

# Visiting the Middle Ages

BY ERIKA SANDSTRÖM

## Abstract

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On the island of Gotland, in the middle of the Baltic, a Medieval Week is arranged every year. About 150,000 visitors, many of them dressed in some kind of medieval costume, travel to the island to join the event. Why? A historian would like to believe that they are genuinely interested in the Middle Ages and thus come to Gotland to learn more or to feel the wings of history. In some cases that is also the case. Most visitors, however, have a much wider set of reasons for coming to the island – some even claim to be uninterested in history. So what do people do when they travel to the Middle Ages, and what do they think that the Middle Ages were like?

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## Medieval Week and history

Medieval Week takes place every year in week 32 – Sunday to Sunday. A programme is arranged, containing hundreds of happenings including lectures about aspects of the Middle Ages, tournaments, theatrical plays, music, bars, and handicraft. Most of the events take place in the town of Visby, a small town with preserved buildings and an almost complete 13th-century city wall. The town is on Unesco's World Heritage list. Normally Visby has about 25,000 inhabitants, but since it is a popular tourist destination, the number of people in town from June to August is well beyond its winter population. During Medieval Week, estimates – though not quite secure – claim around 150,000 visitors.

Medieval Week takes a creative view of the Middle Ages. On the one hand, the organization is keen to present the “real” Middle Ages, particular about invited lecturers and eager to make, for example, the marketplace look

properly medieval. The event once started as an attempt to teach Gotlanders about their own heritage. On the other hand, the event is focused on legends about the invasion of Gotland by the Danish king Valdemar Atterdag in 1361. Gotland was indeed invaded and this truly was an important event in the islands medieval history, but the history that is re-enacted as part of Medieval Week is based on good stories from a popular tradition, widely know not to be the truth about what happened. On the evening of the first day of the week, everyone can attend a play where a young maiden, accused of helping the king invade her native island, is walled into one of the towers in the city wall – a re-enactment of one of the legends about the invasion. This re-enactment of the killing of a young woman is widely attended and followed by picnic on the beach outside the tower. On the other side of the town are five mass graves, four of them excavated, containing the remains of the roughly 2,000 Gotlanders who fell trying to



Fig. 1. The young maiden who betrayed Gotland to King Valdemar of Denmark, as she is about to suffer punishment at the hands of the Gotlanders. Photo by Henk Buddingh.

fight off the Danes. These people and the real, tragic events during the summer of 1361 are also part of the programme, but in the form of a solemn commemoration ceremony, not as entertainment. This is, I would say, very much the Medieval Week way of doing things – history proper, yes, but also a popularized history that entertains and make people happy. The legends and the fake Middle Ages are used as something exciting to visit, but the real history is there to explore more intellectually and more seriously. If you want to learn about the real Middle Ages, you visit the museum, take a guided tour through town or attend lectures. If you wish to be entertained, you might visit the tournaments, a play or hang out in one of the medieval bars. The programme encourages visitors to imagine themselves in the Middle Ages, for example by writing about Visby in 1361 as if it was today – “A market is held at Strandgatan on an ordinary day in Visby

in 1361” (From the programme for 2001) or “Three days after Sanct Jacobi, AD 1361, the warrior king of Denmark makes his victorious entrance into Visby. Tremble at the sight of this conqueror, as he rides with his guard of honour to meet the terrified burghers” (from the programme for 2008).

When I first visited Medieval Week, I was doing research on museum education together with archaeologists, pedagogues and historians for the Swedish Arts Council (Aronsson & Larsson 2002). I was thrilled to see that so many people were interested in history – as a historian it is not too often that you find lots of other people with the same interests. I soon realized, however, that they were not that interested after all, and often said things like “No, I’m not interested in history – I’m in it for the riding/booze/girls/music” according to preferences. As much as I found this slight-

ly depressing, I also thought it interesting. The original question why so many people wanted to spend a week at a medieval event was even more baffling – these people were not even interested in history, yet they had paid the boat ticket, a hotel room and (often) made their own medieval dress and decided to spend time in Visby during this week. I ended up moving to Gotland and writing my Ph.D. thesis about this phenomenon (Sandström 2005). My study was mainly based on interviews with visitors to the event, but also used material such as forums on the Internet. I might add that some of the people I talked to that first year were not really honest with me when they claimed to be uninterested in history. Over the years I have got to know some of them, and now know them to be both interested and well informed about the past. Either they lied because admitting an interest in history is not the coolest thing to do, or they misinterpreted my questions, believing them to concern history as a subject in school, often not very well liked. Still – an urge to know more about history is obviously not the main thing for visitors to Medieval Week, so why do they go there?

## Imagining the Middle Ages

One thing is perfectly clear; people do not visit Medieval Week because they believe that the Middle Ages were in any way a nice time. They don't. You will have to look very hard to find a visitor who considers the Middle Ages to be something other than basically awful. According to my informants, people in the Middle Ages were dirty – they had for example no toothpaste – and poor, oppressed, harassed by famine and disease. This goes not only for the Middle Ages, but also for all historical periods up to the 1950s. Time travel thus is not a thing for nostalgia, dreaming of a

time better than ours, or for people who have problems adjusting to present-day life. The idea of progress, believing in the continuing development of mankind, is firmly rooted among most people, and not specific for visitors to Medieval Week. The Middle Ages is not considered much worse than other times, but every past is compared to our present, and the comparison tends to come out to our advantage. A period that is distant from the positive things we have today, such as modern health care, democracy, education and peace, is prone to suffer a harsh judgement. One might add that those nice features of the present mentioned above, and in the interviews, reveal a Eurocentric view of the world. Health care, democracy and peace are not present-day features all over the world, but it is apparently difficult to compare in both time and geographical space at the same time. Many visitors I have talked to are well aware that the Middle Ages they relive during the week is not the same thing as the Middle Ages they believe was the real thing. You wouldn't want to relive famine, plague, oppression and



Fig. 2. The final banquet on the last evening of the week. Photo by Claudia Deglau.

other distasteful things. Once, at the beginning of my research, I was slightly stupefied to learn that one person had visited every week since 1990, though he considered the real Middle Ages to be a horrible time. For him, however, there was no logical problem at all,

since the week simply isn't the real thing. Historians sometimes shiver at what they believe to be ignorance about history, as they notice, for example, that almost everyone visiting the week is dressed as nobles or monks – not very realistic for a real medieval town. For visitors, though, dressing up is something to do because it is fun, and it is more fun to be nicely dressed than to look representative. Most people I have interviewed have a fairly good idea of details such as what people might have eaten in the Middle Ages, but they can't see that this has to determine what they have for lunch during Medieval Week. If you meet a knight on the street of Visby, you will likely find that he knows that most people in the Middle Ages were not knights, it is simply more fun than being a peasant. The overall idea of the Middle Ages is very much like the one found in the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism), where one re-enacts the Middle Ages not as it was, but as it ought to have

been. History can be revised to fit the needs of the present.

## History as an easy way to socialize

Almost everyone I have interviewed says that visiting Medieval Week is something you do to socialize with other people. This is fairly well known from other studies about the use of history; we know, for example, that few people go alone to museums. They prefer to visit with the family, and it gives them an opportunity to talk about their family history and place themselves in it (Bohman 1997; Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998). During Medieval Week it is not this kind of getting together that is the main thing, rather it is the opportunity to meet people that you otherwise don't see. Members of the SCA come to Medieval



Fig. 3. Enjoy the company of others in the garden of the Chapter house. Photo by Franziska Kühn.

Week to live in a camp outside town, and there they meet other people with the same interests. Some of them have knowledge that you don't have – you might get to know how you can make yourself a new pair of medieval shoes. You don't see these people in everyday life, because they come from different parts of Sweden and Europe, but you meet them, and live with them during this week, and there is a point in re-uniting once a year.

One large category of visitors to Medieval Week is what the local newspapers characterize as “festival drunkards”. This disparaging term is reserved in the media for those who are not “legitimate” heritage tourists who attend events in the programme, but rather seem to be here just in order to party. It is really an unfair term, because people might actually be both drunk in the evenings and interested in attending lectures on history, but the truth is that there are a lot of people for whom Medieval Week is not very different from a trip to, say, Majorca or Kos, or to a music festival like Roskilde. For them the week gives an opportunity to meet completely new people that you may never see again – it's fun just talking to them for a couple of hours. When tourists go to a Greek island they don't *have* to do a lot of sightseeing to ancient temples; just relaxing and having fun might be vacation enough. One of my informants told me that if he were to introduce a friend to Medieval Week, he would simply say “Would you like to hang out with us for a week?” – nothing about the Middle Ages or the historical environment, only the social thing.

## The freedom of the past

Another important reason for visiting Medieval Week is that it gives an opportunity to do things that you cannot – or don't want to – do in ordinary life at home. This of course does not apply to every visitor, but to some, mainly

younger ones, it is an important thing about the event. You can behave differently than you would otherwise. By this I don't mean that people think they have stepped into history or that they suddenly think they have transformed in to medieval people, because that is mostly not the case. Some do act in a way that they consider to be medieval, adopting a medieval persona (Gustafsson 2002), but I have not found this to be a common trait among the visitors. Rather it is like being on vacation. The person does not change, but the setting is different, more permissive and free of the burdens of ordinary life. Social norms are dissolved, since everyone knows that this is just for fun, just playing. During this week it is not strange, for example, to wear home-made clothes, more or less medieval in style. It is perfectly all right not to take a shower every day and thus be a bit nasty at the end of the week. Strong men can actually do embroidery in public, and not be thought of as gay or weird. You can simplify courting to “Hi, shall we make out?” – and get what you want, be drunk in the early afternoon, sleep long in the morning and talk to anyone you see. Again, it is very much like classic Swedish charter tourism to the Mediterranean; a form of tourism that when it first became popular was seen as undignified and described as the five S's – Sun, Sand, Sex and Spirits (Löfgren 1999, p. 173). Vacationing is not always a trip to something, but away from ordinary life – and a trip to Medieval Week seems to be rather the same thing. You don't travel to the Middle Ages, but away from work, laundry, cleaning and other musts. Another quotation, from a conversation between one of my informants and me:

“Do you think that Medieval Week feels medieval?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you live in a tent, eat with your hands and don't take proper care of personal

hygiene.”

“At that’s the Middle Ages?”

“In a nutshell!”

“But couldn’t you do the same thing at home?”

“No, then I would be a social outcast.”

This emphasizes the image of Medieval Week as not so much history or heritage tourism, as plain vacationing, and there is a strong connection between this trait of freedom to do whatever you like and the above-mentioned function of Medieval Week as a place to socialize. Even though people do not need a historical setting to get drunk or be slightly dirty, I do believe that history actually helps, especially when it comes as a big event. There are bars open and everywhere you can find something going on. The atmosphere is relaxed and no one needs to be dressed up in order to be accepted. The whole event is one of playfulness, mixed with heritage. Also, this breaking of social norms is actually in accordance with how most people view the Middle Ages, as a

slightly less civilized time when things were easier. There are also historians and archaeologists who claim that Medieval Week really is more medieval than it seems to be, drawing parallels to the medieval carnivals when social order was set aside and the beggar was made king (Petersson 2003, p. 329; Aronsson 2004, p. 104.)

## Learning about history

Some visit Medieval Week because they want to learn more about history. This means that they attend lectures or join courses of some kind. If they are in an association, like the SCA, meeting other members is also part of getting new knowledge. However, for those searching for knowledge, other things might be lost. Some people think that knowing about the Middle Ages means that you must have everything authentic. It is a bit like historians



Fig. 4. Sport the medieval way. The annual soccer game between Dominicans and Franciscans attracts lots of visitors. The referee is always Pope Matthew I, and the game – though with rather vague likeness to proper soccer – always merits an article in the sports section of the local newspapers. Photo by Erika Sandström.

watching a costume drama and not being able to enjoy the film because they are so focused on noticing the anachronisms. When people like this arrive at Medieval Week in clothes that are more fanciful than medieval, this category of visitors tend to think that “Oh my, they don’t know much” or “they are not seriously interested”. If you look at one of the many Internet discussion groups about Medieval Week, you will see a discourse of “we who know” and “those who are ignorant”. The division is mainly based on how people dress, authentic or not, more seldom on how they behave. Authenticity for the general writer on the forums is a matter of what you wear. This is not only a question of being correct; it also gives a certain feeling of closeness to the past. One man dreams of having a perfect replica of one of the suits of armour found at the excavations of the mass graves from 1361: “it is fantastic to wear something that you know was actually worn and that it really was there, in the battle. It would be a perfect feeling.” I have seen people suggesting a more medieval way of speaking, also in order to enhance the feeling of being in another time, but since that would be very difficult to achieve, the examples given sounded more like 19th-century drama than Middle Ages – and I can’t say it made a big impression on anyone. At least for some years, the programme contained a small notice on how to behave properly medieval when a religious procession passed by, but the effect it made is unknown to me.

The quest for knowledge is partly a way of distinguishing yourself from others, creating a bond with the “us” who are well informed and serious. But, as I have already noted, those who appear at Medieval Week dressed in the wrong kind of costume are usually fully aware of their “mistake”. They have created a dress that they think is beautiful, or a costume that is easy enough to make, or they prefer a cool cotton cloth to heavy wool. In an article about live role-play, two girls explain how they de-

cide what to wear during Medieval Week: “The dresses are important. We make new ones every year. They must be long, colourful and beautiful – princess dresses!” (Hellström 2002 p 121). The girls add that they get inspiration not only from books on the Middle Ages, but also from Disney films and costume dramas. In recent years a gang has visited the week dressed up like copies of Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, topped with an inflatable rubber boat that they carry around. Though I have not spoken to these fellows, I feel quite sure that they know their costumes are not authentic and that they wear them just because it makes them look good.

## Time travel?

Is this time travel? Do visitors come to feel the wings of history and imagine living in the Middle Ages? Most of them don’t care a bit about that, but some do. Unfortunately, the visitor searching for this feeling is often the same visitor that I just talked about – the one who knows a lot about the Middle Ages and who is prone to be a bit of a know-all in the details. One person I interviewed said that it was easy to get the feeling of actually being in the Middle Ages during the first years, but as his learning grew he started to notice the details and the fiction was ruined. He no longer saw a real medieval tent, but instead noticed, “Oh, he bought his tent pegs at that store.” Increasing knowledge seems to kill imagination. This has a parallel in some of Nietzsche’s criticisms of history, put forward long before Medieval Week came to be. Nietzsche claimed that too much history is hurtful to man, and that the attempt to preserve everything for its own sake will only preserve, not create life. Too much historical knowledge will make people less prone to creativity and fantasy (Nietzsche 1998).

Travelling to Medieval Week is, for most people, not the same thing as travelling to the Middle Ages. Fortunately, feeling the wings of history is not an important part of the visit for most of the tourists. They use a historical event for other things, things discussed above and easily obtained through Medieval Week. This, I think, is beautifully illustrated by a quotation from one of the chat sites about the event: "Rather bad weather, really no feeling of the Middle Ages – but my God, what a lot of alcohol!"

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