

# Viking Heritage

magazine



1/2005



 Högskolan på Gotland  
Gotland University

# Editorial

**RECONSTRUCTION** of pre-historic remains is always a hot topic with various angles of approach being put forward. Several articles in this issue continue this interesting discussion.

Let's start with the very special reconstruction of the boathouse at Avaldsnes in Norway, see photo on the front page. The discovery of the exceptional remains of a Viking-age boathouse in 1990 opened up a new discussion concerning prehistoric boathouses. Here two articles allow you to follow the reconstruction process and the thinking behind it.

A Viking-age boathouse needs Viking ships! This time we are glad to be able to treat you with two stories of two famous Viking ships namely *Íslendingur* and *Havhingsten fra Glendaloug*. *Íslendingur* is the replica of the Gokstad ship that sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to North America in the year 2000, and now the captain let us take part in that voyage. Read also some personal impressions from the launch of *Havhingsten* in Roskilde last September.

Closely related to reconstruction is experimental archaeology, which is an academic "hands-on" method used especially to find out more about how objects were produced in ancient times. New research regarding Viking-age techniques of bronze-casting has lately been realized in Denmark. We are very proud to be the first to publish the results of these experiments.

So questions concerning quality, authenticity and purpose are most important when it comes to re-creating and displaying prehistoric objects and facts. And Viking Heritage Magazine will continue to cover this theme in issues to come.

I wish you all an enjoyable read!

**Marita E Ekman**  
Editor

Email: [marita.e.ekman@hgo.se](mailto:marita.e.ekman@hgo.se)

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HERITAGE NEWS

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Drawing by Lou Harrison, [thunderheartstudios@yahoo.dk](mailto:thunderheartstudios@yahoo.dk)

## Words of Wisdom

*The coward believes he will live forever  
If he holds back in the battle  
But in old age he shall have no peace  
Though spears have spared his limbs.*

From *Hávámál*  
(Words from "The High One")

### About the front page

The reconstructed boathouse at Avaldsnes on the island of Karmøy, Norway. Read more about it on page 3-7. Photo Karl Johan Gundersen.

# The Gotlandic Althing and the Cistercian monastery in Roma

BY MAJGOR ÖSTERGREN

## The organisation of the Gotlandic society

The organisation of the Gotlandic society during the Viking Age and early Middle Ages was based on *things* (20 in total), three *tredingar* (thirds) and six *sättingar* (sixths). The highest governing body was the Althing or *Gutnaltínget*, which consisted of 20 thing judges presided over by a chief judge and, following the introduction of Christianity, even the three *tredingar* deans.

Prior to Christianisation the Althing was not only the highest judicial and administrative unit but also the highest religious body, which means that the place where the Althing was held would also have been the most important cult

place. Thus Gotland constitutes a parallel to the Icelandic social structure during the corresponding period. Possibly both go back to an all-Germanic structure with certain regional differences but common basic features.

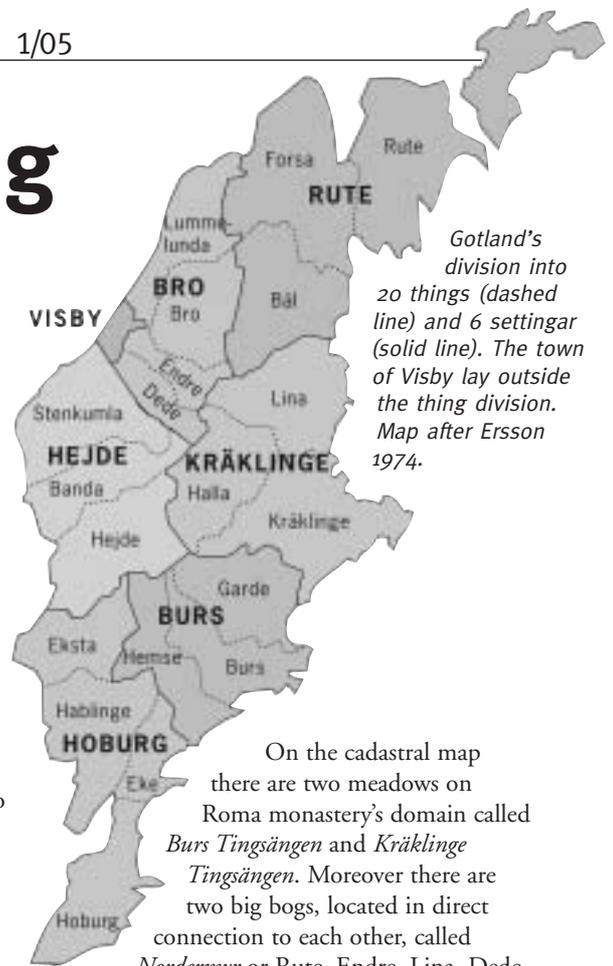
The Swedish royalty and the Bishop of Linköping diocese seem to have had a relatively little effect on Gotland and the Gotlanders. For example there were no royal officials on the island. Gotland was not included as part of the king's royal tour of the country either. The Bishop in Linköping did not have the right to certain taxes that he had on the mainland nor part of the "tenth" either. The tax burden was low.

Moreover Gotlanders had their own mint, introduced about 1140 AD and which was clearly implemented under the auspices of the Althing. The leading social class consisted of the independent farmers and it is most likely that the Gotlandic thing decisions originated exclusively from this social class.

## The Althing's location at Roma

The Althing's location in Roma parish is supported by a German translation of *Gutasagan* from 1401 (see VHM 4/2004 eds. note) and has been generally accepted by researchers, just like the view that the Althing was of vital importance for the establishment of the Cistercian monastery in Roma.

However there has never been any concrete proof that the Althing had its meeting place in just Roma. Not before 1990, when the author noticed some interesting information on the cadastral map of Roma parish from 1699, at the same time as a couple of archaeological surveys shed new light on the history of the Roma monastery.



Gotland's division into 20 things (dashed line) and 6 settingar (solid line). The town of Visby lay outside the thing division. Map after Ersson 1974.

On the cadastral map there are two meadows on Roma monastery's domain called *Burs Tingsängen* and *Kräklinge Tingsängen*. Moreover there are two big bogs, located in direct connection to each other, called *Nordermyr* or *Rute*, *Endre*, *Lina*, *Dede* and *Forsa Tingsmyr* and *Wallgiärdemyr* or *Burs*, *Garda* and *Halla Tingsmyr* respectively. *Burs Tingsängen* lies on the boundary between *Björke* parish approximately three kilometres southwest of Roma monastery, while *Kräklinge Tingsängen* and the two bogs lie directly adjacent to, southeast and straight east of the monastery respectively.

*Burs*, *Kräklinge*, *Rute*, *Endre*, *Lina*, *Dede*, *Forsa*, *Garda* and *Halla* are all names of nine of the 20 Gotlandic things. Four lie in *Nordertredingen* (of seven), three in *Medeltredingen* (of six) and two in *Sudertredingen* (of seven).

It is quite likely that the names on the 17<sup>th</sup> century map stem from at least medieval if not pre-historical name use. The names can hardly have been added after the Reformation in the 1520s, when the Roma monastery in practice was put on equal footing with a King's demesne.

It is also highly probable that these thing-names are connected with the location of the Gotlandic Althing, which thereby can certainly be considered have been located in Roma parish. The area at Roma monastery, later Roma Kungsgård (a royal demesne), is an excellent strategic choice of location in the middle of the island close to important communication routes, both waterways and roads. The thing-names imply that the individual things owned or had the right to use



Gotlandic things with the things mentioned marked as part of Roma monastery property on the cadastral map from 1699.



Map from the 1699 cadastral map of the area between Roma church, Roma monastery, Björke and Halla churches, with indicated thing meadows and bogs.

Drawing, Stefan Pettersson and Helena Duveborg.

special land areas adjacent to the Thing site.

The Althing was probably held around midsummer every year and would have collected a big number of people and even animals that were brought along, e.g. horses. People gathered to discuss important matters of common concern, made sacrifices, and decided about marriages, planned trading voyages and engaged in trade.

It is tempting to compare this with the description of the Icelandic Althing, where the equivalent to the Gotlandic Thing, *godordet*, had their own special houses – sheds – for accommodating their thing-men. These sheds were owned by the “godarna” – the equivalent of the Gotlandic Thing judges – but rich and otherwise influential persons could have their own sheds. According to the description in the Icelandic Sagas, these sheds were located at a certain distance from each other.

It might seem rather odd that the things also had a share in the bogs at the Althing place, but on one hand, the wetlands have always been important for grazing and the animals also needed pasture while the Thing was being held, while, on the other hand, the bogs can also have provided straw thatch for the things’ sheds. Moreover during the Viking Age, the bogs were actually lakes, forming large connected water systems, which

meant that they were also important as navigable water routes.

#### The archaeological surveys

In the spring and the autumn 1990 a couple of archaeological surveys were undertaken with the aid of metal detectors in the fields around Roma Kungsgård. In the so-called Gold Field *Guldåkern* (the field got its name during 19<sup>th</sup> century, when three gold coins were found there) northeast of the monastery and north of the ancient Kräklinge Thing meadow a find was discovered which indicated that the place must have had a special function. It was not a typical find from a ploughed-over Gotlandic farmstead. Instead it gives the impression of having originated from a trading place, reinforced by the way the objects were spread out in the field. The objects have been found scattered over an area of 200 x 300 meters with certain concentrations.

However the presumed trading place doesn’t seem to have had any great extent of the activities so typical for these places, like bronze casting. There are few bronze smelts and casting cones are missing. On the other hand, several parts of pieces of silver were found, a small silver bar, a bent finger ring of silver, just over 20 silver coins (mainly fragments of Arabic coins) and just over 40 weights. The weights are of varying shapes and age but most of them are polyhedral (multi-sided).

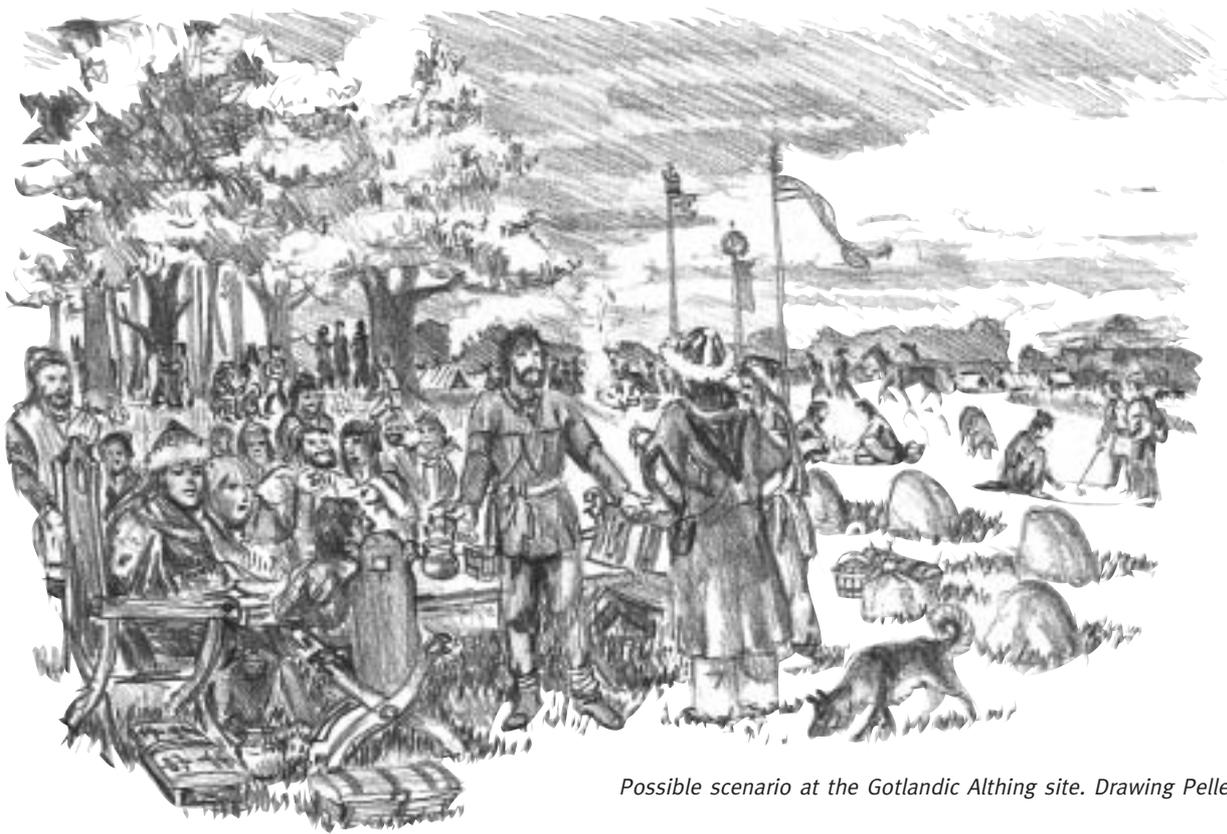
It is fully possible that the find material from Guldåker is a sign of a trading place located directly adjacent to the Gotlandic Althing’s meeting place during the Viking Age. The finds indicating trade (like fragments of coins and weights) originate mainly from the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet another survey was carried out in a field that was earlier part of the Kräklinge Thing meadow. Here, in a concentrated area, Viking-age objects of a different nature than the objects in the Guldåkern were found. The find material can probably be linked to the remains of a typical Gotlandic settlement from mainly the Viking Age, but also the Vendel Period. Among the objects are two fragmentary silver coins, a piece of melted silver, whole and parts of bronze jewellery, bronze bars, a bronze casting cone and 12 pieces of melted bronze, that is a relatively rich trace of remains from making bronze handicrafts.

#### Linking the Althing to Roma monastery

It is probably no coincidence that the Thing names exist just within Roma monastery’s domain and that the monastery is situated right next to the Thing names.

The monastery was probably established in the year 1164, according to Yrwing, on initiative of or in consultation with the Gotlandic Althing, and for that very reason was situated at the thing site.



Possible scenario at the Gotlandic Althing site. Drawing Pelle Fahlén.

The Althing was not only the highest administrative and judicial body, but also the highest religious body. It seems natural therefore that, after the introduction of Christianity, it is also the Althing that takes the initiative in building a church (which is clear from the Gutasaga) and establishing the monastery.

Moreover Gotland with its leading position within the eastern sea trade ought to have been of particular interest to the Cistercian order. The Cistercians were known to be great innovators involved in the most important

enterprises in the regions where they established themselves.

Yet another strong link between the Althing and the monastery is the name of the monastery itself. The original name that the monastery received when consecrated was obviously Guthnalia, which is a latinisation of Gutnalting, meaning the Gotlanders' Althing. The monastery would hardly have received that name had it not been located in right next to the Althing meeting place.

During the Middle Ages, concurrent with the development of the town of Visby, the political power on Gotland was

divided between the Althing and the town, while the county council was gradually weakened. Finally, during 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Althing in Roma had had its day. The power now lay completely with Visby's burghers and the Danish sheriff in Visborg's castle.

**The Gotlandic Althing's meeting place – common land?**

It is possible that the area at the present Roma Kungsgård has served as a kind of common ground, where the 20 things had the right to use certain special land areas as well as parts of the bog. Within these areas – named after the things – there was pasture for the horses and houses built for accommodation while the thing was in session. From the Icelandic Sagas, we know that each farm was represented with several persons at the Thing. Therefore there could have been several thousand people who gathered at Roma every year .

However it is possible that the things did not each have an area with their own "sheds". Since only Burs and Kräklinge Tingsängar are known, it might very well be that only the Sixth (*sättingar*) (Bro, Burs, Hejde, Hoburg, Kräklinge, Rute) had areas with "sheds" and that the things within each *sätting* had to share the areas.

The Cistercian monastery ought to have been erected on the Althing's common land and probably in close proximity to the site for the Thing proceedings. Exactly where the Thing site



A selection of the objects found in the so-called Guldåkern on the property of the Roma monastery. Drawing Pelle Fahlén.

## Heritage News



**Viking Heritage**  
magazine

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Viking Heritage Magazine,  
Gotland University,  
Cramérgatan 3, 621 67 Visby, Sweden.  
Tel. +46 498 29 97 43, +46 29 98 30,  
Fax +46 498 29 98 92  
[vhm@hgo.se](mailto:vhm@hgo.se)  
[www.hgo.se/viking](http://www.hgo.se/viking)  
Gotland University: [www.hgo.se](http://www.hgo.se)

**PUBLISHER AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**  
Dan Carlsson, [dan.carlsson@hgo.se](mailto:dan.carlsson@hgo.se)

**EDITOR**  
Marita E Ekman, [marita.e.ekman@hgo.se](mailto:marita.e.ekman@hgo.se)

**LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION CHECK**  
Luella Godman,  
[luella.anders.godman@i.lrf.se](mailto:luella.anders.godman@i.lrf.se)

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## Danish archaeologists came to visit

Last autumn a group of archaeologists from Denmark came to Gotland to study the historical places of the island. Here they are having a friendly chat, visiting the editor of this magazine.

Photo: Ken Ravn Hedegaard.

## A 900-year-old stave church discovered

In Aidt, near Thorsø on Jutland, Denmark, archaeologists have found the traces of a wooden medieval church. This is a very uncommon discovery, especially as there were no burials at the site.

The church is 12 x 6 meters. The find comprises 22 postholes, all of which are 80 cm deep. The church has a nave and a choir, as known from Romanesque churches, and is dated to 1050–1150 AD.

It is located about 50 m from the church in Aidt. Around 20 wooden churches of this kind have so far been found in Denmark.

Source: [Berglinske.dk](http://Berglinske.dk)

## A magnificent find of runes on a lead plate in Skänninge, Sweden

Archaeologists have made a remarkable find of around sixty rune inscriptions on a sheet of lead-plate. Earlier only around a total of 20 sheets of lead-plate are known from Sweden.

The plate is 2 x 3 cm and only 1–2 mm thick. There are around sixty millimetre-high runes inscribed on both the front and back, most likely with a sharp small knife.

The plate was found in the excavations of a grave in a monastery church. It was slightly damaged, so the whole inscription could not be seen. What makes it so interesting is the fact that the inscription is not in Latin, but in the language of the people. According to Helmer Gustavson, the rune expert, the inscription is probably a prayer for the dead, most likely Ave Maria.

## In search for Vikings in Iran

This winter Danish archaeologists have travelled to the coasts of the Caspian Sea in northern Iran to find out more about the relationships between Iranians and Vikings.

When examining Viking-age silver coins found in Denmark, Nadia Haupt, a researcher at Copenhagen Museum, discovered more than one thousand coins and relics that did not belong to the Danish or other Scandinavian cultures. She became interested in where these items originated and what kind of influence the Eastern cultures had on Scandinavia in the Viking period.

The fieldwork done in Iran will now be followed by studies in Denmark.

Source: [www.payvand.com](http://www.payvand.com)



**The big event when the Swedish crown princess Victoria** came to Gotland for the opening ceremony of Gotland Viking Island 2005, has inspired the artist Ingvar Westöö to make a new picture stone, this time a paper work of art. The princess came from the sky to light the first of all the bonfires around the coast of the island. Art by Ingvar Westöö. Copyright: The Documentation Group Rex Mundi.

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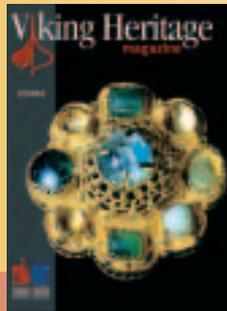
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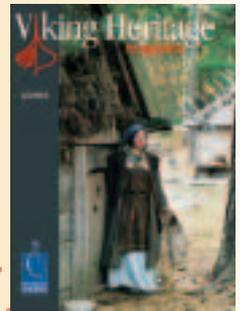
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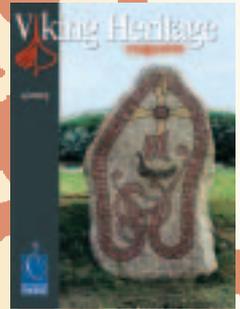
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