

## WISBY AND SOME CHURCHES OF SOUTH GOTLAND.

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As it took us exactly twelve hours to steam from Stockholm to it in a good boat, we may assume the capital of Gotland to be situated fully 120 miles from that of Sweden. It cannot, however, be more than half that distance from the nearest port on the Swedish Coast, Westervik. As you approach Wisby from the sea, the sight of the old battlemented walls, and of the many towers and gables of the churches, is very impressive, and gives colour to the description of Wisby, in Murray's handbook for Sweden, as "the most interesting town in North Europe."

The shop of the bookseller Nyberg, whither on landing we wended to get maps and a cicerone, gave us a foretaste of the architectural treat in store. This shop is constructed out of the vaulting of the hall of a building belonging to the famous Hanseatic League, which monopolised the commerce of the Baltic and North Sea in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its floor is laid on the caps of the piers that carry the vault, which is Early Pointed and deeply ribbed. But long before the Hanseatic League was founded in 1241, Wisby was the seat of an active commerce. Indeed, the eleventh and twelfth centuries were the period of its glory, to judge by the style of its churches. The facts connected with its early attainment of such commercial prosperity, as commonly stated, are these. The regular course of traffic from "Ormuz and from Ind" westward through Egypt or Constantinople, was interrupted by the Crusades, and the exasperated state of feeling between Christian and Mahomedan which gave rise to those Holy Wars. Traffic, irrepressible among civilised nations as the air they breathe, sought for a new route, and found one up the Channel of the Volga, to Novgorod. Whence it again became diverted from a straight line, and sought an emporium in the largest island in the Baltic, in Gotland, and particularly in its chief, indeed, only town, Wisby, which it enriched to such an extent, that following the good custom of the day to dedicate superfluous wealth to the service of God, it covered the island with about one hundred, and filled the city with no less than eighteen, churches.

As the island is eighty miles long, by about thirty wide, we find a church still existing for every two and a quarter square miles. While, when the eighteen churches were standing, as the population within and without the walls of Wisby, at its most flourishing time, was only, 12,000, there was accommodation in them for all worshippers and to spare.

But unfortunately the merchants and citizens of Wisby were not

content with raising houses of God in their island. They wished for independence from their old suzerains, the kings of Sweden, and hence became involved in wars with their former masters; or, exciting the cupidity of the kings of Denmark, were left without allies. It was from one of the latter, that the blow came that laid them low. In 1361, Waldemar III of Denmark, took Wisby by storm, yet did not profit by the plunder, for his largest treasure ship was wrecked on leaving the south-west shores of Gotland. It was after this calamity that the Hanseatic Leaguers established themselves in Wisby, and revived its importance as a commercial centre, till the Venetians arose as the great carriers between the east and west, and the discovery of the route to India, by the Cape of Good Hope, by Vasco di Gama, led to the extinction of Wisby's trade.

Of all its churches, but one exists at this day that is used for Divine Worship. This is the Cathedral of St. Maria, which dates from the end of the twelfth century. It has three towers in unusual places—one at the west end, while two flank the angles of the extreme east end. The lower storeys are unmistakably Romanesque, but they are all three topped with ugly modern caps. The Middle Pointed architects inserted their windows in the church, cutting into the Romanesque corbelled string-course in all directions. At the south-west angle of the nave is a huge chapel of the same decorated style, which is thought by some to have been the Wapenhus, or place where the fighting men of the congregation left their weapons when they entered the sacred building. There is a similar excrescence in one or two of the ruined churches. In the interior, one is struck with the nave and aisles being exactly the same in width and form of roofing.

There are three of the nine or ten ruined churches still traceable that we may quickly dismiss, being already despoiled beyond powers of preservation; or, at any rate, they are so regarded by the City authorities, who keep the six others under lock and key (as far as their interiors are concerned), and who really spend money in their maintenance. These are St. Hans, of which large mishapen masses of masonry lie about some still erect fragments of wall in sad desolation; St. Olaf, in the botanical gardens, whose western arch of tower, and tower foundations form a pleasing addition to the surrounding vegetation; and St. Göran, or George, outside the northern ramparts. This is a later edifice than the earlier remains within the town. Its three roofless gables blend pleasingly with the rounded slopes of down, on the side of which it was built—one cannot at first tell for whom, or why, save to aid an enemy in forming up for a final assault on the ramparts. But one learns on inquiry that it was the church of some hospital, or Lazaretto, and was the place of interment of fever or plague-stricken patients. Numbers of tombstones, within and without the church, attest the truth of the statement. On the verge of the Cliff behind it stand three lofty columns of hewn stone, surrounded by a low wall, the gallows of Wisby, where coiners and utterers of base money were hanged in chains, other criminals who were condemned to death being beheaded. There is yet within the walls an old doorway, pertaining to the utterly demolished Church of St. Gertrude, with an illegible inscription above it.

Of the disused churches of Wisby, St. Lars and St. Drotten, St. Clemens and Holy Anders are nearly co-eval, and date from the middle of the eleventh century

St. Lars and St. Drotten are closely contiguous, and the cicerone tells a story of their being built through the jealousy of two sisters—maiden ladies—who could not agree about their seats at mass, and so resolved, not on “leaving church,” as dissatisfied pewholders used to do with us, but on a much better plan—each building a church. With regard to the names: Drotten is translated into Latin as Trinity, and so that is probably its meaning; while Lars is the equivalent of Lawrence. St. Lars has transepts, indeed such large ones as to make the church assume almost the form of a Greek cross. It is the only church in Wisby that has them, and it is the only dilapidated church that is completely roofed in. It has, moreover, something corresponding to a triforium gallery—*i.e.*, a passage about half way up their height in the thickness of the walls, and with openings at intervals to the inside of the church, which is used, we were told, on Gala Days for processional effects. The east end is apsidal. The entrances are three, on the west, south, and north. But (and this remark applies to all the ruined churches here) there is a comparative absence of carving of cap or jamb or architrave, on door or window, inside or out, which would lead one to suppose that the art of stone carving was little understood or practised in Gotland, were it not for the beautiful productions of the chisel visible in some of the country churches, to be noticed presently. The material—a sound limestone of a deep blue hue—is perfectly workable, and has been delicately treated in the little external tracery of the windows of the later churches. The tower of St. Lars is on the south-west side. An upper storey was evidently added to it in Early Pointed times. The stones of the plinth and foundations are very massive.

The tower of St. Drotten, which a narrow lane only separates from St. Lars, is at the west end. It is low and inelegant, and the body of the church is too square to be symmetrical. It has a large roofed chapel on the south side, and a Romanesque apse at the east end. This and the nave are roofless, but there must have been a high pitched roof to the nave, to judge by the grooving in the east side of the tower, and the corresponding gable above the chancel arch. The foundations of two piers in the centre of the floor space shew it to have been divided into two equal aisles: a mode of construction which, besides at the cathedral, I saw in a church or two in the country. St. Clemens is a better proportioned ruin. However, it was evidently divided into the usual nave and north and south aisles. But only the foundations of their piers remain. Here is a Wapenhus, as at the Cathedral, which still retains its roof. Near the altar, the cicerone told me, was found a treasure in a curious way, “so they say.” A lad of native origin, one Salts Vedel, found himself sometime after the desecration of Wisby’s churches, at Rome, a shoemaker’s apprentice. As he was working at his stall he heard an old monk who had emigrated from Wisby, whisper to his fellow, that there lay concealed in St. Clemens’ church, at Wisby, a goose of solid gold with twenty-four little ones. Whereupon Salts Vedel resolved to go in search of this treasure, and after working his way to Dantzic, got back to his father-land and found it, and died burgomaster of the city.

Holy Anders—or “Helig Ands Kyrkan,”—church of the Holy Ghost, is by far the most curious church in Wisby. Indeed, it is the most singular in shape that I have seen; though Fergusson mentions two or

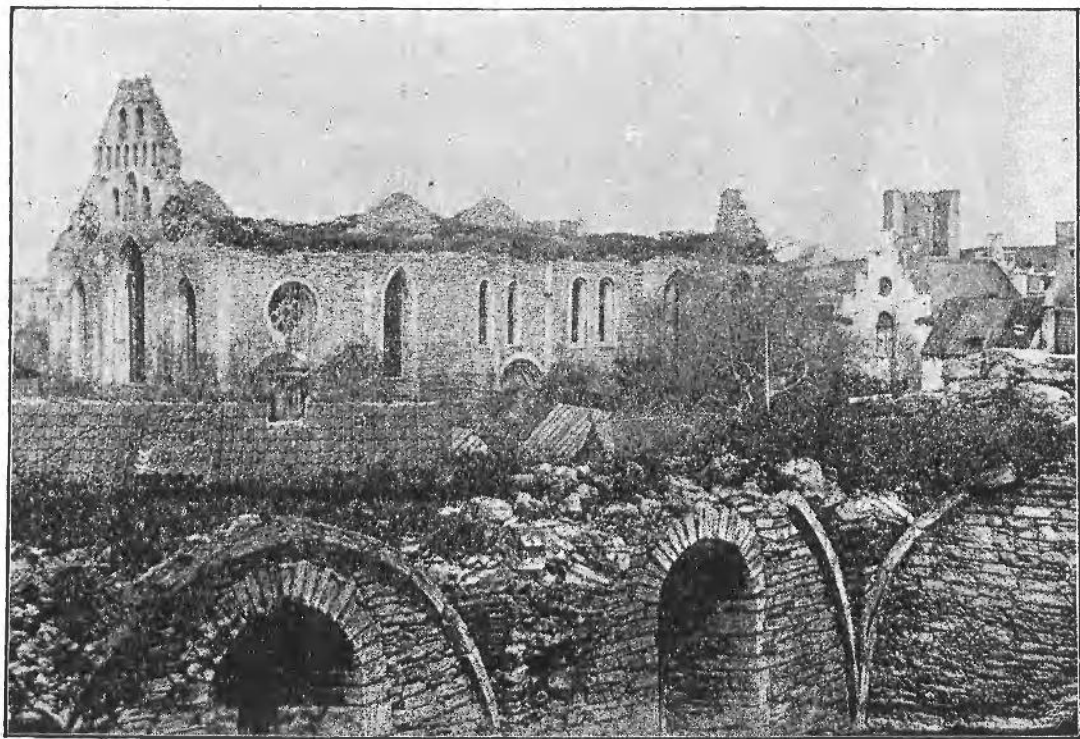
three in Germany like it, adding, however, "This church displays peculiarities not found elsewhere" (*Handbook of Architecture*, vol. ii, p. 585). The body of the church is in shape an irregular octagon ; having two stories. The upper storey is supported by four octangular piers. In the vaulting of the roof of the lower storey is an octangular aperture, about 8 feet wide. The double staircase leading to the upper storey, is in the thickness of the wall, at the west end. This (staircase) is lit by a quatre and a cinque-foil window, through two sides of the exterior wall. A sexfoil window pierces the west wall below the staircase, to give light to the lower church, which is further lighted by two larger round windows on the north-east and south-east sides. The doorways are on the north and south sides. The latter, leading into the garden of the lunatic asylum, is comparatively large and trefoil headed, and so I suppose of later date. The columns supporting the roof of the whole body or nave of the church, stand in the same vertical line as those below : and with good reason, for the roof must have been enormously heavy, to judge by the thickness of the portions that yet remain, and of the wall of the surrounding parapets, which afford a wide ambulatory and seats, commanding a fine view. Two round arches of about the same size, connect both storeys with the chancel, which is externally square at the east end. But internally, it is rounded off, by the spaces for two newel staircases, which lead to two little sacristies, or chambers at a high level, close under the roof, which was round vaulted. There is no trace of the altar, though two aumbries exist at the back of where it once stood. The chancel windows are (besides the east), a disproportionately long and wide south one, and a smaller one on the north side. Perhaps the south window has been enlarged in later times. There is a priest's door on the south side, with a coarse trefoiled head. I may add that the upper storey of the body of the church was lighted by three splayed windows in the north-east, south-east, and south walls, and that the eight corbels that carried the roof remain, as do two of the arches. These spring from large square caps. The bases of the columns whence they spring have four leaves carved in low relief on rounded mouldings. An explanation of the double church to a single chancel is that the upper storey was for the nuns of the adjoining convent to hear mass ; but others contend this could not be, as the separation between monks and nuns did not take place till the fourteenth century ; whereas this church was built about 300 years before. There is, moreover, some uncertainty about this having been a conventual church at all ; but there is none about St. Catherine and St. Nicholas (the last I have to describe at Wisby) having been—St. Catherine a Franciscan, and St. Nicholas a Dominican Church, or attached to monasteries belonging to these celebrated orders—the begging and preaching friars. They both date, principally, from the early part of the thirteenth century ; though there is evidence of earlier work about St. Nicholas.<sup>1</sup> They are longer and loftier than the older churches, and are well proportioned edifices of the usual type, nave and aisles, but with no triforium or clerestory, nor side chapels. Their east ends are apsidal, with five long and elegant pointed windows, the tracery of which must have been elaborate for Wisby. There are six bays in the body of St. Nicholas Church and

<sup>1</sup> My note on St. Nicholas runs thus :—Its north and south walls are late Norman, to judge by its windows, which are round, but long, and in pairs between the bays.

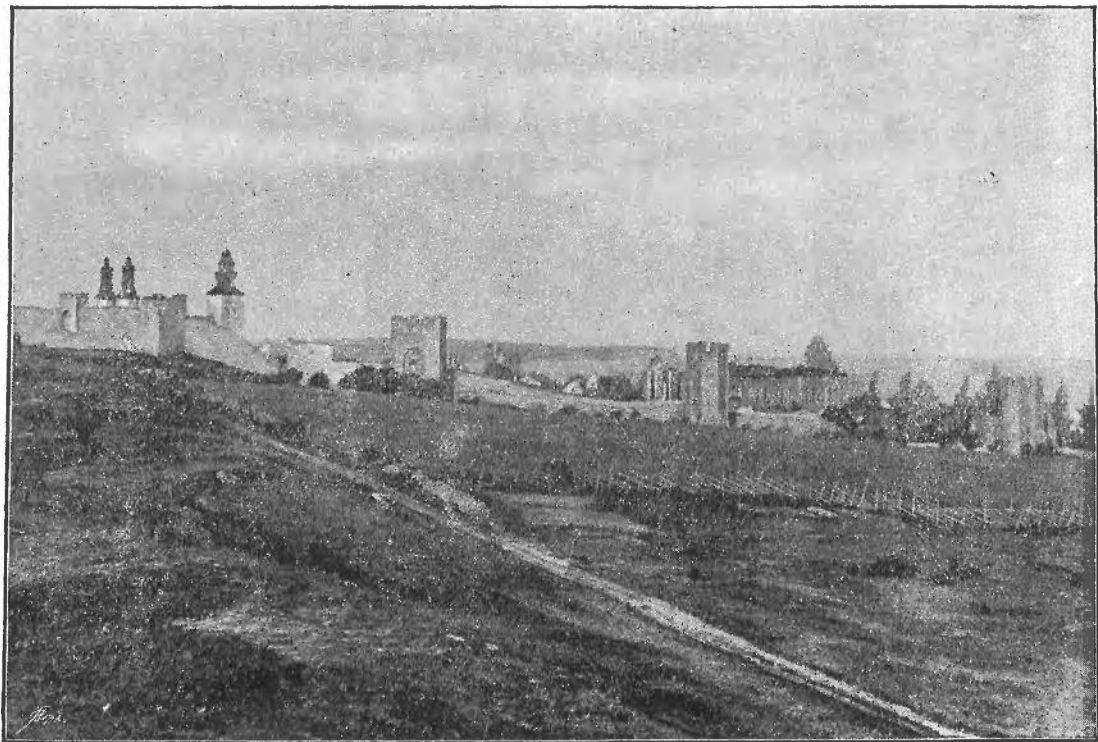
eight in that of St. Catherine, but these are not of uniform width. There is a good deal of the roof vaulting remaining at St. Nicholas, but only ribs, springing from high and plain capped piers, cut the blue sky as we looked up in the nave of St. Catherine. This church had a western tower, but recently taken down, and there is a crypt at the east end of the south aisle, which seems to have been connected with another under the chancel; this can only be entered for a few steps under a square-headed doorway towards the latter, as it has been filled in. There is a piscina in this crypt and two square niches. A small window, with downward splay, gives it light. There is one ornament, "*rara avis*," in the chancel, a rose carved above the doorway leading to the sacristy. There are also remains of sedilia and an aumbry. A staircase in the south wall of the south aisle leads to the scanty remains of the monastic building. At St. Nicholas, these were on the north side, to which a staircase, easily ascendible, conducted, but absolutely nothing of the Friars' abode remains. Here there are two piscinæ, and lofty sedilia, in the chancel, and a recess for a tomb in the south aisle wall. But the glory of St. Nicholas is its beautiful wheel window in the south wall at the west of the south aisle. Three not very imposing windows are at the west end of the nave and aisles. Yet the west end, externally, is effective. There are two round windows in the gable, which were not for light but for ornament. These "*rosaces*" were said to have been highly enriched with jewels, and two carbuncles in particular shone so brightly as to be discerned by the mariner far out at sea when no stars were visible. These formed part of Waldemar's spoil, so they could have done the work of a lighthouse for not more than one and a half century. Still, during that period, let us hope they tended to save many a stout Baltic barque from shipwreck.

The walls of Wisby are unusually complete. A writer, Strelow, quoted in a note by Marryat, "*One Year in Sweden*," states: "Then in 1289 stood Wisby in her first flower and bloom, surrounded by three ditches and a wall within them." They were built, it is said, at the cost of the peasantry of the island in 1288, to preserve the citizens against the inroads of the Boors, by whom, I presume, are meant the Danes. On which information I have to remark that it seems odd that the rich citizens allowed the country folks to do what it would have been more natural for them to do for themselves—*i.e.*, protect their own property, and houses and churches, which certainly were then in full perfection, and must have been well worth preserving. Further, I know that this wall-building and ditch-digging process must have been a costly one, for there were no less than thirty-six towers and four imposing gateways. However, my concern is with the present appearance of these walls and towers, which on the north face mount up the hill, quite disengaged from other buildings, in highly picturesque fashion. On the east and south fronts they are more built up against on the town sides, and gardens with their fences abut on them externally.

Passing through the gate of the west, or seaward, tower, and along a path by the shore on the outside of the wall, which is here low and towerless, we come, at the north-west angle, upon the best specimen of Wisby town-walling. Viewed from inside, it may be remarked that the walls are strengthened below by an inner core, which rests on arches and batters back till it unites with the outer wall about half-way up. The



St. Nicholas, Wisby.



Wisby. The Town Walls, from the North.



curtains have no loopholes nor parapets, so that the defence must have depended solely on the towers, which were so near together, as to cross arrow shower easily. The towers are very varied in construction. Some are square, some pentagonal—one square below and pentagonal above. Another projects a few feet from the line of wall, resting on four rounded corbels. Most of them preserve their battlements, but never had machicolations. The north gateway has a pointed archway in a round headed recess, that is carried up two storeys. Just beyond, at the north-east angle, is a large tower that was used as the mint.

The ditches present a complicated appearance. Being dry, the engineers had to increase their number to three. In one section, the outer moat had a retaining wall about six feet high, of large unmortared stones, which must have been intended to serve the purpose of a counterscarp, while at the north-east angle or rather sharp curve, was the foundation of what military engineers call a cauponiére, *i. e.*, a low bastion, projecting from the walls into the ditch, which it sweeps with its fire. All the towers are open at the gorge. The "slott," or castle, lies in ruins on the south-west side.

Of the 100 country churches, I selected a set of four which could be reached by railway, though the South Gotland line is not a rapid mode of locomotion. Passengers are few, to judge by what I saw on the day of my transit to and fro. Nor can the carriage of goods be heavy, excepting that of firewood, for one traverses a purely agricultural region, varied here and there by pine forests. The former was sadly in want of rain. Although in the beginning of September, the sun's rays beat fiercely on pasture and arable land—so that it is a wonder how cattle and sheep, which seemed to abound, were kept alive. The names of the four churches I selected for my visit were Stanga, Burs, Nars and Lau (pronounced, I think, Lowe). This is the order in which I visited them; but as their architectural interest is in inverse ratio to their order, I prefer to begin with the last first.

Lau.—The striking feature about the surroundings of this church is the existence of three lych gates. The churchyard, to be sure, is somewhat large—fully amounting to a God's Acre—but what could have been, or can be, the need of so many resting places for a corpse, or funeral cortege, where houses are not clustered together, but scattered about sparsely, is a problem. Whether Lau ever had a stone tower is a question, but the foundation of a square W. tower are plainly discernible. At present a little octagonal wooden projection from the west wall is all the tower it can boast. Lau, too, had doubtless a stone gabled roof, but now this has been replaced by a boarded one, rising at two angles. It had recently been profusely coated with pitch, great drops of which had fallen on the walls and plinth both of nave and chancel. The ridge of the latter is considerably loftier than that of the former. I have heard that a distinguished ecclesiologist, the late Rev. J. L. Petit, used to look upon this as the best type of ecclesiastical architecture. The chancel walls are of good tooled stone. The north nave door has carved monsters on the caps of its jambs. The south chancel door is handsome—Early Pointed—with trefoil tracery on the doorway proper, and flower caps to the jambs. There are three round-headed windows in nave. The east window is of dubiously restored tracery. Inside are five bays of one height, running the whole length of nave and chancel, and dividing both into



two aisles. They are lofty and imposing. The columns supporting the roof are round, with square abacus. There is an old but mutilated font, and some remains of frescoes on the south wall.

Nars churchyard has two lych gates, the one at the south-east corner has a trefoil head deeply carved in wood. This church, is early pointed, though the belfry windows in the tower are round-headed. Here, as at Lau, the original roof has been replaced by one of wood, only its coating of pitch was less carelessly laid on. In shape it is the ordinary type—nave and aisles, and chancel of lower height. The west door is cinque-foiled. The mouldings of the south door are of a kind resembling the scallop shell. The caps of the jambs of the doors are of flowers, but mutilated. Internally, the roof is supported by two columns, one with square, the other with round abacus, whence the pointed vaulting ribs of the roof spring. There are pointed piscinæ in the altar space, and a hollow in the south wall where the sedilia were. The font is similar to one that will be described at Stanga, and well worth noticing. These and the last two I have to describe, have far more elaborate mouldings than any of the ruined or still erect churches in Wisby. The material of this stone carving is a pink marble, and perhaps lends itself to the chisel. Still it is curious that the church builders in the city should have cared so little about, and those in the country spent so much pains upon the sculptured decorations of their churches.

The walls both of Burs and Stanga are of stucco, with limestone quoins and dressings. Burs has a Romanesque tower of two storeys, with a low spire capping it. But its peculiarity is the rich stone carving over and about the south chancel door. The Almighty Father is represented standing in a canopy above. Four female Saints are figured below. On the caps of the clustered columns at the sides of the door appear the five wise and the five foolish virgins. Inside, the church has fixed seats; the bench ends of which, having the Apostles painted on those on the north, and twelve female saints on those on the south side, indicate where either sex sit during divine worship. Two stoups are inserted in the east wall south of the altar, in one of which lay a deeply chased alms dish, of brass, representing the Annunciation. There are remains of sedilia; and an old brass slab, with only the legend still visible, is to be seen on the pavement in front of the Holy Table. There is some old stained glass in the centre light of the east window.

Stanga is an early thirteenth century church. Its tower and spire are similar to Burs. The nave is lofty and short. It is supported by one central shaft, with a richly carved capital whence spring the ribs of the vaulting. The east end is apsidal. The font appears to have been gilt. It has a Romanesque base with projecting heads of monsters. The top is rudely carved with allegorical figures. The south door, which is a fine specimen of iron work, has suspended on it an old iron Swedish Ell measure, with a black letter inscription "This is the right length." But the glory of the church is the stone carving about this door. In the apex are sculptured the Everlasting Father and the Blessed Virgin; at a lower level SS. Peter and Paul, and below again two other Apostles. The caps of the columns, starting from left to right, carry in continuous series carved representations of the Massacre of the Innocents, and the Flight into Egypt; the Annunciation, Salutation, and Nativity. The spectator is supposed to

look at the right first. Above the doorway, under a canopy, the Resurrection is chiselled in low relief. Then, as if to show the wealth of sculpturing power which was left after the execution of this long series, there is conspicuous on the wall to the right of the doorway, in panels, a series of three easily recognisable subjects—the Virgin Mary worshipped by Angels,—above, Christ before Pilate, and on the top, the Deposition from the Cross. I wished to have procured photos of these most interesting sculptures, but I could not meet with any. I strongly recommend them to photographers, and I cannot conclude without advising the ecclesiologist to visit Wisby without loss of time, and the churches of Gotland, of the great interest of which I received, and so can convey only a too hasty impression.