

The Play about the Plot

History on Stage and at Stake during the Medieval Week in Visby

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Hayden White has pointed out that the narrativization of history adds a sense of causality and moral value to past events. Building upon these ideas I will analyze six differing ways to narrate the Danish take-over of Visby in 1361. My main focus is on public dramatizations, enacted during the Medieval Week on the Baltic island of Gotland. The story enacted in this commemorative festival has repeatedly been subjected to reconstructions concerning its story-line, perspective and role characterization. Some changes are initiated by the festival organizers whereas others result from playful and provocative moves that challenge their intention. The different versions evoked by these reconstructions re-evaluate and decenter the focus of preceding representations. Doing so they also turn the public performances of a historical narrative and the play about its plot into a medium in which constructions of contemporary community and identity may be claimed, contested and negotiated.

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Standing just outside of the medieval city-wall that surrounds the Swedish town of Visby, I caught sight of a group of people that aroused my curiosity. There were about ten to fifteen of them, men and women, some middle-aged, several teenagers and a few children. All were dressed in sackcloth and they were busy painting terrifying wounds on their faces. Several tubes with theater blood were handed around in an excited and cheerful mood.¹

This was the first day of the *Medieval Week*, an annual festival on the Baltic island of Gotland which commemorates the Middle Ages. Since its small-scale initiation in 1984 the event has developed into a grand finale of the tourist season. In the summer of 1997 it attracted close to 100,000 visitors. The festival is arranged jointly by a number of interested parties, such as the museum Gotlands Fornsal, the local heritage movement, the adult educational association, the district authorities, and the tourist association.²

The week-long program features a diversified range of performances and activities, many of them attempting to recreate concrete and sensory aspects of every day life in the Middle Ages. Visitors are encouraged to participate actively, preferably by assuming medieval roles and dressing up in faithful costumes.³ The result is a striking co-existence of playful, pedagogical and commercial representations of the past (see Gustafsson 1995).

The people I saw outside of the city-wall portrayed provincials and were preparing to partake in one of this festival's most popular features: the public dramatization of the Danish takeover of Visby in 1361.

A dramatic peak moment, a scene in which the Danish invaders penetrate the Southern Gate of the city-wall, was due in a couple of minutes. Before I had time to ask what the simply dressed group had in mind, a tall man wearing a hat of tangled gray wool turned to me declaring: "*Today, we are going to change history!*"

The phrase loses some of its significance when translated into English. The Swedish word for history – *historien* – may signify both *history* and *the story*. I think the man in the wool hat was playing on this ambiguity. His group was about to make their contribution to the play, aiming at once at a retrospective change of the re-enacted past and a displacement of the narrative perspective.

The dramatization as a whole features a number of scenes, performed at preannounced times in different places within the city. When carried out according to plan, these scenes enact a story about how Visby was taken over and forced to pay ransom to the Danish king. However, the plans are not always realized. Only the main characters have written lines and attend regular rehearsals. The remaining cast consists of a nucleus of people who return year after year and a varied constellation of volunteers. In practice, any spectator is free to enter, at least peripherally, the temporarily established theatrical frame. Not uncommonly the dramatization is enriched by imaginative and unannounced initiatives, some of which threaten the prescribed structure of events. For example, over the years aggravated and wounded farmers have attempted to prevent the entry of the Danes. This has become, at one and the same time, an expected feature and a challenge to the plot.

This paper concerns the ways in which people strive to control the representation of history by creating several alternative story-lines. I will discuss six examples of historical representations, among them my own description of the historical event. My main focus will be on strategies used to direct and redirect the outcome of the events that are enacted in the festival dramatization.

Hayden White (1973, 1981) has directed attention to the poetics of historiography. One of his ideas is that the tendency to present events in the form of full-fledged narratives imposes an illusory sense of causality and order upon them. In many ways, the re-enactments discussed in this paper, can be used as examples of this historiographical convention. When events in the distant past are dramatized in the form of stories they are given a certain order and

meaning. On the other hand, on this festive and playful occasion, any plot is also subjected to a wide range of reconstructive possibilities. By being exposed to interventions from the audience the dramatization unleashes a spontaneous reordering of a historical narrative well known to Swedes.

Another of Hayden White's observations is that history, when presented as a story, appears to have an allegorical meaning. The moral evaluation of the past is brought about when people play down certain events and highlight others and when they characterize some events as openings and others as endings. According to White, the moral is not least to be found in the closure of a story, in the well-made ending that contains a summing up and an evaluation of the events that preceded it (White 1981:20). The historical representations I intend to discuss in this paper all present different pictures of a 14th century event. The question I pose is in what ways these varying versions also contain competing evaluations of the past.

History sets the Baltic island of Gotland apart from the rest of Sweden. Thanks to its location in the intersection between important sailing routes, the island has been an exceptional tradecenter since prehistoric times. There are still many well preserved ruins and other remnants from this golden age. Almost every little village outside of Visby features a lavishly decorated medieval stone church. More gold and silver treasures have been found in the soil of Gotland than in any other Swedish province.

Gotland did not truly become a part of Sweden until the middle of the 17th century. Both Visby and the country belonged formally to Sweden at the time of the commemorated Danish invasion, but they were governed by a thing of their own, *gutnaltinget*, and followed a law specific to the island, *Gutalagen*. Gotland has not only been torn between the Nordic arch-enemies Sweden and Denmark. In the period between the Danish invasion in 1361 and the Brömsebro peace treaty in 1645, through which Gotland was ceded to Sweden, Visby was alternately held by such different powers as Baltic privateers, the deposed Swedish king Erik of Pommern and the Teutonic Knights. The specific nature of Gotland's history and its austere

and beautiful landscape are repeatedly highlighted in tourist campaigns. Gotland is a cherished tourist destination. Each summer vacation an invasion of visitors from the mainland increases the island's population (at present 58,000 people) almost tenfold.

During the late Middle Ages the port of Visby, the biggest city on Gotland, grew in importance at the expense of the rest of the island. One reason was that the city linked itself to the most important trading union of the time, the German Hansa. Foreign tradesmen were attracted to Visby and many settled there permanently. Meanwhile, the formerly prosperous ports in the countryside of Gotland lost their importance. The relationship between Visby and its surroundings gradually changed for the worse. The city-wall was erected to gather duty from visiting islanders but also to protect the townspeople in case of a civil war. This wall came to mark the literal dividing line between survivors and victims of war when Danish military forces disembarked on the island in 1361. This takeover of Visby which is commemorated during the Medieval Week, is

usually referred to as a fateful turning-point, the end of Gotland's heyday.

The following brief summary of the events is based on discussions in contemporary history books (Öhrman 1994, Åberg 1993) and is the *first* of the six representations of history I will discuss in this paper. As is the case in most of my other examples, history is here presented in the form of a story.

When the Danish invaders arrived at Visby, they had already won several battles against farmers and tradesmen from other parts of Gotland. The final battle between the powerful Danish mercenaries and the poorly equipped islanders took place just outside the city-wall. It is likely that the scattered defense had hastened to the city hoping for assistance or protection. The city gates, however, remained firmly closed until the battle was over and the defenders of the island were totally defeated. According to hearsay, the townspeople even amused themselves by watching the uneven fight from the top of the city-wall without interfering.

After the battle, the Danish king Valdemar Atterdag made his victorious entry into Visby.



C.G. Hellqvist's painting *Valdemar Atterdag imposes a levy on Visby* which was completed in 1882.
Photo: Gotlands Fornsal.

Inside the city, however, no blood was shed. The citizens had to pay a considerable ransom, but afterwards all their rights and privileges were restored. In fact the city could continue its trade even more easily than before, since the formerly competitive countryside had been radically weakened. The only difference was that the city now formally belonged to the Danish crown instead of the Swedish. This difference barely mattered to the tradesmen of Visby – an ethnically miscellaneous group kept together by shared business interests.

The second representation of the events is a painting from 1882 that most Swedes are likely to recognize.⁴ For several generations of school-children this detailed and dramatical scenery has served as the self-evident illustration of the famous trauma. The painting is in the style of late 19th century National Romanticism and was completed by Carl Gustaf Hellqvist in 1882. The setting is the big square in Visby and the perspective is that of the townspeople.

Seated on a blood-red throne the Danish king looks strikingly cold-hearted after having threatened to set the city on fire unless its citizens succeeded in filling three huge barrels with treasures. The couple in the very front are the city's mayor and his wife. It is easy to recognize the bad guys and the good ones, the victims and the offenders. Possible exceptions are a Jew and a monk who abandon their stereotyped fortunes in the right section of the composition.⁵ In this painting the events of 1361 are interpreted as yet another vicious act by the archenemy Denmark, carried out at the expense of innocent burghers of a city that rightfully belonged to Sweden.

My third example of a historical representation is the public dramatization, as it was composed during the first years of the Medieval Week. When the initiators of the festival decided to stage these events, Hellqvist's painting was more than a century old. By using the famous composition as a model the organizers hoped to ensure recognition.⁶ However, in order to restore a century-old interpretation of history they had to make ideological adjustments. The nationalistic bias and the outdated style of reverence towards history had to be transformed. Admittedly, it could be argued that

reverence towards the past is something very much up-to-date. My point is that today's popular interest in matters of heritage and regional history co-exists with previously dominant attitudes towards history, such as those colored by the ideology of the Social Democratic welfare state. Culturally accepted attitudes towards formerly celebrated national narratives in post-war Sweden would generally be modest indifference or distanced irony (cf. Anshelm 1993:12, Lowenthal 1996:159 f). In the place of these patriotic narratives of the past arose a new *grand narrative* in which the central conflict was between capitalist suppressors and proletarian victims. This new narrative has influenced and still permeates historiographical conventions in contemporary Swedish consciousness.

This helps us understand some of the differences between the painting and the enactment. The play's interpretation of the mayors bears little resemblance to the justly angered noble-



An entrance that marks a turning-point in the reenactment as well as in the history of Gotland. Photo: Lotten Gustafsson.

man who can be seen in the painted scene. Rather, it is a portrait of deceitful and vain rulers of the past. Among the features that remain recognizable is the familiar grim look of the Danish king. In the drama, however, the foreign aggressor is not the only antagonist. The audience takes pleasure in hooting when the king rides through the city gates but they hoot almost as loudly when Visby's two mayors make their entrances. The main characters of the painting are morally re-evaluated in a way that harmonizes with role conventions of labor movement theater in Sweden. Accordingly, men with power and wealth assume the roles of villains rather than victims.

Another difference is that the painting depicts a single frozen moment whereas the dramatization covers a longer strip of time, enacting sequences supposed to depict what happened before and after the frightful ransom scene. In a classic manner it presents and evaluates the imagined past by giving it the form of a story – a selection of events connected in a meaningful order with a well-marked beginning and end. Of course, the construction of any story has to do as much with the process of sorting out as the process of putting together. The most controversial absence in this story is that of the uneven battle between islanders and Danes.

What has not changed is the perspective of the play. As in the case with the painting it has remained that of the townspeople. The medieval city-wall and the streets of inner Visby are used as a stage, ensuring a spatial and symbolic linkage to the original event. The audience – thousands of people arriving mostly from the Swedish mainland – are included in the performance in the role of 14th century citizens.

The opening scene of the festival re-enactment aims at establishing the anxious atmosphere in Visby on the morning of the day of the Danish arrival, July 27, 1361. From the top of the wall, the two mayors try to calm people by giving false assurances. This is a beginning that points in a familiar direction (cf. Young 1987:VIII). We all know that arrogant pride usually leads to surrender and fall – at least in stories. Consequently, the dramatic highlights that follow are the entry of the king and the humiliating paying of ransom on the city square.

In the afternoon the characters of the mayors stand out more clearly. We see them blaming their failures on an innocent maiden, whom they accuse of having been in cahoots with the Danish king. The story of the invasion ends as a romantic tragedy. While the citizens of Visby lose their treasures, the maiden is left to face death by starvation, built into a tower in the wall.⁷

The gruesome battle and the alleged voyeurism of the people in Visby are not enacted. That which has been left out is instead paraphrased in a scene in which a huge staring crowd approves of the cruel execution of the maiden. In this scene the audience is appointed the role of passive and deceitful victims. A major portion of guilt is imposed on the town's own rulers, the mayors. Each year, they are portrayed by men with influence and power in contemporary Gotland.

The festival re-enactment is a historical presentation made to amuse and engage a large and diverse audience. Its ending fulfills several important expectations conventionally placed upon a popular late 20th century story. It takes a moral aim at those in power; it contains colorful images of a mythical past; and a beautiful girl is subjected to estheticized violence.

Despite all of this, the organizers initiated a major change a couple of years ago, when they added a new and radically different final scene. The old closure was not totally replaced, in as much as it was used on the first day of the festival. The new final scene was scheduled a week later to serve both as end of the enactment and grand finale of the entire festival. This second ending is the *fourth* representation of history I would like to discuss. It refers to a moment in time when the Danish mercenaries had left Gotland after having granted the city its old rights.

Once more, the city square, is made to serve as the major stage of the re-enactment. A good portion of Visby's restaurants are engaged in the preparation of a huge public feast. For this occasion an entire arsenal of medieval-inspired attributes have been mobilized – torches, jesters, bag pipe music, grilled lamb skulls and strong regional beer. Anyone willing to pay a minor entrance fee receives a handmade ce-



Visby's big square is temporarily transformed into a space for community celebration. Photo: Samuel Andersson.

ramic goblet and may partake in the celebration of Visby's recovery from the fearsome invasion enacted a week before. In this scene the participants are attributed the roles of survivors celebrating peace.

According to Hayden White as terminating motifs, festive occasions symbolize men's temporary triumphs, "occasional reconciliations of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds" (White 1973:9). Compared to the first ending the second is not only happier. It is also a recovery of the citizens' moral status. In fact it alters the entire evaluation of the events referred to in previous scenes.

Seated at the honorary table are the festival organizers and many of the important people who have been cast as mayors during the years. Suddenly, one of them gets up to read aloud the settlement between the city of Visby and the Danish king. This time his speech is greeted by cheering only. One fateful turning-point has been neutralized by another. In this version the mayors are not ridiculed for calm-

ing the people on the morning of the invasion. The test of time showed that they were right when claiming the city's invulnerability.

The fact that the city now belongs to the Danish crown is not lamented. It is telling how the question of nationality, in this regional version of a formerly established Swedish historical narrative, is regarded as a passing and superficial formality. The festive scene suggest an alternative definition of community, consisting of the people who stay on the island long enough to outlast the Medieval Week.

As has already been noted, the old closure continues to be performed on the festival's first day. The new one follows a week later, on the last day of the festival. In this way, the enactment of the feast coincides with the departure of most tourists. The second Sunday of the festival is often referred to as the islanders' own. Things are about to return to normal when the permanent residents are invited to rejoice that the days of (both historical and contemporary touristic?) invasion are over. Most tourists only stay

long enough to experience the first and tragic ending. The two endings and their different evaluations seem to be directed at different audiences. Those who follow all of the scenes may experience a development from misfortune and guilt to relieved celebration. The dramatic shifts suggest a purifying and renewing potential of the yearly return to an infected historical point.

A main assumption of the initiators of the Medieval Week was that the island's history needed to be revived. This might have been a misjudgement. The events of 1361 are well-known on Gotland, but they are commemorated in rather different stories than the one told in the festival dramatization. Ever since the first year of the Medieval Week, the festival has been accused of carrying out an insensitive "celebration" of events that caused irreparable damage to the countryside of the island.⁸ The public feast may be interpreted as an appeal to the critics to forgive ancient wrongs and instead rejoice in the present peacefulness, and unite at the prospect of another long winter on the island. However, far from all residents feel tempted to partake in the attempted community of the public feast.⁹

The recurring criticism is more telling of contemporary tensions between the privileged town and its rural surroundings than of any unbroken oral tradition. The city-wall in many ways still marks a crucial social borderline and a majority of the influential enthusiasts organizing the festival are well-educated people originating from the Swedish mainland. Their alleged indifference is paradoxically enough assigned both to their status as non-locals and as town-dwellers. A popular rhetorical convention is to stress the continuity between "the deceitful 14th century burghers" and the privileged "bourgeoisie" living in Visby today. Some express their disapproval of the enactment by refusing to partake in it. Others find means to express their positions within the frame of the event.

This is a way to interpret my *fifth* example of alternative representations of history, which brings us back to the group I met by the wall. The sight of wounded farmers has become a recurring feature of the play. Their main action

has been to hinder the entering Danes. Sometimes they have thrown apples and eggs at the soldiers and their horses. One year they ran ahead of the invaders, placing brightly colored traffic signs in their way. Another common action among them is to grab hold of people in the audience, loudly accusing them of having done nothing to help the islanders during the battle.

In 1995, for example, the whole group lay down in the street, just inside of the gate where several horses were about to pass – a drastic expression reminiscent of contemporary civil rights movements. It is a technique to express moral superiority by claiming the role of inoffensive victim. This is obtained by juxtaposing the, in this case playfully ascribed, brutality of the opponent and the vulnerability of unshielded bodies in public places. It is a symbolically powerful expression used in many protests against tangible contemporary threats.¹⁰ The fragility of the farmers is also underlined by the fact that the self-sufficient provincials of medieval Gotland are transformed into barefoot and rag-clad paupers. The social re-definition of the victims are also yet another narrative device in the spirit of proletarian esthetical conventions.

By taking the part of wounded farmers people suggest an alternative interpretation of the past, referring to the events from the perspective of the defeated islanders. The group of hideously made-up people usually enter the story at a time when they already would have been dead, showing up on the inside of the city-wall just as the king is about to enter. By introducing images from the preceding battle they achieve more than just confusing the story's temporal order. Their contribution brings that which was left untold back to focus. The powerplay between Danes and Swedes fades away in comparison with the conflict between the town and its rural surroundings. By accusing the spectators of the wrongs of the 14th century citizens the farmers project the moral ambiguity of Visby's inhabitants on to the audience.

I can feel a rhetorical temptation to describe these indignant farmers as suppressed historical facts returning to invade a narrative from



A young man embodies the suffering of medieval islanders during the Medieval Week reenactment. Photo: Lotten Gustafsson.

which they have been excluded. Truly, with their hollow-eyed faces they almost resemble vengeful ghosts of a kind that would rise from a collective guilt. But the farmers are not only examples of the past invading the present but also of the opposite. Their presence evokes contemporary conflicts between countryside and city, between people from the Swedish mainland and islanders, between privileged and discontented.

My *sixth* and last example is the carnivalesque competition concerning the liberations of the maiden. The women who have played the role of maiden over the years have all been abducted during some of their performances. One year, the popular tournament riders succeeded in turning the tragic ending into a classic Hollywood closure. The king and the rescued maiden were seen setting off on horseback in the sunset by the beach, an image transforming not only the character of the leading parts but the entire genre of the performance. It might be interesting to compare the reactions to this happening with other challenges to the plot.

The energetic attempts of wanna-be-saviors and farmers to prevent the anticipated course of events give rise to ambivalent feelings. Some organizers and other participants stress that the possibility of intrusions add to the entertainment and excitement of the event. Others say that they are serious threats to safety, order and historical accuracy. Different strategies have been used to protect the plot from unauthorized moves. In the summer of 1997, some of the younger resisting farmers were persuaded to enter instead as defeated prisoners of war, safely tied-up and led by the Danish soldiers. The cart where the maiden is kept is usually surrounded by alert and armed men, safeguarding her as well as the story itself.

It seems that the narrative reconstruction that was most unambiguously received was the fairy-tale ending created by the knights. Many recall this obvious narrative sabotage fondly, as a lovely practical joke. How should the different reactions be understood? The playful knights aspired to heroism. The blood-stained farmers claim the roles of victims. Also, they touch upon delicate matters concerning guilt, identity and heritage. The knights problematize the enactment's ambition to be authentic. The farmers highlight the perpetual problem of *whose* history it is that should be told.

To conclude, each of the six representations of history relates to events that took place on Gotland in the traumatic summer of 1361. They all evoke different images and evaluations of the past by means of narrativity. The main focus of this paper has been to examine the multiple versions and perspectives that commingle and compete during the public dramatization of the Medieval Week. In comparison with written or painted historical interpretations the public re-enactment opens up an exceptional range of expressive possibilities, allowing anyone present to partake in the storytelling or to attempt at a reconstruction of it. It is a medium that allows a polyphonic representation of an established historical narrative. This polyphony however is not established without friction.

More is at stake than claims of authenticity and authority. The different endings of the play, as well as the challenges of the plot, all suggest



The captive maiden cries out in despair. Photo: Lotten Gustafsson.

alternative standpoints and diverse ways to evaluate the outcome of the Danish invasion. The claiming and acting-out of roles of resistance and heroism allow people to decenter the focus of the enactment as well as to position themselves favorably in relation to the events depicted. Moreover, the varying ways to tell the story each attribute a different status to the role portrayed by the vast majority of participants. The medieval townspeople are alternately portrayed as victims, survivors and traitors.

The island of Gotland has a grand and stormy past. Like many other histories it is made to serve as a flexible background onto which different images of *us* and *them* may be projected.

People use the story enacted during *the Medieval Week* as a means to link themselves and others to the wrongs, sacrifices and heroic deeds of earlier generations.

Notes

1. This is an expanded version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Austin, Texas on October 31, 1997. The article explores questions that I elaborate further in my forthcoming thesis on the polyphonic construction of the past in play and performances during the Medieval Week. I am grateful to Barbro Klein and Thomas Masterman for comments on this paper. A slightly revised version in

Swedish has been published in the journal *RIG* 2 (98).

2. This constellation corresponds with the contemporary growth and change of interest in history and heritage. Svante Beckman, for instance, has pointed out that established producers of history presentations today collaborate and are rivaled by the rapidly expanding commercial experience industry, heritage-hungry amateurs and politicians (Beckman, 1993:25–40).
3. The emphasis on embodied experiences and role play is shared by the global living history movement, a phenomenon that offers interesting entry-points to an analysis of late modernity. See Jay Anderson for an overview of the field of historical re-enactments in the early 1980's (Anderson 1984).
4. The well-known painting has been tenderly ridiculed for its many anachronistic details (Rudnert 1991:175–200). Still, it continues to serve as a cherished illustration, which shows how little the popularity of a heritage icon depends on its accuracy as a historical source (cf. Lowenthal, 1996:165 n.p.).
5. In his dissertation on C.G. Hellqvist art historian Sune Rudnert analyzes the composition as a mythical allusion to the Final Judgement. He notes that the representatives of good and evil are situated on opposite sides in accordance with the conventions for that motif (Rudnert 1991: 195).
6. In the creation of the plot and the lines a whole range of other written sources, historical as well as fictional, were used as sources and inspiration. Elements based on the painting are movements, props and scenery as well as the atmosphere in the scene on the square.
7. The sacrifice of a maiden is one of the motifs included in the dramatization by force of established fictional conventions rather than historical probability. The vigorous motif which at times portrays the woman as victim, at times as the cause of wartime violence is repeated in folk legends as well as literary accounts of the Danish invasion.
8. See for example Gotlands Tidningar 84–03–07 and 97–08–08. It needs to be stressed that there are also a great number of native voices that express strong appreciation of the festival enactment. My leaving these aside in this paper is a bias caused by my interest in alternative ways to represent and evaluate the past.
9. Victor Turner's term "communitas" refers to the strong sense of affinity he claims that people may establish in the liminal phase of rituals, an affinity that temporarily dissolves social barriers (Turner 1969, chapter three and four).
10. The powerful symbolism of vulnerability in embodied expressions of resistance is ingeniously analyzed by Jennifer Schirmer in an article on women's protestation in public places in Argentina and England (Schirmer 1994:185–220). She discusses for instance how bodily weakness may

be transformed into sources of power and moral authority when bodies that are culturally conceptualized as defenseless and inviolable – for example naked and old female bodies – are exposed in public places that are charged with potential violence.

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