STRONGHOLD XI

Teutonic Order in the Kingdom of Sweden, 1237–1467

LIVONIAN MASTER'S LARGEST OVERSEAS ESTATES

Christer **Carlsson**, Wilhelm **Ljungar**, Karl **Lysén**

Editor: Koit **Rikson**

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Estates of the Teutonic Order in Sweden (13th century).

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Flags of the Teutonic Order and the Teutonic Order in Livonia.

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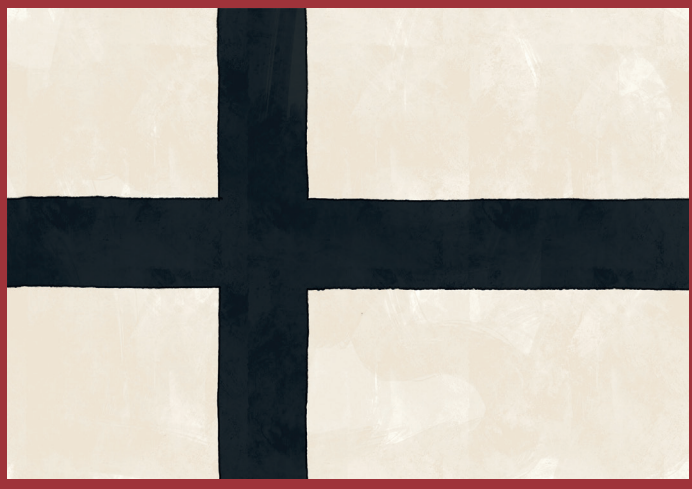
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History of the Order

Among the religious orders in medieval Sweden, the Teutonic Order was a latecomer. The Cistercians and Hospitallers had been active in the kingdom since the middle of the 12th century, and the Mendicants had established their first friaries in the early 1220s. Additionally, there seems to have been little to no desire from either the Swedish kings, the Scandinavian and Baltic bishoprics, or the Teutonic Order itself to have the Order establish themselves in the Swedish realm. That is, whereas the Hospitallers had been invited by the Danish king and the Archbishop of Lund, and the Grand Master of the Hospital had sent men and resources to establish the first commanderies in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, the formation of the Teutonic Order's houses in Årsta and Visby was the result of a process initiated in the interests of local elites.

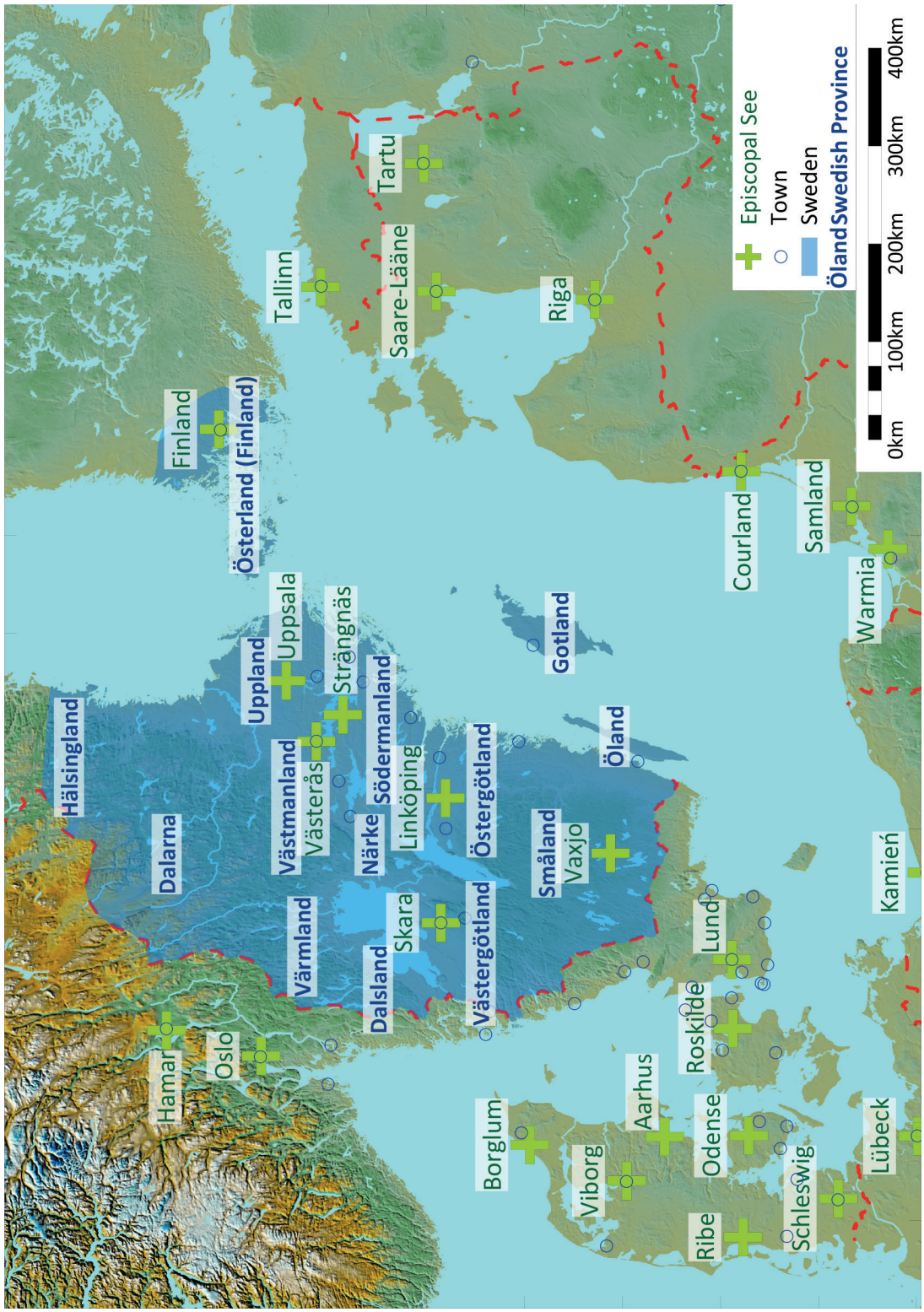
SWORD BRETHREN & THE TEUTONIC ORDER ON GOTLAND DURING THE BALTIC CRUSADES, 1202 – CA. 1350

Since the beginning of the Baltic Crusades, the city of Visby had been an important participant as well as a transit harbour for crusaders travelling Riga and the Baltic frontier. Consequently, control over the safe transit of armed pilgrims through the city became of interest not only to the local burghers, but to the bishop of Riga and his newly founded military order – the Sword Brethren – as well. Already in 1213, a bull issued by Pope Innocent III confirmed the ownership of the Sword Brethren's estates on Gotland. In 1226 at the latest, the bishop of Riga constructed a church dedicated to Saint Jacob in Visby, which served pilgrims and travellers in the city until the 1270s.

It is therefore likely that the Sword Brethren established some kind of administrative centre on the island to tend to their estates. There are a few sources supporting this. Around 1300, when the Sword Brethren had been absorbed into the Teutonic Order as its Livonian branch, there is the mention of a "*Curia Militum Christi*" in the *necrologium* of the Visby Franciscans. In 1341, there is a mention that the commander of Kuldiga was storing grain on the island. Yet, the house must have been abolished shortly afterwards, since no further mentions exist in later sources.

ORIGINS OF THE ÅRSTA COMMANDERY

Unlike in Visby, the Teutonic Order did not make any effort to establish themselves on the Swedish mainland. Instead, the introduction of a Teutonic

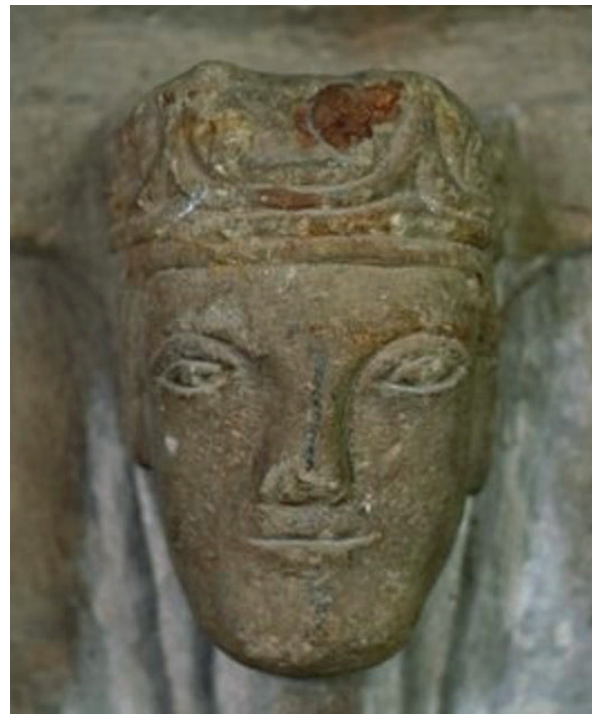


Sweden in approximately 1260.

presence in the kingdom was orchestrated by members of the lay elite in the provinces of Södermanland and Östergötland. Several factors drove the establishment of new religious foundations in 13th century Sweden. Of course, religious orders themselves actively sought out opportunities to expand their organisations, but without local support it was hard for new monastic enterprises to materialise. The motivations for local elites to take on the economic burden required to create new monastic foundations were complex.

Primarily, local elites gained direct religious benefits and prestige from a close connection to a religious foundation in the shape of mass for their souls, burial, and part in the monastic order's privileges. The patronage of military orders served to increase the prestige of martial elites due to Swedish participation in the Baltic crusades. For example, the Swedish Jarl, Birger Brosa (*the Smiling*), had been the main sponsor behind introducing the Hospitallers into the kingdom in the 1180s. As the royal jarl, he functioned as the military commander of the *ledung* fleet. Combining the office of jarl with the image of a *milites Christi*, Birger Brosa led a crusading expedition to Estonia in 1195. Following Birger Brosa's example, his successors continued to be instrumental in the expansion of Swedish crusading interests in the Eastern Baltic throughout the 13th century.

Connections with monastic foundations also served a secondary purpose in 13th century Sweden. In the reoccurring civil wars induced by royal elections, the property of landed elites on the losing side was often at risk of confiscation by the crown. However, property donated to monasteries and other religious houses – who were not subject to secular authority – was protected. At the same time, canon law did not yet take precedence over Swedish law, which meant that land donated outside the family could be taken back after the donor's death if the other heirs did not consent to the transfer. Consequently, recent scholarship has shown that strategic 'temporary' donations were common among the High Medieval Scandinavian nobility.



Stone bust of King Erik den Läspe och Halte (the Lisp and Lame) Eriksson [1222–1229 & 1234–1250] in Vinköl Church, Skara.

Photo by Jacob Truedson Demitz, 2023.

Given this complicated landscape, the creation of a Swedish commandery stretched the second half of the 13th century. Two central actors in this process were the local noblemen Karl Ulfsson



Stone bust of King Valdemar Birgersson [1250–1275] in Skara Cathedral.

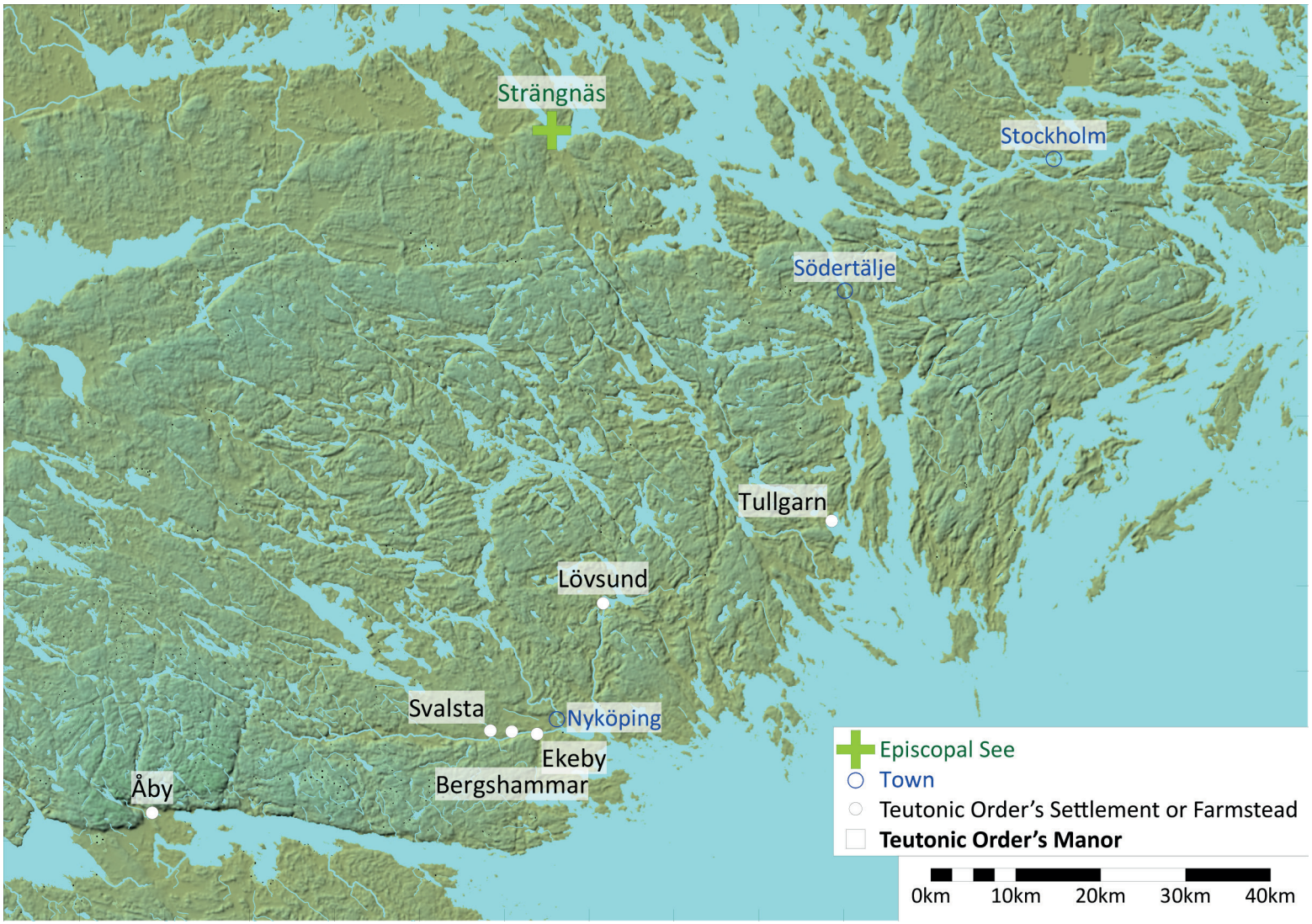
Photo by Ragnar Sigsjö, 2009.

and Johan Elofsson. The former, Karl Ulfsson, was endowed with a strong crusading pedigree as well as great personal wealth through his father, Jarl Ulf Fasi (*the Fearsome*), and grandfather, Jarl Karl Döve (*the Deaf*). Especially Karl Döve, who was the younger brother of Birger Brosa, had been a central figure in the participation of the Swedish elite in the Baltic crusades in the early 13th century. After becoming jarl, he had led a Swedish crusade to Estonia in 1220 and died in battle at Lihula (August 1220). Although no sources mention if also Ulf Fasi went on crusade, his epithet Fasi (*the Fearsome*) is strikingly similar to Jarl Jon's – who went on crusade to Finland in 1205 – '*paganorum terror*' (the Terror of the Pagans). Consequently, it would be surprising if he did not go on a crusade during his 17-year tenure.

While his relationship to the crusading movement clarifies Karl Ulfsson's positive disposition towards the Teutonic Order, it is not sufficient to explain why he chose to provide the economic foundation for the Order's presence in Sweden. Rather, the large donations in Karl Ulfsson's will were a result of political conflicts within Sweden. In 1229, Karl's father had supported Knut Holmgersson Långe's (*the Tall*) coup against the six-year-old King Erik den Läspe och Halte (the Lisp and Lame), who was forced into exile. Knut was part of the *Folkung* movement, which consisted of noblemen displeased with the growing centralisation of royal power in the realm. As king, Knut remained in power until his death in 1234, when King Erik returned to the throne. Despite his support for the usurper, Ulf Fasi proved too influential to be removed from office by the young king.

The following decade saw a stable continuation of King Erik's reign; it was only in the late 1240s that political tensions flared up again. In 1247, another

Donations to the Teutonic Order in Södermanland in 1261. The mill (*myrbiu*) and the settlement *Lostem* have not been identified.


Strängnäs
Stockholm
Södertälje
Tullgarn
Lövsund
Svalsta
Nyköping
Ekeby
Bergshammar
Åby
Episcopal See
Town
Teutonic Order's Settlement or Farmstead
Teutonic Order's Manor
0km
10km
20km
30km
40km



Stone bust of King Magnus Ladulås (Barnlock) Birgersson [1275–1290] in Skara Cathedral.

Photo by Ragnar Sigsjö, 2009.

Folkung rebellion broke out, led by Holmger Knutsson – the son of Knut Långe. Whether Ulf Fasi had died just before the rebellion or was killed in the fighting is unknown. Either way, the *Folkungs* were defeated the same year at the Battle of Sparrsätra. Holmger Knutsson together with his closest supporters were hunted down and executed the following year. In 1250, King Erik died and his new jarl, Birger Magnusson, who was married to King Erik's sister, managed to elect his own son Valdemar as the new king. In reaction, yet another *Folkung* uprising began, led by several pretenders as well as Karl Ulfsson – who possibly saw it as an opportunity to regain his father's title as jarl. As in 1247, the 1250 rebellion was defeated, and the leadership was executed after the Battle of Herrevad's Bridge (1251).

Despite his support for the uprising, Karl Ulfsson reconciled with Jarl Birger afterwards. According to the *Hakonarsaga,* Karl accompanied Birger's daughter Rikissa to her wedding in Oslo in 1251. In 1253, he was still present in the jarl's circle, since he appears as a witness to Birger's land transactions with Gudhem Abbey. But soon afterwards the relationship seems to have soured considerably. According to *Erikskrönikan*, written in the 1320s, the jarl attempted to poison Karl Ulfsson, which prompted Karl to flee into exile.

The choice of the Teutonic Order provided several benefits. Membership provided Karl Ulfsson with both security for himself through geographical distance from his enemies and for his estates through the sovereignty of the Teutonic Order against secular authority. That is, as a knight-brother of the Order, Karl Ulfsson's property was protected since the Swedish king did not have authority over the sovereign military order. In theory (at least), any seizure of property from the Teutonic Order would have had to be litigated at the Papal Curia.

After arriving in Riga, Karl Ulfsson joined the Livonian Branch of the Teutonic Order. In later Swedish sources he is referred to as *Junker Karl*,