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A new interpretation of the partial inscription on the memorial cross at Grens, Mästerby parish, Gotland

By Maria Lingström and Tim Sutherland


A large stone memorial cross with a partial inscription is situated at Grens, in Mästerby parish, central Gotland. According to oral tradition the termination of the 1361 Mästerby battle between Danes and Gotlanders was fought here. An inscription on it has been interpreted as containing the year 1550 but a recent ‘raking light’ survey now enables another interpretation. Through comparing the observed letters with medieval texts, including that on the Korsbetningen cross, at the mass graves in Visby, we suggest that the Grens cross is 1361 related. The Grens cross itself, as well as its engraving, might have been made by non-professionals, due to the evident lack of skilled manufacture, resulting in a somewhat misaligned cross and an abandoned inscription. The seven readable characters are an “a” and following a gap, “do”, together interpreted as representing “Anno Domini”. After a wider gap, four letters might be interpreted as “ic:ob”. The first part is ambiguous, because of the shallow and incomplete nature of these letters. The “o” is the most certain letter in this part of the inscription. The “:” might represent a punctuation mark. Our interpretative suggestion for this section is “hic obiit”, that is, “here died”. The early erection of the Mästerby cross might suggest that the country dwellers were determined to be resourceful, albeit with small economical margins thus commemorating this important event with a lasting memorial.

Keywords: Mästerby, Gotland, Battlefield Archaeology, Inscribed Cross, 1361

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Since 2006 the “Mästerby 1361” battlefield archaeology project has conducted metal detector surveys on Fjäle marsh, in Mästerby, Gotland, and its surroundings in order to prove a battle took place in that location. Before the battlefield archaeological surveys began, it had been hinted that a battle never even took place at Mästerby and that the stories were merely legends and folklore. By recovering physical evidence of the 1361 battles between Danes and Gotlanders (see Lingström 2018; 2019; 2020 and references therein) it has been proven beyond doubt that
a significant conflict took place on the former marsh. The Grens memorial, the largest stone cross on Gotland, which stands over three meters high, and which local tradition connects to the conflict, is situated one kilometer northeast of the main battle area.

In 2012, geophysical surveys and a raking light survey were conducted at the cross by the University of York. The results from the raking light survey will be presented here for the first time. But first, an overview of what is already known about the memorial cross and its historical context.

Medieval stone crosses on Gotland

Today 15 memorial stone crosses exist on the island of Gotland (Säve 1875; Riksantikvarieämbetet, Fornsök). Of these, 13 are medieval and five have inscriptions. Most of the crosses mark either single accidents, preferably related to ecclesiastical men, or homicide related deaths, but four are associated with the year 1361 – one by its text and three by folklore. The Korsbetningen cross, in Visby, is the most famous. The other three are the Grens cross in Mästerby, the Gunhilde cross in Sanda and the cross in the county governor’s house in Visby. Gunhilde, according to folklore, was the site where the Danish king set up his camp the night before the battle in Mästerby and is situated four kilometers south of the bridge at Ajmunds in Mästerby. According to oral tradition, the blood of the defeated flowed all the way from the battlefield to the cross in the county governor’s house in Visby. Neither the latter nor the Gunhilde cross have inscriptions. The other nine medieval crosses date from between the latter half of the 13th century until the 15th century. Additional to these 15 memorial stone crosses, a Denmark based cross, which originated from Gotland existed up until the 18th century – the so called Julskovkorset. It had originally been erected in Vall parish on central Gotland, to commemorate two men, who were killed in 1442 (Siltberg 2009, p. 109). The shape and the layout of the text of the cross resembles the one from Grens.

The Grens cross

The Grens cross is situated in a flat field, 50 metres west of a road, on a small elevation in arable land, just 800 meters south of the medieval church in Mästerby, on the central part of Gotland (fig. 1). According to oral tradition, it was placed there in memory of the men who died on Fjäle marsh during the Danish invasion in 1361. The battles are estimated to have been fought on the 23/24th or 24/25th of July (Thorndeman 1926, p. 30 and sources therein). When it comes to the 1361 events, local oral traditions and legends play a very important part over the centuries as sources of information. The Grens cross has allegedly fallen over twice. Legend has it that if it were to fall over thrice, the world would come to an end. These alleged collapses suggest an unsecure foundation; an issue that will be discussed later.

Fig. 1. Map of medieval Gotland. After Tortzen 1961.
The cross is generally considered to be blank, that is, it has no inscription. It is a typical Gotland medieval memorial cross resembling its more famous equivalent at Korsbetningen in Visby. The Visby cross is, through paleographical studies, supposed to have been erected and inscribed after the year 1375 (Thordeman 1939, p. 437).

In this article, we suggest that the Mästerby cross is most likely 1361 related, but that it differs in significant ways from the Korsbetningen cross. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the observable text on the former and to discuss these literary fragments and the date of the Grens cross in order to present new theories about it in relation to its Visby equivalent. This has been undertaken by carrying out a raking light survey at night. The resulting text fragments are compared with medieval Gotlandic texts and paleography in general.

**Oral tradition and written sources**

The cross once stood in the former farmyard of the settlement of Grens (Map of Mästerby parish 1753, digital version, Land Survey), where oral tradition claims that the final 1361 battle in Mästerby between the Danes and the Gotlanders was fought. The site was a farmstead with medieval ancestry, and it appears to have been a unit of some size and importance within the parish.

The first written mention of the Grens memorial cross, and also the 1361 battles fought in Mästerby, is by the 17th century Gotland vicar, and later superintendent, Hans Nielsson Strelow (Strelow 1633), who held two Mästerby neighbouring parishes (Snöbohm 1871, p. 287). His *Chronica Guthilandorum* was influenced by his weakness for national glorification, which was typical for the period. The Chronicle is assumed to be based partly upon older written sources, which unfortunately have been lost (Axelsson & Gislestam 2011, p. 648). Strelow states that two battles were fought on two consecutive days on Fjäle marsh. The Danes were victorious and many Gotlanders were taken prisoner. He also claims that the Grens memorial was erected by the Danish king Valdemar. Strelow adds: “Whether the cross was moved from Fjäle marsh, or the place, where the farmstead now is situated, once lay in the marsh is to me uncertain” (Strelow 1633, p. 170).

In the 19th century the antiquity intendant Per Arvid Säve suggested that, “On the other side of the cross are some unclear, thrown together writing marks: possibly ADOMDL=1550”. He tells the tale of the 1361 mighty man, who had been chopped off at his waist (sw. *gren*), so that only his groin and both legs remained hanging over the saddle. With this burden the war horse ran into the nearby farmstead, which from then on is called “Grens” (groin). The horse shook his burden off and the half man fell off. The thirsty horse scraped his hoof, and a spring ran up. The fallen warlord is supposedly buried underneath the cross, which resembles the cross at Korsbetningen in Visby, erected at the same time (Säve 1875, p. 9). The tradition is a mix between local elements, a story explaining a site name and a wandering tale. Site name research today claims the name Grens derives from meaning a site where the road branches off (sw. *grenar sig*). What is more pertinent is that the cross of oral tradition is connected to the 1361 events. Another tradition claims that the Gotland rider was killed by the Danish king himself (Wennersten 1915, p. 9). It is important to note, therefore, that the cross is traditionally connected with the battles, someone who was killed and the burial of a victim of the battle.

**Cooperation with the University of York**

In 2011 the Mästerby project launched a cooperation with battlefield archaeologist Tim Sutherland from the University of York, initiator of the surveys of the battlefield and mass graves of the 1461 battle of Towton (Sutherland & Holst 2014). For the 2012 field survey he brought with him geophysical surveyor, Dr. Helen Goodchild from the University of York, metal detector specialist Simon Richardson, who had 30 years of experience of metal detecting the battlefield of Towton, and TV documentary producer Jeremy Freeston from Dragonshead Productions Ltd, maker of the TV series “Medieval Dead”. One episode in the documentary deals with the Battle at Visby whilst another deals with the conflict at Mästerby. In addition to the geophysical surveys,
the British team also carried out a raking light survey of the faces of the stone cross.

It is already known that the mass graves from the battle in Visby are marked by a large stone cross and a similar cross is located on the battlefield at Mästerby. What do we know about the date-related relationship between the Visby and the Mästerby crosses? We know that the former was erected in order to remember the dead from the battle and therefore has to have been constructed after 1361. Every aspect of that cross suggests that it is a memorial with a contemporary or slightly later inscription that is located on the site of the graves. But what do we know about the Grens cross? It is similar to the Visby cross in scale and design, it is also placed near to a battlefield, and it is linked to that battle in folklore. It is important, therefore, to compare the two crosses.

The dating of the Korsbetningen cross – a possible parallel to the Mästerby cross

The memorial cross at Korsbetningen is presumed to have been erected after the year 1375, based on the work of Widéen by Thordeman (Thordeman 1939, p. 437 and references therein). The inscription reads “In the Year of Our Lord 1361 on the third day after St Jacob’s day (27th July) the Gutes fell into the hands of the Danes before the gates of Visby. Here they lie buried. Pray for them”. Three days after St. Jacob’s day (25th) is 27 July, in this way of counting including the day itself (von Brandt 1959, s. 45). In its original form the text, which is partly abbreviated, says “ANNO DNI M CCC LXI FERIA III POST IACOBI ANTE PORTAS WISBY I’MA’IB’ DANOR CECIDERU’T GUT H SEP’TI OR’ PE”.

When it comes to lettering style, Thordeman sees its closest parallels in the Wrede stone dating to AD 1382 (Thordeman 1939, p. 334) and a gravestone from Väskinde parish (Curman & Roosval 1942, fig. 248). The latter has the inscription “ANNO DOMINI MCCCLXVII OBIT BUTUI BEI’SCA”, that is “In the year of our lord 1372 Botvid Belsca died”. The Wrede stone reads “HIC JACET TYDEMAN WREDE O ANO DNI MCCCLXXXII”, that is “Here lies Tideman Wrede who died in the year of our lord 1382”. The Wrede stone was found during excavations in Solberga convent, that is, just next to the mass graves (Thordeman 1939, p. 334, 437, 451). These three above mentioned stones/crosses came from the same professional school of stonemasons active in Visby (Thordeman 1939, p. 437).

Results of the raking light survey

In order to read any potential carving on the Grens cross a raking light survey was undertaken on a dark September night in 2012. This revealed a fragmentary inscription.

On the side that faces away from the road, at “eleven o’clock” on the cross’s circumference, most of what appears to be, a large incomplete “a” could be identified (fig. 2). This letter has been engraved vertically on the axis of the cross, rather than on a circumference relative to the centre of the circle.

Following a large gap, at “one o’clock” the letters “d” and what appears to be an “o” can be observed (fig. 3).

On the six o’clock engraving, which first part according to us is to be interpreted as “ic”, there appears to be a line across the top of the first letter. This might be a natural line in the stone, in which case the first part of this inscription might represent two single separate letters. It is interesting that these first letters are very shallow, as if they had just begun to be carved and then abandoned, in which case they may be similar to the letter “o”, above. This is followed by a single letter which appears to be an “o” and another, which initially looks like an “I”. Following this there is a small, thinner line, which could link to the latter to form a letter such as a “b” or it might be part of another letter (fig. 4).

Discussion of survey results

The letter “a” appears to be incomplete (fig. 8). Its orientation, on the vertical, rather than on an arc of the circumference of the circle is different to the other letters. It is also larger than the other letters. This all suggests that it is the beginning of the proposed text. The letters “a” and the “d” are carved as outlines and not as hollow letters. The following letter “o” has started to be carved, but in the hollow manner, rather than
as an outline. It is rather crude or is incomplete. These first three letters have been interpreted as most likely forming the beginning of the phrase “Anno domini”, which is the prelude of so many medieval inscriptions, the Korsbetningen (Visby) example included. The word “domini”, however, is usually not written out fully on stone monuments, but shortened to “dni”. As the third letter, which appears to be an “o”, is not outlined but is either deeply and crudely carved or is unfinished, it appears to have been carved by a different person. The inclusion of the “o” would imply that if our interpretation is correct then the engraver understood what needed to be written but not the format in which it usually appeared, thereby spelling the full word and not its shortened version.

The letters at “six o’clock” on the Grens cross are more unclear. As mentioned earlier, in the 19th century they were interpreted as MDL (Säve 1875, p. 9). However, we present a new interpretation.

We believe the six o’clock letters could be “ic:ob”, which might be interpreted as part of “hic:obiti”, that is “here died”. The sentence “Anno Domini [date] obit [name]...” is common on medieval tombstones. This cross, however, is not currently regarded as a tombstone, but a memorial, which makes the “hic/her” word very important to formulate. The letters “ic” are very shallow, whereas the lower letter “o” is the most certain one and very deeply incised. The following “b” has the same deeply cut character and is almost complete, whereas the right end line might have become a bit too straight, compared to how the inscriber presumably intended it to be (see fig. 4). The “;” might represent either punctuation marks between two words or the abbreviation of a single word. Punctuation marks are used on the Korsbetningen cross (Thordeman 1939, p. 437). We believe that the “;” represents a punctuation mark between two words. As mentioned above, the six o’clock letters can be interpreted in a different way because of their partly shallow and incomplete nature. By studying a photograph Henrik Klackenberg, from the National Archives, suggests interpretations of either “v:ol” or “u:ol” for these letters.

The engravings that are readable today on the Grens cross are most likely the letters Säve...
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saw already in 1873. However, as stated, we interpret the six o’clock letters differently from Säve. The other face of the cross – that which is turned towards the village road – never seems to have had an inscription. This seems to imply that originally the inscription faced away from the road, which would in turn suggest that either the cross has been turned around; or that the inscription was more relevant to that side of the landscape; or that it was originally meant to be inscribed on both faces, like the cross near Visby. This latter interpretation could be significant, as is discussed below.

Comparison with a Mästerby tombstone
As to the Grens and the Korsbetningen crosses, when it comes to questions about dating, provenance, and possible illiteracy, comparisons with two tombstones from Mästerby churchyard have proven most useful.

One of the tombstones is in memory of the vicar Petrus, who died on 1 May 1372 (fig. 5). It is possible that he, or his predecessor, was the priest in Mästerby during the battle on Fjäle marsh and might therefore have overseen the burial of the combatants. The type and style of letters on this tombstone are remarkably similar to those on the Korsbetningen memorial cross; even the word WISBY displaying an incredible similarity (fig. 6). The engraving on this stone also strengthens the perceived dating for the Visby cross as its date falls within that suggested timeframe, 1365–1385 (Thordeman 1939, p. 437 and references therein). It should also be noted

Fig. 4. Letters at the bottom of the circumference, possibly representing ‘…ic:ob…’ (The illustration is inverted for increased readability). Photo: Tim Sutherland.
that the letters on the tombstone are upper case or ‘capitals’, like other memorials at the time, mentioned above. It is very likely that this tombstone belongs to the above-mentioned school of masons active in Visby. The letters are unlike the type carved on the Grens cross, which all appear to be lower case ‘Black Letter’.

Lower case Black letters or the Gothic style have the character of letters produced by a broad, yet thin quill pen angled at 45 degrees when written on, for example, parchment. The style was often used during the 9th–15th century (fig. 7). One problem with engraving this style of text is the need for parts of certain letters to sit above or below the bulk of the main text – a potential problem when carving letters between inscribed lines.
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Fig. 8. Comparison of an incomplete ‘black letter’ ‘ā’ (middle) with the upper inscribed letter on the Grens cross (left) and an interpretation of what might be a poorly copied version of it (right). This style is very similar to the inscription on the Fide church wall (see fig. 11). Photo and arrangement: Tim Sutherland.

Fig. 9. A rectified photograph highlighting the many misalignments in the design and construction of the Grens cross. Photo: Tim Sutherland.

Fig. 10. Close up of lettering on the tombstone in Mästerby churchyard dating to AD 1501. Note the shallower and sometimes outlined carving – not the deeply cut full letters, the much larger ‘A’ and the inverse letters ‘nn’ suggesting the carver was illiterate. Photo: Tim Sutherland.

Non-professional stonemasons?
The analysis of a rectified image of the Grens cross clearly shows that it is far from geometrically symmetrical. The circles which form its ring are not concentric and the arms are not perpendicular to the axis of the cross shaft (fig. 9). This resulted in an irregular cross and ring, with circles that are not physically wide enough, in parts, to contain the proposed letters, especially in the bottom left quadrant (fig. 13).

This evidence suggests that the Grens cross was not only made by persons not familiar with geometric design but possibly also not used to carving letters in stone. Photographs of the fragmentary inscription have been shown to a colleague, the Master stonemason Mattias Garn, in York, who found the inscription very interesting. To him it is clear that the inscription was made not by one, but by two people, who most certainly were not experienced stonemasons and perhaps not even literate. It was he who pointed out that the upper inscription is mainly formed of the outline of letters whereas the lower inscription has the middle of the letters carved hollow. The two different inscription types are executed in a
different manner with the ‘hollow’ letters carved from the centre of the line outwards therefore starting as a single line which becomes deeper as it is carved. This procedure cannot be carried out once the outlines of the letters have been carved. This suggests that not only were the inscriptions carried out by different people but that the initial engraving appears to have been halted and then taken up by a different person using a different method of engraving.

When discussing possible amateur stone masonry, another tombstone from Mästerby is of interest. It was raised in memory of the vicar Sigfrid, who died in 1501 and is useful for a number of reasons. Note the very large ‘A’ in the “Anno Domini”; also the ‘nn’ is written upside down, indicating that the engraver might have been illiterate, and therefore might simply have been copying letters written on something else (fig. 10). This might also be an example of bad project management as if the person who ordered the engraving did not provide a good enough description of how to complete the work. It would have been simple enough if the supervisor had written the full text on something for the engraver to copy. Although it might be easy to blame the person who carved the letters, the matter of responsibility must also be considered; if a non-professional engraver had been employed, it might simply not have been his fault. It can also be observed that the lettering on the second gravestone is cut in a shallower manner, almost as if they are a simple outline, and not the deeply-cut letters more often used by professional masons. Some of this inscription has also been eroded away and is no longer readable. This might suggest that the work has been carried out by a less-professional rather than a time served experienced stonemason. The Grens cross exhibits several similarities to this method of working.

Important questions
It is worth posing the following questions: Are the manufacture of the cross and the engraving of its inscriptions contemporary actions or are they traces of two or even three different events? Is the partial inscription on the Grens cross the result of unprofessional work or was the inscription professionally planned? Is the cross from an early period, like that at Visby or is it of a later date? Was it never completed or has a finished inscription worn away? Are there or were there once human remains buried at the cross? Have any bones, originally buried there, been recovered from mass graves and placed in consecrated ground in a local churchyard, as happened on the Towton battlefield 23 years after the conflict (Sutherland & Holst 2014); or was a mass grave left in place and then officially consecrated during an ecclesiastical visit? Was there some special occasion, perhaps the visitation of the Linköping bishop some time during the latter part of the 14th century when the cross was erected? Although there is no written evidence of bishops consecrating crosses, it is likely that they did so, especially in this case, where graves might have been involved.

Bishop visitations on Gotland
The erection of the Grens cross might have been matched with some ecclesiastical event of importance, as suggested above, a bishop’s visitation. Although coming under king Valdemar, Gotland throughout the Danish period ecclesiastically belonged to the Linköping episcopate, which resided in eastern mainland Sweden (Pernler 1977, p. 62). According to the Guta Saga, recorded around year 1220, the Gotlanders had agreed with the bishop that he should make visitations on the island every third year. He was supposed to visit half of the parishes each time, in order, for instance, to consecrate churches and altars, which meant all Gotland churches should be visited through two visitations every sixth year (Silberg 2009, p. 596; Pernler 1977, p. 67). However, in reality, the bishops for different reasons were not able to go on visitation journeys to Gotland as often as promised. Bishop Nils Markusson very likely overwintered on Gotland during an exile caused by political opposition during 1362–1363. Another exile was spent on the island between 1371 and 1373 by archbishop Birger Gregersson. In 1375–1376 bishop Nils Hermansson had to reside on Gotland, since the king did not approve of his appointment, and he might also have visited the island in 1390 (Pernler 1977, p. 120).
There are during the 14th century, therefore, several years, when the bishop or even the archbishop conveniently stayed either throughout the winter or for several years on end and thereby perhaps had more available calendar dates than a regular presumably rather rushed bishop visitation. These long term stays conveniently coincide with the Mästerby dwellers’ potential needs for a consecration of both the memorial cross and the presumed mass graves.

**Dating and suggested interpretation of the Grens inscription**

How can the partial inscription on the Mästerby cross be dated? The Grens cross has some medieval type letters cut into it but no complete words. The letters are crude and carved in two different ways. We must not make the somewhat judgemental assumption, however, that the town cross was erected earlier than its rural equivalent, as reflecting ideas of the innovative town versus the supposedly retrogressive countryside. The making of the town memorial was, evidently, well-funded, whereas its rural equivalent seems to have had a much smaller project budget. It is worth stating that the letters on the Grens cross appear to be similar to that on medieval written documents, that is ‘Black letter’, and these might be seen as earlier than those on the Visby cross which are in upper case and significantly different in style.

**Clues from southern Gotland?**

An inscription in Fide church on southern Gotland (fig. 11), is considered contemporary with the 1361 events. The original text is “Edes succense gens cela dolens ruit ense”, which in translation is “The houses are put to the torch, tortured people fallen to the sword; raging forth, sword in hand” (translation Kathleen Gow Sjöblom). The year 1361 can be read through a so-called chronogram, which is included in the Latin text, when adding the numerical value of the letters. The inscription is supposed to have been created...
during the period 1361–1400. Through archive studies an extraordinary discovery was made in year 2002 of the unknown sequel of the inscription, which says: “Emulus ecce canis captitur gudlandia danis”, that is “See, the like of a dog, and Gotland is conquered by Danes” (translation Kathleen Gow Sjöblom). The sequel is likely to have been displayed in the church as well, but already during the 15th century censored through lime washing because of its politically sensitive contents (Siltberg 2002, p. 25ff). The “do” section in “dolens” is strikingly similar to the “do” section on the Grens cross, even though, here, the letters are connected.

The letters on the Grens cross
It can now be confirmed that there are three sections with letters on one side of the Grens monument: at “eleven o’clock”, at “one o’clock” and at “six o’clock”. The minuscule “a” at eleven o’clock gives us some clues to the dating. Minuscule letters are known on Gotland from the 14th century onwards. We assume that the inscription work was locally initiated. Yet the initial minuscule “a” is much rarer than starting off with a capital “A”, as in most inscriptions starting with the phrase “Anno Domini”. A scan through Gotlands gravstenar shows that minuscule initial a’s, as in “anno”, are known from Visby gravestones dating from 1415 until the 16th century (Hamner 1933, p. 66, 93, 211, 214, 215, 221), and from the mainland dating to 1380 to 1451 respectively, the former referring to the grave monument of nobleman Magnus Porse in the Riddarholm church, Stockholm (Gardell 1945, part II, p. 267, 278, 288). The minuscule Grens ‘a’ suggests a refinement, and not a standard ‘a’, which might lead us to a learned person; possibly a priest.

When it comes to the next section, “d” and “o”, we might infer that these were engraved by different people. It could be that the “d” was originally to be followed by a “ni” as in the shortened version of domini. This might suggest that the person who continued the engraving knew the word should have been domini but did not know of its shortened version. This would strengthen the theory that this word should represent ‘domini’ and thereby, suggesting the large “a” should represent “anno”.

As mentioned above, there is a striking similarity between the Fide and the Grens “do” parts. The Fide inscription is supposed to have been created after king Valdemar and the Danes gained power over Gotland, during the period 1361 until around year 1400, perhaps when the Teutonic Order controlled the island 1398–1408 (Siltberg 2002, p. 37). The amalgamated “do” on the Fide inscription might suggest that it is of younger date than the Grens inscription, a style which became more common during the 15th century.

In contrast to the ‘a’, the ‘do’ section is quite compact and suggests that the performers intended to use rather small letters, which consequently would have meant many letters within a rather restricted area. Furthermore, it is unclear if the initial proposal was meant to read “dni” or “domini”. Since the engravers might have been illiterate and just performers, the work all depended on the instructions shaped by the project manager(s). The instructions must have been written, probably on a piece of parchment since the latter possibly were not able to supervise the engraving the entire time.

A comparison with the Guta Law is helpful (fig. 12). The eldest preserved copy is dated to 1350–1375 (Siltberg 2015, p. 73). There is a striking similarity between the letters “a”, “d” and “o” in the law manuscript and the ones on the Grens cross!

Finally, for the six o’clock letters, which might be interpreted in different ways, we suggest “ic:ob”. We do not know for sure whether this section represents one or two words. If one word was intended it would have meant an inconsequence in the intended full text, that is, abbreviations at six o’clock but not for the “Domini” section. If we believe the intended full text inscription was consistent, the six o’clock letters should represent two words, with a punctuation mark in between. But why start engraving the last two letters of a word and the first two letters in another word? This suggests that letters were first probably written in a temporary medium, such as charcoal or chalk, on the memorial.

If we go for the two-letter interpretation at six o’clock a good question would be: Which
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medieval Latin words end with “ic” and which begin with “ob”? As mentioned above and based on comparisons with other medieval memorials and tombstones, “hic obiit” seems very likely. If the last two letters on the other hand are to be interpreted “ol”, the name Olof comes to mind, a name which has a certain connection to Gotland. However, the word-order speaks against the Olof interpretation. If the memorial was to be Olof related in some way, either representing a private individual or the saint, the inscription should say “hic iacet Olof” or “Sancti Olavi”, which speaks for a “ob” interpretation. There is simply no room for an “iacet” or “Saint” in the interpretative suggestion (fig. 13). There is only room for a very short word and bearing this in mind we suggest the word “hic”.

We do not know whether the engraver’s purpose was to write the year (MDCCCLX) with or without spaces between the letters (compared with for example, the cross at Korsbetningen), which has an impact on which part of the inscription the six o’clock letters represents. The punctuation mark at six o’clock might suggest such marks might have been intended to be used as to the year as well.

As to specifying a certain day of the year, this was normally very important to state, since money might have been given to the church in order for requiems to be read on that specific day (Hamner 1933, p. 20). Such a day was for instance inscribed on the Korsbetningen cross. There is no evidence that a date was planned to be inscribed on the Grens cross. According to Strelow (1633) there were two battles fought on two consecutive days on Fjäle marsh, that is potentially the 23rd–24th or the 24th–25th, which would have made naming a specific date more complicated.

New interpretation of the Grens inscription
There now follows one, of possibly many, interpretative suggestions for the Grens cross (fig. 13). The full text, hypothetically, might have simply
read approximately “Anno Domini MCCCLXI hic obit gutenses. Orate pro eis”, that is “In the year of Our Lord 1361 here died the Gotlanders. Pray for them”. Even with such a brief inscription it is clear that the text could not fit within the cross ring facing away from the road. This would mean that either the other side of the cross ring or the central part of the memorial would need to have been used in order to complete the inscription. If we assume that the Grens memorial was erected quite soon after the battle, then the people who formulated the memorial text would have had to be very careful, not to offend the new rulers. A formulation, like the one in Fide church, would have been politically sensitive and so just a simple text indicating the year and perhaps some cautious words about the people who died would have been more likely.

It is perfectly clear that the 1372 Petri tombstone from Mästerby churchyard was made by the professional Visby school of stonemasons. It suggests that the stone was an official initiative with substantial funding. It is possible that at approximately the same time, someone wanted to erect a memorial cross at Grens, just 800 meters south of Mästerby church. This initiative does not appear to have been officially sanctioned. But why? The work on the Petri tombstone was based on the death of an employee within the church, thereby officially funded, whereas the Grens memorial intended to commemorate civil country dwellers from around the island. In that perspective, the funding would not have been official, based on scarce resources from the rural inhabitants who survived the invasion. By official we mean erected by a person or an organization larger than the parish: a king, a bishop, a town or the Gotland thing, and by non-official Mästerby and/or its neighbouring parishes or even just parts of the local community.

According to the classification suggested by Widéen in Thordeman’s monograph the Grens cross inscription, as well as its Korsbetningen equivalent, falls into group 3b, which dates to 1365–1385 and is characterized by smaller, rounded and deeply incised letters (Thordeman 1939, p. 437 and references therein). The letters on the Grens cross have been suggested to date to the 14th century by comparisons with other medieval texts. All three sections of letters are also suggestively dated to the 14th century by Henrik Klackenberg, National Archives (email 16/4/20). Parts of the Grens inscription are very similar to the Guta Law and the Fide inscription. Altogether the evidence suggests that the Grens memorial cross can be connected with the Danish invasion of Gotland and was erected some time after 1361, as required by local inhabitants; it was not a well-funded memorial project. It might even have been the first 1361 related cross, erected before its Visby equivalent, and therefore a trial and error project, with few prior examples to study, before undertaking the project.

Conclusion
We can now be quite sure that at some time after the 1361 events the Mästerby dwellers wanted to create a memorial to commemorate their beloved menfolk so that prayers might be offered in their memory. Although the town of Visby, in the medieval period, had several competent stonemasons it is unlikely that the small settlements in Mästerby had one at all. At some point someone decided to construct a stone memorial cross at Mästerby, perhaps even to replace a wooden one and to once more raise the status of Mästerby in memory of those men who lost their lives in the battle. Payment for the stone material, the stonemason’s work and the inscription might have been a problem in such a rural community. The Mästerby dwellers might not have been able to afford professional stonemasons after the battle, especially if the population had been depleted by the conflict. Alternatively, it is possible that they wished to construct the basic cross but could not afford to get it engraved. Orders might therefore have been given to one or two local men to perform the job. It is likely that a prescribed text was written by the local priest. However, it is important to emphasize that Gotland farmers were not unacquainted with the art of writing during the Middle Ages. A proof for this is the Guta law, which was written in Gotlandic. A number of medieval letters written in Gotlandic and several other languages are also known (Siltberg 2019, p. 102). The medieval Gotland church was more decentralized than that of mainland Sweden,
as evident by its 94 dispersed churches. Since most priests were locals, from the island, they had a strong contact network within the establishment, and thereby access to education of how to read and write (Siltberg 2015, p. 105).

Someone was able to sculpt the crude cross, however misaligned it turned out to be. But if the men did not possess the adequate abilities for the stonework or the inscription then the end result could only ever have been a shadow of the work that would have been undertaken by professionals. The cross was constructed but its irregular shape and form, with uneven circles and cross arms reflected a non-professional element to its execution. It is interesting that the cross has allegedly fallen over twice and there also appears to have been two attempts to engrave the cross before this work was halted. It is, therefore, possible that the engraving was halted on each occasion because the cross had been re-erected. It is obvious that whatever prompted the engraving, the letters would already have been drawn on the stone, probably as soon as the actual cross was finished and just before its erection. Even if sufficient time was allowed to engrave the stone, it must have soon become obvious that the lettering would not fit within the constructed circle, and after some deliberation, the task was abandoned, possibly to have been taken up by someone else at a later date, before they too stopped.

If the engraving of the inscription took place during a collapse, then only one side could have been engraved – the only face available. There is no evidence of engraving on the opposite face. This might explain why the fragment of inscription is on the side not facing the road.

The shallow nature of most of the planned outline for the inscription, similar to the later tombstone in the Mästerby graveyard, might have slowly worn away leaving the bare traces of what had been attempted. What the engravers originally planned to mark on the cross is unknown. However, in this paper we make a suggestion, based on the readable parts and comparisons with other medieval memorials and tombstones.

To summarize, we believe the events occurred as follows:

1. The Grens cross was made, most likely during the period 1361–1385, which means it either predates or is contemporary with its Visby equivalent. Its crude design tentatively suggests the former; it had very few other crosses to be compared with, and we believe the Korsbetningen cross didn’t yet exist. Since professional engravers could not be afforded, the text was simply written on the circumference. Based on the style of the letters the inscription has an early date. The engraving work was started by a non-professional local but was soon abandoned due to technical difficulties. The cross was presumably placed on one or several graves. The graves and the cross were as soon as possible consecrated by the bishop.

2. After a couple of decades, perhaps already at the end of the 14th century, the cross falls over due to instability caused by the decaying bodies. At this time a second engraving effort is being made by another local man, who soon has to abandon the task as well. Since the written text during the years has been filled in by locals, he could do his job on another part of the circumference.

3. Alternatively, only the cross was erected during the 1361–1385 period, and the two engravings efforts were made when the cross fell over: presumably at the end of the 14th century and the second time, we don’t know when, perhaps some time during the 15th century due to further compression of the underlying pits. The written text was however very important for the Mästerby dwellers, in order to tell the passers-by of the terrible 1361 events and must therefore have been written on the cross directly after the cross was finished. If the potential mass graves and their bodies at some time were removed to a churchyard, this would also have been a good time to attempt to complete the inscription.
Seven 14th century style letters are today readable on the Grens cross. If we compare the cross ring with a clock, we can read an “a” at eleven o’clock, then, after a gap “do” at one o’clock. These letters were indisputably meant to form the phrase “Anno Domini”. At six o’clock four partly unclear letters are visible. In this paper we suggest they are to be interpreted as “ic:ob”, which are parts of the words “hic obiit”, “here died”.

The inscription would most likely have contained at least a year, presumably MCCCLXI. If completed, the year would have ended at about “five o’clock”, which means that the six o’clock letters must contain a meaning other than the year. It should also be observed that these six o’clock letters are carved in a different manner to those above, which appear to be merely outlined – except for the ‘o’ which appears crudely carved or completed by another hand.

Why did the engraver/s of the Grens cross not just go to the nearby churchyard, where they had the key for how to write at least the beginning of their text: the 1372 tombstone over vicar Petrus? Why were the “Anno Domini” phrases formulated differently, with one intended full phrase on the Grens cross but two elegant abbreviations on the Petri tomb? The answer might be as simply this: The tombstone did not exist when the Grens cross was produced! This means the cross might have been erected earlier than 1372.

Is the Grens cross 1361 related? It is very difficult to provide any definite interpretations. Instead, we might look for interpretations that are more likely than others. For example, the local folklore, and the location of the Grens cross suggest it is associated with the 1361 battle. If we assume this, then we must also assume a post 1361 date for the cross. It might also be assumed that there was some period between the battle and the erection of the cross due to planning of resources and labour. We cannot know, however, if the time frame involved days, weeks, months or years. It is, therefore, important to assess the overall interpretations of the Grens cross compared to that at Visby. It is our belief that the crude and unprofessional nature of the execution of the work on the Grens cross, and the type of lettering it displays, suggests the lack of a precedent from which to copy. This would imply an earlier, rather than a later date. The use of a form of black letter type script might also suggest that the cross was copied from a handwritten document, possibly meant only as a note to a mason, to be elaborated upon when carved – an undertaking that was eventually carried out by other less-professional hands. The lack of an enclosing ring to the text, possibly due to the use of Black Letter, which would have required lines to be carved outside the ring, strengthens this concept.

The efforts of the engravers are now recorded, but possibly not in the manner that they originally planned. This monument is, therefore, a memorial to the potentially well-meaning, but abandoned efforts of a poorer community from Mästerby, whose inhabitants might have died but the survivors might not have had the wealth or potentially even the skills to create a professional, fine stone cross.

It is not currently known if the cross was erected as a memorial or as a grave marker. If there are no mass graves around the Grens cross then it was placed there, near to a main road, to attract the interest of passers-by, who might have prayed for the dead who might still lie undiscovered under the surrounding fields. If the cross represents a grave marker, however, then we might assume that bodies of the former combatants were buried nearby. There are examples where such graves once existed but have since been emptied of most of their contents and the bones reburied on consecrated ground. Such battlefields include Towton (1461, England) (Sutherland & Holst 2014) and Aljubarrota (1385, Portugal) (Cunha and Silva 1997). This leads to an important question. Does the Grens cross mark the location of mass graves like its Visby parallel? In terms of this paper, it might be more relevant to look at this in another manner. The discovery of a mass grave at Grens would confirm both that the cross is a grave marker and was certainly constructed after the invasion of Gotland in 1361. It is tempting to think that, as with modern gravestones that eventually subside into the collapsing grave of their ‘owners’, the Grens cross might have fallen over at least twice before due to the very unstable ground upon which it was constructed. Was this due to a
A new interpretation of the partial inscription on the memorial cross at Grens, Mästerby parish, …

large pit, representing a mass grave, which it had been placed upon? Hopefully, the future might inform us of which interpretations, put forward in this paper, are correct.

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