

## **A note on 14th century warfare**

To begin with, we shall have a short introduction to which types of arms and armour that were used in fourteenth century Sweden. The law of each county (or country, as Sweden more or less existed as a form of confederacy at this time) stated that each and every free man where to own arms and armour so they would be able to do service in the levy. Although this differed from one place to another, the laws provided very specifically which types of weapons and armour that the peasants were obliged to have in their possession. For the head the law stated that each man should have a muza (probably mail coif - a disputed interpretation), chainmail or plata (some form of body protection, most likely a coat-of-plates), järnhatt (generally kettlehat, but other types of helmets were also used) and a shield (the round shield existed side by side with the heater shield. Pavises however, doesn't seem to have been in hig use.). The weapons mentioned in the laws are first of all bows, with a specific amount of arrows (three tolfter, dozens). Some of the county laws state that a spear also should be part of the soldiers weaponry. The equipment mentioned in the laws correspond well with the archaeological finds from the excavation of the mass graves of the so called Korsbetningen. These graves were dug for the around 1800 local Gotland peasants, who died fighting invading Danes in the battle of Visby, the 27th of July, 1361, and are situated outside the city walls of Visby in the Swedish province of Gotland. One aspect that does not comply with the weaponry prescribed in the laws, is the lack of arrow points. A handful if any were discovered. Instead a great number of points of crossbow bolts were found. Whether this means that the crossbow had superseded the bow as the regulated weapon, or if bows simply were not used in this particular battle, is not easy to know. The axe seems to have been a favoured weapon. The Viking style long axe survives long after the dark ages, and is still popular in the fifteenth century. The halberd does not appear until later (the first evidence - however doubtful - is dated to 1410-1415). Different types of war hammers and maces were in use, leaving tell tale holes in the skulls of excavated fighters. There is also evidence handgonnes were used. To which extent we do not know, but the oldest handgonne known is the Swedish Loshult handgonne (Loshult is a parish in the south of Sweden), dated to 1340-1350. Several other handgonnes have been found, like the famous Mörkö handgonne (dated to late fourteenth century), and this indicates they were not extremely uncommon. As Sweden was very influenced by Germans and German fashion, the weapons and armour in use were generally of German style.

### ***The armoured horseman***

The Alsnö stadga (the statue of Alsnö), 1279-1280, stated that each man that presented an armoured horseman to fight for the king would be void of taxes. It was a general opinion that the king should "live off his own" ("his own" being the area of Uppsala öd north of Stockholm, lands with the purpose of providing the king with an income - generally referred to as Kronolän - "the crown's fief"), and therefore the taxes were not very high to begin with. Even so there weren't many knights in Sweden, and hence the Swedish military forces during the fourteenth century was an army mostly consisting of free peasants. It has been suggested that at the height of Swedish chivalry, the kingdom could muster maybe 500 knights. During a period Sweden had as little as three knighted families. A reason for the relatively few knights is the Swedish terrain. Apart from some areas in central Östergötland, Västergötland and parts of Svealand, it consists mainly of rocks, dense woods and lots of lakes and streams. When the knight was mounted he would have trouble manoeuvring the rough ground, and as the he relied much in his advantage of being on horseback, the terrain was certainly not an ideal one. As dense forests with lots of obstacles provides to little space for an army of riders, the purpose of knights are lost. The terrain simply prevents them from charging enemies in a broad line of battle (which were the knight's preferred way of fighting). Another reason for the lack of knights might be that they could only be knighted by the king himself. The knights where divided in two groups, riddare (knight) and

knape/väpnare/sven (squire). To keep their status as nobles, they were obliged to present themselves once a year at muster points.

### ***An army of peasants...***

Sweden never had a continental style feudalism, and the free class of peasants were a strong and respected group. The nobles were always keen to have them on their side - for example to overthrow the king without the aid of the peasants, was impossible and unthinkable. Then again, the peasants mainly wanted to be left out of big game politics and mind their own business. Even so, the peasants were required by law to fight for the king in times of need. Even in the fourteenth century, this was an old law. It was based on the so called "leding" law, which stated the peasants obligation to provide ships for the fleet, but was some what modernized to fit the needs of the time.

The army was probably never very big. In chronicles such as Erikskrönikan absurd numbers of soldiers are often mentioned, but one must take into account that ballads and other poetic texts might mostly be fiction. In the case of the mentioned Erikskrönikan, it is a question of political propaganda, and this force us to be suspicious to the numbers described. However, other numbers has been suggested, based on treaties and personal letters.. In 1363, for example, Albrecht departs from Warnemünde in Germany along with Swedish nobles and not more than 1600 soldiers to claim the Swedish crown. In the same year Albrecht's predecessor Magnus and his son Håkan, king of Norway, puts up an army together with the Hanseatic league. It consists of about 4000 soldiers, siege engines and ships. Please note that this relatively large army is put together by two kings and one of the mightiest political factions of the time. 1389 the Danish queen opposes king Albrecht with an army consisting of "1500 horsemen along with footmen", and four years later is mentioned a pirate fleet of 1200 men. As mentioned above the battle of Visby left about 1800 dead bodies, and it has been said that very few of the Gotlanders defending Visby survived. This can be compared to Henry Vs army of Azincourt - about 7000 soldiers (at the siege of Harfleur it has been said it was even bigger).

The somewhat puny number of soldiers in the Swedish armies are probably based on two factors, the first being that Sweden at the time only had about a million inhabitants, of which only about 30% - at the very most - were suited for battle. Taking into account that a nation wide muster was impossible due to communication and transportation difficulties, 1500-2000 men is about the most that could be enrolled from the areas adjacent to the muster points. The second factor is simply a matter of logistics. In a country of poorly developed agriculture, armed free peasants and dense woodland it is not easy to provide enough food to sustain much more than about 2000 marching soldiers.

### ***...reinforced by Germans***

As complement to the levied troops, especially when waging war in foreign land (in this case mostly Denmark, Russia or Novgorod), the use of German mercenaries were common. They consisted mainly of different kinds of specialists (like for example gunners and bombard crews). The Hanseatic league supplied both Danes and Swedes with troops depending on who gave them the sweetest deals. Free mercenaries, not tied to the Hanseatic League, were most likely also employed. The North German Hanseatic city of Lübeck was the site of the North European mercenary market for centuries. Mercenaries were expensive, however, and the economy of the realm was almost always strained (the cocky Swedich peasants weren't willing to pay too heavy taxes). This resulted in that parts of the land occasionally was held by German nobles as security for loans that the king could not pay. To squeeze out as much as possible from the stalwart peasants, these nobles themselves employed German mercenaries. These men did not care who got in their way; they were professional soldiers with no ties or bonds to the population - they

might even have seen the Swedish commoners as nothing less than enemies, and Swedish laws meant little to them and their masters, as they were only "guests" in the country. This problem worsened under the realm of king Albrecht of Mecklenburg, himself a German, invited and elected to the throne by Swedish nobles, as a strategy in the always ongoing struggle for power; their plan was for Albrecht to serve as a puppet, and rule the land themselves. The monk Andreas Lydekini later describes the state of the realm: "Then the birds of prey settled on the cliff tops, for the Germans oppressed the land for many a year." Once Albrecht was seated in the throne, he realized that he hadn't much to work with - it was expensive business being king, and he sort of inherited a lot of huge debts. His solution was to give his German knights and sheriffs areas of land as deposit.

### ***The army in battle and on campaign***



Most campaigning in Scandinavia took place during the winter time, when the ground was covered with snow, and the lakes and streams were frozen. The snow usually settles in November-December, and with few exceptions it stays until February-March. The army could travel the short routes across the frozen waters, and in some cases use sleighs to move quickly on the snow. We know at least scouts and vanguard used skis in the 15th C.

It is mentioned that Karl Knutsson used skiers in his campaign against Skåne (Scania - a province in the south of Sweden, at the time more or less a part of Denmark), and there is little reason to doubt the usage of skis in the fourteenth century, as finds of skis from as early as the viking age has been made. Skiing and sleighing is a lot faster than to negotiate the hilly, dense forests.

Iteraries most often lists two different routes of travel, one during winter time and one during summer time. The one describing the winter time route generally describes a road that is two third shorter in both distance and time. Another positive aspect of winter time campaigning is that the peasants were not needed at home to bring in crops, plough or tend the farm as much as during spring, summer and autumn. In some instances the winter was an advantage during defensive warfare. The Swedes made defensive position on the ice of a lake, cut holes in the ice in the evening, and allowed the water to freeze over night. In the early morning they covered the thin layer of ice with snow and waited for their enemies to charge them.

There is, of course downsides with winter campaigning. First of all, it is the cold. This could not have been a very big problem; the soldiers were used to being out in winter cold. Campaigning was not much different from the ordinary work day at the farm, in terms of physical efforts and being exposed to cold. Still, it is challenging to be outdoors for days, marching and maybe not having as much food and drink as you need. The real problem though, must have been the short

days. During the darkest winter days, the sun sets at three or four in the afternoon, and rise again about nine or ten in the morning (in some parts of Sweden, the sun never rises at all during parts of winter time), which gives us seven hours of daylight at the most. As it is difficult to navigate an entire army through pitch black winter forest in the snow, the darkness put a hamper on the army's movability.

How did this army of peasants and a handful of mercenaries stand up to the more continental armies of the Danes, packed with knights and great numbers of hired soldiers? As history tells us, quite well. The Swedes most often tried to avoid battle on open ground, where Danish knights would have the opportunity to ride them down. Instead they kept to the forests, which were essentially roadless, apart from the highways - little more than trails of mud or gorges, merely adapted for wanderers with sumpter horses.

The roads were also kept to high ground, so that they wouldn't turn into streams in case of heavy downfall. On these already narrow paths, the Swedes lay in wait for the invaders. When the enemy least expected, the defenders felled trees across the path, so called bråtar, and to make things worse for their visitors, they cut of any route of escape by chopping down trees at the rear of the enemy troupe. As soon as the falling trees hit the ground, the defenders started a deadly crossfire of arrows and crossbow bolts.

Most peasants relied on hunting as well as farming for survival, they where most likely skilled archers, that did not have to be ordered to the butts for training like for example English bowmen. The enemy had no choice but to try and clear the road of the heavy trees, but the bråtar was well defended by Swedes with a grudge. The Danish cavalry was at a disadvantage when trying to charge over the bråtar, so clearing the trees from the opposition was not an easy task. As soon as the Swedes were driven off, the time consuming work of dragging the bråtar from the trail began.

At the meantime, the defenders went some kilometre along the path to the next prepared ambush, had a meal, bandaged their wounds and had some hours rest, until the invaders reached their spot, weary and with bruised morale. And then everything happened all over again. It was a hard, nigh impossible task to invade Sweden by land. The Swedes also enjoyed the advantage of being at their own turf, hence knowing every path and every bit of land in the area, and so they could navigate at their own leisure, when the invaders had to stick to the trails or get hopelessly lost.

### ***Insignias and field markings***

The Swedes does not seem to have made much use of insignias, badges, tabards or shield heraldics. As far as we know, no pictorial or written evidence speak of soldiers displaying badges or their masters colors, even in those sources when one might expect them. Shield paintings often seem to have had more decorative than heraldic purpose. It might be of interest, that no "Grant of arms" was (or is) needed in Sweden. You simply painted a shield with a motif of your liking, and started to work the trademark in. German troops might have followed German fashion, and some of the mightier families might also have adapted to the German trend, as many nobles in Sweden were actually from Germany at the time. Even the society as a whole was greatly influenced by German habit, language and culture, as many merchants and people in positions of power originated from Germany.

In the above mentioned Karl Knutsson's campaign against Skåne, we know that the gunners marched under the flag of St Erik (considered national and patron saint of Sweden, although he has never been canonized by the Vatican). Otherwise, evidence are scarce.

The symbol of the kingdom of Sweden, three golden crowns on a blue field (as seen in Albrecht of Mecklenburg's seal at the top left) seems to have been displayed on flags in the army. First appearing as the arms of Sweden in a cardinal palace in Avignon 1320, it is still the field insignia of the Swedish military. King Magnus Eriksson (Albrecht of Mecklenburg's predecessor) might have used it, and it fits well with him being king of Norway, Sweden and Skåne. We know for sure that king Albrecht used the three crowns, and on the effigies of bishop Henrik of Finland, dating to early fifteenth century, Swedish crusaders are happily waving their three crown banners. It took a long time before the Swedish army adopted uniform clothing. Even in the eighteenth century it was stated that "the soldier fights in his own clothes", even if royal regiments had uniforms. To recognize each other in battle, a sheaf of straw or a twig of fir was attached to the hat or helmet.

Something close to insignia was the use of foxtails and wolf tails. The otherwise notoriously unreliable sixteenth century writer Olaus Magnus writes: "To taunt their enemies, the Swedes tie wolf or fox tails to their spears." Normally, we would treat this as nonsense, more or less, but as the German painter Albrecht Dürer actually depicts knights with foxtails or wolf tails on their lances, this might really be the case. What is so taunting about wolf tails and foxtails? These animals were hated and scorned for killing livestock and (in the case of the wolf) sometimes even pose a threat to human beings. The punishment "to be hanged with wolves" where a convicted man or woman was hung up alongside the bodies of wolves, was a most degrading execution.

*Article by Johan Käll*