18th century Swedish and Russian warships wrecked in Estonian waters

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The history of Estonia has been in close connection with Sweden and Russia during many centuries. We know of the existence of an intensive intercourse between the islands Gotland and Saarema at about 800 B.C. Those were the Estonian coastal dwellers who plied the Baltic Sea to Sweden and took over the custom of burying in stone ship-settings about 2700 years ago.

For ages the Baltic Sea has been an important seafaring area. Large numbers of Viking ships have sailed along the coasts of Estonia in the 18th century, during the Great Northern War, the Russian empire extended its power to the Baltic.

In 1700 the forces of Czar Peter the Great appeared on the banks of the river Narva. Their first attempt to enter the territory of Estonia was successfully repulsed by the Swedish forces on 20th November 1700.

A Russian monument in commemoration of the soldiers killed is standing at the place of the battle up to the present day. But this first attack only led to Czar Peter's further invasion into Livonia with the aim of reaching the Baltic Sea.

In the years 1701-1702, the Russians started to build up a fleet for lake Ladoga. Different types of open vessels, mainly propelled by oars, were built. A number of small vessels, mainly (lodja or ladja in Russian) were also built at the Russian town Pskov for the lake Peipsi fleet. The main aim of the fleet was to make possible the conquest of the castle Neuschloss (Vasknarva at present), located at the northern part of the lake on the upper reaches of the river Narva, and to facilitate attacking of the eastern coast of Estonia.

At the same time the Swedes in Tartu built up their own lake Peipsi fleet to protect the castle Neuschloss from capture by the Russians.

![Estonia and the river of Emajõgi between lake Peipsi and Võrtsjärv.](image)

In 1704 the Swedish fleet consisted of the 14 following small vessels totaling 108 guns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Guns</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&quot;Wachtmeister&quot;</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&quot;Karlskrona&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&quot;Carolus&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&quot;Ulica&quot;</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5&quot;Dorpat&quot;</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6&quot;Narva&quot;</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&quot;Skytte&quot;</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8&quot;Vivat&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9&quot;Victoria&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10&quot;Elefant&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 &quot;Schlippenbach&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>12 &quot;Numers&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 &quot;Strömfeldt&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 &quot;Horn&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
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**Total**

<table>
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<td>108</td>
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In addition to 320 members of the crew there also were approximately 250 soldiers on board the ships.

Early in the morning on the 3rd May 1704, the fleet left Tartu and set sail for lake Peipsi under the leadership of Carl Gustav Lüchern von Hertzfeldt, the naval commander of the fleet.

Convinced of victory over the Russians, the Swedes by way of celebration revelled in drinking and firing salute on the eve of the battle.

The fleet of 14 ships, headed by the "Victory" sailed down the river with a fair wind. The last in line of ships was the "Vivat". The flagship "Carolus" sailed in mid-line. Unfortunately the Swedish sailors and soldiers were off form after the revery before their departure from Tartu, without first reconnoitering.

At the same time the Russian forces, 7066 soldiers with 18 cannons had entered the river Emajõgi and proceeded to the medieval castle Warbeck (Kastre at present) blocking the fairway by means of floating timber. Behind the floating barrier there lay in wait 3 infantry regiments aboard the vessels and, in addition, on each bank of the river 3 infantry regiments.

The Swedish vessels were caught in a trap. Half of the Swedish force jumped overboard and managed to escape. The reminder of the ships crews took up battle but were soon overpowered and taken prisoner. They had neglected to reload their guns after firing salute during their revery of the night before.

190 Swedes had fallen and 142 were taken prisoner. The flagship "Carolus" was blown up by the commander of the fleet to, prevent seizure. The Swedes were defeated, their vessels lost and the Russian forces were free to move on to Tartu, the town of the Academia Gustaviana. Czar Peter's fleet increased by 13 Swedish ships and 96 guns.

Up to the present day the remains of the "Carolus" are resting on the bottom of the river. The place has been well known for centuries and in 1886 von Essen, the local landlord intended
to take the wreck ashore, but this was never done.

During World War II the majority of the population was either lost or displaced so that today there is nobody left who remembers the exact location of the wreck. The group of divers from the diving club "Vikar" of the Estonian Maritime Museum has made some diving trips to Kastre but without particular success. The water in the river is badly polluted and the visibility is near nil. Some pieces of ceramics, an axe, a stone cannonball and some ships planks were found but no wreck.

In the 1930-ies the river was dredged at the area of Kastre and in all likelihood the wreck became buried under stones and other debris. In any case, a small mound of stones in the shape of a ship is lying in the river at the probable place of the battle a likely monument to the unsubdu ed warship "Carolus".

The war spread to the territory of Livonia and also to the Baltic Sea.

Many years passed. Just 96 years after the battle of Kastre the Swedish fleet of warships appeared in the vicinity of Tallinn. On 13th May 1790 the Russian fleet in the Tallinn bay was attacked. We know that the Swedish fleet was defeated, two mighty warships lost, and a number of ships damaged. Entering the bay of Tallinn the ship-of-the-line "Tapperheten" ran aground on the shoal Uusnadal. Next day it was refloated by jettisoning some 40 cannons. The shoal represents a huge mound of boulders lying approximately 5 m below the surface. A shoal of such depth would obstruct a ship of the line without damaging her hull.

Only one 24-pounder was discovered by us in 1983. We found it resting vertically at the steep edge of the shoal. The gun was buried in the mud and taken ashore. At present this gun is resting among other cannons in the vicinity of the Maritime museum.

We suppose that most of the cannons were salvaged by the ships crews after getting Tapperheten off the shoal. In all likelihood the ships armament was rigged up with buoys or secured to the vessel by cables before jettisoning. After refloating the warship her guns probably were heaved to the ship and mounted in place by means of tackles.

After their defeat the Swedish fleet sailed out of Tallinn bay. But one ship-of-the-line, the "Riksens Ständer" had met with disaster. With a stormy wind from the West it had run aground right at the entrance of the Tallinn Bay. An underwater reef extending from the island Aegna towards the north-west had caught her. Being not under command because of damage to the rigging the warship was unable to pass clear of the dangerous rocks and hit them.

The situation was hopeless. The ships crew left the "Riksens Ständer"

![River Emajõgi at Kastre with the site of the castle Warbeck and the possible site of the "Carolus".](image)

by boats. The mighty warship was destroyed by setting it on fire.

In 1897 a ships cannon and an anchor were recovered not far from the island Aegna by the hydrographic vessel "Sekstian". The finds were put on a patch of greenery almost at the centre of Tallinn as a monument of the battle. At that time there existed no doubt about these objects belonging to the Riksens Ständer.

During recent years a number of objects from various wrecked ships have been found near the island Aegna. Cannons, pieces of ceramics, copper kettles, planks, timber knees and so forth can be seen at different places. Undoubtedly many ships have been wrecked on this luring reef.

In 1988 the bottom of a wooden ship was discovered at the port-western tip of the Aegna reef. The remains of a ship are lying partly embedded in the sand between huge rocks. Resting on the ships bottom is a mound of cannonballs, also case shot, other ammunition and lead plates. The wreck is that of a warship without doubt. Preliminary investigations of the find let us presume that it may have been a ship from the 18th century.

A water-dredge was used to help finding any smaller objects so as to obtain the possibility of determining the ships origin.

At first the wreck was assumed to be the "Riksens Ständer", but it turned out not to be a Swedish ship, since almost all the objects found were of Russian origin. Some of them resembled the objects which have been found on the famous St.Nikolai, a Russian frigate from the 18th century. A set of brass weights made in 1748, a Russian sabre of a type used in 1740-1752, some sword hiltts, a pair of navigational dividers, various buttons and so forth. A gilded cockade with the image of the double-headed eagle, the symbol of tsarism, deserves special attention. A rare Russian coin was also found. This one kopek coin was minted in 1756. It is remarkable that such metal money was minted only in 1756 and 1757.

All the aforementioned lets us assume, that the wreck was the Russian frigate "Wachtmeister", caught in a storm and driven onto the Aegna reef on 9th October 1757. The warship, 118 feet long with a beam of 31,6 feet, was built in 1754 at the shipyard of Arhangelsk.

The frigate "Wachtmeister" set sail from Reval to Kronstadt under the command of a naval captain of the 3rd rank. Because of the obvious carelessness of the commander the ships position became disastrous. The anchors were dropped, the masts cut down, but the ship continued drifting. By the morning the frigate was badly damaged on the rocks and was wrecked. After noon the wind abated and part of the crew rowed ashore. Some of the sailors and petty officers remained on the wreck. They intruded into the commanders cabin, got drunk and started fighting. Very soon the frigate broke to pieces. 14 seamen were either killed or drowned. The command
der retired. Under the ships remains a dead body was found. It may have been one of ships officers. Among its bones some pretty plaques were picked up. He had also worn leathered top-boots with big brass buckles and very good gloves.

Among the various objects found in the sand around the wreck was the stem of a broken drinking glass. Although it seems very simple one, a regular pattern of air bubbles can be seen in the upper part of the glass stem. Exactly such an interesting pattern is shown in the book "Altomaer Museum in Hamburg". As judged by this book the glass stem might have belonged to a drinking glass made either in a southern German or in a Hessian foundry.

Such drinking glasses with cut or engraved pictures of ships, harbour scenes, or even sea battles were very popular in the 18th century. Inscriptions occasionally explain the subject matter or purpose of the picture. Although badly damaged by drift-ice, the wreck seems to be a valuable object of research. Its further excavation will be continued in the following years.

There was a large number of disasters with the Russian warships in Estonian waters during the 18th century. In 1781 the "Rodislav", a 66-cannon ship-of-the-line, ran aground on the reef Nargögrund in Tallinn bay. Some days after the disaster the warship was smashed to pieces and carried off the reef in a severe storm. In 1983 a considerable part of a ship was located between the reef Nargögrund and the shoal of Littegrund. The following year we spent a week investigating the wreck. It was found that a fragment of the starboard side of a big ship was resting under layers of gravel and pebbles. The ships side has been partly freed from debris and mapped out, but no strayfinds were discovered.

A huge sternpost, partly covered with copper-sheet was found lying near the ships side. I am inclined to think that these remains may have belonged to the wrecked "Rodislav".

We don’t know exactly how many Swedish and Russian warships have been wrecked in Estonian waters during the 18th century. In one of the sources, the book "The list of warships from 1668 to 1860" by Veselago, printed in 1872, there are some short and laconic statements concerning ship disasters.

For example:

Man-of-wars,
"Astrahan" 66 guns, wrecked at island Dagö in 1761.
"Syjatoi Pjotr" 66 guns, destroyed by fire in Reval in 1764.
"Syjatoi Aleksandr" 66 guns, destroyed by fire in Reval in 1764.
"Vsevolod" 66 guns, destroyed by fire in Reval in 1799.
"Voselav" 66 guns, wrecked in Gulf of Finland in 1789.

In 1934, dredging the basin nr 3 in the port of Tallinn, a huge ships bottom was detected under a thick layer of mud. By means of two floating cranes the wreck was raised and lifted onto the quay. Its dimensions were: length 52 m, breadth 9 m and height 2.5 metres. Unfortunately the time was not favourable for ship archaeology. The wreck consisted of approximately 330 cubic metres black oak and about 3000 kilograms copper. Later the wreck was sold to cabinet-makers in order to pay for crane services. In all likelihood the ships bottom might have been part of one of the aforementioned Russian warships. I make bold to say that the 18th century seafaring history of the Baltic sea offers still many problems waiting to be solved.