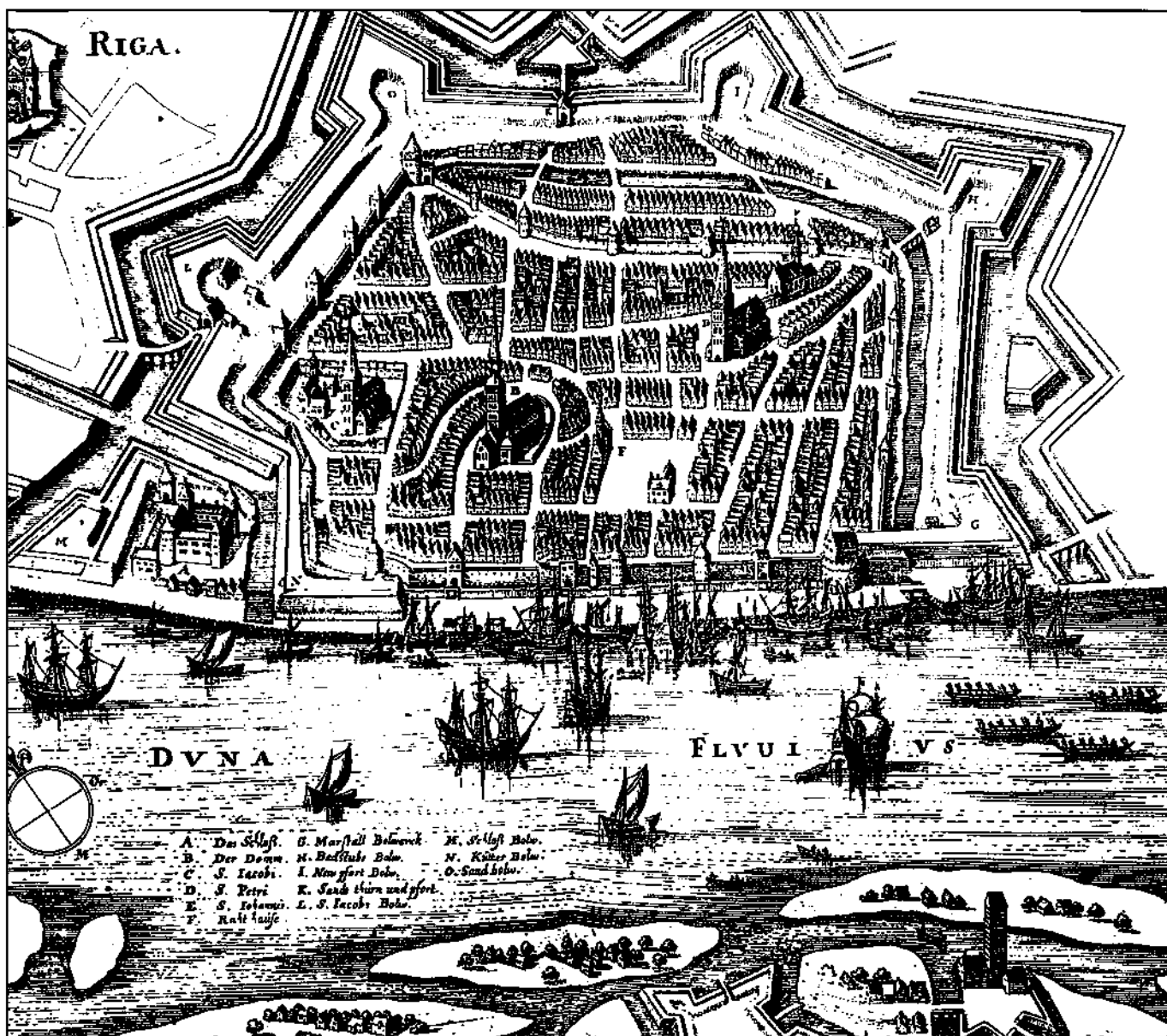


# On the disaster of 10 Swedish Warships wrecked at Cape Domesnäs in 1625

By Vello Mäss.



Riga in 17th century

*As I'm a representative of the Estonian Maritime Museum, the subject of my article is on marine archaeology. I'd like to focus your attention to the Gulf of Riga, more precisely to the Cape Domesnäs (Kolkas rags in Latvian).*

*As you know, at the beginning of the 1620-ies the Swedish Navy was actively engaged in the Gulf of Riga. On the 1st of August 1621 160 warships appeared at the outer roads of Riga and on the 4th they entered the river Daugava in order to capture the town. After ten days of fighting the town was captured the 15th of August.*

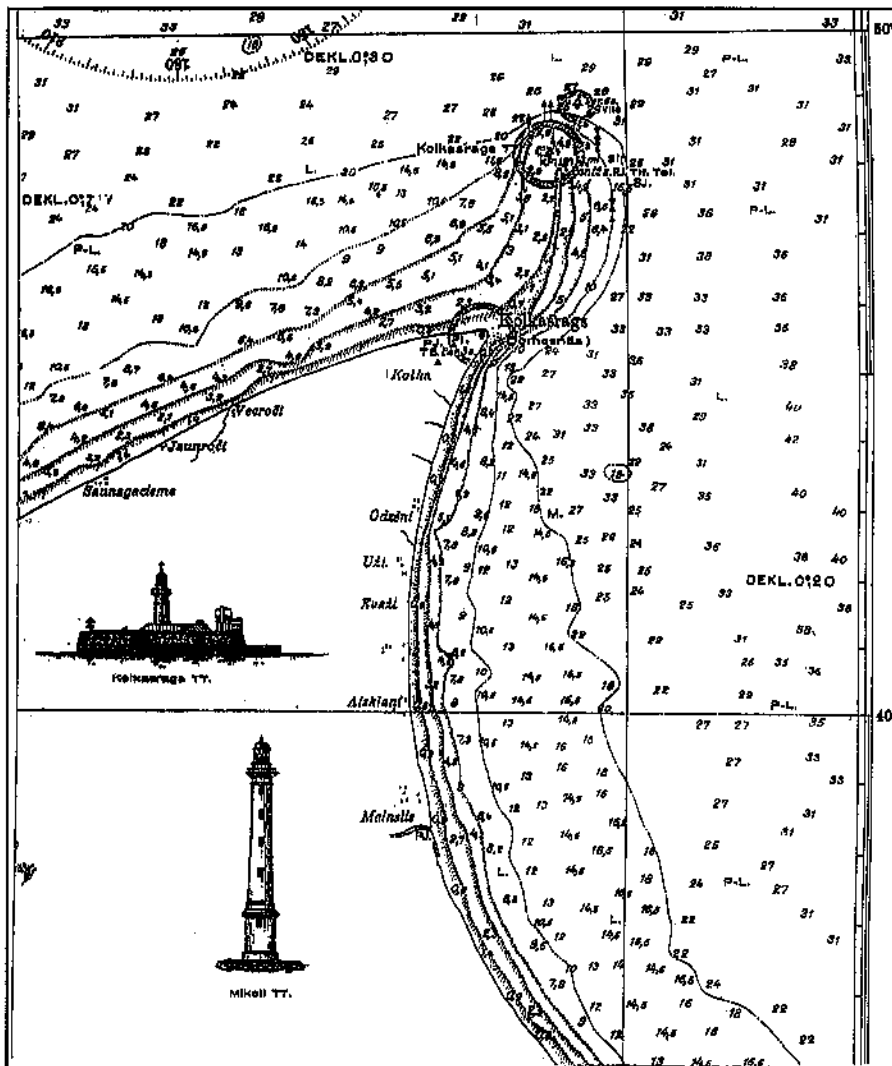
*In 1622 the book "Von Eroberung der Hauptstadt Riga in Livland" was published by Nikolaus Moulin. In this very rare book a drawing of the 17th century Swedish fleet can be seen. In the autumn of the year 1625 the fleet of the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf was met by a terrible disaster - the loss of ten warships.*

In the course of the last two years the Estonian Maritime Museum has been engaged in the research of the circumstances of the disaster.

On this occasion I owe a special word of thanks to Dr. Ilmar Arens and mr Arturs Zalsters for very valuable assistance.

Dr. Ilmar Arens lives in Stockholm and successfully worked at the Swedish archives. He has provided us with the possibility of obtaining the correspondence between the Swedish King Gustav II Adolf and the Admiral of the fleet Klas Flemming, concerning the disaster.

Mr. Arturs Zalsters, a resident of Riga, has spent a lot of time on the coast of Latvia, searching for traces of



A nautical chart of Cape Domesnäs, printed in 1929.

shipwrecks, investigating old ethnographical boats and collecting information from the local coastal dwellers.

From the report to the Swedish King, written by the Admiral of the fleet, Klas Fleming, on the 8th of October 1625, we know that 14 warships left Riga and set sails for Stockholm on the 20th September.

The weather was favourable and the fleet proceeded right to Cape Domesnäs under few sails in order to reach this dangerous area in the morning.

Unfortunately the weather changed and a few hours later the conditions became very rough. The wind changed to east and increased to a heavy storm. The fleet altered course to north to prevent running ashore in the darkness. They hoped to reach the island Runö by the morning and then to continue sailing through the strait Irben with a fair wind.

Although a great compensation for drift was made, it turned out to be insufficient. In the morning, half an hour before dawn, the warship "Gustavus" ran ashore at Cape Domesnäs. After daybreak they discovered the stranded warship "Perseus" not far from "Gustavus" and the "Mars" some distance away. The "Apollo" was close by. She and a Dutch merchantman hadn't reached the seashores before dawn.

After some futile attempts to float the "Gustavus", the Admiral decided to transport all the men, cannons and sails from the "Gustavus", "Perseus" and Mars to the "Apollo" and the Dutchman. This was done and they safely reached Sweden. In their homeport they joined the warships "Stockholm", "Achilles" and "Jupiter" who had arrived without any great adventures. Seven warships, the "Engeln", "Maria", "Hektor", "Orfeus", "Harboleijonet", "Hannibal" and "Elefanten" were lost.

The question is, where might they be?

In order to find an answer to this question, let us look attentively at the chart of Cape Domesnäs.

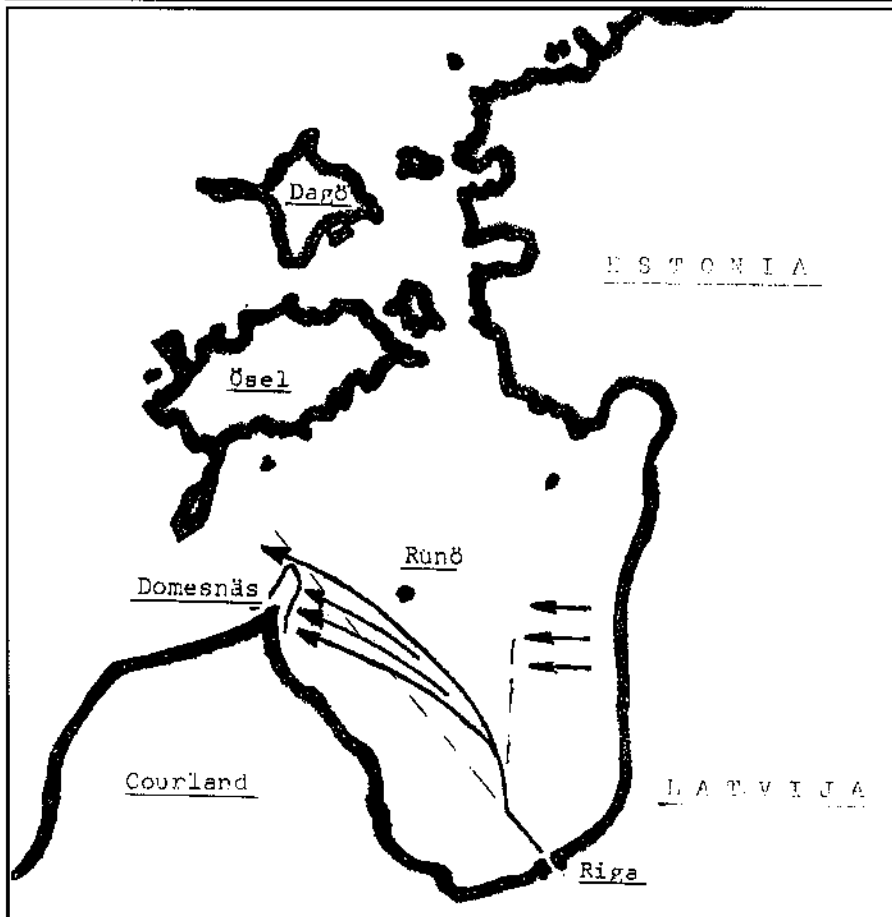
One can see the underwater part of the cape, extending to a length of 3,5 miles right to the North, blocking the fairway. The depth of the water above the reef is approximately 1,0 to 2,0 meters.

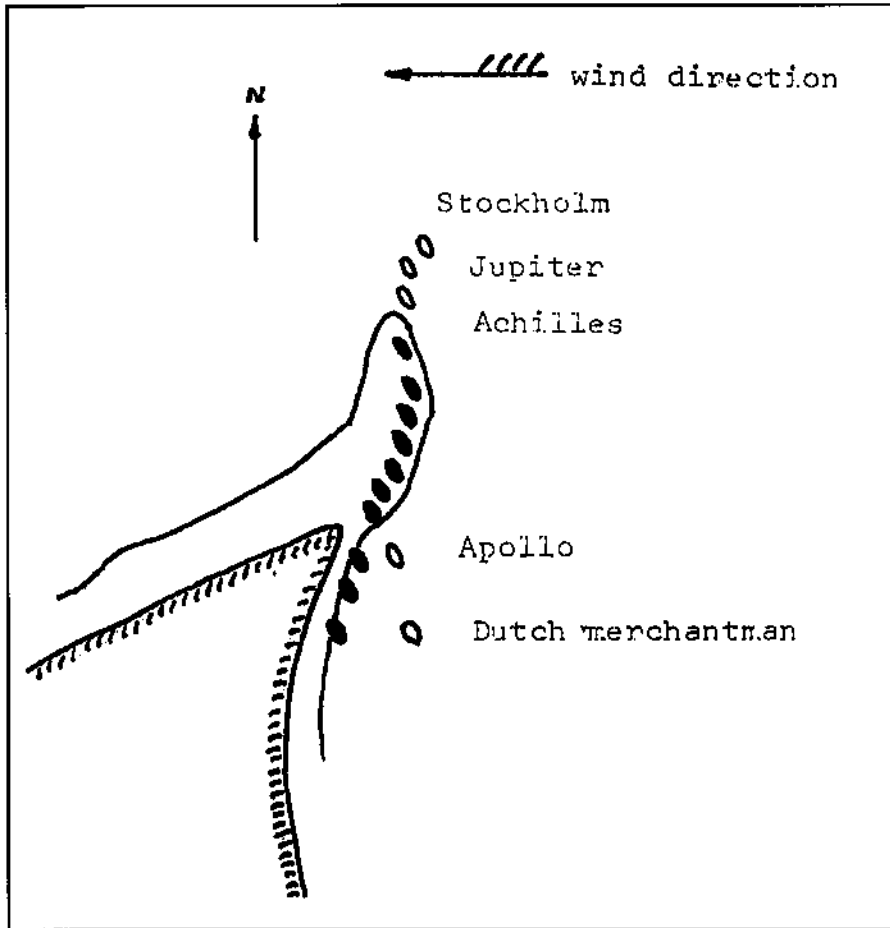
Under conditions of strong wind from the East the water level in the Gulf decreases substantially.

On the 21st of September 1625 the situation here in all likelihood was as follows:

The fleet was in fact scattered by the storm. As we know three ships, the "Gustavus", "Perseus" and "Mars" ran ashore. The "Apollo" and a Dutchman

The probable course of the Swedish fleet.





The probable situation at Cape Domesnäs on 21st of September 1825.

● Wrecked ships.  
○ Ships that escaped the disaster.

very short time they broke up and all seamen got drowned.

The event of this disaster is still alive in the memories of local fishermen. Does there exist any possibility of finding traces of whole ships?

According to my opinion that involves great difficulties. In the waters of the Straits of Irben a great number of ships have been wrecked in the course of thousand years.

The cape with its surroundings has gained bad reputation in the course of time. The chart shows that during the period from 1882 to 1869, 46 ships were wrecked right at Cap Domesnäs, and in addition, another 24 ships at the southern coast of the strait.

The researchers of seafaring history from Latvia have found some wrecks and a number of parts from wrecked vessels, resting underneath the sand at the coast of Courland.

In 1936 a wood carving in the form of a lion head was washed ashore there. This was sent to Riga and, at present, is in the museum. Doesn't it remind one of the wood sculptures from the Wasa'?

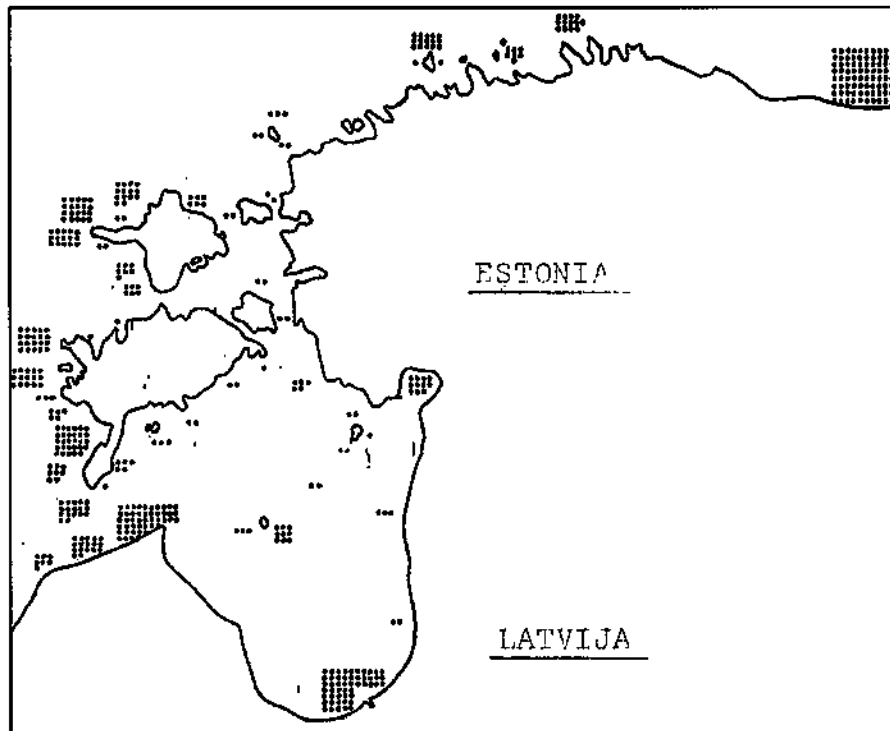
It is most difficult to determine from which of these thousands of ships wrecked here, any of the found parts might have belonged to. In the 1930-ies a well known Latvian hydrologist, Rudolf Knapp, worked in this area. As the result of his scientific research work one can see that both the shape of the underwater reef and the northern part of the cape have changed during the years.

The underwater reef changes, it's shape depending on the direction of the wind. With the strong wind from the west, colossal amounts of sand are moving eastwards and the central part of the reef resettles towards the Gulf of Riga. With a heavy storm from the east the sand moving process acts in opposite direction, and the reef resettles westwards.

In addition to this phenomenon, great changes in the shape of the cape have been noticed. The sharp point of the cape is continuously decreasing with the removal of soil westwards.

Judging by those facts of the case, one may assume that the place where the Swedish ships have stranded in 1825 is now covered by deep water and the remains of the warships have become embedded in the sandy bottom. The vessels that crashed onto the reef are also most likely buried under sands, periodically moving to and fro across the reef.

In 1989 an expedition from the Estonian Maritime Museum worked for some days in the waters of Domesnäs. Mainly investigated were the conditions for underwater research. They turned out to be very difficult, usually

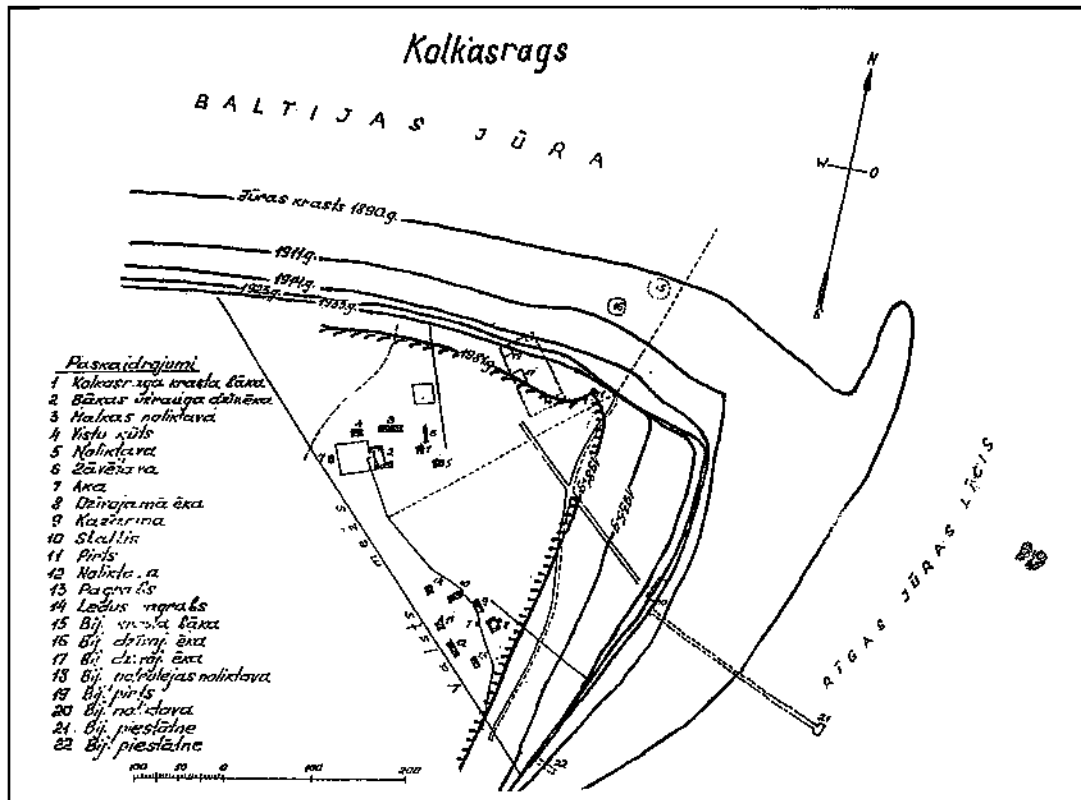


remained afloat. They were able to make out the land in time.

Three ships: the "Stockholm", "Achilles" and "Jupiter" had passed the lurking reef by a lucky chance and managed to escape disaster. Seven ships: the "Ängeln", "Maria", "Hektor", "Orfeus", "Hannibal", "Harboleijonet" and "Elefanten" couldn't pass the reef and ran aground.

The sites of ships wrecked in Estonian and Latvian waters from 1862 to 1869.

I am convinced that the sounding lead had been used regularly to determine the depth of water and that the anchors had been dropped as "Gustavus" had done before stranding. The sandy bottom, however, was not good for holding an anchor and the ships drifted onto the reef in a very short time. In a



with quite bad visibility, variable currents and light sand, drifting along the bottom. A heavy cross sea was noticed on top of the reef, and no wrecks were located.

This summer the Estonian Maritime Museum plans to go there once again with a bottom-profiler in order to locate remnants of wrecked ships under the sand. According to information from local fishermen, remains of sunken ships have been seen protruding from the sand, mainly at the top of the reef, after heavy storms.

Although we can't show any practical results yet, I believe that another page in Swedish seafaring history will be turned as a result of our research. It will most likely serve

Changes in the shape of Cape Domesnäs during the course of time from 1890 to 1981.

as a base for an Estonian/Latvian Swedish joint venture in the future.

The list of the Swedish ships met by disaster at Cape Domesnäs in 1625				
Stranded at Domesnäs				
Ship	Carrying capacity	Guns	Crew	Soldiers
Perseus	120 läster	18	59	60
Mars	100 läster	18	40	80
Gustavus	?	42	75	80
Wrecked at sea				
Engeln	100 läster	18	50	80
Maria	200 läster	26	64	80
Hektor	150 läster	26	64	70
Orfeus	150 läster	28	76	150
Hannibal	150 läster	22	59	50
Harboleljonet	150 läster	20	59	50
Elefanten	150 läster	30	84	--
Summa		170	456	480
Arrived in Stockholm: Apollo, Stockholm, Jupiter, Achilles.				

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