

# EXAMPLES OF MEDIAEVAL SEALS. SEALS PRESERVED AT WISBY IN GOTTLAND.

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DURING a visit to Sweden in 1849, impressions of some seals preserved at Wisby, a seaport town, capital of the island of Gottland in the Baltic, were obtained by me and brought to England. At a subsequent time, these seals being considered as possessing more than ordinary interest, I procured a more perfect set of impressions through the kindness of G. J. R. Gordon, Esq., H.B.M. Secretary of Legation at Stockholm, and Herre Eneqvist, the Rev. Dean of Endre, Custos of the Museum formed in the Gymnasium at Wisby. The seals described in the following notices are seven in number, six of large dimensions, and one of much smaller size. Representations of the entire series are here given of the same size as the originals.<sup>1</sup>

No. 1. The seal of the Germans in Wisby of the guild of St. Canute. A round seal 2½ inches in diameter, and cut in very deep intaglio. Within a border is this inscription in Lombardic letters :

**S:TEVTHVRIOR:IN:WISBI:DE:GVILDA:SCI:KANVTI**

Sigillum Teuthonicorum in Wisbi de Guilda Sancti Kanuti. The inner margin of the area of the seal is elegantly cusped, each cusp terminating in a fleur-de-lys. The device is a seated figure of a king, 2 inches long, which undoubtedly represents Saint Canute, although no nimbus appears around his head.<sup>2</sup> In the right hand he holds a sceptre tipped with a fleur-de-lys, with the left hand he holds an orb surmounted by a cross. He is seated on a throne or *faldistorium*, of which the sides or arms

<sup>1</sup> It must be observed that of the large seals the two last of the set of impressions sent by Herre Eneqvist are numbered 6 and 7, whilst No. 5 is omitted, as also in his letter accompanying the seals. I have been unable to ascertain whether this is owing to some oversight, or whether this No. 5 may relate to a seal of this series known to exist, but lost or now inaccessible.

<sup>2</sup> Assuming that Saint Canute was Canute the Great, his history is closely connected with England. After the Danes

had made predatory incursions into England for 200 years, Canute, son of Sweyne I. King of Denmark, finally subdued the whole country in A.D. 1013. Soon afterwards Canute succeeded his father as King of Denmark and England, and in 1028 of Norway also, and was esteemed one of the bravest and most powerful warriors of that age. In the latter part of his life, he built churches and monasteries, and made a pilgrimage to Rome; for which piety, after his death in 1036, he was canonised by the church of Rome.

terminate in two lions' heads, as if two demi-lions were conjoined to form the throne, and each holds in the mouth a sprig of oak leaves. A cloth



embroidered or quilted in lozenges with a centre spot, covers the animals, the two fore-paws of each lion forming the support.

The date of this interesting seal may probably be the beginning of the XIIIth century.

The inscription upon it tells as much as is known of what its use was, and who possessed it; all that can be said about the employment of it is this.—That being the seal of the guild or corporation of German merchants dwelling at Wisby, it was used in sealing the charters, treaties, &c., which this guild had to make, either as members of that great mercantile confederacy, the Hanseatic league, in their general commerce, or perhaps in sharing in the municipal concerns of Wisby.

How the Germans were interested in Wisby will be alluded to presently in noticing another seal of the series, and the history of their connection with that town will be sketched briefly.

No. 2. The seal of the brothers of the *convivium* of Saint Lawrence. A pointed oval seal,  $3\frac{3}{8}$  inches long by  $2\frac{5}{8}$  broad, not cut in such deep relief as No. 1, and of inferior workmanship. It bears this inscription :

**+S:FRATRV:DE:CONVIVIO:SDI:LAVRENCII**

Sigillum Fratrum de Convivio Sancti Laurencii. Within the border is an upright full-faced figure representing St. Lawrence. The Saint has a nimbus round his head, which is clean shaven, except the ordinary tonsure. He is dressed in the deacon's dalmatic over an alb, and at the neck is the usual embroidered amice. His right arm holds up the gridiron, emblem and instrument of his martyrdom; the left hand holds a closed book.

This seal is also of the XIIIth century, though perhaps later than No. 1.

The inscription appears to confirm the idea suggested by the shape

usually employed for ecclesiastical seals, that this is not a secular seal, but was used by the brothers of the Convent of St. Lawrence, if the term



*convivium* may be assumed to denote some kind of conventual establishment.

No. 3. The seal of the brotherhood of Saint Nicholas in Gottland. A seal  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter, cut in bold relief, and of good, but careless workmanship. It bears this inscription :

**"S: CONFRATERNITATIS S: NICHOLAY: IN: GOTTLANDIA"**

Sigillum confraternitatis Sancti Nicholay in Gotlandia. Within the border is the full-faced figure of a seated bishop. Round the head is an oval nimbus ; he wears a pointed mitre, and his face is clean shaven ; he wears an alb having an embroidered apparel at the feet. Over the alb he wears a chasuble, over it is laid the orphrey in the shape of a pall ; and round his broad neck is the amice embroidered with trefoils ; the right hand is held up with the first two fingers extended, the usual gesture of benediction : in the left he holds a pastoral staff.

The seat is a level stool or bench having no back, and in the place of arms there are heads, resembling the head of a fawn or kid, facing inwards ; the seat seems to be a solid erection of masonry, hollowed at the sides by an angle cut in ; all the blank surface of the seal is marked by a diaper of lines ruled so as to form lozenges, but irregularly. Though at first sight it might be thought this was an ecclesiastical seal, from the representation of

a bishop on it, yet, the shape being round, the inference that may be drawn is that this is a secular seal; and that the "confraternitas," or brotherhood, was not a religious body like a conventual establishment of monks, but a society whose members lived not only in Wisby, but were



scattered, as the inscription shows, "in Gotlandia," that is, throughout the whole island of Gottland. What this society of St. Nicholas actually was, there is nothing left to show; it might be merely a guild of merchants, or a mixed general institution like the modern free-masons. We can only conclude that it was a secular body which took the figure of Bishop Nicholas as the emblem for their seal, and called their society by his name.

The date of this seal is probably of the early part of the XIVth century.

No. 4. The seal of the Germans frequenting Gottland.—A round seal,  $2\frac{5}{8}$  inches in diameter. (See cut, next page.) It bears this inscription:

**\*SIGILL' THEVTHONICOR' GUTTLADIA' FREQUENTANTIVM**

Sigillum Theuthonicorum Gutlandiam frequentantium. The whole of the circle within is taken up by three stems springing from twisted roots; the centre stem bears at the top a fleur-de-lys.<sup>3</sup> This seal is unquestionably secular, its date seems to be the end of the XIIIth century, and it was used, as the inscription shows, by the Germans frequenting Gottland. Whether these "frequenters" were a resident corporate guild, or whether they were travelling merchants, can now only be imagined; this seems to have been the official seal of a recognised body, whether of a corporate guild or not, and it must be concluded that this enriched form of the fleur-de-lys, whether

<sup>3</sup> On the *Sécretum* of Stephen de Lis, Prior of Lewes, is the figure of a lily, plainly the emblem of his name. Per-

haps the fleur-de-lys of these Germans frequenting Gottland was emblematical of their trade, office, or character (?)

considered as a merchant's mark or not, was as valid an emblem for sealing as the figure of a saint or king.



No. 5. The seal of the Convivæ of St. James of Wisby. A pointed oval seal  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long by 2 inches wide. It bears the inscription :

**✠ S: CONVIVAR: S: JACOB: DE VISBY**

Sigillum Convivarum Sancti Jacobi de Visby. It will be observed that the



first letter of the word DE is capriciously formed so as to have the appearance of an M. Within is the standing figure of St. James ; his head is out

of all proportion, being too large for the rest of the body, while the lower parts are also far too small, except the feet; the head appears to be tonsured, with the hair long and flowing behind the ears, which are thus placed unduly forward; the mouth is open, and surrounded by moustache and beard; the dress is a gaberдинe, or simple frock, and round his broad neck hangs a cord supporting a bag or palmer's scrip, on which is a large escalloп shell; with the right hand he holds a staff ornamented with a knob at the top, and with a ferule and a point at the bottom; in the left hand he holds a closed book. The imperfections of this seal, together with the character of the letters, combine to give rather an earlier date to it, it may be of the early part of the XIIIth century.

Possibly these Convivæ were only members of a Guild; but the pointed-oval, or ecclesiastical shape of this seal, together with the cross placed at the beginning of the inscription, and the emblem of the saint, tend somewhat to suggest that the society for whom it was made were Cœnobites, or monastics. By this light, therefore, thrown upon the meaning of the word "convivarium," these "convivæ" may have been persons of some ecclesiastical character, who lived together under a common roof, and were bound by certain rules and habits. Yet, since from the name they do not seem to have been either nominally monks or friars, or bound by any strict rule of fraternity, possibly they were guests who lived together, wandering ecclesiastics. The idea conveyed by the pilgrim's dress of St. James leads further to the notion that they also had adopted the palmer's garb: and since few in those days were accustomed to assume that mark of distinction without having first made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, it is not impossible that these Convivæ, who lived in times so connected with the Crusades, were really palmers, who had returned from their wanderings, and lived as a corporate body in Wisby.

No. 6.—The seal of the Mayor of the Guild of All Saints in Wisby. A round seal, 3 inches in diameter, and by no means less interesting than those previously described, on account of its late and somewhat richer style of workmanship. It is cut in deep relief, every portion of the surface being employed, unlike those preceding, in which the spaces between the border and the figure are blank; and it conveys the notion of resemblance to a Flemish brass, in which country indeed it may have been executed. Within the border is this inscription,

**⚠SIGILLVM⚠MAIORIS:GILDÆ:OMNIUM:SANCTORVM:IN WISBY**

Sigillum majoris gildæ omnium sanctorum in Wisby. The principal object is a sitting figure. A round nimbus marked with the cross commonly given to representations of Christ, points out at once that this figure is Jesus, and helps to explain the subject of the seal as representing the Saviour sitting in heaven receiving the saints with a blessing, and being attended by angels. The face is oval and thin, compared with the broad full faces of St. Laurence and St. James. The hair is long, and hangs in curls on the shoulders. The right hand is held up, with the first two fingers extended in the attitude of blessing; the other is held lower, with all fingers spread out. The seat is very small. On each side of the Saviour are three kneeling figures in long robes, with the hands uplifted in the attitude of supplication. There is no distinction indicating sex, all have bare faces, long hair twisted round the ear, according to the fashion of the XIVth century, and in

length and shape, the garment is the same for all ; two figures of the six have a broad band of embroidery round their dress, and another has the



whole dress spotted with a quatre-foil or flower. Above the Saviour's hands there is an angel swinging a censer on each side.

Thus this seal is superior in elaborate decoration to the preceding ; the general characteristics of the workmanship seem to indicate it to be of a later date, probably made in the first quarter of the XIVth century.

Notwithstanding the holy character of the emblem, the inscription and circular shape seem sufficiently to show that this is a secular seal, used by the Mayor of the Guild, or, as the inscription has by some been explained, by the Greater Guild, of All Saints in Wisby.

No. 7.—The seal of brother Gerard of Gottland, of the order of preachers. This seal is very much smaller than the preceding, but its original use and subsequent wanderings have made it equally interesting. It is a pointed oval,  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inch long, and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch wide, of somewhat stiff design and workmanship. Around the edge is this inscription :

**✱S'FRIS GERARARDI DE GOTTLADIA ORDIS PDIT**

Sigillum fratris Gerarardi de Gotlandia ordinis predicatorum. Within is a crowned female standing, holding a child, and a monk is kneeling, praying to them. There can be no doubt that this group represents brother Gerard and the Virgin Mary with the Infant Saviour. With the right hand she holds a ball, with the left hand she holds the Infant Jesus, while he is looking up to her face, and with his left hand he holds a cross on her bosom. On the Virgin's right hand kneels brother Gerard, with the tonsure, a hood and long robe ; his hands are upraised in the attitude of prayer. Over his



head is a star of six points, and there is a similar star below the ground on which the figures rest.

The date of this seal appears to be the early part of the XIVth century. Its shape and inscription point out plainly that it was the personal seal of an ecclesiastic, and, although he calls himself only "frater," since it was not the custom for each ordinary monk in a convent to have his own peculiar seal, and indeed for none but the head or some official of the body, this must be concluded to have been the private seal of brother Gerard of Gottland, who may have been chief of the order of Preachers (or Dominican monks) in that country.



At what time or in whose hands it left Gottland is not known, but the mode of its restoration a few years ago is too curious to be omitted. The seal is of silver, the shape not fully described. In 1825 a Wisby ship-master having taken a ship-load of copper from Alexandria to sell at Athru, in Candia, he there received in payment, together with all sorts of coin and curious things, this seal: and after keeping it for nearly twenty years, he presented it, in 1844, to the museum in Wisby.

To trace the progress of this seal during 500 years, and from such remote and disconnected islands as Gottland and Candia, is now of course impracticable; but in the words of that kind friend who has so materially assisted in procuring this and the other seals (H.B.M. Charge d'Affaires at Stockholm), we may fancy, perhaps, brother Gerard voyaging to Rome and dying there or on board his ship, or being obliged to part with his silver signet for want of money. By some accident it may thus have reached Candia. But, certainly, the coincidence which after such a lapse of time brought it back to Gottland adds to its interest and value.

The first observation resulting from this minute examination of these seals is this—there is a curious degree of similarity in all the large seals, which seems to show they were made within a certain country, as well as century of time. Germany seems to be that country, and the XIIIth century that date. Some one or two differ, and they are evidently slightly later than the rest; but, as a series, they are of a coeval period, and an unique series for the variety of kindred subjects displayed upon them.

The next observation is the absence of heraldic bearings, which is a remarkable feature, and more curious because several of these seals seem indubitably to be of German manufacture, and amongst the Germans there was a great regard to heraldic insignia. Perhaps the reason was this, these guilds were formed of persons who did not possess the privilege of using arms as individuals, and yet considering themselves too important to use, as corporate bodies, the mere merchants' marks, they employed these



emblems. From this entire absence of heraldic devices the inference also may perhaps be drawn, that noble families had no connection with the societies to which these seals belonged.

To proceed now with the history of these seals, mention must first be made of the few facts that are known respecting them. It is satisfactory to know they are all now preserved amongst the numismatic collections of the Royal Gymnasium (or Museum) at Wisby, being considered to belong to the Record-office of the Cathedral Consistory there. They were all found in Gotthland, and collected a few years ago from different places, having been rescued from different mean uses, to which, for a long time, they had been exposed. One was found in a peasant's house, where it had been used as a stamp for gingerbread cakes ; others, there is reason to think, had been employed for a like purpose, or for butter stamps : and while we may smile at this ignoble use of these seals, we shall feel glad that the practical purpose to which they were applied by the Swedish peasants has been the means of preserving these interesting seals of comparatively unknown institutions and people, whilst cupidity too commonly destroys any metal treasures soon after their discovery. The shape of the seals easily suggested this domestic use of them by the peasants, for they are raised on the back in the usual form of mediæval seals, with a handle for the fingers to grasp when making an impression. There is no inscription on the back, but in the handle of each is a hole large enough to have passed through it a chain or strong cord. The material of which some of them are made is stated to be "metal," by which the Swedes generally mean brass, and one or two are described as bronze ; the probability is, they are made of that hard mixed metal, of which the seals found in England are made, and which was generally used during the mediæval age.

After stating that none of these seals have been used officially for a long time, "several hundred years," as it is said at Wisby, and having mentioned all that is known of their later history, it may now be well to consider, very briefly, what has been recorded about them, and to glean the circumstances of their early history as far as they can be gathered.

Herre Eneqvist, the Curator of the Wisby Museum, in his letter, gives a reference to a Swedish book, "*Gothlandska*

Samlingar" (Gothland Collections) by George Wallin, in which, at Part I., page 116, and fig. iii., he states, that with the exception of No. 6, the preceding five (large) seals are all figured, and that the accompanying text "gives all the information that any one possesses respecting them." Not being able to find this book in the British Museum, or any library within my reach, the foregoing observations have not been confirmed or gathered from it: yet, inferring from another sentence in the letter, "We have no historical information whence these seals have come," that this book referred to would not enlighten us much, its absence therefore is not felt.<sup>4</sup> "As regards No. 6," Herre Eneqvist continues, "about which Wallin gives us no information, this seal has probably belonged to the Guild which was attached to the first or oldest church here in Wisby, by a person of the name of Bolair of Akubeck, and which was dedicated to All Saints, as is mentioned in the short history attached to the edition of Gothland's Civil Law by Hadorph,<sup>5</sup> and latterly again by Schlyter."<sup>6</sup>

In another sentence, Herre Eneqvist says, "It is probable that after the churches (of Wisby) were ruined, and the Guild-halls also, they all, finally, were united with the only church preserved, viz.: St. Mary's church, and (the seals, &c.) were preserved in the archives of its chapter." He also says, "No. 4 appears, in fact, to have been used in commercial, perhaps even in diplomatic affairs. All the others, viz. St. Canute's, for the Germans dwelling in Wisby, St. Lawrence's, St. Nicholas', St. James', and All Saints' have been in fact the seals of different Guilds."

It should be mentioned that some who have examined these

<sup>4</sup> Mr. A. Nesbitt having informed me of a book which he thought might throw some light upon the history of these seals, after writing this paper I turned to it, and found it valuable in affording one more seal to the series, and in confirming the dates I had assigned. At the end of G. F. Sartorius' "Ürkundliche Geschichte des Ursprunges der Deutschen Hanse, von J. M. Lappenberg," is a plate with two round seals engraved. No. 1 is represented attached to a deed, but the impression is very broken, and only two words of the inscription left, "Sigill' Teuthonico," the device, however, plainly consists of stems of fleur-de-lys; and though this engraving is smaller, the device and words being identical with No. 4 of my series, there can be little doubt

that it represents the same seal. No. 2 is a seal as large as those of my series, the Lombardic inscription is "Sigillum Theuthonico" in Gotlandia manencium," and the device a stem of fleur-de-lys with two branches on each side but of a different character to No. 1; this, therefore, is the seal of another guild of "Germans remaining in Gotland;" the explanation adds that No. 1 is the seal of a deed made in November 1280 (confirming my idea of the date), and No. 2 of a deed dated 1287.

<sup>5</sup> Joh. Hadorphius "Collection of Schonish Laws," Stockholm, 1676.

<sup>6</sup> C. J. Schlyter "Juridiske Afhandlingar." Upsala, 1856. Neither of these Swedish books contains plates, and I have not had opportunity to examine them.

seals concur with Herre Eneqvist in the belief that none of them are ecclesiastical. But, having quoted all the information sent from Wisby, it is to be hoped presumption will not be imputed, when it is said a different opinion exists in my mind as to the character of the seals. This difference is mentioned, because the other point, the curious union of churches and guild-halls, also quoted, might not improperly be questioned either as a mistake, or that we must understand the ancient guilds in Wisby were really connected with the ancient churches, the corporations with certain parishes, and so the same saint was the emblem of both. It is certain there were churches in Wisby of the same names as the saints on these seals, and undoubtedly the sacred characters used by these guilds as emblems on their seals seem to countenance this idea of union, but it may be better to understand the remark in the latter as referring to the churches exclusively; viz. that on their destruction in 1361, the parishes were united, and one church was a centred union for them. Indeed, there can be little doubt that these guilds of which we have the seals—for waiving further discussion, four certainly are secular seals of guilds—were corporate bodies, separate and distinct from the churches and each other. At the present time it is not known that any guild-halls ever actually existed at Wisby; but amongst the numerous ruins of churches and other buildings now extant there, it is impossible to say whether or not some of them might truly have been the halls of guilds of which these were the seals.

Notwithstanding the doubt then of the buildings belonging to these corporations, these secular seals are plainly valuable proofs of the existence of native and foreign mercantile bodies; they certainly are relics of some of the ancient guilds of Wisby, and if the only vestiges of them left, are the more interesting.

The next and last point is, What was the immediate cause of this series of seals? For want of recorded information respecting it, the origin of these seals may be attempted from inference.

The German element is clearly the chief feature in the series, and without doubt it only remains to trace the connection of these German guilds with the Swedish town of Wisby, in order to find the immediate cause of the seals; and in the kindred Germanic character of the guilds, we arrive at the probable origin of these Swedish seals.

Wisby, where these seals were used, is the only town in Gottland, an island in the Baltic Sea, a country now chiefly known as supplying lime to the otherwise destitute granite soil of Sweden. The ancient marine laws of Wisby are generally known, but besides these, except to the sportsman, the tourist, or the archaeologist, the attractions of this locality are little known. Yet Wisby is an ancient town, and had early intercourse with its transmarine neighbours, so that it is a town of the highest historical and antiquarian interest. "The feudal walls and towers still exist almost in as entire a state as they were in the XIIIth century ;" and ruins and records prove that after the establishment of the Hanseatic League, Wisby attained, during the XIVth and XVth centuries, even a still greater degree of wealth and importance than it possessed as a powerful mercantile city in the Xth and XIth centuries. That Wisby was not too obscure a place to have so many guilds of merchants as these seals indicate, is shown by the fact that throughout Gottland, which is about eighty miles long by thirty-three at the widest, there are now about 100 churches, mostly early XIIIth century in date, and still in good preservation. In Wisby alone there are the remains of eighteen churches, of which some features are so curious that it is impossible to explain them. There was a St. Lawrence's as well as St. Nicholas' church ; and therefore our seals might have belonged to guilds of these names, and been connected with the churches in some way. Romish convents and large houses also are numerous there, and present the proofs that Wisby had varied and extensive mercantile dealings with places equally mercantile and civilised. And what places could these be but the Hanse towns? It is then to the influence of the Hanseatic League that the origin of these seals must be ascribed, and consequently their use and validity recognised ; for Wisby indeed was no unimportant city in the confederacy of the Hanseatic League, and we can understand both somewhat of Wisby's extensive commerce from the character of the seals before us, and the dignity and value of these seals from their Hanseatic connection. Remembering, therefore, what the Hanseatic League was, we understand also directly why these seals of the Teutronics or Germans represent German guilds in Wisby, and indicate so close a connection between Germany and Gottland. "The Hanse towns (in Germany first) were

certain commercial cities associated for the protection of commerce ; to this confederacy acceded certain commercial cities in Holland, England, France, Spain, Italy, (and Sweden if only by Wisby) until the number of the Hanse cities amounted to seventy-two." The German origin of the league and the proximity of the German coast by the Baltic, explain to us therefore at once how easy and natural a thing it would be that Wisby should have, not only "Germans frequenting Gottland," a body of sufficient importance as to have a corporate seal for their guild, but that the Germans should have a permanent guild in Wisby known by the name of a national saint St. Canute.

There can be little doubt then that these Wisby seals are of Hanseatic origin, and of Hanseatic use ; and further, that the very existence of these seals at the present time has been influenced by that league ; for the fact of their preservation is owing probably to the subsequent obscurity of the Hanseatic League after its decline, when the seals were dispersed because uncalled for and uncared for.

Doubtless there were many more seals of other guilds and of convents, and in due time modern research may discover them ; as it has been shown, even these before us were unknown to exist till lately. At the end of the XIVth century Wisby was taken by the king of Denmark, and plundered of enormous wealth in merchandise ; it thus received a fatal blow to its prosperity, and the dispersion of the seals may have then commenced. But certainly the Hanseatic League, although for centuries it had commanded the respect and defied the power of kings, began to decline about the middle of the XVth century ; and if the assumed connection of these Wisby seals with the Hanseatic League be their true history, their dispersion occurred probably at this date.

With the league Wisby fell ; and these beautiful seals from Wisby—proofs of the civilisation of mediæval Gottland—valuable indications of the state of art amongst the merchant-traders of that time—vestiges of that splendid confederacy, the Hanseatic League, were lost for full 300 years, and only preserved from being cake-moulds by the hands of the archaeologist.

(The Central Committee desire to acknowledge the kindness of the author in contributing largely towards the cost of the woodcuts by which this memoir is illustrated.)