

Rune Edberg:

Vikingaskeppet Ormen Friskes undergång. Ett drama i det kalla krigets skugga

(The Loss of the Viking Ship Ormen Friske. A Drama in the Shadow of the Cold War).

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Abstract

The Ormen Friske, a Swedish replica of the Viking ship from Gokstad, Norway, sank in the North Sea in June 1950, drowning all 15 on board. The fatal voyage started from the Viking Age site of Birka in Lake Mälaren. Having successfully sailed across the Baltic Sea and having been towed through the Kiel Canal, the ship set sail for Rotterdam but perished near Helgoland.

An inquiry by a German official, supported by eyewitness accounts, showed that the ship had been caught in bad weather. The crew steered for shelter at Helgoland, but at that moment U.S. aircraft commenced a high-altitude practice bombing run, targeting the evacuated island, thus apparently preventing the ship from reaching it. Swedish officials suppressed the role that the bombing may have had in the disaster and re-jected the conclusions of the German inquiry. Sweden also declined proposals for an inspection of the wreck by experts, and none was made. Nor was a message in a bottle, testifying to the bombing, examined. The disaster was instead blamed on the ship's alleged deficiencies and the crew's inexperience. During the Cold War, the government of non-allied Sweden cooperated closely in military and intelligence matters with the U.S. and Britain. The reason for the cover-up was to avoid annoying these powers.

Most of the ship's wreckage was cleared away. But a small number of parts and artifacts were safeguarded, some of which still survive in museums, archives and private homes. A register of all known remains, both discarded and still existing, has been compiled. They are discussed in terms of the varying meaning attributed to them by the different authorities and people involved. Also, the remaining artifacts have their sentimental value thanks to their accompanying narratives. Sources also include documents in public archives and private files, press and amateur photos, newspaper reports as well as personal communication with elderly people who were once involved with the construction of the ship or related to its crewmen. This work therefore is archaeology of the contemporary past.

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