

Peter Foote Memorial Bursary Report
Research trip to Visby, Gotland. 05/11/20-15/11/20
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Thanks to the Peter Foote Memorial Bursary, I was able to travel to Gotland to conduct research at the Gotland's Museum's archives. I also got to visit the museum's stockrooms, as well as organise a field trip in the Gotlandic countryside. This research trip inscribes itself in the wider context of my position as an Erasmus+ intern at the University of Stockholm on the project "Ancient images 2.0. A digital edition of the Gotlandic picture stones" which gathers archaeologists, 3D specialists and several PhD students to create a digital catalogue of these unique artefacts. I was initially supposed to stay much longer in Visby, but the travel restrictions in place due to the pandemic made it difficult and expensive to organise this trip. I am therefore extremely grateful to the Viking Society for their precious support. I was in fact very lucky to be able to go at all, as the museum and archives had to close unexpectedly due to COVID-19 on my last working day. Despite this, my time on Gotland was a lot more enriching than I expected it to be.

I spent most of my time in Visby working at the archives of Gotland's Museum. These archives include the type of official reports produced for the Swedish National Heritage Board, but also the private archives of Gotlands Fornvänner, the not-for-profit organisation established in 1875 to care for the island's museums and heritage. As with the Swedish National Heritage Board's archives in Stockholm I have been working at since January, my task was to read and gather all documentation relating to the parishes where picture stones have been recorded, and digitise it. I have already gone through several kilometres worth of archives in Stockholm. The records kept in Visby are less plentiful, but more targeted and arguably a lot more useful. The museum's staff were kind enough to keep the archives open well beyond their normal operating hours, which allowed me to read through the records of sixteen parishes. For comparison, picture stones have been recorded in seventy-six parishes, while there are in total ninety-two parishes on Gotland. Going through the archives is a tedious task. One obviously cannot read everything, so skim-reading skills are particularly important as are diligence, discipline and patience. In the case of intricate hand-written letters from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, knowledge of palaeography can greatly speed up the process as well!





A wonderful consequence of spending so much time sitting down reading is that I got to know the museum's archivists and staff members quite well. Antikvarie Birgitta Strandberg-Zerpe as well as archivist Lisen Karlsson are just two of the truly inspirational professionals I have had the pleasure of spending time with. It has been particularly interesting to listen to their experience of the pandemic from the perspective of a museum which relies on visitors to survive. Gotland being an island, it was particularly isolated last summer, and this has had profound consequences on the cultural industry. But as it turns out, they were not too bothered about the museum closing in November as footfall is low during the winter months and heating up the museum costs more than it earns! I got to see how the museum and archives are run behind-the-scenes. It is an enriching experience for any student considering a career in heritage. Spending time working in archives also helps understand how they work. My PhD thesis relies a lot on archives and documents which have not been widely published, and understanding how information is classified makes it easier to look for it. All archives work differently, however, but since my PhD project partly has to do with Gotlandic identity and the picture stones' role in defining that identity, the experience I got from working at the museum's archives has been invaluable.

Birgitta, accompanied by top Gotland archaeologist Per Widerström (who is also part of the project I have been an intern for) took me to Magasin Visborg, where thousands of the museum's artefacts are stocked when they are not exhibited. A little-known fact is that these stockrooms are open to the public free of charge, and thus provide a great addition to the more conventional museum visit. Located outside of Visby in former military barracks, Magasin Visborg is a world of its own where medieval sculptures stand next to Art Deco furniture, and where human bones are kept right next door to children's toys from the 1960s. It is an amazing journey into the bizarre, the anecdotal, and the grandiose: some artefacts are literally too big to be exhibited in any museum, such as a sixteenth-century canon salvaged from a Danish fleet, several metres long, of extreme rarity and incredible value, but for which no one has any room! Of course, I mostly focused on the picture stones kept there. They include, again, stones which are too heavy, too large or too fragile to be exhibited, but also smaller fragments which would be of little interest to visitors. These fragments are the reason the work I have been doing at the archives is so important: the archives are littered with information concerning unregistered stones that have now been forgotten, lost or destroyed. But some of them may have simply been accumulating dust on a shelf for the past few decades!

The day after this visit, I went on a quick field trip to check a couple of stones to update the information that is held over them. After spending eleven months sitting in the archives, finally going on-site was refreshing. But I never found the first stone I set out to inspect. It was not kept where the official online database indicated it was.



The notes of Jan Peder Lamm, foremost archaeologist who spent most of his career working on Gotland, indicated another location on a nearby farm. I searched for the stone there as well, to no avail. In a case like this, a logical conclusion would be that someone moved it or stole it. But it was a slab several metres tall, and so for it to disappear without leaving a trace is odd at best. It may simply be that I missed it. This farm was a private property and while the Swedes are famously relaxed, it is always delicate to inspect every inch of someone else's garden without officially asking for permission beforehand. But if it did indeed disappear, that would be very interesting in itself. The next stone I went to inspect was just as it was recorded: it was still attached where it was supposed to be, and the measurements were still exact. This means that the stone has not been damaged recently and does not show signs of erosion. This is very important to check, because most picture stones still on-site in the countryside are left with no protection, at the mercy of the weather. There has been a lot of debate in the past century regarding how to best protect the stones but in the meantime, most of them have sadly been left to deteriorate outside. It was therefore a relief that this stone, its carvings and its paint, were still intact. The last stone I checked was reused as a bench inside one of the lychgates of Garda Church, notably famous for its Byzantine frescoes. It is an intriguing case: the stone in question is only a fragment of what must have been a larger slab, and very little can be made out in terms of carvings. I was provided with a digital reconstruction of what might be visible on the fragment but could not make it out in real life. Again, it may be that the stone's state deteriorated since the 1980s (when it was first discovered), or that I am not trained enough to see the subtle traces of tools and carvings which might be visible to others. Nevertheless, there has been speculation regarding this stone: is it a fragment or was the whole bench part of the same monument? When was the stone moved there? From where was it taken? How old is it? These are all elements which could help advance the wider discussion concerning this famous church's history and its reuse of ancient, pagan architectural elements.

In conclusion, this trip was a great mix of archival work and more practical experience. I met experienced heritage professionals who gave me an insight into the secret life of a museum, which was a pleasant and unplanned outcome of the trip. I was able to familiarise myself with Gotland's Museum's archival methods and practices, which is bound to be useful in the future both for my thesis and later as a scholar of medieval Sweden. Again, I would like to thank the Viking Society for Northern Research for their contribution, support, and encouragement.