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## In the Wake of a Viking Ship Tragedy. An Archaeologist's Challenge to a Cold War Cover-up

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## ABSTRACT

Rune Edberg 2013. In the Wake of a Viking Ship Tragedy. An Archaeologist's Challenge to a Cold War Cover-up .

*Ormen Friske*, a Swedish reconstruction of a Viking ship, was wrecked in a North Sea gale in 1950, with the loss of its crew of 15 young men. At the time, the disaster was attributed to bad construction and poor seamanship, and this is still the customary interpretation. Although the wreck was available for examination, Swedish authorities decided that it should be discarded; subsequently, the tragedy was never seriously investigated. Any role by the US in the bombing of the island of Heligoland that coincided in time and place with the sinking of the vessel was also denied or downplayed. The bombing as such was later acknowledged by US military authorities, but its possible part in the Ormen Friske disaster is still unclear. The event is here examined within the context of the Cold War. In particular, the Swedish consulate in Hamburg wished to avoid annoying the British authorities, who at the time ruled this sector of occupied Germany. Several aspects from working with contemporary and recent sources are discussed. Some parts of the ship and personal belongings of the crew are held in museums or kept by relatives and are here treated as bearers of the narrative of the tragedy.

**KEYWORDS:** Archaeology of the contemporary past, Ormen Friske, Gokstad ship, Viking ships, Frisksportförbundet, Heligoland, Air bombing, Cold war, Memorabilia, Narratives, Mentality, Reflexivity.

RUNE EDBERG<sup>1</sup>

# In the Wake of a Viking Ship Tragedy. An Archaeologist's Challenge to a Cold War Cover-up

## Introduction

One stormy day in June 1950, the Ormen Friske, a Swedish-built reconstruction of a Norwegian Viking ship, capsized in the North Sea. All 15 on board perished. My investigation of this tragedy, exploring its background, causes, aftermath, narratives and memories is one of the first examples in Scandinavia of a large-scale study in the relatively new research tradition of what has come to be called 'Archaeology of the Contemporary Past'.

This study has been published in book form (Edberg 2004a), and some additional material including further discussion have subsequently been published (Edberg 2004b, 2005, 2011). These texts are all in Swedish. The following is the first account in English, presenting the questions, sources, methods and results in summary form. Emphasis is placed on work method and experiences that might be of interest to others working within the field of archaeology of the contemporary past.

The extensive written and narrative sources constituting a major part of my research material are mainly in Swedish. In addition, most of it consists of non-published archive documents, private letters and oral interviews. A very good mastery of Swedish is indispensable for anyone wishing to check on these sources or proceed with the research on the Ormen Friske disaster. Therefore, I think it is reasonable and satisfactory to point to my Swedish-language books on the subject for full and detailed references, limiting references here to a nucleus.

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## Three questions

My survey of the *Ormen Friske* disaster centres around three questions or tasks, formulated after a preliminary review of previous literature on the topic. I noted that there were many allegations of deficiencies in ship design and in seamanship. Nevertheless, this information was not consistent, and there were worrying reports that the ship had been caught up in an air raid. There were no survivors or witnesses. The first task was therefore to make an inventory of all the source material in order to document the ship, its voyage and sinking with the aim of obtaining the basis for an independent assessment.

It appeared that even though 15 citizens had died, no government agency in Sweden had undertaken any inquiry into the cause of the accident. This struck me as strange and aroused my curiosity as a researcher. Task number two was therefore to investigate whether there was any particular reason for this lack of scrutiny.

The standpoint for this work was that archaeology aims to study the interaction between material culture and human behaviour regardless of the time interval. The material culture here consisted primarily of the ship *Ormen Friske*, its function and symbolism, from the hewing of its timber until its wreckage was cleared away. With regard to the time factor, 50 years had passed since the event when I began my study. The prototype for the *Ormen Friske*, the Gokstad ship, dates to about AD 900, and seen in this light, the study spans more than a thousand years.

Objects have affected people throughout the ages and those from the past can still affect us today. When conducting archaeology of the contemporary past, one is challenged to study not only the appearance or usefulness of artefacts, but also their non-material characteristics, such as their meaning, symbolism and potential for reminiscence. As a third task, therefore, I set out to examine any rescued artefacts from the ship and its crew that were preserved for posterity, viewing them in this light.

My overall aim was to integrate these three tasks in a fruitful way, to obtain a holistic understanding of this tragedy.

## Method and source material

Methodically the survey entailed localizing and obtaining access to sources in the form of remnants of original texts or narratives, preserved by whatever means; whether printed in book or in magazine form, hand-written as letters, specified in contracts or otherwise, taken as sound recordings, as photographs, on film, or in the form of preserved objects. In addition, I interviewed a number of people about their recollections.

My next step was to delve into the archive material concerning the ship and the course of events leading up to its capsizing. The material was found in a number of places. A large amount was available from the archives of

*Frisksportförbundet* (more about this organisation below). This included minutes, letters from in-and-outgoing correspondence and many other documents, together with photos and albums of pasted newspaper clippings (FSF-RA-Arninge; FSF-Stensund).

I discovered that a Dutch journalist, Giel Bakker of the daily newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* had boarded the *Ormen Friske* for part of the final voyage. He had disembarked before the accident. From the Royal Library in The Hague, I obtained microfilms of all his reports and thus had access to a first-hand testimony from an outside observer aboard the ill-fated vessel.

Rich archival material was also found at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, partly in the ministry's own archives and partly in the archives of the Hamburg consulate. Thus, as soon as I got the confidentiality ban lifted, I had access to a treasure trove of documents that were previously unknown to the public (UD-Stockholm, UD-Hamburg). Material concerning the identification of bodies was located in the archives of the Swedish National Laboratory of Forensic Science, where I also found personal items, such as samples of the victims' clothing (SKL-RA-Arninge). By searching through several additional archives, I was able to collect supplementary material and correspondence (KK-Sjö-RA-Sto; Sjöhist-Åbo; SALB-Sto; SMNF-Husum; and others, cf. Edberg 2004a:253f).

During this phase of my work, I recorded the names of a large number of people for future contact. Since more than 50 years had passed, many proved to have passed away, as one might expect. However, despite this, I managed to contact several persons, and conducted a series of telephone interviews. I even visited some informants in their homes. Personal contact gave rise to numerous suggestions of other people whose names were not previously known to me, such as younger relatives who could relate how their family remembered the incident. I met with Ted Schröder, son of the ship's drowned master Sten Schröder, and was permitted to freely review his rich collection of letters, documents and objects, relating to the tragedy (Schröder-Gbg). The niece of another crewman, Sigurd Mattus, also had much documents and correspondence that she put at my disposal (Mattus-Gbg).

I also placed an advertisement in a weekly magazine (*Kvällsstunden*) with a nationwide older readership, stating that I sought contact with people who had recollections of the *Ormen Friske*. This provided valuable information (for names of the personal informers, Edberg 2004a:253f).

Owing to these personal contacts, I obtained access to a first-rate contemporary source, namely the letters written home by two crewmen (Hans-Emil Nilsson and Sigurd Mattus) during the voyage. In addition, I was permitted to view pictures from the rolls of film these two had posted to family and friends, only a few days before the accident. These provided information in text and image not just about the sailing procedure, but also about life on board and the atmosphere there. Through these contacts, I also examined objects kept as mementos by the different families (for lists of all located finds and memorabilia, see Edberg 2004a:159f).

Oral information is one of the features of archaeology of the contemporary past. I handled these sources as is the practice in today's Scandinavian ethnology. A rule of thumb is that one must be cautious with the facts one is given, but pay attention to the interviewees' personal memories concerning impressions, moods and reactions. Anonymous sources are accepted in ethnology and this became necessary in some cases, when the interviewees stated that they did not want their names revealed. Incidentally, the oral interviews that I collected were so rich in detail that they could only be partially used within the framework of my study. In addition, after my main work was published in 2004, I met several persons, previously unknown to me, who were close to the events in 1950 and made interviews with them. I used parts of this new material in Edberg 2011.

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The daily newspapers played an important role in my source material, as they were the dominant media for spreading news and opinions at the time. Critically observed, it was interesting to note how the story of the accident and its causes were reconstructed (cf. Narrative, below). However, newspapers were otherwise generally quite a good source of information. The reports and interviews conducted during and in direct connection with the actual voyage were very valuable owing to their immediacy in time and space. This primarily refers to the writings of the above-mentioned accompanying Dutch reporter, but also to many others, such as the local newspaper in Ystad (*Ystad Allehanda*), which published a detailed article that included interviews with crewmembers, just days before the accident. Newspaper clippings also provided a comprehensive picture of the public reaction to the concept of a replica Viking ship, its construction, voyage, capsizing and the aftermath (for lists of all checked Swedish, German and Dutch newspapers and journals as well as international news agencies, see Edberg 2004a:253f).

## The ship and its capsizing

The *Ormen Friske* was a reconstruction of the Norwegian Gokstad Ship, approximately 23 metres long and 5 metres wide. Excavated in 1880, documented and then reconstructed, the Gokstad Ship is one of three original crafts that have long been on exhibition in the famous Viking Ship Hall in Oslo. The *Ormen Friske* was built in the spring of 1949 on the initiative of Sten Schröder, an engineer by profession, who was a leading figure and former vice-chairman in an association called *Frisksporfbundet*. This was, and is still, an independent non-profit and non-political nationwide movement that promotes the physical fitness and mental wellbeing of its members. It advocates outdoor activities, simple and healthy eating as well as total abstinence from drugs, alcohol and tobacco. In 1950, one of its slogans was 'Against sickness and war; for health and peace' (FFSF-RA-Arninge; FSF-Stensund).

Sten Schröder's testimony indicates that the purpose of building the ship and launching it at sea was partly to promote the ideology of the movement. Employing the icon of a Viking ship would tie in with romantic and popular notions about our ancestors' daring voyages and (allegedly) healthy lifestyle (Schröder-Gbg).

The boat was built at the association's training centre in Stensund, situated on the Baltic coast near Trosa, about 60 km south of Stockholm. Schröder had managed to engage a sailing-ship expert, Sam Svensson, as adviser, and together they constructed the drawings of the vessel. These were based on the excavator's publication of the Gokstad ship (Nicolaysen 1882; cf. Kiselman 2004). The foreman for the project was a young master boat builder, Bror Westerlund, who completed the ship in six intensive weeks that spring together with five helpers.

The steering committee of *Frisksportförbundet* had been hesitant to invest in the project, mainly owing to the organisation's weak economy, which in turn had caused some personal conflicts. Schröder was known as an enthusiastic and charismatic leader, but keeping within planned budgets was not considered one of his strengths. The association therefore abstained from backing the venture, and Schröder himself had to take financial responsibility for both construction and voyage (FSF-RA-Arninge; Schröder-Gbg).

As soon as the ship was built, it was sailed to Stockholm to partake in a sports exhibition. For a few weeks, it offered daily rowing and sailing trips to paying passengers. Schröder devoted the rest of the season to sailing demonstrations, trying to recuperate funds to cover his boatbuilding debts. His success was minimal, but suddenly there was a break-through. In the summer of 1949, a Danish replica of a Viking ship, the *Hugin*, received a great deal of positive attention as it sailed across the North Sea to England. Now the organisers of a maritime fair to be held in Rotterdam in the summer of 1950 also desired to be visited by Vikings. Schröder got the job and the financial guarantees he requested (FSF-Arninge; Schröder-Gbg). (Fig. 1)



Fig.1. Sten Schröder preparing to launch the *Ormen Friske* at Stensund for its second season. Photo taken by Sam Svensson 1950, courtesy of the Maritime Museum, Stockholm.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173439\\_fig\\_1\\_ssvr\\_600.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173439_fig_1_ssvr_600.jpg)



On June 4, 1950, the voyage began. It would be the ship's final trip, and would end in disaster. *Frisksportförbundet* was essentially a youth movement and the crew was composed of its well-trained male members. Schröder was 38 years old and the oldest on board; most of the others were around 20-25. The majority were working class, while a few were university students.

The voyage began with a ceremony at the Viking trading centre of Birka on Lake Mälaren and continued south from there through Södertälje Canal and out onto the Baltic Sea. After eight days in mainly adverse winds and severe weather, the ship arrived at Ystad on the southern tip of Sweden. (Fig. 2) Some damage to the rudder and rig was repaired with the help of members of the town's yacht club and additional equipment was installed. The voyage continued to Kiel and through the Kiel Canal. On June 21, the ship reached the German Bight, where it would go under the following day. (Fig. 3)

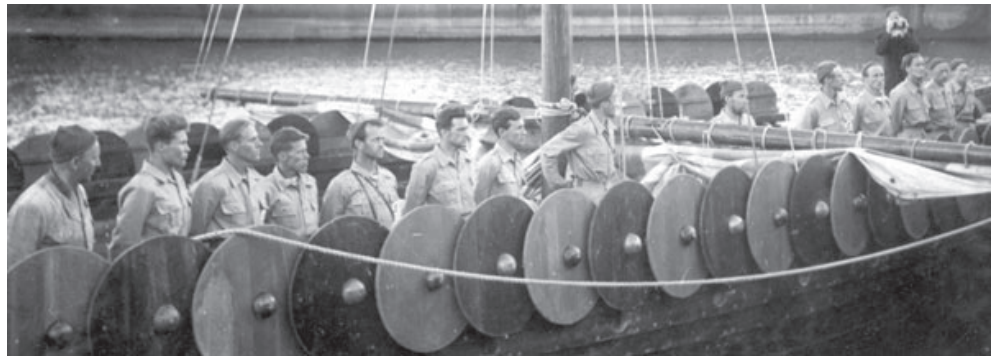


Fig. 2. The crew of the *Ormen Friske* man the rails on arrival at Ystad, dressed in blue gang-plank outfits. Photo 1950, courtesy of the Ystad Yacht Club.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173437\\_fig\\_2\\_reling\\_600.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173437_fig_2_reling_600.jpg)



Fig. 3. The *Ormen Friske* capsized off Heligoland. The tidal streams carried the bodies and wreckage to the Frisian coast. The stern was salvaged on Pellworm and a memorial erected there later. Map by the author.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173419\\_edberg\\_fig\\_3.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173419_edberg_fig_3.jpg)



On the morning of June 21 when the men on board the *Ormen Friske* set sail for Rotterdam, it was a beautiful day with a moderate wind. However, that evening it blew from the southwest and a storm rose the following night. Examining the filed weather reports, which I requested and promptly was supplied with from all authorities concerned, I noticed that neither the Danish, German nor the Dutch services had warned of the storm, which formed very suddenly (meteorological details, Edberg 2004a:84f).

The disaster first became known four days after it happened, when wreckage and dead bodies started to float ashore on the islands of North Frisia. It became clear that Schröder himself and all his 14 crewmembers had drowned.

The closest Swedish representation, the consulate in Hamburg, was alerted by the local press and the vice-consul was sent to the coastal area. He immediately pronounced himself very critical and categorical about the ship to Swedish journalists who came to the scene. He explained that 'the thick bottom planks apparently were broken like matches by the North Sea waves and in collision with sandbars' (Dagens Nyheter and several other papers, June 28, 1950).

Wreckage was salvaged by locals on the islands of Pellworm, Sylt and other North Frisian islands. Reports were sent in to the nearest relevant German authority, the *Wasser- und Schifffahrtsamt* in the coastal town of Tönning. Its head officer was Martin Bahr. He took it upon himself to conduct a hearing, and then compile observations, from eyewitnesses among the seafarers who had observed the *Ormen Friske* after the ship had left the mouth of the Elbe. It was revealed that as the *Ormen Friske* sailed into the German Bight, a large number of boats were out fishing lobsters. The Swedish ship passed straight through these fishing grounds while being observed from both lightships and the fishing boats. In this way, it was possible for Bahr to closely trace the voyage of the *Ormen Friske* (Bahr's report and letters in UD-Hamburg).

According to the report of Martin Bahr, completed two weeks after the accident, the change in the weather had forced the entire fishing fleet of the German Bight to seek refuge in a safe harbour. Many cutters had gone in to the island of Heligoland, where there was the chance of protected anchorage and mooring. Just before the probable time of the accident, the *Ormen Friske* was sighted by some fishermen who were on the pier. They had been out fishing north of Heligoland and reached the harbour through its northern entrance. According to these eyewitnesses, the *Ormen Friske* set course to the narrow southern entrance of the port, which was at that time fully exposed to the wind.

For several months after the accident, Bahr corresponded with the consulate in Hamburg. He wanted to know what should be done with the parts of the wreck that had been salvaged in various places, and which remained *in situ* pending expert inspection. Bahr even offered the names of local experts who could undertake the work, if the Swedes so wished (UD-Hamburg).

The bodies of 9 of the 15 crew members, many badly mutilated, were subsequently found and sent home to Sweden for burial by their families.

The consulate involved itself in the identification of the bodies, but no other initiatives were taken. On one of the days immediately following the accident, the vice-consul announced that Sweden did not have any interest in the wreckage recovered, and that the finder could keep it. Finally, close to six months after the accident, Bahr received information by letter from the consulate that it was decided that no Swedish inspection or investigation into the wreck would take place, and that the wreck could be discarded. I found a copy of this letter, with this hitherto unknown and remarkable content, in the previously confidential consular archives (UD-Hamburg).

## Context – world affairs

Sweden had certainly suffered very lightly during the Second World War, but the blockade had been efficient and trips abroad were something of which a young generation could only dream. The voyage of the *Ormen Friske* would traverse a Europe that was now beginning to open up after the war, although passport and currency restrictions still existed. The expectations of the participants of this adventure were great. However, at the same time as the *Ormen Friske* fell into difficulties in the German Bight, another event occurred that gives this idealism and optimism for the future surrounding the voyage a doomed perspective.

American aircraft had begun bombing the island of Heligoland from a height of 6000 metres. At the time, the island was vacated of its population and used as a practice site for the strategic bombers of the Western Powers, launched from bases in England. No warnings were ever issued about these bombings, the purpose of which was to practise radar attacks. This was before the time of nuclear submarines and long-range missiles, and the only way to deliver a bomb load against an enemy, i.e. the Soviet Union, was to fly them in. Bomber plane types utilized to train new crews were B-29 and B-50 “Super fortresses”, stationed in Britain. In 1950, the giant new B-36 “Peacemakers” were also deployed. In a real situation, the planes would have nuclear weapons on board. For Heligoland practise bombing, conventional charges were used.

Heligoland is a rocky islet in the North Sea, slightly over 2 km long and c. 700 m wide. Just over 1 km east of Heligoland lies its low neighbouring island, die Düne, 2 km long and 300 m wide. During the two World Wars, Heligoland had been set up as a ‘North-Sea Malta’, an important base to protect the German ports of the North Sea. During the Hitler era, a submarine bunker with a several metres thick concrete roof was built there. At the end of the war, British military spokesmen designated Heligoland as a danger to peace and declared that the island should be wiped from the face of the ocean. In 1947, the underground sections of the Heligoland base were shelled by the victorious powers. In total, 6 700 tons of explosives and all kinds of ammunition were used, the largest-ever non-nuclear explosion. Owing to its

use first during the war, and subsequently being blasted and bombed, by 1950 Heligoland had the appearance of a moonscape (Grossner 1974; Herms 2002).

The crews of the German lobster boats were well aware of the risks they exposed themselves to when they sought shelter there. Nevertheless, the island always was and remained crucial for them when far from their homeports. They were also able to survive bombing sessions by taking refuge in wartime bunkers. As the bombs began falling, the fishermen on the pier mentioned above had to run for shelter shortly after noticing *Ormen Friske* in its dangerous situation (Bahr's report, UD-Hamburg).

Four weeks after the accident, a United Press telegram was published in several Swedish newspapers: 'The American 3rd air division headquarters in London announced on Friday that their bombers conducted exercises over Heligoland on June 22 and thereby could have caused the sinking of the *Ormen Friske*'. In a statement from the bombing headquarters the same day, the American press spokesman added to the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (July 22): 'Normally, these exercises are carried out at a height of 6000 metres or more, which means that our pilots would not have been able to see the Swedish ship if it entered into the training area as a result of the storm or other causes. This was a very tragic event.' According to the paper, the US spokesman represented the 3<sup>rd</sup> Air Division, London.

In Europe, the focus of the Cold War was on Germany. After the end of World War II, the country was divided into occupation zones. Hamburg, badly bombed, lay in the British zone, as did Heligoland. The Swedish diplomats in Germany felt it was vitally important to be on good terms with the British, being dependent on the latter for offices, housing and even food rations. It can be gleaned from the Hamburg Consulate archives and oral sources that the Swedes, both for business and in private, sought to avoid anything that could irritate the British (UD-Hamburg; Interviews).

The sinking of the *Ormen Friske* coincided with an acute major international political crisis. On 25 June 1950, the same day that the first bodies and wreckage from the ship were found, the Korean War broke out. This major conflict would last for three years and was close to sparking off a nuclear war between East and West. The received opinion in Sweden was that the Korean War illustrated the aggressive intentions of the Soviet Union and China. Western armament was seen as defensive and legitimate and hence beyond criticism. Anyone who tried to moderate this worldview was branded a crypto-communist (cf. Forser & Tjäder 1972).

## Narrative and silence

As soon as the accident became known, the major Stockholm newspapers and several others from Sweden flew reporters to the area. When they arrived there was still no certain news about how or when the accident had happened; the

only traces being the bodies and salvaged wreckage witnessing that a tragedy had occurred.

During these first two to three days, the official story (the narrative) about the loss of the *Ormen Friske* was formulated. In the absence of any concrete knowledge about the causes of the accident, the reporters embellished their own speculations. The rhetorical device was a reference to fictive sources for authority: 'experienced seamen', 'expert opinions', and the like. The only named source was the Swedish vice-consul, who had said that he did not believe that the voyage had any prerequisites for success. Images of badly wrecked ship timbers were presented as evidence of poor construction. Neither the vice-consul nor the reporters seem to have considered the possibility that the splintered nature of the wreckage was the result of the accident, and not automatically its cause.

The general account in the newspaper reports those first days was that the ship had broken up in the storm because it was poorly built. The young sportsmen were dead, which in itself was very tragic, but they were naïve idealists who had set out in heavy weather in a feeble boat. They were 'frail vegetarians' who had 'panicked', so it was claimed.

Since the day it was first formulated, this story has been repeated, not only in the mass media whenever the tragedy of the *Ormen Friske* is mentioned but also in texts written by researchers. Some quote the *Ormen Friske* as an example of what can go wrong if one does not carefully comply to Viking Age principles when building a reconstruction, is negligent about the ballast, etc. (e.g. Vadstrup 1993:28; Johansson 1993:134).

At this time, no one knew exactly where the accident had taken place since the witness accounts, indicating the route taken by the *Ormen Friske* during its final 24 hours, had not yet been collected. Thus, since it was not known at this stage that Heligoland was the location of the accident, the press understandably made no mention of or connection to any bombing raid in that area.

A week after the tragedy relatives of the lost crew visited the sites where the largest pieces of wreckage had landed, and noted that they were heavily scratched. This damage, supposedly caused by the ship beating against the dreaded underwater reefs that surround the southern entrance to Heligoland harbour, was not mentioned at all in the newspaper reports (Mattus-Gbg).

However, Martin Bahr, who examined the wreckage, wrote that in his opinion, the ship had broken apart 'in collision with some sturdier material than a sandbank'. Further, he wrote that in his personal opinion, after having studied the evidence and listened to witnesses, the ship was not as unfit as was stated by the press and that through their actions, the crew showed that they were fully able for their task. According to Bahr, the *Ormen Friske* had gone down not owing to any faults in the ship or defects in the crew, but through a chain of unfortunate events (Bahr's report and correspondence, UD-Hamburg).

By the time Bahr's report became known, the journalists had returned home and the immediate novelty of the event had passed. Furthermore, since Swedish officials paid little attention to this new information it received only limited

airing and was short lived. Similarly, Washington's official recognition of their bombing raid did not receive much attention when it arrived a few weeks later, only generating brief newspaper articles or mere one-column notices. At the time, the press was generally very respectful of the government, and the types of journalistic confrontations that often occur in today's news reports were practically non-existent. No demands were raised that the accident be investigated.

With regard to the *Frisksportförbundet*, much positive publicity had come its way through newspapers, radio and cinema newsreels concerning the building of the *Ormen Friske* in 1949, the plans for sailing it to Rotterdam in 1950 and the launch of the voyage. The association was the recipient of much goodwill, which was gratefully accepted, considering that the media otherwise tended to refer to its membership as 'vegetable fools'. Many members were indeed vegetarians, a diet that many considered very odd at the time. As noted above, the association did not officially support the voyage, even though its own magazine praised the venture as 'the greatest propaganda success story in the association's history'. In a letter, the chairman of the association described the project as 'a brilliant idea'. However, in formal terms, Sten Schröder was solely responsible, as the spokesman for the association was very careful to point out after the accident. The association also feared that it would be forced to pay the project's debts and even face insurance claims from relatives of the victims (FSF-RA-Arninge; FSF-Stensund).

It is also possible that underlying political motives were present. The archival material indicates that the pro-American feelings, typical for the time, were well anchored among the association's leadership. For example, members who had signed the so-called 'Stockholm Appeal' against atomic weapons were chastised and threatened with expulsion; the Appeal being described as 'communist propaganda' (FSF-RA-Arninge). Their leaders saw themselves as 'apolitical', which according to the language of the time meant pro-American. To question the actions of Swedish diplomats seems to have been as foreign to the leadership of the association as it was to the newspaper editors.

Although 15 members perished, the association thus officially refrained from demanding an investigation into the tragedy, and by so doing, was in practice accepting the cover-up of the accident. No consideration was made for the fact that this placed the grieving families in the dark about how their sons, brothers and husbands had died. The deceased Schröder became the association's scapegoat. His widow, Doris, and two young sons, were evicted from their small home at the training centre in Stensund (Schröder-Gbg; Interviews).

In stark contrast to the fence-sitting posture of the authorities and the association, some private initiatives were undertaken. The brothers of two lost crewmembers visited the sites of the beachings shortly after the accident. They were articulate middle-class people (two merchants, elder brothers of dead crewman Sigurd Mattus and a pharmacist, elder brother of dead crewman Hans-Emil Nilsson), who later on, on their own initiative, brought information of Martin Bahr's investigation to Sweden. Having personally met them at the

site, Bahr later sent the relatives copies of his report. No previous mention had been made in Sweden about the ship having been caught up in a wholesale bombing raid, and the relatives disseminated the information as best they could (Mattus-Gbg; Newspapers *ibid.*). However, as mentioned above, their impact was limited in comparison to the massive news coverage of the actual accident a few weeks before. In my search through the Hamburg consulate archives, I also discovered a press release, sent after the information about the bombing had leaked out. The consulate denied that the air bombing of Heligoland had any role in the sea accident. Correspondence from the consulate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that the press release was written solely to counter the brothers' activities. Correspondence in the Foreign Affairs archives also contains condescending comments about this 'attempted vindication' (UD-Hamburg; UD-Stockholm).

As far as I could discover, no other relatives reacted other than bringing home the bodies for burial (the cost of which the families had to bear themselves). This can probably be understood in the light of their social background and the criticism of the ship and crew in the press, which was hard to bear. To single-handedly take action against the authorities was a major challenge for these families now that *Frisksportförbundet* had declined acting on their behalf. Mourning the sudden loss of a husband, father, son or brother naturally dominated their lives; a brother of one of the dead told me 'Father and mother took it hard. They did not want to delve into the cause of the accident'.

Sailing-expert Sam Svensson, who had been the construction advisor when building the *Ormen Friske* and had designed the rig, was interviewed after the accident. He defended the ship, saying that the strakes were of superior knot-free pine. The wood for the frames certainly was not as good, he admitted, but added that 'this cannot have been the effective cause'. Svensson also related that he himself had been able to tack 'well' with the boat, thus 'there was nothing wrong with its capabilities'. He surmised that the boat must have hit a mine, been thrown against a reef or suffered something similar, i.e. encountered a situation that no material could withstand. Svensson emphasized that he was only an advisor, neither responsible for the construction nor the voyage (Svensson's statements to *Stockholms-Tidningen*, *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts Tidning* and other papers, June 27.) Svensson's participation in the *Ormen Friske* project was on evenings and holidays, when off duty. However, considering his position as a recognized expert with first-hand knowledge of the ship, he – if anyone – might have been expected to demand an inquiry. However, he did not, which seems bewildering. Personal relationships and conflicting interests at his workplace, the Maritime Museum in Stockholm, may have played a role here (cf. Svensson 2004; Svensson's letters in Sjöhist-Åbo; Kiselman 2004; Interviews).

By law, both major and minor accidents at sea should be investigated by a special government agency; at the time, this was the maritime bureau attached to the Swedish Board of Trade, and marine hearings and investigations were



routinely conducted. The Swedish foreign consulates often played a major role in the gathering of information. This was not mandatory for non-commercial sea-traffic, which included the *Ormen Friske*. Nevertheless, marine hearings, while not compulsory, could be implemented on demand, or on the agency's own initiative. No documents concerning the catastrophe involving the *Ormen Friske* could be found in the department's archives, despite the fact that in the same year, other, much less disastrous, accidents involving 'pleasure boats' were investigated (KK-Sjö-RA-Sto). My impression is that the maritime agency would hardly have rejected a specific demand for an investigation of the *Ormen Friske* disaster from an authoritative source – such as *Frisksportförbundet* – if one had been immediately placed.

## The significance of memory\_

Graves, memorial sites and objects from the wrecked ship and its crew continue to spark people's memories and perceptions of the disaster.

Memorials for those lost on the *Ormen Friske* have been erected in a small number of places. One stands in *Frisksportförbundet's* headquarters and training centre, at Stensund near Trosa, where the ship was built. This is a roughly cut sliver of stone, c.2 m tall, containing the names of the dead and the inscription (in Swedish): 'The *Ormen Friske* built on Stensund in spring 1949 capsized off Heligoland 22/6 1950. Fifteen Swedish sportsmen followed it into the deep' and a quotation from the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet J. L. Runeberg's heroic verse *Molnets broder* (in Swedish): 'Not with complaint shall your memory be celebrated, not like those that pass and are soon forgotten'. Sten Schröder had intended to return to Stensund in triumph after a successful sea voyage. Instead, the result was a monument raised here to his failure.

For many years, *Frisksportförbundet* held a memorial service at the stone during their annual summer jamboree at Stensund. Gradually, this occurred less frequently, as the tradition bearers within the association passed away, I was told by veteran members. The first time that I visited the site, in 1993, the area was covered in forest and undergrowth, and it was still that way during my visit in 2005, when, incidentally, I was invited to speak about the *Ormen Friske*. That same year, I had been interviewed by the local regional TV channel. When I again observed the site in 2009, the spot was opened up and the trees felled. An area around the stone had been neatly fenced in. I like to believe what I was told by the *Frisksportförbundet's* staff, that the memorial was re-charged in this way owing to the attention received by my research.

Another memorial has stood on the North Frisian island Pellworm since 1951. It was erected next to the ruined tower of the island's Alte Kirche, also known as St Salvator's Church. Carved by a local firm, it was funded by a voluntary collection in Sweden. It is still lovingly cared for by the local congregation. A copper plate bears the victims' names and the same verse as on the stone in Stensund (Fig. 4). On the 50th anniversary, a service was held at



the Alte Kirche to which relatives were invited. Five or six of these attended, as well as a representative from *Friskisportförbundet* (Interviews). This coincided with the opening of the exhibition at the Maritime museum in Husum (see below). Pellworm lies off the beaten track and the stone is not particularly well known to relatives or the fitness movement in Sweden. However, it is highly charged with local memories, supported by the wreckage displayed in a café on the island (see below).



Fig. 4. Memorial at the Alte Kirche on the island of Pellworm. The author lays flowers 60 years after the accident. Photo: Helena Lindstedt 2010.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173435\\_fig\\_4\\_re\\_pellw\\_600.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173435_fig_4_re_pellw_600.jpg)

A replica of the memorial stone in Pellworm stands in Kalmar cemetery in Bålsta, Uppland, Sweden. It was erected over the grave of one of the victims by his father, a priest in this parish. The text on this stone is not that of Runeberg, however, but taken from the *Book of Revelations*. Other graves on various Swedish locations also form memorials, occasionally mentioning the *Ormen Friske* in their inscriptions. I have e.g. a picture of old friends from one victim's local *Friskisportförbundet* club gathering at his grave, 50 years after the accident.

During their stopover in Ystad, Sten Schröder signed up the *Ormen Friske* as a member of the local Yacht Club. The memory of this event is kept alive by their annual 'Ormen Friske Race'; and after the publication of my book in 2004, the club purchased a number of copies to distribute as prizes over the coming years. A framed canvas signed by the *Ormen Friske* crewmembers, during their visit in 1950, still hangs in the Ystad club house.

In 2000, the Maritime Museum in Husum, *Schiffahrtsmuseum Nordfriesland*, gathered a number of preserved artefacts from the ship, e.g. its dragonhead, dragon tail and some shields, for the 50th anniversary of the accident; they also arranged for an exhibition concerning the tragedy. On my visit in 2010, the

material was still exhibited at the top floor of this magnificent museum at the harbour of Husum (Fig. 5). Most of the exhibits came from Pellworm, where a large portion of the *Ormen Friske's* stern had been a tourist attraction in a summer café for decades. Although the wreckage subsequently rotted and was cleared away, the café still bore a sign with a Viking ship over the door on my visit in 2010.



Fig. 5. The 'Dragon tail' from the *Ormen Friske*, on exhibition in the Maritime Museum in Husum, Germany. The sign says 'Original wreckage'. Photo: author 2010.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173433\\_fig\\_5\\_originalvrakdel\\_600.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173433_fig_5_originalvrakdel_600.jpg)

I managed to find a small fragment of the ship's planking still preserved; this time at another museum on the North Sea coast, in the Eiderstedt town of St. Peter Ording. I was able to borrow the fragment and in 2003, I showed it to Bror Westerlund, the builder of the ship. He concluded that it probably came from the *Ormen Friske*. This closed the circle in an emotional way, 54 years after its construction.

The compass and tiller, which were salvaged after the accident, were brought home to Sten Schröder's family in Sweden. They are now preserved in the home of one of his sons, who also carefully preserves his father's surviving papers. At the time of the accident, this boy was four years old, and his whole childhood was marked by the loss of his father and the complete change to his life situation that followed. The objects that the family received back from the *Ormen Friske* were impregnated with their father's bold plan, his failure, and the heavy judgment of posterity.

Memorabilia are also kept by other families. For example, the watch found on the corpse of a dead crewmember is treasured by his niece, who also inherited her father's collected letters, newspaper clippings, etc. concerning the incident. Prior to my visit (2003), she had taken things down from the attic. The wristwatch her uncle had worn aboard the *Ormen Friske* lay on a bed of wood wool (Fig. 6). There were also letters, a photo album, his membership

card from *Frisksportförbundet*, and there were photos of his girlfriend. It was evident that the memories and the sensations aroused by the memorabilia were activated by my interest during my visit, and the impression was confirmed in my continued correspondence with this family.

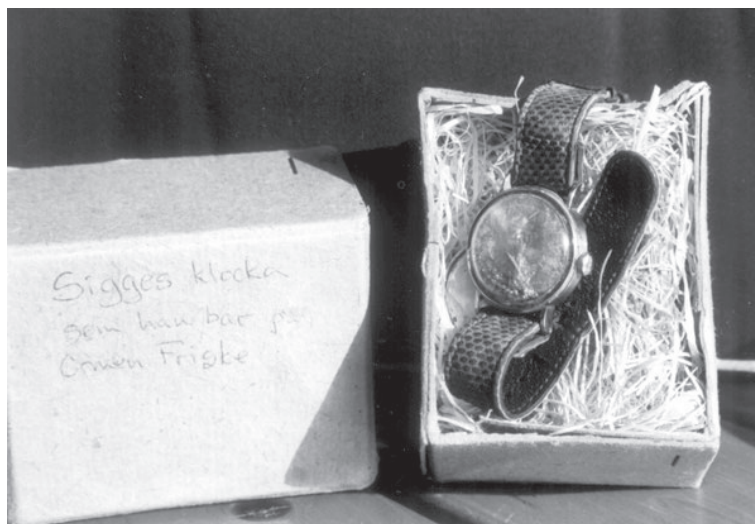


Fig. 6. A watch kept as a memento by a niece of one of the dead crew. Photo 2003, courtesy of Annika Mattus-Tufvesson.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173431\\_fig\\_6\\_siggeur\\_600.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173431_fig_6_siggeur_600.jpg)



Fig. 7. Åke Nilsson's brother died on the *Ormen Friske*. Åke Nilsson, a pharmacist, was one of the relatives engaged in finding out more about the accident. The bottle ship was a 1950 gift from the harbour captain of Husum, Germany. Photo 2002, courtesy of Åke Nilsson.

[http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173429\\_fig\\_7\\_akesvv\\_600.jpg](http://www.arkeologi.uu.se/digitalAssets/173/173429_fig_7_akesvv_600.jpg)

Åke Nilsson, who lost his younger brother Hans-Emil on the *Ormen Friske*, was one of the relatives who travelled to Germany soon after the accident, to conduct their own research and make contact with the authorities there. He was also the initiator of the memorial service at Pellworm in the summer of 2000. From his memorabilia from 1950, he showed me a ship-in-a-bottle displaying the *Ormen Friske* in the harbour in Husum, constructed as a gift by the town's harbour captain (Fig. 7).

More than two months after the tragedy, a message in a bottle, concerning the bombing, was found on the beach on the Danish side of the border, near the spot where, not too long previously, two corpses from the *Ormen Friske* had floated ashore. The text on the yellowy scrap of paper, possibly torn from a wrapper, read (in Swedish), 'Help! *Ormen Friske*. Bombardment'. The Danish police sent it to Stockholm to what was then the State Bureau of Forensic Science. There it lay for several months before being set aside. The explanation given was that an investigation was unnecessary; no clear reason was given (SKL-RA-Arninge). The scrap of paper might very well be authentic. A collection of samples for analysis of the crewmembers' handwriting could easily have been arranged in 1950. My own attempts, long after, were unsuccessful.

Wooden shields from the *Ormen Friske* were found by private individuals in Germany and Denmark, and at least one such souvenir proved to be still in the keeping of the person who had found it as a young boy, on one of the Frisian Islands. He was now a prominent archaeologist with a maritime focus (Hans Joachim Kühn), but if the find had any bearing on his career, he would not tell.

In my book from 2004, I listed all the finds from the *Ormen Friske*, both those that survived and those that were destroyed but previously recorded in some way (Edberg 2004a:159f.). They are dealt with in the find list in the manner of traditional archaeological objects. As shown by this commentary, however, categories such as size, material, type, etc. are not full descriptions, since they also need to be examined in terms of their significance to the event or as carriers of narratives. The objects are each coloured by their own history, similarly to the text in an archival record. A strong force field – or aura – may be seen as surrounding these apparently neutral lists.

## Three answers

By combining the various sources, the three questions that I initially asked could now be answered, each in its own way.

With regard to the design and construction of the ship, the sources showed that it was expertly built with the modern methods available in 1949. The keel was constructed from a 16" beam of laminated wood and the strakes were made from pine boards. The frames were not of natural grown timber, a quite serious deficiency. No clarity could be obtained concerning the crew's combined expertise, but they had a certified ship's master on board as navigator.



Being a *Frisksportförbundet* member himself, he had signed off a merchant ship where he was second mate, expressly to take part in this North Sea voyage (FSF-RA-Arninge).

So how did the shipwreck happen? The absence of any accident investigation makes it impossible to assess the role of any shortcomings or weaknesses of the boat or crew. The wreckage is not preserved and the documentation consists of photos and descriptions. These show that the ship broke up, and to some extent how, but not why. According to the last sighting of the ship, the accident occurred at about the same time as the American bombs began to fall. There is no evidence that the ship suffered a direct hit. The ship's manoeuvres may or may not have been influenced by the crew's efforts to keep clear of the bomb bursts. It seems likely that it was smashed against Heligoland's underwater rocks or surf, as Martin Bahr concluded. Perhaps the rig fell overboard first, which would have made the ship inoperable, and have it swing broadside to the waves, filling it with water.

In a discussion about an accident involving a ship such as the *Ormen Friske*, one should not ignore the fundamental problem with open vessels. In rough weather, they may fill up with water, making them impossible to manoeuvre. Even if the hull remains afloat, bailing out water is not very practical when clinging to the rails for dear life, close to a treacherous cliff-lined coast in a storm. If the ship has ballast, it then rapidly sinks, as has happened in recent years with several Norwegian copies of Viking ships. When recently reading about the spectacular return journey from Denmark to Ireland in 2007-2008 with the *Sea Stallion from Glendalough*, I noted that an extensive set of safety equipment was carried on board, and an accompanying tender kept close at all times. If the *Sea Stallion* had been flooded, its six tons of ballast could have sunk it immediately, putting its crew of about 60 people to the mercy of the waves (Crumlin-Pedersen 2010:36).

Some of the criticism levelled at the *Ormen Friske* was, in my opinion, no doubt founded on an exaggerated idealization of the seaworthy properties of Viking ships. If one imagines that the originals were perfect, then as soon as something goes wrong in modern reconstructions or replicas, it is natural to look for errors and deficiencies in the latter, instead of investigating the actual conditions. As is well known, accidents at sea have occurred throughout the ages and still occur, even with the latest ship technology and skilled crews. Incidentally, The Icelandic Sagas hold many tales of Viking Age shipwrecks and drownings.

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Regarding the absence of any investigation into the accident, I have shown that neither the Swedish consulate in Hamburg nor the Swedish National Board of Trade in Stockholm took any initiative. Instead, the consulate spread speculative information as to the cause of the accident before anything was

known, and dismissed subsequent information concerning the bombing of Heligoland. The State Bureau of Forensic Science ignored the evidence of the message-in-a-bottle with its desperate call for help. The silence of the Swedish authorities, on hearing reports that the men on the *Ormen Friske* might have had a chance to save themselves, if the ship had not had the misfortune to end up amidst an American air raid, should, as stressed above, be seen in the light of the major political events of the period. Perhaps this primarily concerns the reaction of the Swedish consulate in Hamburg, but it is also true on several general levels. The attitude of the *Friskisportförbundet* changed from approval to dissociation. The fact that they favoured an alternative lifestyle did not mean that they were in general opposition to society. On the contrary, the association's leadership shared the political views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This also was the standard Swedish view. The fear of economic repercussions was a further reason to bury the event, to put all the blame on Schröder, and to move on.

Viewed at a distance of over 60 years, this complete lack of activity seems incomprehensible, but it should not be understood as a kind of conspiracy. Instead, it seems clear to me that it must be interpreted as the result of a common mentality, an ideological consensus, which was the spirit of the age.

The only force that to some extent broke through this frame was the involvement of the crew's relatives, which gave publicity to politically sensitive information. However, receiving no response, it presently ceased. For most of the families, dealing with their grief took all their strength.

A journey of peace in a Viking ship ending in a rain of bombs was obviously a tragic accident, a combination of coincidences, but in retrospect also a political memento. There was a wedge between the Swedish policy of neutrality with all its rhetoric, and the circles within the political and above all diplomatic and military elite that throughout the post-war period were in league with the US and NATO. This is the perspective from which the *Ormen Friske's* bleak destiny and legacy must be viewed. The tragedy can then also be understood as a collapse, one of many, of the common people's innocent support of the Swedish official policy of neutrality (cf. Holmström 2011).

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With regard to memorabilia, I have shown that a large number of objects were preserved and these are surrounded by their stories, or their narratives. The emotionally strongest ones are the personal items that were collected from the deceased, such as watches and rings. The small, insignificant, but in this context extremely important remnants of clothing preserved in an archive can fill the viewer with deep respect. The same applies to the message from the bottle, still preserved but never expertly examined.

The surviving objects remain significant by virtue of their history, and in turn, they keep the ship alive. The items were snatched from their context by the shipwreck, but at the same time, they can be seen as carriers of the event's

history. A variety of sites related to the ship affect their own social spaces, and thus give the ship an 'after-life'. However, the wreckage that still survives appears more neutral as museum objects, and in its own way, it associates as much to the Viking Age as to the 1950s.

The three questions and their answers in this study interact. They move between the local and global worlds, the concrete and the abstract. The ship and its demise was thus a measure of the spirit of the age, or, put another way, this little story was played out against the great backdrop of 'History' and should be understood in relation to it.

## Pre-understanding and reflexivity

The result of any research is determined in the encounter between researchers and their objects of study. Also in archaeology, the scholar's own views and presuppositions should be looked upon as important factors.

Traditional archaeological research usually works within large distances of both time and space from its human objects of study, who are considered as nameless 'prehistoric' or 'medieval' 'people' or 'communities', etc. A form of distancing is integral to the nature of the subject. For archaeologists working with the contemporary or recent past, the situation is different. Here there are living people both among the sources and among those directly affected by the text. They may have strong views, be highly emotionally involved, or both.

When working with recent material, one's fundamental views of contemporary or present issues play their unavoidable part. For example, the person who excavates one of his own country's wartime crashed airplanes has a better chance of identifying with (or even deifying) the crew, than the person whose family was at the receiving end of their weapons. In such a case, the researcher's choice of perspective may be invisible to those concerned, while obvious to an outsider (cf. Legendre 2001). In addition, research questions that may seem inescapable to one scholar may very well seem irrelevant to another. Aiming to consider one's own research context and personal point of departure in a reflexive manner is thus as relevant as any general source-critical position.

The researcher's scientific curiosity is also a kind of commitment. It is obviously necessary to maintain a balance, to be aware that we are influenced by our personal identity and that we cannot withdraw from the scientific tradition in which we were trained. To closely examine one's own personal incentives, as far as this is possible, may thus be considered relevant to one's interpretations. If this seems naive and romantic, I cannot see the harm in at least trying: Why did I start examining the *Ormen Friske* tragedy? This was partly owing to my long-standing interest in experiments with Viking ship replicas, and my research into prehistoric travel. Nevertheless, I also felt an affiliation between the *Ormen Friske* project, carried out by a group of idealists, relying on themselves and friends with very little external support and my own research that benefitted from much moral support from fellow



scholars, but (at the time) had very little financial backing. However, I felt no need for prudence, either when labelling the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' diplomatic actions in the wake of the disaster as a cover-up, or when describing the abysmal response of *Friskisportförbundet* as cowardly. In this respect, my independence (even if partly unintentional), turned out to be an advantage.

## Acknowledgements

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- FSF-Stensund = Friskisportförbundet's files at its main office, Stensund, Trosa, Sweden
- KK-Sjö-RA-Sto = Kommerskollegium's sjöfartsbyrå's (The maritime bureau attached to the Swedish Board of Trade) files at Riksarkivet (The National Archives), central depot, Stockholm, Sweden.
- Mattus-Gbg = Crewman Sigurd Mattus' letters, documents, artefacts etc. and brother Gerhard Mattus' files. Kept by niece Annika Mattus-Tufvesson, Göteborg, Sweden.
- SALB-Sto = The archives of Statens arkiv för ljud och bild (The National radio, film and TV archives), Stockholm, Sweden.
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