and nunneries had done much to establish Christianity in Sweden, the best of them exemplifying the new and at first confusing ideal of life preached by the Church. Many of their inmates were skilled in the arts of husbandry, simples, and the care of the sick, all of which they were able to impart to others; certain of the institutions served as asylums and hospitals, while others were seats of learning and study. It was not uncommon for men and women from the most exalted families to take religious vows, either withdrawing completely from the world or becoming prominent figures in their new sphere. In about 1280 Ingrid, the daughter of an old magnate family, had received Papal sanction to found a nunnery in Skänninge on the Östergötland plain, and daughters of King Valdemar and Magnus Ladulås had also taken the veil.

The virgin and the widow have always been favourite types of female saint in devotional literature, and it was in the latter capacity that Birgitta was to become a figure of international fame. The Swedes acquired in her a saint of their own. She was born on a big estate in Uppland at the



9. Detail of wall painting by Albertus Pictor, Härkeberga Church, Uppland, end of 15th century.

beginning of the fourteenth century, just when the disagreements between the second generation of Folkungs were starting. Her father was the lawman Birger Persson, well versed in both law and politics – he helped to revise the Uppland law – and a great landowner; on her mother's side she was related to the royal house. As a child she shared in the workaday life of the estate and in the great family feasts, where the new chivalric mode of life was given free rein; but according to the legend she began very early on to have visions of the Virgin Mary and of Christ upon the Cross. In the fashion of the time she was married very young – at the age of thirteen, according to her daughter – to a young man from one of the leading magnate families, Ulf Gudmarsson of Närke, who was both a knight and a lawman. To him she bore eight children on their estate Ulvåsa in Östergötland. Long after his death she vividly described his shortcomings, and revealed his addiction to the material pleasures of life; obviously, Birgitta was the stronger character of the two. She did not allow her preoccupation with practical matters to interfere with her studies and devotions, in which she sought whenever possible to include her husband; as, for example, in their joint pilgrimage to the shrine of the Apostle James in Compostella. She also found time to visit the court of the young King Magnus Ericsson to propagate her particular form of piety; and there is no doubt that she took a lively interest in her husband's legal business. She appears, indeed, to have influenced everyone she met.

The years Birgitta spent on a big estate, first as a child and then as a housewife, provided a realistic basis for her imaginative mind. She took an active part in every aspect of life: work in the fields, the mills and the smithy, the stables, hen-coops, and kitchens; hunting, tournaments, and festivities; the *Ting*, administration of justice, and the political discussions of the magnates; pilgrimages over land and sea. All these activities set their stamp on her subsequent literary work and are implicit in the metaphors she uses, Biblical



10. St Birgitta, wooden statue in Vadstena Chapel,

c. 1435.

concepts being intermingled with scenes from her own daily round. She recalls the estate in times of unrest when she describes in a vision the Bowman who is wont to look about him through the windows and shoot those who take no heed for themselves; and when she speaks of 'pulling up mossy and barren stumps and casting them into the fire, setting fruitful plants in their place', she draws on her experience of swithening in the forests, or maybe work in the herb-garden in early spring. Even at this time she was able to discuss religious questions with her domestic chaplain Nils Hermansson, afterwards Bishop of Linköping, and with the canon of the same town, Magister Mattias, a learned man who had studied abroad.

When Birgitta was about forty her husband died, and henceforward she could express more freely her true inclinations. She sought to exchange an active existence for one of contemplation, although a passive life was ruled out by her enormous vitality and masterful nature. She now had the opportunity to realize the great Catholic ideal of the widow-saint, and she bent all her ambition and energy to its achievement. With this in view, authorship, activity in the Church, the foundation of religious houses, pilgrimages, asceticism, and charity were all undertaken with astonishing perseverance and zeal, and in addition she gave free rein to the visionary side of her character.

Before long she began systematically to record all her visions. She, or one of her confessors, tells how 'her bodily powers were taken away or rendered impotent, but all the powers of her soul were supremely quickened to see, hear, utter, and feel those things that are of the spirit'. Not all of her visions were of this kind, however. In addition to her power of ecstasy or mystic communion with God, she gradually became convinced that her will and her wishes were divinely inspired, and many of her prophecies on topical matters are of this nature. Others, again, were purely devotional literature. These three groups constitute a noteworthy

collection, the largest of its kind in mediaeval Swedish literature.

It would not have occurred to any mediaeval man or woman to doubt the authenticity of these visions. As in the case of Joan of Arc and her 'voices', the only question was whether they came from God or the Devil; and it was the authority of the theologian Magister Mattias that finally vouched for their divine origin. These hours of doubt and the subsequent confirmation of her vocation unquestionably proved the turning-point in Birgitta's life. She went to the Alvastra monastery where her husband was buried, finding in the subprior Petrus Olai a suitable amanuensis to translate her visions into Latin. She now had a working knowledge of this language, the tongue of the Church and the learned world, and the work was carried on under her stringent supervision. Petrus and a namesake of his, who was also Birgitta's helper, describe such hours: 'The words imparted to her she wrote down, when in health, with her own hand in her own tongue, and then caused us her scribes to render them with utmost precision into Latin, whereupon she compared the rendering with her own manuscript, so that no single word therein should fail or exceed that she had heard or seen in her vision'.

It must have been during this period that she was divinely inspired to produce her greatest work. Christ revealed Himself to her in a vision in which He laid down the rules of the Order which she was to found in Vadstena; and she immediately brought her remarkable will-power to bear on the task of carrying out these commands, which she considered as coming direct from God. Her first step was to enlist the support of her kinsman, the King; and in 1346 Magnus and his consort Blanche of Namur bestowed on her the royal estate of Vadstena for her purpose. The next, more precarious, step was to obtain Papal sanction. She resolved to seek this in person, and a vision gave divine confirmation to her will. Destined never to return, Birgitta left Sweden to plunge into

the Europe of the Hundred Years War and the 'Babylonian captivity' of the Popes. Her relations with Magnus Ericsson were no longer the same as they had been, and she felt the need of a wider arena for her prophecies and her calling — one is tempted to call it her spiritual ambition.

But, though Rome was her goal, no Pope had lived in the city since the beginning of the fourteenth century. The head of the Church had long been under the influence of France, and at this period resided in Avignon; and, though it was hoped that he would return to Italy for the Holy Year of 1350, he did not actually come until nearly twenty years later. Birgitta spent more than twenty years in Rome awaiting his advent, and soon became a notable figure there. Her visions still centred round the homeland, her own circle, and the foundation in Vadstena; but they also began to encompass the entire affairs of the Church, as well as the great political topics of Europe. This was characteristic of Birgitta. Unlike so many of the mediæval female visionaries, who were content with wholly mystical experiences, she was eager to intervene in a practical way in the burning questions of the day, proving herself a true scion of her energetic ancestors.

'My hour is nearly come' — thus Birgitta proclaims the words of God to Pope Clement VI in Avignon at the approach of the Holy Year — 'when I shall visit upon thee all thy forgetfulness and sin. And as I raised thee above all others, so shall thy soul be plunged into terrible torment, which shall sorely afflict thy body and thy spirit, if thou obeyest not my Word. And thy unruly tongue shall be silent within thy mouth; that title which thou sanctifiest on earth shall be forgotten and dishonoured in the sight of me and my saints.' But if the Pope would only follow the commands of God to make peace in the Hundred Years War between England and France and then betake himself to Rome, he should receive the eternal reward. Long and earnestly did Birgitta plead with Pope Clement VI and his successors Innocent VI and Urban V, but for many years it was in vain.

Meanwhile she had ample opportunity to study conditions in Rome and to make many pilgrimages throughout Italy. It was a curious environment for the Swedish noblewoman; but, just as her childhood had done, it provided her with vivid material for her writings, and inspired many prophetic visions embodying the commands, wishes, and wrath of God.

In Birgitta's Italian revelations Rome and its surroundings are represented as a new Sodom and Gomorrah. 'Many altars are left desolate,' she writes, 'the sacraments exposed in taverns, and those who offer them serve mammon rather than God.' Elsewhere she declares that five profanations have taken root: few people attend confession or mass, there is much loose living, Lent is not observed, the rich men force their servants to work on the Sabbath, and Christians practise usury more avariciously than the Jews themselves. But she still hoped that in spite of all this iniquity the city was not beyond the redemption for which she was working so zealously. She also visited the court at Naples, where Boccaccio had acquired much of his worldly wisdom, and where now her tongue spared neither man nor woman. Meanwhile she was making firm friendships throughout Italy and in other countries; the Birgittine circle included such personalities as the former Spanish bishop Alfonso of Jaen, who had given up his office in order to serve God better; in due course he was to have a great influence on Birgitta's visions and on the manner in which she ultimately recorded them.

All this time Birgitta was awaiting the return of the Pope, for not until then could her Order be approved, and as the years went by this had become almost an obsession with her. And it was not until 1367 that Urban V came back to Rome, spending only three years in the Papal city before setting out again for Avignon. Birgitta followed him to Montefiascone, where in scathing terms she revealed to him a vision in which God sternly called the Pope to account. As a result of this encounter Urban ratified her new Order as a part of the Augustinian Order, and gave his sanction to the command

which Birgitta had received in a vision more than twenty years earlier. Meanwhile work on Vadstena Convent had been proceeding, and Birgitta must have felt that she had at last been granted final proof of the divine source of her inspiration. Step by step she was accomplishing, with admirable devotion and perseverance, the task which she had set herself. But one thing remained, and that one of the most important – the great pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which was to crown her saintly life. She knew that there she would be vouchsafed a vision of the birth of Christ; and she did not wish to die until she had had this supreme experience.

She began her journey in 1372, when she was nearly seventy years old, accompanied by several of her closest friends and relations. In Naples, where she was received with all ceremony by Queen Johanna, her son Karl fell ill and died. The story goes that while the Queen, accompanied by her husband King John and the great men of Apulia, followed the dead knight to the tomb with weeping lamentation, Birgitta walked dry-eyed behind the bier, thanking God that His will had been done. This episode was later worked up into the familiar tale of how Karl had found favour in the eyes of the Queen of Naples, who wished to have him for her husband, and how Birgitta's prayers for divine intercession were answered by the illness and death of her son. This mixture of the family saga, hagiography, and Renaissance story brings out, notwithstanding its historical inaccuracy, the fundamental divergence between Birgitta and the Boccaccian Italy in which she moved.

After Karl's death Birgitta's pilgrimage proceeded over the Mediterranean Sea to Cyprus, where the prevailing conditions conduced to a series of visions on sin, punishment, and years of grace. Thence from Jaffa to Jerusalem, where the pilgrims spent some months. They returned home by the same route, arriving in Rome in the spring of 1373. In the summer of the same year Birgitta died. A short while before her death she had been informed in a vision that her dead

body was to be brought back to Vadstena, and that her soul should, in the words recorded at the time, 'enter into her house, into the joy of Christ'. Her remains were carried north towards the end of the year, where they were laid to rest in the land she had quitted nearly a quarter of a century earlier.

Birgitta had never lost her contact with Sweden during her stay in Italy, and many travellers to Rome brought her news from home. She was particularly interested in the political developments both of her own time and during the preceding period. An older Swedish King, who can probably be identified with Magnus Ladulås, is shown in everlasting torment in a powerful vision of the Day of Judgment, Birgitta's counterpart to Dante's Divine Comedy – and she strongly objected to Magnus Ladulås being worshipped as a saint.

In his youth Magnus Ericsson had tried to keep in step with Birgitta's advice and rules of piety, which as time went on swelled into what might almost be called a Mirror for Princes. But their relations became increasingly strained, and when Magnus clashed with the magnates Birgitta's sympathies were all with the latter. She never forsook the political views of her father and kinsmen, who favoured an aristocratic government based on constitutional principles and were strongly opposed to the constant attempts on the part of Magnus to strengthen the monarchy. These views were expressed both in the election of the King in 1319 and in the composition of the *kungabalken* of the *landslag* (p. 50). Birgitta's theories on the true function of the state are a curious blend of the religious and the political. Lacking a closer knowledge of the real state of affairs in Sweden, she visualized Magnus Ericsson as a typical tyrant, a servant of the Devil. She approved the acquisition of Skåne in 1332; but when Valdemar Atterdag, with the help of the army, regained the province in 1360 and, in the next year, made the famous attack on Visby she laid all the blame for these reverses on the Swedish King, and her reproaches became

increasingly bitter and abusive. One vision which she had during this period even gives counsel for an organized rebellion against Magnus. Nor was Magnus the only one to suffer from her political prophecies. Valdemar Atterdag was compared to a fox, which in its turn resembles the Evil One; and Magnus Ericsson's successor, Albrecht of Mecklenburg, fared no better. Many of the sins attributed to the Scandinavian monarchs of this period originated in Birgitta's grim and threatening visions, and the view which later generations were to take of the history of this period was strongly influenced by her powerful personality.

Some years after Birgitta's death an official investigation was started of her claims to canonization. The evidence collected from those who had been in direct touch with her reveals many vivid aspects of contemporary Swedish and Italian life, and gives a full and detailed picture of Birgitta and her associates. All this, coupled with the visions compiled and edited by her followers, form a collection unsurpassed in Swedish records. It was a long time before the object was achieved, however, for the investigation coincided with the great schism in the mediaeval Church. Nevertheless, it was finally attained, thanks to the efforts of powerful supporters, Queen Margaret of Denmark and Sweden among them, and the canonization ceremony took place in 1391. Birgitta had achieved the goal which she had set herself.

VII

Visby and Valdemar Atterdag

1361

The most famous town of Scandinavia in the Middle Ages was Visby, on the island of Gotland. The numerous mediaeval houses which still stand, the magnificent church ruins, and the great city wall with its gates and turrets give some idea of its vanished glory, which equalled that of any other mediaeval town in northern Europe, and far exceeded that of the early Swedish towns of Birka, Sigtuna, and Stockholm. Gotland had preserved a strategic and economic significance ever since the eventful era of the Migrations and the Vikings; and when this phase of history came to an end the Gotlanders still continued to navigate the trade routes to Russia and the south and west coasts of the Baltic Sea. This is proved by later Swedish finds of Arabic, Anglo-Saxon, and German coins dating from 800-1000, more than half of which were dug up on Gotland. The important trade route by which Russian furs and other commodities were brought to the world market ran from Novgorod down to Hedeby; and, at a time when it was considered necessary not to lose sight of land, the peasant skippers and merchants who carried on the older Baltic trade found a natural and valuable base in the series of harbours along the Gotland coast; the town of Visby did not exist at this time, though the present site shows traces of early settlement. During the twelfth century German colonists from the west settled all the way along the southern coast of the Baltic, previously inhabited by the Wends and other Slavonic tribes. This expansion also gave new opportunities to the German merchants whose only access to the Baltic trade routes of the coveted Russian region had hitherto been across Denmark or Slavonic

territory; and the new mercantile town of Lübeck came into being on the lower reaches of the Trave in the 1140's. Having thus established a firm footing on the Baltic, the German traders were now able to sail to Novgorod in their own ships, instead of using Danish or Gotland fleets, as they had done before. They made good use of their improved position, and the result was that Gotlanders and Germans were both competing for the Russian trade. The Germans were not slow to realize the advantages of the island as a base for the trade organizations which had been formed in Lübeck and in the hinterland of western Germany. The present site of Visby was chosen for their centre, and a town gradually grew up similar to Lübeck, though not without protest from the native trading strongholds on the island.

The Germans in Visby comprised both permanent residents and merchants from northern and western Germany, who made it their base for trading expeditions into Russia. Thus the town had a stable German population and contained also the storehouses and offices of those who, though residing in their own country, had acquired economic interests in Visby and Novgorod. These merchants naturally appointed their own agents in the new town, and Visby in effect provided a link on foreign soil between traders from different parts of Germany.

These enterprising Germans gained considerable prosperity from their trade with Russia and northern Europe, a prosperity which was reflected in the growth of the new town. From the end of the twelfth century Visby's remarkable rise is revealed in its buildings, some of which can still be seen to-day, either in ruins or much altered. The German Church of Saint Mary (now the cathedral) was consecrated in 1225, and the city wall was probably completed during the same century. Thus Visby became the most important of the Baltic towns, its population drawn largely from northern and western Germany and particularly from Westphalia. Nevertheless there was also a native community, and the two

elements constituted what was later described as 'the two tongues' of the city. This gave Visby a peculiar dual character, and it possessed a further unusual feature in that, although a Hansa town, it acknowledged the King of Sweden and, like the island on which it stood, formed part of the Swedish kingdom.

A somewhat fanciful account of the rise of Gotland is given in the so-called *Guta Saga*, which in its present form dates from the thirteenth century – that is, from the time when the Icelandic sagas were at their finest. It begins by describing the way in which the island sank each day into the sea and was forced to remain static by the magic agency of fire, and goes on to define the island's relations with Sweden. Naturally, a tale of this kind does not aim chiefly at achieving historical accuracy. Nevertheless the *Guta Saga* is of great literary interest. Evidence of a more complete and reliable nature can be found in documentary and archaeological sources. Needless to say, the rise and progress of the island owed much to its extremely favourable position. Yet its history is full of violent conflicts. At the beginning of the thirteenth century its progress inevitably aroused widespread envy and resentment. The old Gotland peasants, who were still trading in Russian squirrel and wax with the English court, regarded the innovations of the intruders with disfavour. It was a plain clash between the rural traditions of the Vikings and the urban civilization of the Middle Ages. An open feud broke out in the 1280's. The citizens of Visby, safe behind their impregnable wall, were victorious. The Swedish King Magnus Ladulås supported them, demanding in return the payment of taxes and the recognition of his royal authority. Thus the city became supreme on the island. New developments, however, were threatening Visby's dominant position in the Baltic. From the beginning of the thirteenth century the North Sea merchants abandoned the difficult route across the narrow neck of the Jutland peninsula and the route which ran between the Elbe and Lübeck in favour

of the direct route north of Jutland. They also found an important source of trade at the entrance to the Baltic: salted herrings from the Scanian fisheries were much in demand; and the German Hansa towns, Lübeck in particular, wielded a good deal of influence over Skanör and Falsterbo. Moreover, the Hansa ships were now navigating the North Sea direct. The result was that, by fair means or foul, Visby was gradually superseded in importance by Lübeck. The latter, together with its Hansa associates, was better placed for uniting the North Sea and the Baltic into one trading area, since Visby was situated rather on the periphery. This change in the relative importance of the northern European trade routes was confirmed by the decision in 1299 that the seal of the Hanseatic merchants should no longer be used in Visby.

But Visby's period of greatness was by no means over. The town was still to act as an important local trading centre in the great Hanseatic scheme; and was of particular value to the Novgorod traders. The trade of the late Middle Ages has been rightly called a world trade; though small in quantity it comprised a large variety of goods. Accounts from the funeral feast of St Birgitta's father in 1328 include such items as ginger, cinnamon, pepper, and other spices from India and West Africa; almonds, rice and sugar from Spain; saffron from Spain or Italy; wines from the Rhineland and Bordeaux. Visby was still drawing considerable profits from this trade and also from that in raw materials from Sweden and Russia, and in broadcloth, salt, and ale from western Europe and Germany. A fourteenth-century Lübeck chronicle has exemplified the wealth which accrued from this commerce in the statement that in Visby the swine ate from troughs of silver. It was at this time too that interest was centred on Visby and Gotland as a result of the part they played in the great feud between Denmark on the one hand and Sweden and the Hanseatic League on the other.

The relations between Sweden and Denmark in about

1360 are obscure. The Kings Valdemar Atterdag and Magnus Ericsson were alternately at war with each other and in alliance. As we have seen, Skåne reverted to Denmark in 1360, and at the same time Valdemar was involved in quarrels with the Hansa towns, particularly over the question of trading privileges. He wanted to persuade the rich peasants to pay a high price for the renewal of these privileges, but his clients proved refractory. He therefore decided to subdue them by force, believing that in this way he could at the same time strike a blow at Sweden, provide occupation for his very fine mercenary army, and win booty for himself. In the early summer of 1361 he planned a campaign of which the ultimate goal was known only to a few people. The most dramatic episode in Visby's early history was under way.

Valdemar's fleet first embarked for Öland, where the Castle of Borgholm was taken. The next objective was the west coast of Gotland, where the King landed at the end of July. Here, however, his well-equipped army met with hastily organized resistance on the part of the peasant population. Three battles are mentioned in contemporary records; the last was a desperate struggle which took place just outside the walls of Visby. The spot is marked by a memorial cross, whose brief and pathetic Latin inscription can be translated thus: 'In the year 1361 on the Tuesday after St James's day (27th July) the men of Gotland fell into Danish hands at the gates of Visby. They lie here. Pray for them.' Contemporary sources estimate the peasant losses at 1,800-2,000 men; Lübeck refers merely to an overwhelming defeat suffered by the peasants who lacked both training and arms.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, excavators discovered by chance the mass graves into which the dead were unceremoniously bundled after the battle; and these led to other finds of a somewhat macabre nature. Curious rusty weapons, mangled limbs, skulls transfixed by arrows

from a cross-bow, grinning crania still in their chain-mail helmets – these, in addition to a mass of bones which were impossible to identify, constitute one of the most fearsome revelations of a mediaeval battle that has ever been known. Detailed investigations of this material enable us to follow the course of the bitter struggle. The Gotlanders fought to the last man; the remains include the bones of men of all ages, of boys and cripples, and even of women. But these pathetic amateurs stood no chance against Valdemar and his professional soldiers. And after that the island was his.

It is not known what part the citizens of Visby played in this struggle, though some indication is given by subsequent events. Shortly after the catastrophe the city opened its gates to the conqueror; a record which dates from about the same time states that this was a voluntary act, while the Franciscan monks in Visby describe it in their account as a formal capitulation. Two days after the battle Valdemar drew up a charter for the city, promising that it should retain all its ancient rights and privileges. A portion of the wall has been associated on account of its peculiar character with the mediaeval custom by which an armed conqueror entered a vanquished town through a breach in its wall, and Valdemar may have entered Visby in this manner. However that may be, the city had surrendered, and the inmates were prepared to make concessions in return for the renewal of their trade privileges. It is clear from this that they did not share the attitude of the countryfolk towards Valdemar Atterdag, and they thus afford another instance of the divergent interests of town and countryside which characterize the mediaeval history of Gotland.

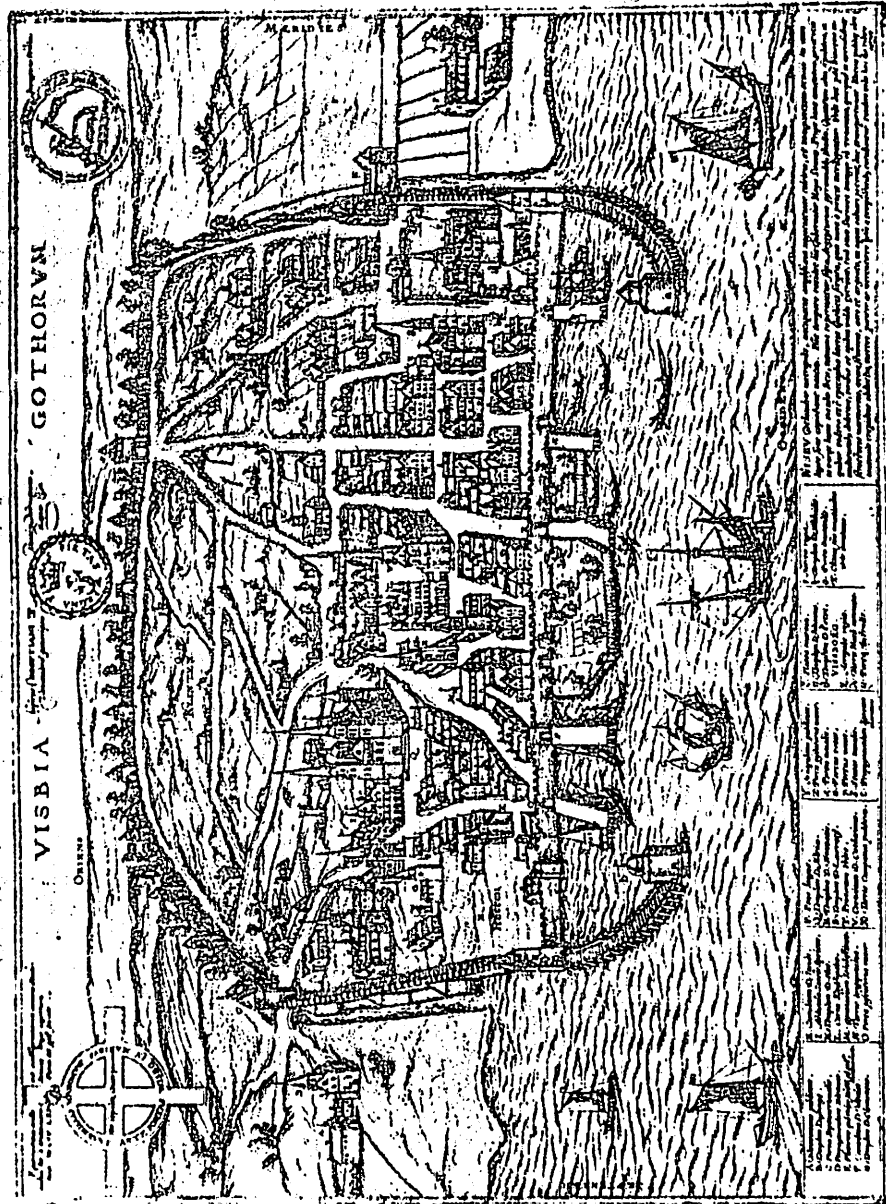
The walled city had opportunities of negotiation with Valdemar which were denied to the open country, and it must have been obvious to the citizens that capitulation was preferable to a siege with all its attendant horrors and of which the outcome was in any case uncertain. They may have been moved by the bloodshed among the peasants,

which they could witness from the wall, or prompted by the inadequacy of their own fortifications and strength; a mediaeval town needed citizens who were also soldiers. At all events Valdemar entered the town in triumph, and Visby had to pay the price he demanded for a treaty. A good deal of legend has grown up around the tributes which the city had to pay to escape destruction. Nevertheless, evidence of what Valdemar may have received for taking the city under his protection is provided by a quantity of wares which had been deposited in Visby by merchants from the other Hansa towns; later, the citizens of Visby informed these men that they had had to safeguard this property by relinquishing part of their own, probably hoping by this means to induce the Germans to share the burden. In any case, they themselves had to yield up part of their accumulated treasures.

Gold, silver, Russian furs and other costly wares had to be delivered over to the conqueror. There was no question of wholesale pillage, however, and Visby continued to hold its own as a trading town. There is a natural temptation to interpret a decline in fortune as the immediate consequence of dramatic events, and some later historians have tried to trace the decline of Visby from Valdemar's campaign, but there is little ground for the popular view that the Danish King stripped it of all its wealth. Visby had already lost its earlier position as the centre of Baltic and Hanseatic trade, and the effect of the disastrous days of July 1361 may well have been no more than incidental. On the other hand, they had far-reaching consequences for the peasant population, and it was long before they recovered from the blow.

Valdemar's campaign against Gotland and the conquest of Visby was a dual manoeuvre directed equally against Sweden and the recalcitrant Hanseatic merchants. With regard to the former, Valdemar had now conquered a favourable position in the Baltic, which brought about a change in the relations between Sweden and Denmark; and Gotland was to become a bone of contention in Scandinavian politics

right up to the middle of the seventeenth century. We must pass over its chequered career in the years that followed; but its early history and particularly its subjugation by Valdemar Atterdag throws considerable light on trade in the Baltic during the early Middle Ages, and also gives a comprehensive picture of the bitter feuds of the fourteenth century:



11. Visby. 17th century print.



14. Mass grave at Korsbetningen: photograph taken during excavation.

VIII

The Union of Kalmar

1363-1434

After the overthrow of the Folkungs by Albrecht of Mecklenburg's German troops it seemed as though the German exploitation of Sweden was about to begin in earnest. The traditional picture of Albrecht as a weak and incapable ruler derives from later hostile propaganda. In fact, he succeeded in his foreign policy, in seizing Skåne from Denmark and holding it for some years; and at home it was only by constant exertion that the Swedish Council was able to keep him in check.

This restraint was at first exercised by the leader of the Council, Bo Jonsson Grip, the *Drots*, who was the highest official under the crown and held a large number of important fiefs. After Grip's death in 1386 the King's obvious plans for a revolutionary change began to cause the nobles some uneasiness. His Mecklenburg-Swedish empire began to appear threatening both to them and also to other groups of society. Once again a war seemed to be brewing between a king who desired absolute power – this time with effective foreign support – and those who wished to uphold the freedom of the constitution.

During the fourteenth century the Swedish military system had been rapidly developing along lines already discernible at the beginning of the Folkung era. Fortified castles were built, many of them under the auspices of Albrecht, who had had experience at home of their military importance. These castles also became administrative centres. The surrounding fiefs were leased out on varying conditions (in return for services rendered by the holders, or as a security and pledge for loans to the crown) to the great nobles, who

undertook the responsibility for their defence and maintenance. It seems likely that foreign servants of the crown under Albrecht had already introduced new methods of administering these fiefs, and the polemical literature later directed against Albrecht makes repeated references to their brutal levies. During his rule many of the important castles and fiefs were held by his father and other Mecklenburgers, and it was therefore inevitable that the clash between King and magnates at the end of the 1380's should centre round these possessions. Only a small portion of the country was under the direct control of Albrecht, but he planned to recover the fiefs which had been pawned to Bo Jonsson Grip and others.

In 1388 the Swedish lords appealed for help to Queen Margaret of Denmark and Norway, who was Valdemar Atterdag's daughter and widow of Magnus Ericsson's son, King Håkon of Norway. Her troops defeated Albrecht at Åsle in Västergötland in February 1389 – and she herself was acclaimed Sweden's legal ruler. She recovered for the crown some of the castles and fiefs held by the nobles. But this was not the end of the struggle. In Stockholm loyal Germans massacred a number of their Swedish fellow-citizens in the so-called 'Käplinge murders' of the summer of 1392; Albrecht's adherents, nicknamed the Vitalians, made the Baltic Sea unsafe for navigation, and Margaret did not gain complete control of Stockholm until 1398, nor of Gotland until 1408 – while Bo Jonsson Grip's son Knut Bosson, who was formerly employed by Albrecht, retained an independent position in Finland up to 1399. To all intents and purposes, however, all three Scandinavian countries now had the same ruler. In this they followed the pattern of Poland and Lithuania, which had been united three years before by marriages between members of their leading families, and also of the Burgundian Dukes, who at that time were endeavouring to fuse together the scattered regions on the north-east frontier of France. But though Margaret's policy

had always been influenced by dynastic considerations, the Scandinavian races were far more closely related to each other than those of the Polish or the Burgundian realms; and Sweden and Denmark had a further link in that they were both involved in the struggle against German influence.

This union of the three kingdoms was a new and remarkable development in Scandinavian politics. Yet it was not entirely without precedent. Even if we disregard the attempts in the eleventh century or the struggles of the twelfth and thirteenth, the union had already been foreshadowed earlier in the fourteenth century. Duke Eric had tried to consolidate his territories round the mouth of the Göta river; Magnus Ericsson had reigned simultaneously over Sweden, Norway, and the Scanian provinces for nearly thirty years, and had also, with his son Håkon, united parts of western Sweden with Norway during the conflicts which followed the overthrow of the Folkungs; and Albrecht of Mecklenburg had tried to regain Skåne. Though admittedly these were temporary phases, they are nevertheless significant. Moreover, some of the natural trade routes of southern Sweden passed through coastal provinces, which at that time belonged to Denmark; and members of the Scandinavian nobility, which had become a distinct group during the fourteenth century, had formed family and economic connections beyond their respective frontiers.

If her dynastic alliance was to become permanent, Queen Margaret would have to make plans for the future. Her only son Olof had died, but she found a possible successor in her great-nephew, Eric of Pomerania. He had already been elected heir to the Norwegian throne in 1388 and to those of Sweden and Denmark eight years later. He was then to be acclaimed and crowned at Midsummer of the following year by leading representatives of the three Scandinavian kingdoms in Kalmar, the most important town in southern Sweden, not far from the Danish frontier.

There is no eye-witness account of the proceedings at

Kalmar in 1397, but they can be gathered from documents connected with the various negotiations involved. Eric was crowned King of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway on Trinity Sunday in the presence of the Scandinavian deputies, who swore allegiance to him in the name of their respective countries. This was endorsed in a deed written on parchment, with attached seals in token of the agreement of the participants. This document gives only the bare outlines; a second document which is preserved in the Danish archives is more complicated and contains the draft of a joint Scandinavian constitution. The three countries were to have Eric as their king during his lifetime, and thereafter were always to be ruled jointly by *one* king. This king was to be chosen from Eric's direct descendants; should this line die out, counsellors of the three kingdoms should elect a king acceptable to all. The three were also to make common cause in certain matters of foreign policy; any one who attacked one of them was to be regarded as an aggressor by the others; regulations were laid down for negotiations with other powers; an outlaw from one country was to be similarly banished from the other two; and all feuds which had hitherto prevailed between them were to be buried and forgotten. Each kingdom, however, was to keep its own laws and its own form of administration.

This is a remarkable attempt to ensure close political co-operation under joint leadership – a union which yet makes allowance for each kingdom's political tradition and its laws. It would be difficult to express such a conception unequivocally, nor did the authors wholly succeed, despite the maturity of thought which the document displayed. Enlightened and even inspired as it is acknowledged to be, historians are not agreed as to its true purport. Was it a valid Act of Union or only a preliminary? And who was responsible for its ideas – the Queen or her opponents?

For the fact is that the document shows some striking inconsistencies. It was not written on the regulation parchment

but on paper, and it reads almost like a draft. The seals, which in the Middle Ages served the same purpose as a signature to-day, have in this case been stamped directly on to the paper, so that it has been extremely difficult to identify the jumbled and damaged wax fragments. Nor does their number tally with the list of seven Swedes, six Danes, and four Norwegians who are quoted as its authors; there is not a single Norwegian seal, and there are only three Danish ones. The six parchment copies which it prescribes were never made. Obviously, then, this was not an inviolable decree; the document as preserved testifies only to the workings of a great idea, to discussions and plans.

Nevertheless, the Union existed, albeit only during Margaret's and Eric's lives. It had supporters in all three kingdoms. It could not but be approved by those nobles – and they were many – who had inherited or purchased estates in more than one of the Scandinavian countries. The question was whether the coalition could endure in face of the individual interests of the three kingdoms and their different traditions in foreign policy – Denmark leaning towards the south, Sweden towards the east. Co-operation had been feasible and even essential during the heavy German pressure on Sweden at the end of the fourteenth century, but this pressure had now been eased. Further, could the old struggle between monarchy and aristocracy abate, let alone disappear in this new setting? Much depended on the course chosen by the joint heirs to the Folkungs and the Valdemars.

The main aim of Queen Margaret's foreign policy was to drive back the Germans and expand Denmark's frontier southwards. At home she sought with equal consistency to create efficient government and financial order by appointing royal bailiffs, directly dependent on the crown, to carry on the administration of the country – and in this she succeeded where Magnus Ericsson and Albrecht had failed. Her careful diplomacy prevented any clashes with the Swedish nobles, who moreover had made important concessions to the Queen

at the assembly at Nyköping in 1396, when the danger from Mecklenburg still threatened. These concessions enabled her to restore some of their estates to the Swedish crown, a process called in Swedish 'reduction'.¹ The effects of this achievement, for which Magnus Ericsson had striven in vain, fell most heavily on the churchmen, who were therefore less kindly disposed towards the Queen than were the nobles. But she had an amazing gift for avoiding friction during her rule. She refrained from placing Swedish castle-fiefs in the hands of foreigners, and she spent a great deal of her time in Sweden — more, probably, between 1398 and 1412 than in Denmark; King Eric also visited Finland on two occasions. She was adept at winning over public opinion, shrewdly exploiting the religious foundation in Vadstena and the Birgittine tradition generally to this end. Not only did she promote the canonization of Birgitta and patronize the Birgittine houses in Denmark but she also paid frequent visits to Vadstena, where she would spend some days in the foundation. Her sojourn there over the Christmas of 1403 has been sympathetically recorded by the otherwise hostile monks, revealing a curious facet of life in this age. Margaret had demanded to be received as a 'Sister' in Vadstena, and was solemnly permitted to do so. The chronicler describes the scene when she kisses the hands of the inmates in farewell, and chides a lay-brother for his humility in wrapping his hand in his mantle before offering it to her. This intensely human side of the Queen was later to be reflected in her will, for her beneficiaries included many of those who had suffered humiliation or material loss during and after the war with Albrecht, and the souls of those on both sides who had been killed on land or at sea.

¹ The term 'reduction' is applied to the resumption by the crown of any kind of land, i.e. fiefs, hereditary estates, Church lands. This reduction could be made under various pretexts. The greatest of these reductions was that of Charles XI, to which the term 'reduction' is almost exclusively attached in English. We shall use it in its more general Swedish sense.

Margaret died in 1412, and Eric of Pomerania became sole monarch. He possessed neither her popular appeal nor the unflinching authority born of her remarkable triumphs. He zealously pursued and expanded her programme of administration and foreign policy; but he lacked both charm and tact, and he soon stirred up antagonism, which his consort Philippa, sister of Henry V of England, was powerless to conciliate, though she often came to Sweden and held meetings with the Council there. There were more Danes and Germans among the royal bailiffs than had been the case in Margaret's time, and the Swedish nobles, who by now held only a small number of fiefs, felt increasingly slighted; furthermore, they were allowed very little political influence, and it was clear that Eric was aiming to establish an absolute monarchy. The churchmen found in him a ruler who encroached on their rights by interfering in clerical appointments, and there was a particularly violent clash over the election of an archbishop in Uppsala in 1432. The King's costly foreign policy, directed towards the south, made financial and military demands on Sweden, while his attempts to increase the state revenues by reorganizing the taxation system alienated the sympathies of the peasants. Moreover, not only did Eric's deliberate attempts to establish over the three countries an absolute monarchy, similar to those that were being formed by rulers elsewhere in contemporary Europe, arouse opposition in Sweden but his ambitious foreign policy involved him in long and expensive wars with Holstein, which had important if indirect consequences.

At this time Sweden's main exports were the iron and copper from the Bergslagen mines. These were shipped by Hanseatic merchants, who had a long-standing interest in the industry. In 1426 Eric's war against Holstein induced the League to support his enemies with the time-honoured weapon of an economic blockade. This meant that Eric's kingdoms were cut off from the supply of salt and other

essentials, and Bergslagen was particularly hard hit, since it had no market for its products. The position grew steadily worse, and at the beginning of the 1430's there was an uprising among the miners which struck at the foundations of Eric's Union. Once again a new Swedish province enters the limelight, illustrating afresh the strong regional individuality which gives Sweden's history its peculiar character, revealed most clearly during the last century of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. The people of Västmanland and Dalarna now enter Swedish annals with explosive force.

Bergslagen, Sweden's only 'industrial' area at this time, was naturally more advanced economically than the other provinces, and reacted more quickly than the purely agricultural areas to violent economic changes; its special organization and the 'free' status of the more prominent mine-owners (*bergsfrälse*) gave it some of the characteristics of contemporary urban communities. In this particular crisis the men of Bergslagen chose their leader from among their own ranks. His name was Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson, and he was one of the 'free' miners, bore the title of 'squire', and came originally of German family which had settled in Sweden some generations earlier. Little is known of his earlier life; even his date of birth is uncertain.

This was not the first time that Bergslagen had murmured against Eric's bailiffs and the principles of centralization they represented. The royal bailiff in Västerås, who had jurisdiction over Västmanland and Dalarna and whose ruthless methods seem to have been based on feudal tradition, had already been forced to resign. Nevertheless he continued to act as a convenient scapegoat for all the unpopular features of Eric's rule; he has even come to be regarded as the main cause of Engelbrekt's rising. Actually his removal would not have prevented it; as we have seen above, it had other more complex roots.

Eric had made a truce with the Hansa towns in 1432, but

the unrest in Sweden still continued, and the rising in Bergslagen broke out in the early summer of 1434. One after another the manors of the bailiffs were captured by the peasants. At Västerås, the heart of Bergslagen, Engelbrekt assumed leadership of the rising. Men of all classes joined his ranks, Västerås was taken, and the lawman of Uppland, who was socially the most important man among the rebels, was installed in the castle. The rebels pressed on through Uppland towards Uppsala and Stockholm, and there were also risings in the coastal settlements of Norrland, on Åland, and in Finland. The first account of Engelbrekt's rising that has come down to us is contained in a letter written home on 1st August by a Danzig merchant then in Stockholm:

Here is a man called Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson; he is Swedish, born in Dalarna, where copper and iron are quarried. He has gathered about him a good forty or fifty thousand men and can surely muster more, if he wishes; they have conquered and burnt many towns, castles and villages in the realm. When they came to Stockholm and there encamped on the one side, as the Hussites in Danzig, the castle and the town went manfully to the defence; there was no storming. . . . The chief demands of the men of Dalarna centre round their desire to have one King in Sweden and to drive out the King of Denmark from the three kingdoms; they themselves will be rulers. They therefore wish Sweden to return to her state under King Eric, whom the country now worships as a saint. In his time no customs duties or taxes existed and no burdens were laid upon the peasants, and they will therefore have back the same rights as in former days.

Engelbrekt's men failed to take Stockholm, but a truce was made with King Eric's castellan which was to last until November. Engelbrekt himself proceeded with the bulk of his army to Örebro. Here it was agreed that the castle should capitulate to Engelbrekt if it was not relieved within six weeks. Nyköping was his next goal, where a similar agreement was made, and then Engelbrekt marched into Östergötland. The purpose of the campaign was undoubtedly to

establish contact with the Council of the State, which was at that time assembled at Vadstena. The proposal of the rebels to abolish taxation, among other things, was a strong inducement to take up arms; but if there was to be any lasting result, the rebels would have to make an alliance with those in Sweden who were politically experienced. The disagreements over the Uppsala archbishopric must have shown Engelbrekt that not all the great lords of the kingdom approved of Eric's absolutist tendencies. It is true that the opposition of the Church had been broken; the previous year three Swedish bishops on a visit to Denmark had been forced to express their support of Eric in a letter to the Pope, though they afterwards revoked what they had written. The clergy had at first condemned the rising as 'a fire of evil and desolation' comparable to the Hussite movement, but this could easily be modified or reversed in the common cause. The lords of the Council also had reason enough to ally themselves with Engelbrekt, and awaited his coming in Vadstena.

This meeting resulted in an alliance between the Council and Engelbrekt. The members of the Council blamed the rising itself for the subsequent violent measures against the King, and claimed that Engelbrekt had forced the alliance on them under duress — just as the bishops had been forced to support the King in the previous year. Before long, however, they had drawn up a comprehensive indictment couched in legal terms, accusing the King of infringing Sweden's fundamental law contained in the *kungabalken*. The Church and the nobles thus joined with Engelbrekt and his armed forces in opposing the principles of absolutism, and Eric found himself in a very awkward position, since he was checkmated also in his conflict with Holstein and the Hansa. Meanwhile, the rising continued to spread; one by one the strongholds fell before the attacks of Engelbrekt and other leaders. In addition to the peasants, the bishops' soldiers and a large number of Swedish nobles took part in these sieges,

reinforcing with their lances and iron armour the clubs, axes, and arrows of the peasants. Even cannon were used on both sides in these Engelbrekt feuds, though the noise of this mediaeval artillery still exceeded its effectiveness.

In September Engelbrekt, who was then in Västergötland, urged Bishop Thomas of Strängnäs and the lords of Uppland to be responsible for the naval defence against King Eric's anticipated counter-attack, while he would undertake 'with the help of God and St Eric to answer for the defence on land as far as to the Sound'. The rising was now in its third month and had made enormous strides. How was the King of the Union going to react?

It is a curious coincidence that some months after these events the future Swedish archbishop, Nicolaus Ragvaldi, made a speech at the Council of Basle in which, following up certain earlier ideas, he identified the Goths of the Teutonic migrations with the Swedish *Götar*; thereby laying the foundations for an interpretation of Swedish history which would ultimately far outweigh the one offered by Snorre Sturlason.