

The Testimony of the Button

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BARBRO KLEIN

## The Testimony of the Button

About nine o'clock on the evening of Sunday, November 30, 1718, King Charles XII of Sweden was shot through the head and killed while besieging a Norwegian fortress near Fredrikshald (today's Halden), not far from the Swedish border. At the moment of death he had been supervising soldiers digging trenches, and was officially presumed the victim of a chance shot from the Norwegian fortress. The bullet that killed the thirty-six-year old monarch ended eighteen years of foreign wars that had drained and divided the country. It also put an end to Sweden's territorial ambitions and to her cherished role as a great European power. The king's sister Ulrika Eleonora and her husband Fredrik of Hessen succeeded to a throne that would never regain the power and prestige lost to it through the spectacular career and early death of Charles XII.

Two centuries later, on May 25, 1932, master smith Carl Hj. Andersson of Horred paid a visit to folklorist Albert Sandklef, director of Varberg's Museum in the province of Halland in southwestern Sweden;<sup>1</sup> in his hand he was holding what Sandklef later termed a "curious object": two half-spheres of brass filled with lead and soldered together into a ball, with a protruding broken loop that testified to its former use as a button. One side was flattened, the result of a forceful collision with a hard surface (C, 239). Andersson said he had found the object in 1924 among gravel stones from a pit near Deragård, a farm four kilometers from his home,

<sup>1</sup> Some of Sandklef's many works are of interest to students of oral history. See, for instance, "The Bocksten Find", *Acta Ethnologica* no. 1 (1937): 1-64, an article subsequently enlarged into a book called *Bockstensmannen* (Stockholm, 1943). Sandklef discusses ancient and modern legends about revenants laid with a pole, connecting the narratives with a bog find of a thirteenth century man.

and handed it over to Sandklef with the words: "It's supposed to be this button that was used to shoot Charles XII" (K, 11). Andersson was referring to folk traditions that Charles XII had fallen not to a Norwegian bullet but to a button from his own clothes, fired by an assassin in his own army.

Sandklef, an avid collector who over the years had personally recorded several versions of such traditions, claimed later that the interview made a great impression on him; nevertheless he waited eight years to publish his reaction to Andersson's discovery. Then in 1940 Sandklef and three co-authors contended in a profusely illustrated, best-selling book called *Carl XII:s död* ("The Death of Charles XII") that the king had indeed been shot with the very button found in Deragård's gravel.<sup>2</sup> The authors' reconstruction of the events surrounding the death of Charles XII is based on the testimony of folk narrative and folk belief, supplemented by evidence from written historical records, from coronary, ballistic, logistic, metallurgical, and costume-historical research. *Carl XII:s död* and Sandklef's follow-up study a year later, *Kulknappen och Carl XII:s död* ("The Bullet-Button and the Death of Charles XII"),<sup>3</sup> made a case for the historical accuracy of folk tradition that was in all senses provocative. Despite a rambling exposition, frequent ungrounded assumptions and careless handling of texts, these studies represented a multi-front attack on official history that could not be and was not ignored. On the contrary, both the popular appeal of the controversy of 1940/1941 and the animosity with which it was waged provide a special insight into the importance of historical legendry for a nation's image of itself.

More folk traditions were collected during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about Charles XII than about any other figure in Swedish history. According to one of the most widespread beliefs, one that is central to the legends concerning the king's death and to Sandklef's argument based on these legends, Charles XII was "hard" (*hård*), i.e., invulnerable to ordinary bullets, which in many tales just drop into his boots like blueberries. According to many tellers, he could be slain only

<sup>2</sup> By Albert Sandklef, Carl-Fredrik Palmstierna, Nils Strömbom and Sam. Clason (Stockholm, 1940). Here referred to with "C" and page number.

<sup>3</sup> (Lund, 1941). Here referred to with "K" and page number. — Sandklef's two works on Charles XII are as little known outside of Sweden as they are well known inside the country. One discussion of them in English is in Michael Srigley's "The Death of Charles XII of Sweden," *History Today* 13 (1963): 863-871, but there are no clear references and the folk traditions are misunderstood.

with a silver bullet, sometimes only with a bullet made from inherited silver; others maintain that the lethal object had to be, and was, a coat button which the king had worn as an amulet.

Most commonly the assassin is a Frenchman, Siquert or Sike when he is given a name, sometimes aided by a compatriot named Migert; occasionally we hear that the murderer was a Swedish soldier called Sivert. Many narrators trace the origin of the deed to the king's sister, and state or imply that the assassin was in her employ. In several versions the messenger who rode directly to Stockholm to inform the princess of her brother's death received an extravagant reward for his news; he arrived just as the princess was washing herself, "and she gave to the messenger the wash basin of silver which she had been using" (C, 222).

When a button is used to kill the king, often it is the king's sister who is said to have cut it off his coat; in one case we are told she did this "because she felt sorry for the people who had to be at war for so long" (C, 225). But in other versions a soldier or the king's valet is the thief; sometimes the king even asks his valet to kill him with the button.

All these motifs are widely distributed; they can be found all over Sweden, in Swedish Finland, and occasionally in other parts of Scandinavia. Nevertheless Sandklef feels that he has identified two small districts in western Sweden in which oral legendry about the king's death almost always cites the button as the murder instrument.

The first such "accumulation district," in the northern part of the Swedish province of Bohuslän, is close to the battlefield of Fredrikshald across the border. Sandklef argues that since the soldiers returning from Charles XII's Norwegian campaign reached this region first on their march home, the stories they told here about the death of the king had not yet been distorted by frequent retellings and new rumors.<sup>4</sup> Further, the personal familiarity of the people of the district with the scene of the actual events has helped to preserve these original narratives fairly intact through two hundred years. The predominant belief here that the king was shot with one of his own buttons must therefore reflect the earliest reports; the silver bullet must have entered the tradition of other districts at a later date.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnar Granberg has further discussed soldiers as tradition carriers and holds that they have been important disseminators not only of traditions about the death of Charles XII, but of folklore about kings in general. See his "Sågnernas svenska kungar" [The Swedish Kings in the Legends], *Fataburen*, 1946, pp. 133-146.

The second “accumulation district” is further south; it includes among others the parishes of Öxnevalla, Horred (Andersson’s home), and Frillesås (where Sandklef grew up). Here legend narrators add the detail that a soldier from Öxnevalla found the button that had killed the king and brought it home. Sandklef published fifteen local versions that contain this additional incident, and stressed that he had never been able to find a comparable tradition anywhere else in Sweden. It exists only in this one small district: the same district in which Andersson discovered the striking lead-filled brass button in 1924.

Sandklef does not always report when his texts were collected, and unfortunately for his case only three of the fifteen “Öxnevalla” versions were clearly recorded before 1924. One was collected in 1921 from a man born in 1832:

Charles XII was so strong that he could straighten out a horseshoe. Once he fought ten Russians and killed them all. Bullets had no effect on him. That’s the reason why he could go on with the war for so long. But finally everyone except the king grew tired of the war. And they were going to shoot him in order to end the war. But it was impossible to kill him until they cut a button off his coat. That’s what they used to shoot him. But there was a soldier from Öxnevalla who noticed when they shot him, and he looked for and found the button and brought it home with him. (C, 235-236)

Another was told to Sandklef in 1922 by an informant born in Frillesås in 1840:

There was an itinerant salesman from Mark’s district during my childhood who was called Skia-Johan, and he said that they killed Charles XII with a Polish button that he had. And it’s supposed to have been a soldier from Öxnevalla who brought that button home from the war. (K, 160)

Sandklef collected the third in Frillesås in 1923:

There was a soldier named Sivert who killed Charles XII. But he shot him with a button from the king’s own coat. It was impossible before. But then there was a soldier from Öxnevalla who found that button. He later handed it over to the minister at the church; the minister probably wanted to find out what it was all about. (C, 235; K, 149)

Except for the reference to the minister in the last narrative, none of these three brief texts says much about the fate of the soldier and his button. By contrast Andersson himself told a story that does not suffer from lack of details; unfortunately the text is undated, and Sandklef does

not quote Andersson directly, supplying only a rather circumstantial third-person account:

At one occasion during 1922, when master smith Andersson was doing a job for August Carlsson in Töllebäck in Istorp, Carlsson related that one of his forefathers once had repaired the ministry. At that occasion Carlsson's ancestor had gotten hold of a report written down by a sexton in Öxnevalla, and in it could be read that a soldier from Öxnevalla had been present in the trenches when Charles XII was shot. And the soldier heard the shot and saw that the bullet hit against a rock and then he walked up and found the bullet at the rock and brought it with him home. And it was one of the king's own buttons which had passed through his head. Then the soldier walked around at home in Öxnevalla bragging about possessing that bullet. But then there was somebody in Stockholm who had confessed and had been banished from the country. And so the minister went to the soldier telling him to get rid of the button, and the minister and the soldier went together to the bog myrtle at Deragård and threw away the button there. But people didn't think it was right to throw the button away, so they forced the soldier to pay a visit to the sexton, and he wrote up a report about the whole thing. But the minister found this out, and so the sexton gave him the report. The minister hid the report at home, and it was there that they [Carlsson's ancestor] found it. (C, 241-242)

This version, then, explains how the button found its way to Deragård. Carlsson was dead at the time of the recording, but Sandklef takes pains to prove that he could have said what Andersson said he did. But even Sandklef was sceptical of the authenticity of some of the details in Andersson's story, and concedes that these may be the result of "literary influence."

Nevertheless, Andersson's account checks well in essentials with several other longer versions, such as the following, which Sandklef feels is superior to the others in its "natural freshness" and "simple and psychologically satisfactory explanations" (C, 224):

It is told that a soldier lived here on the land owned by Deragård, and he was with Charles XII in Norway. He stood watching when they shot the king, and he saw where the bullet fell and he took it with him home. But afterwards he was walking around thinking about this, so he couldn't sleep at night. Therefore he brought the bullet which was a button from the king's coat and went to the minister at church one Sunday. And he told it all to the minister, and the minister said to the soldier that he ought to get rid of the button so that he could sleep nights. As he said this they were walking on the little road just opposite to where the gravel pit is now, and the soldier threw away the button there and it was in gravel which came from that place where the smith in Horred found it. (C, 243)

According to Sandklef, his informant claimed to have learned this story right before 1916; however, one sure thing about this undated recording is that it was made *after* “the smith in Horred” turned up the button.

Most impressive for Sandklef’s argument was not this “superior” version but rather a diffuse account collected in the summer of 1939 by Sandklef and Nils Strömbom from Karl Pettersson, who had been born in Öxnevalla in 1841 and died in 1940. Pettersson’s version supplies a surprising and apparently authentic detail: a name for the soldier who brought the button home.

About Charles XII? Well, it was a really nasty sister that he had, Charles XII. So, it wasn’t possible to shoot him, he had bullets in his boots every evening when he undressed — yes, I sure know what they did in Fredrikshall. It was the government that got the idea to shoot him; they wanted to take over the country. The Prince to whom the sister was married — most of it was his fault. They aimed at his head, because otherwise there would be no effect. Yes, and they shot him with a button which they took from his clothes — it was not a neck button, because that’s not what they took. There was always talk that the sister of Charles XII had taken part in killing him. There were many soldiers at Fredrikshall, and one of them came from Stjärnhult’s *rote*.<sup>5</sup> His name was Nordstierna — isn’t that a fine name? It’s like the name of a really important man. — A high sounding name — yes, and he took the bullet and it was a button, and he brought it along in a leather pouch. Well, he threw it away at Deragård. — I never thought it was a neck button — but it was pretty bad of the sister to make this come to pass — he was really a fine king, for he was good at whipping up all the others. — Well, there was much more talk, and I think it’s true — they spoke a lot about this during my childhood. Nordstierna had the button in his money pouch — that didn’t matter, it didn’t rot. (C, 253)

And the name Nordstierna is historically verifiable: the muster rolls reveal that until 1762 the soldiers maintained by Stjärnhult’s *rote* were called Nordstierna, and that Mårten Nilsson Nordstierna had been present at Fredrikshald. After 1762 the name dropped out of use and Sandklef argues that there must have been some good reason why local tradition preserved the name of a seemingly unimportant soldier for 175 years.

Other written records provide some limited and equivocal support for

<sup>5</sup> Until the end of the nineteenth century the Swedish system of conscription was organized so that ten to twenty neighboring farms together constituted one *rote*. This group had the duty to support with a cottage, grains, and a small salary one professional soldier. A standing soldier name came with each *rote*, and a new soldier assumed this upon entering service.

Sandklef's thesis that Öxnevalle legendry preserved historical fact. The most important eyewitness reports tend to contradict each other, especially on such important details as the direction of the bullet and its size, and it is difficult to obtain from them a clear impression of the circumstances attendant on the king's death. But about some facts one can be relatively sure. The king had been standing in an exposed position with his head above a trench wall. He was leaning his left cheek in his left hand. That morning he had changed his clothes, providing opportunity for a button thief. After Charles XII was found dead and before his body was placed on a bier, an officer removed the king's well-known three-cornered hat and replaced it with his own wig, ostensibly to conceal from common soldiers that their leader lay dead. The officer who made this exchange was André Sicre, a Frenchman who had joined the king in Turkey and in whom we recognize Siquert, Sike and Sivert, the murderer in folk legendry. Sicre immediately rode off to Stockholm to report the news to Ulrika Eleonora and the cabinet, an incident reflected in legends which at times imply that the messenger and the assassin were one and the same. Further, in Siquert's co-conspirator Migert we can recognize Philippe Maigret, a French officer in charge of the trench operations at Fredrikshald and whose report of the events surrounding the king's death was important for Voltaire's biography, *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731).

In more general terms, the political climate of 1718 seemed to invite regicide. Eighteen years of the king's grand campaigns had not been able to prevent the loss of Sweden's foreign possessions, and war fatigue, crop failure and disease had taken their toll on the people. The aristocracy was torn apart by the awareness that the heirless king might die in battle any day. In the fall of 1718 the specter of peace loomed briefly in negotiations with Russia conducted by the king's chancellor, Baron von Görtz: what if the king were to return safely to Stockholm, marry and produce an heir? After the convenient death of the king, Ulrika Eleonora and Prince Fredrik outmaneuvered their rivals with alacrity. Von Görtz was executed in 1718 and Fredrik officially crowned king in 1720.

At the time Sweden, especially Stockholm, teemed with rumors that the king had been assassinated by a henchman of Fredrik and Ulrika Eleonora: and what likelier suspect could there be than the ubiquitous foreigner, André Sicre? The exchange of his wig for the king's bullet-riddled hat smacked of hanky-panky, and rumor rode a new wave in 1723



when Sicre was said to have confessed to the murder during a fit of madness.

Sandklef does not fail to point out the relevance of Sicre's alleged confession to a detail in the Öxnevalla texts: the role of the minister, who in several versions persuades the soldier to throw away the button he had found. Sandklef suggests that the minister in question was a certain Johan Aurelius, who became rector in the Öxnevalla district in 1722 but at the same time maintained governmental duties in Stockholm. This Aurelius was a member of the secret committee which in 1724 investigated the reports of Sicre's confession to the murder of Charles XII. It was of course in the interest of the royal couple to suppress any talk of murder, and Sicre was summarily cleared of suspicion; it was therefore presumably on behalf of the crown that Aurelius urged Nordstierna to dispose of his potentially dangerous evidence. In Aurelius, then, Sandklef found a link between the events of the capital and those of little Öxnevalla.

Andersson's statement that "there was somebody in Stockholm who had confessed" to the murder of Charles XII need not refer to Sicre: eighteenth century Sweden overflowed with such reports. As well-known as Sicre's "confession," for example, was that of Major General Carl Cronstedt, of whose actual guilt some of the authors of *Carl XII:s död* appear quite convinced.

But it is the forensic evidence that gives Sandklef his most striking support. Sam. Clason, M.D., points out that on the last two occasions that the king's body was exhumed, in 1859 and 1917, the examining committees concluded that the bullet had entered the king's head from the left with great power and speed and had passed through almost horizontally.<sup>6</sup> For such conditions to occur, the marksman would have had to have been standing close to the king (10 to 20 meters) and below him, since several eyewitnesses agree that the king had been inclining his head to the left when he was shot; the Norwegian fortifications were far away and above him. The committee of 1917 had further concluded that the bullet must have had a diameter of 18-20 mm.; the original diameter of the button found by Andersson must have been 19.6-19.7 mm. More: the bullet could not have been an ordinary unjacketed lead bullet, because these invariably splinter and there is no trace of fragmentation in

<sup>6</sup> Clason presents his findings in a preliminary form in *Carl XII:s död* and elaborates them further in a much acclaimed study, *Gåtan från Fredrikshald* [The Riddle from Fredrikshald] (Stockholm, 1941).

the king's skull. Jacketed bullets had not yet been invented, so the committee concluded that Charles XII had been killed with an iron bullet. Impossible, says Clason, who discovered that Swedes did not use iron bullets that small at Fredrikshald; Norwegians did, he admits, but falls back on the first argument that they were too far away (K, 200). The king could have been shot only with a silver bullet, he argues, or with a "special projectile" such as the button found by Andersson. The button would then have to be considered "an inspired anachronism,"<sup>7</sup> in effect a splinter-proof jacketed lead bullet used 150 years before its time.

Did Charles XII actually wear spherical buttons filled with lead? Sandklef could not locate any counterparts for the button in Sweden. In portraits Charles XII seems to wear only flat buttons, and flat indeed are the buttons on the perfectly preserved clear blue outfit worn by the king on his last day.<sup>8</sup> It was first a specialist at the Louvre who suggested that the button might come from southeastern Europe or the Near East, an idea confirmed by an official of the Topkapiserail Museum in Istanbul. He said the button was probably Turkish, but could not investigate further, as the holdings of the museum had been evacuated (1940). A Swedish metallurgical expert concluded that the alloys had not been produced by modern methods but could give no closer dating; he added that it seemed "likely that the raw materials for the brass and lead core of the bullet-button can be found within the ore region of Saxony-Bohemia-Moravia-Siebenbürgen, possibly further south" (K, 170-171).

It is certainly not impossible that Charles XII could have worn Turkish buttons, since he had spent 1709-14 as a prisoner in Turkey. On a little-known portrait done in Turkey he wears buttons that look rounder and fuller than the buttons on other portraits. Further, the conjectural "eastern" origin of the button is confirmed by oral traditions that can be proven to have circulated before Andersson's find. Sandklef happily points to the short Öxnevalla text he collected in 1922 (see above) and to other narratives according to which Charles XII wore buttons of Polish or other "southeastern" origin.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The essayist-novelist Frans G. Bengtsson used the expression in his review "Skottet vid Fredrikshall" [The Shot at Fredrikshall] *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 15, 1940.

<sup>8</sup> The costume is exhibited in the Livrustkammaren, a division of the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm.

<sup>9</sup> At this point one feels invited to even further speculation by the fact that André Sicre had joined the king in Turkey. If Sicre is the assassin, is it not possible that already

Sandklef's reconstruction of the events leading up to and away from the death of Charles XII is finally as simple as it is ingenious in its use of folk belief; he summarizes his case as follows:

1. The following traditions must have been current in 1718:
  - a. Charles XII is "hard."
  - b. Charles XII can be killed only by a button which belongs to him.
  - c. Charles XII owns buttons of eastern (southeastern) origin.
2. Somebody decides to murder Charles XII with such a button.
3. This person manages to steal such a button.
4. This button is used as a projectile and kills the king.
5. Nordstierna finds the button and brings it home.
6. Nordstierna throws the button away at Deragård (K, 199).

*Carl XII:s död* caused a sensation; by fall 1940 radio and newspaper publicity had made the bullet-button into a Swedish household word. But for all its popularity, Sandklef's thesis met with fierce opposition, particularly from historians; the longest and most articulate rebuttal came from Nils Ahnlund (1890-1957), professor of history at Stockholm University and member of the Swedish Academy, a master source critic with an elegant style and a large academic following. Already in 1926 he had expressed general scepticism toward the acceptance of orally transmitted legends as historical sources, and proposed stringent conditions for their evaluation as such.<sup>10</sup> Further, Ahnlund was president of the *Karolinska Förbundet*, a society dedicated to the propagation of knowledge about Charles XII and his era. It was as an advocate of the interests of that society that Ahnlund undertook to defend orthodox historical scholarship from the onslaughts of heretical dilettantes.

Like Sandklef before him, Ahnlund became the guiding spirit of a collaborative work, *Sanning och Sägen om Karl XII:s död* ("Truth and Legend about the Death of Charles XII");<sup>11</sup> here four co-authors reject essentially all the conclusions of *Carl XII:s död*. While granting that the bullet which killed the king must have come from the left, they never-

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in Turkey he could have carried the intention of murdering the king? He could certainly have stolen a button from a costume that had been made for the king with Turkish materials, and saved the button until he finally used it.

<sup>10</sup> "Folktraditionen som historisk källa" [Folk Tradition as an Historical Source], *Historisk Tidskrift* 26 (1926): 342-363.

<sup>11</sup> By Stig Jägerskiöld, Nils Ahnlund, Gustaf Hultkvist and Barbro Göthberg Edlund (Stockholm, 1941). Here referred to with "S" and page number.

theless insisted that it had been fired by one of the besieged Norwegians. Historian Stig Jägerskiöld re-examined the political scene of 1718 and denied that it provided any good ground for the suspicion of murder or of murder conspiracy. Gustaf Hultkvist, M.D., member of the 1917 exhumation committee, discredited the findings of Sandklef's medical expert; Clason, he pointed out, was an obstetrician/gynecologist and not an expert coroner. Barbro Göthberg-Edlund discussed the still undated Öxnevalla button and reported finding a Swedish twin, thereby making questionable its derivation from the mysterious east.

These three contributions are finally of little independent value in the debate; none of the results can unequivocally invalidate the reasoning of Sandklef and his collaborators. The essential arguments were Ahnlund's own in his discussion of the folk traditions and rumors as historical sources. He approaches the subject of folklore reluctantly, and even apologizes for taking away "too much space" from more serious considerations (S, 232). But despite this unhidden prejudice, much of Ahnlund's criticism does hit Sandklef where he is most vulnerable: in his fieldwork and handling of sources. Ahnlund refuses to accept Sandklef's basic premise: the identification of two "accumulation districts" in western Sweden. The predominance of material from that area reflects only the concentrated collecting drives made there but nowhere else in Sweden with comparable intensity; the lack of reliable control materials disqualifies Sandklef's results. Further, with the help of a collaborator in the field, Ahnlund uncovered many legends in the Öxnevalla region that Sandklef had overlooked: stories that Charles XII was shot with a silver bullet, and not by a button from his own clothes. Even more telling is an inventory made by Ahnlund's field collaborator: "Out of 28 men and women in Öxnevalla aged from 51 to 87 years, 26 have declared that before the smith's find they had never heard about the soldier from Öxnevalla" (S 209). And the two remaining testimonies are not reliable, insists Ahnlund.

In fact, Ahnlund sought to demonstrate that all of Sandklef's key recordings from Öxnevalla can directly or indirectly be connected with C. Hj. Andersson, who was well-known in the area "for his extraordinarily playful imagination."<sup>12</sup> Far from contenting himself to point

<sup>12</sup> The expression was used in a popular article by a geologist well familiar with the Öxnevalla region and its people. See Lennart von Post, "Kulan från Öxnevalla" [The Bullet from Öxnevalla], *Svenska Turistföreningens Tidning* 8 (1940): 254.

out obvious inadequacies in Sandklef's reportage, Ahnlund goes to quite some length to establish the blacksmith as a demonic artificer of folk narrative. Using evidence from Sandklef and from his own field collaborator, Ahnlund traces the development in Andersson's mind of an increasingly elaborate narrative about the death of Charles XII. In his youth Andersson had been familiar only with the common tradition that the king had been killed by one of his own men; then in 1904 an old soldier told him a family legend that one of his forefathers had been with Charles XII at Fredrikshald and had brought home to Öxnevalla the button which was said to have killed the king. Ahnlund shows how Andersson kept adding new touches to the story until sometime after the find he could spread around a full-fledged composition about the death of the king. And so, says Ahnlund, all of Sandklef's important texts, including the "best" one, ultimately emanate from Andersson. Ahnlund, who does not hesitate to argue *ad hominem* when he gets the chance, accuses Sandklef of deliberately suppressing references that tie his texts to Andersson.

Ahnlund further discovered that Sandklef was not the first to recognize in print the significance of Andersson's find. In 1934 Andersson told his story to Thorsten Friedlander, a journalist who four years later published a long and imaginative account of Andersson's discovery in the Sunday edition of a major Gothenburg paper, relating the button to theories that Charles XII had been murdered by a Swede.<sup>13</sup> The article contains in germinal form almost all of the key arguments later elaborated by Sandklef and collaborators. Furthermore, Friedlander's article was reprinted in country papers, thereby contributing nicely to the oral circulation of Andersson's tale.

Ahnlund also casts suspicion on Sandklef's *pièce de résistance*: the 1939 recording in which ninety-nine year old Karl Pettersson reports the name of the Öxnevalla soldier to have been Nordstierna. Ahnlund found out that in 1935 Pettersson had related to a local folklore collector (who later became Ahnlund's field collaborator) traditions about the death of

<sup>13</sup> "Var det en svensk som sköt Karl XII?" [Did a Swede kill Charles XII?], *Göteborgs-Tidningen*, November 27, 1938. Another Gothenburg newspaper article of the time discusses western Swedish folk traditions about the death of Charles XII and briefly refers to Andersson's story and find. See Carl-Martin Bergstrand, "Folktraditioner om Karl XII:s död" [Folk Traditions About the Death of Charles XII], *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, February 15, 1936.

Charles XII that differed from those he told Sandklef four years afterwards:

The smith is supposed to have found down at Horred the bullet with which they shot Charles XII. It's supposed to have been a person from Stjärnhult in Öxnevala who killed him. Well, Charles XII sure was more powerful than other people. He had one of those helmets, so no bullets had any effect on him there.<sup>14</sup> When he came home in the evenings, he stamped his feet and the bullets fell off him. But I have also heard that his sister arranged it so that it would be possible to shoot him with a silver button. I suppose she did that because she wanted to govern. (S, 199)

Ahnlund accounts for the discrepancy between the two texts with a charge of collusion: the 1935 version is “basically untendentious” whereas Pettersson must have been manipulated into making the 1939 statement. Ahnlund, who is not above arguing by insinuation, notes that the smith Andersson visited Pettersson just a few days before Sandklef and Strömbom came to interview him. Further, it is very possible that the name Nordstierna had been passed on to Pettersson at some time just prior to the 1939 recording: according to one source, Sandklef and Strömbom had checked into the muster rolls some months *before* the interview with Pettersson, and not afterwards, as Sandklef recalled.<sup>15</sup>

Sandklef defended himself energetically in *Kulknappen och Carl XII:s död*, counter-charging, for example, that the amateur collector who interviewed Pettersson in 1935 may have interpreted laxly the basic rule to write down exactly what one hears, no more, no less. He points out that no one could have prepared Pettersson in 1939 with information he did not have earlier: by then he was so deaf that he could barely comprehend that his visitors wanted to hear about the death of Charles XII. Sandklef feels in any case that old people remember better what they learned in their childhood than what they learned yesterday. In *Kulknappen* he also published duly attested affidavits from his informants that they had been quoted correctly in *Carl XII:s död*.

Personal animosities and axes to grind misled both parties into believing that Sandklef's integrity as such was a central issue. It is, after all,

<sup>14</sup> It is possible that “helmet” refers to the Swedish word for “caul,” *segerhuva* (lit. “victory hood”).

<sup>15</sup> Carl-Fredrik Palmstierna, “Detektivarbetet kring Carl XII” [The Detective Work Around Charles XII], *Vecko-Journalen*, November 10, 1940.

possible to explain the discrepancy between Pettersson's two versions without reference to willful deception: the informant simply carried two somewhat conflicting ideas of how Charles XII died. The silver button seems to belong to the tradition that he learned first, while Andersson's story was added later; by 1939 he had better integrated the two traditions than in 1935. In any case, neither text presents undiluted childhood memory.

Sandklef is finally undone by the vagueness of his dating of materials. Even Ahnlund accepts that there probably existed before Andersson's find a limited tradition that a soldier from Öxnevalle brought home the button, but Sandklef cannot document the pre-find existence of the detail that the button was thrown away in Deragård's gravel pit. Once again we are made aware that the conclusions of most folkloristic work stand or fall with the quality of the field investigations on which they are based and on the careful reporting of text and total context.

But lucid text criticism may mask a superficial understanding of the larger and deeper issues under discussion. Ahnlund is too aristocratic to consider traditional legends anything but follies of the uneducated masses, and Sandklef was quick to notice this; he insisted that Ahnlund the armchair scholar, who read Sandklef's books "the way the devil reads the Bible" (K, 159), could understand neither "the laws of folk tradition" nor "the thinking and emotions of the folk" the way he himself could (K, 117). It is as if Ahnlund and Sandklef were acting out the very conflict between aristocrat and folk that characterizes many of the legends themselves.

For example, Ahnlund refuses to accept that any of the officers around Charles XII could have shared the belief of the simple folk that the king was "hard," and that he could be killed only by a silver bullet or by a button from his own clothes. Since the king had almost died from a wound in his left foot received at the battle of Vorskla (1709), Ahnlund feels that his doctor and general staff must have been aware of his mortal vulnerability. Although Sandklef calls attention to the witch trials of late seventeenth century Sweden and to the fact that the feet of Charles XII's corpse were tied together to prevent his return from the grave, he does not refer to much of the plentiful evidence that even learned men of the time held beliefs that the twentieth century would call superstitious. It is even more surprising that Ahnlund should overlook such instances of the acceptance of superstitious beliefs as the medical writings of Olof

Broman, a contemporary of Charles XII.<sup>16</sup> Sandklef may finally display a greater historical sense than the historian when he suggests that in the eighteenth century “it was logical and sensible” to choose a magic object to kill a king (K, 69).

Many attempts at the reconstruction of historical reality from oral legends fail when confronted with the existence of parallel traditions elsewhere. Since Sandklef’s reconstruction of the murder of Charles XII presupposes a belief in the king’s invulnerability, it does not suffer from the discovery of further contemporary instances of such beliefs; on the contrary, documentation of the popularity and wide distribution of parallels actually strengthens Sandklef’s case. One such parallel — noted neither by Sandklef nor Ahnlund — is the case of the famous Scottish Viscount Dundee, John Graham of Claverhouse, who fell in battle in 1689 and was said to have been shot by his own servant “with a silver button he had before taken off his own coat.”<sup>17</sup> We seem here to be faced with a migratory legend, for Charles XII is also reported in some narratives to have asked his own servant to kill him with a button from the royal costume. But migratory legend or not, it is still possible that magic belief preceded and caused either hero’s fall to a button.

Few Swedish folklorists expressed in print any interest in Sandklef’s work. Carl-Martin Bergstrand and Waldemar Liungman took public stands against Sandklef, but neither contributed anything substantial to the debate.<sup>18</sup> The only folklorist to discuss Sandklef’s ideas sympathetically and at some length was Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, who praised Sandklef for not dismissing the button as a mere curiosity and for

<sup>16</sup> *Glysisvallur och öfriga skrifter rörande Helsingland* [Glysisvallur and Other Works on Helsingland], ed. Gestrike Nation, 3 vols. (Uppsala, 1911-54). See also Carl-Herman Tillhagen, “Olof Broman som läkare och medicinsk författare” [Olof Broman as a Doctor and Medical Author] in *Kulturspeglings. Studier tillägnade Sam Owen Jansson* (Stockholm, 1966), pp. 304-324; English summary.

<sup>17</sup> Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 22 (London, 1890), p. 349.

<sup>18</sup> See Bergstrand’s article “Intendent Sandklef och västsvenska folkminnesarkivet” [Director Sandklef and the Western Swedish Folk Memory Archive], *Folkminnen och Folktankar* 29 (1942): 30-34. There is also an answer from Sandklef and a final rebuttal from Bergstrand on pp. 166-168 in the same year’s issue of the journal. Liungman’s late-coming contribution is “Karl XII och kulknappen eller vad folkdikten icke kan bevisa” [Charles XII and the Bullet-Button or what Folk Poetry Cannot Prove], *Bäckhästen* 1 (1945): 55-69. Liungman notes the paucity of folkloristic discussions of Sandklef’s works and then proceeds to refute Sandklef on the basis of what he regards as the true origin and spread of the legend types.



“having dared to involve himself with matters which no historian” would have had the courage to touch.<sup>19</sup> Von Sydow not only defended Sandklef’s competence against those who sneered at his lack of academic degrees, but also declared himself convinced that the object Andersson found is the very button that ended “the era of great Swedish power politics.” Unlike Ahnlund, von Sydow felt that the controversial Öxnevalle legends were based on old, inherited tradition; they did not have the characteristics of “fictional” material.<sup>20</sup>

But von Sydow’s support for Sandklef’s thesis seems finally to have rested on scant foundations, more on a willingness to believe than on any compelling argument. In fact, except for Ahnlund’s telling but purely negative criticism, Sandklef’s ideas were never discussed on a sophisticated level. For example, none of the scholars who took part in the controversy investigated with any thoroughness the complex but striking relationship between the folk traditions, the eighteenth century rumors, and nineteenth century printed popular literature.<sup>21</sup> Further, all the interested scholars

<sup>19</sup> Von Sydow first contributed a review “Boken om Karl XII:s död” [The Book About the Death of Charles XII], *Stockholms-Tidningen*, October 30, 1940. Later appeared “Några tillägg rörande folkminnesmateriallets behandling” [Some Additions Regarding the Treatment of the Folk Memory Material], *Folkkultur* 1 (1941): 194. There is some indication that von Sydow tried to use the fame of Sandklef’s work to raise money for the cause of folklore. Two days after his review, the *Stockholms-Tidningen* printed an interview with von Sydow in which he expressed the need for folklore collecting to continue also during “hard times.” As an example of the important work to which collecting can lead, he pointed to Sandklef’s studies of the death of Charles XII.

<sup>20</sup> In *Kulknappen* Sandklef proposes a distinction between “productive” and “im-productive” motifs. The productive motifs are the widespread ones, the elements of migratory legends; they are the motifs “with whose help new events and experiences create new legends and narratives” (K, 184). The unproductive motifs, by contrast, cannot generate new stories. Von Sydow accepts Sandklef’s distinction as “inescapable” and emphasizes along with Sandklef that the presence in legends of unproductive motifs increases the likelihood of historical accuracy. Thus, because the Öxnevalle legends contain several unproductive motifs, they are historically quite accurate. Neither Sandklef nor von Sydow made any real attempts to think over the implications of the distinction and to clarify its hopelessly unclear aspects.

<sup>21</sup> Palmstierna’s long chapter in *Carl XII:s död* concerning the rumors shows little concern with the intricate relationship between the three literary forms. On the one hand, there are materials which appear well developed in rumor and popular literature, but play a minor role in folk legendry. This appears to be the case with the confessions of regicide. Such stories were printed in country newspapers such as the *Calmar-Bladet* (April 23, 1836) and in a widely popular work by E. J. Ekman, *Den inre missionens historia* [The History of the Inner Mission], vol. 1 (Stockholm, 1896), pp. 40 and 49-51. but confessions seem to be relatively rare in folklore; Andersson’s story is among the fairly unusual exceptions. On the other hand, there are materials which occasionally

and journalists viewed the oral traditions from the single aspect of their potential value as documentation of historical fact; exclusively concerned with "accuracy" and "inaccuracy," none of them gave much thought to the expressive content of the legends, to the judgments and attitudes they embody.

Ahnlund touches this aspect when he characterizes the legends as "non-historical tradition sources," the sole "historical gist" of which "seems to be the fact that they offer a testimony of profound fatigue with the war, a testimony which meets us in a multitude of voices from the depths of the past" (S, 192). But Ahnlund never seems to have realized that since the legends were collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they are actually the voices of a more recent past than he had in mind. Some of the content of the legends undoubtedly derives from the time immediately following the king's death, but no one has tried to determine which features and motifs can be traced back that far. Also, Ahnlund oversimplifies the feelings and judgments actually expressed in the legends. Even the few examples quoted above reveal more than war fatigue. The hundreds of legends about Charles XII in Swedish archives display a wide range of emotions; frequently a single informant expresses contradictory or ambivalent attitudes in one statement. A narrative may express relief at the end of war in the death of the king and at the same time admiration for a leader who "was good at whipping up all the others," as Karl Pettersson put it. The Finnish-Swedish narrator of a long and remarkable tale about the murder feels that the resulting peace was a good thing; but at the same time he warns that "the peace will not last long," prophesying that in 1917 "King Charles from the North will stand up and gather all Christians to battle with non-Christians."<sup>22</sup> This

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appear in print, but still seem to have their firmest basis in folklore. The latter seems to be the case with the motif of the silver basin with which Ulrika Eleonora rewards the messenger. The spread of this motif could only partially have been aided by printing in the second edition of Jacob Ekelund's popular history book, *Anteckningar i fäderneslandets häfder för unga och gamla i synnerhet bland allmogen* [Notes to the Annals of the Fatherland for Young and Old, in Particular the Country Folk] (Stockholm, 1836), p. 303.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in V. E. V. Wessman, ed., *Finlands svenska folkdiktning* [The Swedish Folk Poetry of Finland], part 2, vol. 2 (Helsingfors, 1924), pp. 301-302. Folk tradition connected Charles XII with millennial expectations at an early date. See *Carl XII:s död*, pp. 110-115, and Gustav Aldén, *Karl XII i nyare forskningens ljus och i folkminnet* [Charles XII in the Light of Recent Scholarship and in Folk Memory] (Stockholm, 1918), pp. 93-96.

narrator's attitude seems to be that regicide was necessary but appalling: we had to kill the king but he will return and lead us to glory.

Narrators of historical legends may attempt consciously to judge or explain the events they describe.<sup>23</sup> But there are even more essential ways in which legends, by concentrating on certain characters, actions, and motifs, implicitly and symbolically express the values of their tellers and their groups. In a sense, the entire Sandklef-Ahnlund controversy distracted attention from the way in which all historical legendry is "true": as a condensed representation of the image a group has of its own past and of the meaning of this image for its present and future. A legend does not seek to report facts in chronological order, but rather to interpret events and to crystallize one's experience of them.<sup>24</sup> Sandklef's reconstruction remains attractive, even when we realize he cannot prove his case; not only do murder and intrigue make a better story than the official version of the king's death, but also the striking manner of the execution fixes our attention on a detail which it is difficult not to consider symbolic: the button. We are drawn to some psychological truth in the notion that Charles XII was murdered with one of his own buttons: witness von Sydow's willingness to accept Sandklef's research at face value. In the legends the exotic button is explicitly and implicitly identified as the king's amulet: as such it was the seat of his hero's invulnerability, and the sign of his power and destiny. The legends know that it was the king's own heroic career, symbolically contained in the button, that turned against him and killed him, after he had drained his own and his country's resources into personally-waged, at first successful and finally disastrous campaigns.<sup>25</sup>

In the folklore of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Charles XII came to embody the unfulfilled national destiny of Sweden as an aggressive ruler of peoples. This image was, however, continually qualified by an ambivalent attitude toward his death. Folk stories as well as scholarly theories of murder brought with them an awareness of

<sup>23</sup> See Brynjulf Alver, "Historiske segner og historisk sanning" [Historical Legends and Historical Truth], *Norveg* 9 (1962): 89-116; English summary.

<sup>24</sup> Hildegunde Prütting provides a lucid discussion of the symbolic aspects of historical folk legendry in "Zur geschichtlichen Volkssage," *Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde*, 1953, pp. 16-26.

<sup>25</sup> Another detail in the legendry which has striking symbolic implications is Ulrika Eleonora's wash basin. It seems unavoidable to associate it with the washing off of guilt for the crime; perhaps she gives the silver basin to the messenger so that he can use it for the same purpose.

the destructive side of the king's career; the suggestion that there might have been legitimate reasons to assassinate the great hero had to throw a harsh light on the national self-image he represented. For this reason a military scholar in 1912 saw the necessity of categorically denying the notion that a Swede or a Swedish agent had shot the king: "Indeed, we would not be Swedes, 'of Aryan blood, the purest and the oldest,' if *we* could have betrayed Charles XII, the foremost incarnation of the Swedish folk soul."<sup>26</sup> It is against this background of Charles XII as a national symbol, from which Swedes often found it difficult to preserve any historical distance, that the controversy which flared up in 1940 must be viewed: it was no profound interest in the problems of oral history which made Sandklef's thesis into "a gigantic sensation and an historical question of national proportions" (S, 219).

Participants in the debate frequently referred to the world situation, and at times the arguments were considered very relevant indeed to Sweden's larger concerns at the onset of World War II. One writer calling himself "Academicus" attacked both Sandklef and the Royal Dramatic Theater, which had just presented the Strindberg play in which Charles XII appears disillusioned in the end; unpatriotic and defeatist forces have conspired, says "Academicus," to destroy the lofty memory of that Swedish figure who "personifies precisely the qualities our nation needs during the present situation."<sup>27</sup> But no one at the time analyzed closely the relationship between the outbreak of World War II and that of the button debate, and a spontaneous, unreflected quality is evident in juxtaposed headlines in Swedish newspapers. The lead story on the front page of *Dagens Nyheter*, Stockholm's major daily, for December 1, 1940, was: "Memory of the Hero King Celebrated. Murder Theories Sharply Criticized." On the same page left the headlines are: "Rome's Fleet to Sardinia. Mass Raid Against Southampton. The British Bomb Brindisi." Or in the cultural section of the *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* of November 29, 1940, a review article on "The Death of Charles XII" overshadows another article's unclear answer to the question of how America views Swedish neutrality. The nation of Charles XII was sitting out the war, fearful of attack and aware of its helplessness should war come. But the very people they feared also considered the Aryan Charles XII as a hero

<sup>26</sup> Oswald Kuylenstierna, *Karl XII:s död* [The Death of Charles XII] (Stockholm 1912), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> "Karl XII år 1940" [Charles XII in 1940], *Svensk Tidskrift* 27 (1940): 707-710.

of their own, a state of affairs that symbolized some of the conflicts and guilts they felt themselves embroiled in.<sup>28</sup> The bitterness of the Sandklef-Ahnlund controversy was one result of the national identity crisis of 1940.

In *Kulknappen* Sandklef promised to turn his attention to further investigations of the bullet-button “when calmer times return” (K, 205). But calm times have not been propitious for the study of the projectile that ended the career of the soldier-king and no investigations have materialized. The button remains on exhibit in Varberg’s Museum, and Sandklef still maintains that “the king *could* have been shot with that button.”<sup>29</sup>

*Nordiska Museet  
Stockholm*

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Frenzel surveys briefly German literature of the 1930s in which Charles XII is treated as a great Germanic hero. See her *Stoffe der Weltliteratur* (Stuttgart, 1963), p. 356.

<sup>29</sup> As stated in a letter of May 13, 1971, I am indebted to Dr. Sandklef for his graceful answers to my questions.