

The Stockholm Massacre 1520

In November, 1520, more than 80 Swedish noblemen and their servants were convicted as heretics, then executed on the public square in Stockholm by King Christian II (1513-23). This event was a turning point in the history of the king, who was born at Nyborg Castle in 1481, and in the relationship between Denmark and Sweden. It became the symbol of a tyrannical king's atrocity and led to Christian II's dethronement in 1523. More importantly, it ended the Kalmar Union, which since the end of the 1300's had consisted of Denmark, Sweden/Finland, Norway and the Atlantic territories.

Ever since the time of Christian II, there have been two opposing views of the king – the visionary reform king or the gruesome tyrant. The exhibition presents both sides of the king's story seen through the dramatic events that happened in Stockholm almost 500 years ago.

Room 1: The King's Chamber

The king played here as a child and lived here as an adult, whenever he was in residence at Nyborg Castle. The portraits on the wall all show Christian II, who was the first king to make use of portraits in official propaganda. This doesn't mean that we know precisely what the king looked like. Many of the artists of his day worked from idealizations and categorized their subjects into types. Not only that, the image was also supposed to tell a story or be used in a specific propaganda situation. The real person is hiding somewhere between the idealized image and reality – perhaps the same as in any picture of a person. Can we see him? Is he there? Which portrait did Christian II like best himself? The pillar shows how his contemporaries saw him, two different kings, a good one and a tyrant.

Room 2: Margrethe 1's banquet hall

This banquet hall has been a backdrop for the crown princes' and the kings' court from about 1400 until the middle of the 1500's. The art installation is collaboration between artist Børge C. Meibom and Østfyns Museer, showing through this unique combination that art and history can tell a compelling story about an historic event.

The Trial: First you step into Stockholm Castle on 7 Nov. 1520, where the court is passing judgement on the Swedish nobles. The king sits with his lawyers and his loyal supporters, the Swedish Archbishop, Gustav Trolle, Jens Andersen Belde-nak, Didrik Slaghek and others. To the left is the Swedish Royal Council, which supported the king, and to the right, the convicted: the heretics.

The main accusation against the accused had been that they, in their struggle against the king, had burned down the Archbishop's castle in 1517 and thus been excommunicated from the church. That they now had been excommunicated for "days and years" made them heretics, according to Swedish and international law. They could be executed without trial; the bishops among them had lost their immunity (also according to Roman law) and could therefore also be put to death. This was carried out on the town square two days later.

The Bloodbath: According to the German executioner, Jürgen Homuth, 82 people were put to death in 2 days. This reckoning is found in other sources and is therefore considered correct. A cold rain fell on the square, which looked like a slaughterhouse. The bodies were collected a few days later and burned in a field outside Stockholm. The white sculptures illustrate the doomed nobles and bishops; the black suits of armour the force that brought about the conviction and execution. In this case, black and white don't signify evil and good and don't indicate a taking of sides. Who's a terrorist and who's a freedom fighter? Who fights for the good and who fights for the evil empire? The use of power can always be legitimised; one's colour changes with one's perspective.

The massacre has always been considered a unique case; it exemplifies cruelty on a previously unknown scale. However, measured against the crimes, executions and loss of life that occurred during the wars between Denmark and Sweden – or in other places, for that matter – in the normal course of events in those days, the massacre wasn't sensational. Except for the fact that it was society's elite that was put to death, that is. The Swedes considered the trial and execution to be totally illegal.

From the Swedish perspective, it nonetheless had the positive effect of symbolizing the break with Christian II and later with Denmark as a whole.

The Swedish version of the massacre was illustrated in large, woodcut images in 1524; unfortunately, these have been lost, but engravings of them made in the late 1670's have survived and are shown on the walls around the "square", and in the next room. These consist of one large and eight smaller pictures, with explanatory texts translated (in italics) and elaborated here:

Room 3: The Massacre from the Swedish perspective

After the ceremonious crowning, the bishops and the leading men of the kingdom were invited to a royal feast. This was celebrated during 3 days with pomp and elegance.

The massacre in Stockholm was followed up by further arrests and executions around the country. Resistance against the new king grew, and the people chose Gustav Eriksson, later known by his family name of Vasa, as king of Sweden. He needed to legitimise his claim to the throne, especially since he was going up against a legally elected king. It was only considered proper to go against the legally chosen king if he was either insane or had misused his power and had become a tyrant. This last point was the crux of Gustav Vasa's propaganda against Christian II. What follows is Gustav Vasa's version of events; they are not necessarily untrue. They are just a different and well-organized part of the truth. They are the massacre given a spin-doctor's treatment.

After the king's festive celebration, every one of the guests is grabbed with violent hands and thrown into prison. (This text refers to the installation in the banquet hall:) The following day, the bound prisoners are led out of the prison and all are decapitated in front of the people. The bodies lie there for three days without being buried. Here all mention of the trial is left out; it had been carried out in agreement with Swedish law, or at least an interpretation of the law. Vasa's spin: lawlessness reveals the tyrant.

The body of the regent, long since dead, along with that of a small child, is dug up and burned. After three days, the bodies of the executed, by the king's order, are borne out to the meadows, while the heads are put in a tub.

The regent, Sten Sture, had died of his wounds in the struggle against Christian II, and he had been posthumously convicted as a heretic. As such, he wasn't allowed to be buried in hallowed ground, but should be burned. Legally, therefore, there was no hindrance to digging his body up. The

infant was Sture's son. Even though his action in this case was not illegal, it still cast a cruel light upon the king.

After the bodies were thrown in the meadow, they were all burnt by fire by the king's command.

Heretics could not, as previously mentioned, be buried in hallowed ground and therefore were to be burned. This happened on Södermalm outside Stockholm.

Later, the king ordered seven monks living in a monastery to be drowned in water. Those that swam for their lives were to be forced back with violence.

After the events in Stockholm, Christian II set off on his coronation journey around the country, in Swedish called "Eriksgata", to let the people pay homage to him. Along his way, he ordered several executions. One of the more notable was the murder of the abbot and five monks from Nydala Monastery. The background for this is unclear, but it is known that they refused to pay tax to the army. The law considered this to be treason. Or – it could have been an undisciplined attack by some soldiers.

Then, two nobles of the Ribbing family, aged 6 and 9 years old, were decapitated by the king's order.

The murders of innocent children have always enraged people. What probably happened was that two "youths" or young men in army training were killed. The story of the children's murder circulated widely at the time, but it is unlikely that these infanticides in fact happened.

The population of the kingdom rise up, enraged over so much cruelty. The rebels and their king drive out the king and his folk.

In Swedish history books, Gustav Vasa plays the role of the father of his country, who tore Sweden away from Danish domination. In several categories, he could also be described as a tyrant, since he, in contrast to Christian II, came to power by rebelling against the legally elected ruler.

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History is still used to justify opinions and actions, and to create identities for individuals and communities. Who is the good guy, and who is the tyrant? Who has a patent to define the truth? Who has the right to history?