

# The death of Charles XII of Sweden

*On November 30th, 1718, one of the  
foremost soldiers of the age was shot  
while besieging a fortress in Norway.  
Did he succumb to a stray bullet,  
or was he assassinated?*

By **MICHAEL SRIGLEY**

**A**T ABOUT NINE O'CLOCK ON THE NIGHT of November 30th, 1718, as Charles XII was inspecting sapping operations from a forward trench before the Norwegian fortress of Fredrickshall, a bullet travelling at high speed entered his left temple, and passed clean through his skull. He died instantaneously. Who fired the bullet?

This question, asked within hours of his death, has ever since been exercising the minds of scholars, especially in Sweden, and during the last half century has given rise to keen, sometimes acrimonious debate. In its simplest form the debate is whether or not Charles XII was killed by a bullet from one of his own men, and both sides draw on two main types of evidence: historical evidence based on contemporary accounts, and the results of modern research in such diverse fields as folklore, ballistics and forensic medicine. The intention here is to give a review of this overall evidence so that the reader may be his own jury in resolving the mystery of Charles XII's death.

The personality of this exceptional king is of key importance. Like his death, it presented an enigma to contemporary Europeans as it has done to posterity. A born leader of men, fear-



By courtesy of the Kungl. Livrustkammaren, Stockholm

CHARLES XII, *King of Sweden, 1697-1718; from a contemporary engraving*

less in battle, obsessively shy of women and equally shy of diplomacy, Charles, from the age of eighteen until his death eighteen years later, held the gaze of Europe in a series of brilliant campaigns and battles that led him through eastern Europe as far as Turkey, to end only and typically with his death on a rampart before an enemy fortress. His marches and counter-marches criss-cross the map of Europe, as remarkable for the energy they symbolize as for the grand futility of the outcome. Charles was an absolutist whose hobby was war, and long after his countrymen had wearied of it, Charles played on to the end. When he set out on his Norwegian campaign in the summer of 1718, the Swedes had reached the end of their tether. There had been a series of crop failures; the currency was seriously debased; trade was almost at a standstill; the efficient conscription introduced by Charles's brilliant and unscrupulous Chancellor, Baron von Görtz, was detested, and the men who had accompanied Charles from the beginning had grown old in his service. They longed for peace and for their homes and estates. Whatever its cause, Charles's death during the siege of Fredrickshall was timely and welcome.

It was timely in another sense. Charles's impatience with all aspects of kingship other than war explains why at the time of his death the succession to the throne had not been settled. There were two main contenders, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, his nephew, who was abetted by the unpopular Görtz, and the Duke of Hesse, later Frederick I of Sweden, the husband of Charles's sister, Ulrica Eleonora. Both were present at the siege of Fredrickshall, Frederick of Hesse as nominal commander-in-chief. The latter's prospects at this time were threatened by the negotiations that Görtz was conducting with Russia, and it is of some significance that on the day the King died Görtz was riding from Stockholm to the Swedish camp with proposals for the marriage of the Duke of Holstein to the Tsar's eldest daughter. Such a marriage would have confirmed the Duke of Holstein in the succession. But before Görtz arrived, the King was dead. Görtz was arrested the following day on the orders of the Duke of Hesse, who in this and other ways acted with a promptitude that eventually

secured him the throne of Sweden. For him Charles's death was indeed timely.

Such in outline was the background to the King's death. It ended a war that was not wanted, and it opened the way to the succession of one of the contenders, the Duke of Hesse. Assassination or chance, the bullet that killed the King was opportune.

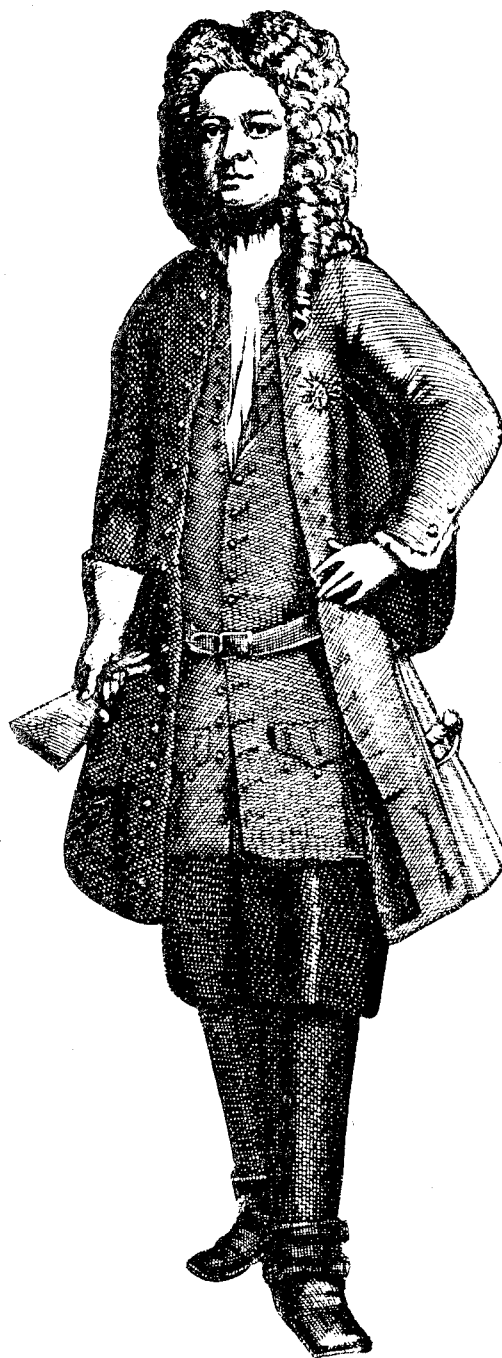
We now turn to the events immediately preceding the King's death, as far as they can be gleaned from the sometimes contradictory contemporary accounts. Where they agree, they show that the King acted somewhat strangely on the day of his death. In the morning he changed his clothes, burnt some papers, and in the afternoon, after a council of war with his generals, he made an elaborate farewell that struck those present as unusual. In the evening he went to the trenches and, again unusually, for he was an even-tempered commander, became irritated that the sappers were not already at work. Some accounts give hints of discontent amounting to treason in the Swedish camp at that time. On the evening of November 29th, one of a group of officers around a camp fire was reported as saying that there would be no end to their misery until a "charitable bullet" found its mark, and, after a war council that evening when the King announced his intention of storming Fredrickshall, two people were heard to say "now or never." Another account gives us a glimpse of the Duke of Hesse in the few hours before the King's death. Apparently he was very agitated. At about eight o'clock, he sent his general adjutant, André Sicre, a Frenchman, to where the King was, and then became even more agitated, pacing the floor and breathing hard. His agitation ceased only when Sicre returned with the news that the King was dead.

Earlier that evening when the King came to the trenches, he was accompanied by a number of high officers including the engineer in charge of sapping operations, another Frenchman called Maignet. When he had reached the most forward line, Charles climbed on to the breastwork, resting his feet according to one account on the shoulders of Maignet. It seems to have been an exposed position, though the King may have been protected by a mobile hut of twigs and wickerwork. It was a moon-lit night ac-

ording to the narrative of Bengt Wilhelm Carlberg, a circumstance that has been confirmed by the researches of the present Professor of Astronomy at Lund University. There was heavy fire from the enemy. Some attempts appear to have been made to persuade the King not to expose himself so dangerously; but if so, he characteristically ignored them. After a while, at about nine o'clock in the evening, Charles was seen to slump forward, without making a sound, and when the bearers arrived, possibly an hour later, he was taken down. His left hand was observed to be gripping the hilt of his sword which was half drawn from its scabbard. The sound made by the bullet was described by Maigret as like that of a stone "flung violently in the mud." Most witnesses believed that the bullet came from the left, although one of the most reliable of them, Carlberg, said that the din made by the enemy's cannon and musket fire was so great that it was impossible to distinguish anything clearly. The bullet itself was variously described as a musket ball, a ball from a falconet or small cannon, and by Maigret as being the size of a large pigeon's egg—although how he could have seen the bullet to make this comparison has not been explained.

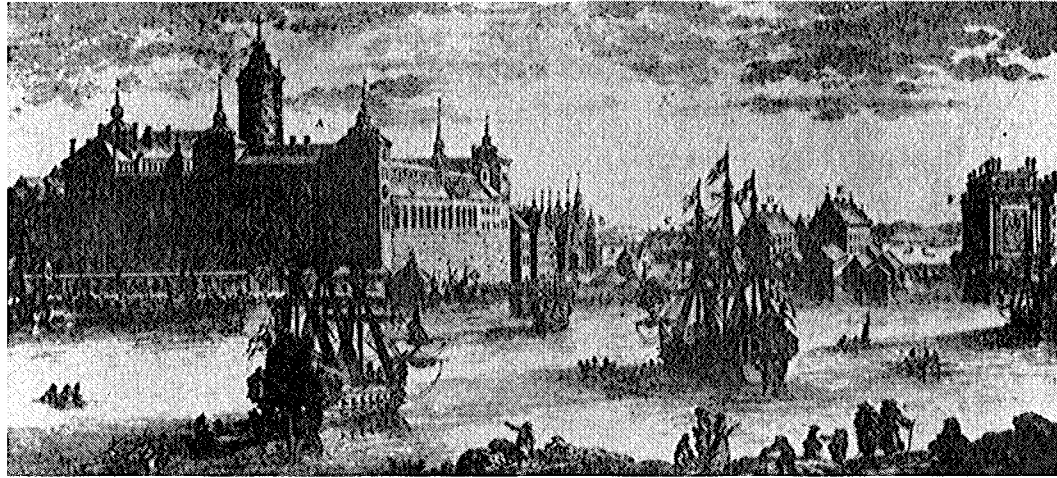
The main sequence of events immediately after the King's death are fairly clear. After he had been lowered from the parapet, he was placed on a stretcher. Sicre, the Duke of Hesse's adjutant, removed Charles's hat, and placed his own on the King's head. Then, wrapped in a cloak, under the guise of a minor officer killed in action, the King was carried to headquarters. Sicre, meanwhile, had carried Charles's hat, pierced where the bullet had passed through it, to the Duke of Hesse as proof of the death. It is not clear what Sicre was doing immediately before the King died. One account says he was to the King's right when the bullet struck from the left. Another says he passed the King just before his death, and reappeared immediately afterwards. But wherever Sicre was at the material time, it is still more difficult to decide why he was in the trenches at all. It is known that he was sent there by the Duke of Hesse, but on what errand is not stated.

On hearing of Charles's death, Frederick of



By courtesy of the Kungl. Livrustkammaren, Stockholm

*Charles XII's unpopular Chancellor, GEORG HEINRICH VON GÖRTZ (1668-1719); a contemporary engraving*



From: "The Life of Charles XII," by F. G. Bengtsson; Macmillan 1960

*The eastern front of the Old Palace, Stockholm*

Hesse acted swiftly. He dispatched his adjutant, Sicre, to Stockholm with only verbal orders, and at the same time ordered the arrest of Görtz, who was known to be on his way to the King with news of the projected Russian match for the Duke of Holstein. Frederick called a general Council of War, and there it was immediately decided to end the campaign and withdraw to Sweden. Gratuities were bestowed on the principal officers—although General-Majors received 800 daler each, one of them, General-Major Cronstedt, of whom more later, received 4,000 daler. An example of the speed with which Frederick of Hesse acted is that the letter, preserved in the British Museum, addressed to the Prince of Wales, later George II, announcing the death of Charles XII and the succession of Frederick's wife, Ulrica Eleonora, to the Swedish throne, was dispatched within three days of the tragedy.

Sicre, riding post-haste from Fredrickshall, arrived in Stockholm on December 5th, and on December 10th appeared the first of two gazettes on the King's death. The first stated that he had died while storming an enemy redoubt, that the Duke of Holstein was close by when the bullet struck, and that the bullet travelled from the right—all other accounts say it came from the left. This misleading story was replaced on December 27th by another, the second gazette, which stated with more

accuracy that the King had died in a trench before Fredrickshall while on a tour of inspection.

This is the main sequence of events immediately before and after the death of Charles XII. It is not necessary to follow all the steps in the consolidation of the Hessian Government. Görtz after a summary trial was executed in 1719, a scapegoat for the nation's grievances. In 1720 Frederick replaced his wife and became King of Sweden. During these years, and for many decades afterwards, Frederick I and his Government were occupied with suppressing the persistent rumours that Charles had been assassinated. A typical crisis occurred in 1723 when Sicre, the former adjutant of the new King, confessed during a bout of fever to being the King's murderer. He received a pension from the Government. Later, after his return to France, he told Voltaire, who was collecting material for his book on Charles XII, that he was in no way involved in the King's death. Sicre was not alone among those who were believed to have confessed. The same General-Major Cronstedt who had received the excessively large gratuity for his rank after the death is said to have confessed on his death-bed to being privy to the plot to assassinate the King.

This then is the historical evidence. Those who believe that Charles was assassinated point to the cogent reasons for murdering him.

Not only did many of the principal officers want an end to warfare, but according to some accounts they were prepared to take drastic steps to achieve this. In addition, Frederick of Hesse had everything to gain from the King's death. He knew that if Görtz arrived at Fredrickshall, his position as claimant to the Swedish throne would have been seriously weakened. Charles's death, occurring when it did, saved him. Why did Frederick of Hesse send Sicre to the King just before his death, and why did Sicre allow the first false gazette to be broadcast? Does not the very promptitude with which Frederick acted suggest that he was expecting the death of the King, as he was daily expecting and dreading the arrival of Görtz? There are also the confessions of Sicre and Cronstedt to the assassination of Charles. Both these men were rewarded and favoured after the King's death. Would they have confessed if they had not been involved in regicide?

As against this, it has been argued that there is no positive proof of assassination, whatever the circumstantial evidence, and that even this evidence is subject to other interpretations. Frederick of Hesse would have acted with the same promptitude even if the King had been killed by a stray bullet. The first inaccurate gazette might have been put out simply to allay suspicion that an assassination had occurred, and prevent a crisis in Stockholm before Frederick arrived to take command. The behaviour of Sicre in disguising the King and taking the bullet-pierced hat are equally explicable as measures to prevent panic, and keep the initiative for Frederick of Hesse. As to his confession, Sicre was in the grip of a fever, and had been ill for over a year. When he recovered he denied his confession. Cronstedt's confession is even less trustworthy. Many scholars believe that one of the documents recording the confession has been falsified and therefore cannot be accepted, while the other main account was taken down almost a century later at third hand.

Argument from historical evidence is, therefore, inconclusive. At the most it can lead only to a suspicion that Charles XII was assassinated, and might support a Scottish verdict of "unproven." Additional evidence is required to come to a decisive verdict. In search of this, Charles's sepulchre was opened in 1799 and in

1859 and, after the second opening, general opinion veered round to the belief that the King died of a stray bullet. It was not until this century that fresh evidence was uncovered that makes a verdict possible.

In July 1917, the year of the two hundredth anniversary of Charles's death, his sepulchre was again opened, and a thorough examination of the King's skull, using x-ray and the most up-to-date techniques, was made by a Commission of specialists. The Commission came to the following general conclusions: that Charles was killed by a round bullet of between eighteen and twenty mms. diameter, travelling at great speed; that the bullet could not have been of uncovered lead, as lead would have shattered into fragments inside the skull, and that it must have travelled at the rate of at least one hundred and fifty metres a second.

The size of the bullet can be pin-pointed even more precisely by the size of the hole in the King's hat through which the bullet passed before entering the left temple. The hole is 19.5 mms. wide, and this can be taken as the size of the bullet that killed the King, falling as it does within the limits set by the Commission. A thorough search has been made for a weapon that could have fired such a bullet, and has been narrowed to a smooth-bore rifle which Charles XII ordered for his officers in 1716, and which was certainly in use by 1718. Its calibre was a little larger than that of a musket, and was designed to fire a bullet of about 19.5 mms. No other weapon of the period had the same calibre.

On the assumption that Charles was in fact killed with such a weapon, what more do we know of the bullet? It could not have been made of lead, but could have been either an iron bullet or a special projectile. Until 1924 there was no possible way of determining which of these two it might have been. But in that year a discovery was made that in the opinion of some has settled the question. It was a small dented brass button filled with lead that was found in a load of gravel in a locality named by tradition as the place where over two centuries before the killer bullet had been thrown away.

The study of the folk traditions arising from Charles's death forms one of the most fascinating aspects of the whole subject, and at the same time one of the most controversial. As

will be seen, these traditions, which have been recorded not in one area but throughout Sweden, are very detailed. Although in the majority of cases they are some two centuries old, this has often involved only four retellings to carry them forward to this century when they were taken down. Their reliability might seem, therefore, the greater. For the purpose of this article it is most convenient to group a selection of them under various headings.

Common to all the traditions is the mention of a button from the King's own clothes. Often the button is endowed with magical properties. Charles was believed to have received it from a witch, and was said to be invulnerable so long as he wore it on his person:

"There was a soldier who told how Charles XII had been helped by a witch so that no bullet could hit him. He was shot but that was because he lost a button that he carried with him and had received from the witch."

The prophylactic property of the button is mentioned time and again:

"Charles XII had a button on his clothes as a talisman. So long as he carried it he could not be hit. Before he set out from Norway his sister cut it loose to take away the protection he got from the button."

"The old people said that Charles XII had such a button on his coat that no bullets could reach him without bouncing off and falling into his top boots. In the evenings he took off the boots and out fell the bullets . . . when he was shot they say that a button was missing from his coat."

Many traditions say that the button was removed from his clothes by one of his own men:

"When he was shot they say that a button was missing from his coat, and they said that a soldier had procured the button from his servant for a large payment, and so the King was shot with his own button. There was no other possible way of shooting him."

In some traditions the bullet that killed him is a silver one, and this reflects the widespread European superstition that a witch or specially protected person could only be killed with a silver bullet, as, for example, the Roundheads believed that they could only kill Prince Rupert's "familiar," his two dogs, with a special silver bullet:

"Charles XII was tough. No bullet could touch him. . . . When Charles XII came to Norway he was shot at Fredrickshall, but it wasn't with an ordinary bullet but a silver one, and that struck him from the side, so it couldn't have come

from the Norwegians, for then he would have been shot from the front."

A few traditions hint at the identity of the assassin or assassins:

"They say that it was two Frenchmen who had been hired to shoot him."

"It is said that there was a soldier called Sivert that shot Charles XII. But I can't remember more than that he was called Sivert."

Could Sivert be the corrupt version of the name of Frederick of Hesse's adjutant, Sicre? Another tradition refers to "Sike," the hired assassin, as having been seen running away into the wood immediately after the shooting.

A large group of traditions deal with the famous soldier of Öxnevala who found the button immediately after the King's death. These traditions were collected in a district on the borders of Västergötland and Halland, and centre on the village of Öxnevala, the soldier's hometown. In essence they relate that this soldier was standing near the King when he died, and that the bullet fell beside him. He picked it up and hid it in his purse. After the retreat from Norway, on his return home, he was in the habit of freely displaying his trophy. Eventually he grew afraid of having it and, after consulting the local priest, he threw it away close to the spot where two hundred years later a button believed to be the same one was found:

"The old people talked about a soldier from Öxnevala who was with Charles XII in Norway. He saw when they shot the King. I believe he was called Frisk—no, I don't remember any more. But I believe he dropped the button at the church."

"The soldier took the button home with him, but the priest in Öxnevala made him throw the button away at Deragård."

There are explanations of why the soldier threw the button away:

"But after he had taken the button away, and thought about it, he found he couldn't sleep at nights. So he took the button with him, a button from the King's coat, and went to the priest one Sunday at church. And he told the priest everything, and then the priest said to him that he should get rid of the button if he wanted to sleep at nights. When he said this, they were on the little road opposite where the gravel pit now is, and there the soldier threw the button away, and it was in the sand that the smithy from Horred found it."

". . . then the soldier came home to Öxnevala and boasted that he had the bullet. But there was one in Stockholm who had confessed and had been deported, and then the soldier went to the priest, and said that he would be rid of the button,

and the priest and the soldier went together to the bed of bog-myrtle at Deragård, and there threw away the button.”

There exists only one traditional account that records the name of the soldier of Öxnevalla and, as it is of such great interest, it is here quoted in full. It was taken down in 1939 by Dr. Albert Sandklef and Nils Strombom, leading authorities on this aspect of Charles XII's death, from an old man born near Öxnevalla in 1841:

“ There were many soldiers at Fredrickshall, and there was one from Stjärnhult's company. Nordstierna he was called—wasn't that a fine name! Sounds like a real man—a splendid name—yes, he took the bullet, it was a button, and he had it with him in a leather purse. Yes, he threw it away at Deragård—I have never heard it was a neck button. Yes, that's my story, and I believe it's true—they told it to me when I was a boy. Nordstierna had the button in his money purse.”

On the strength of the old man's story, a search was made in the muster rolls of the Swedish army at Fredrickshall for such a company with such a soldier. The search was successful. In the muster rolls of the Älvsborg regiment under Stjärnhult's company was listed *soldier* 110 *Måarten Nilssen Nordstierna*. That his name and company should have been preserved in local tradition for over two centuries is astonishing but true.

The traditions reveal one more point of special interest, and this concerns the type of button that was taken from the King's clothes and used to shoot him. The relevant traditions are these:

“ King Charles let them undress a Russian on the battlefield once, and so the King took the buttons which afterwards he had on his coat.”

“ The King ran through an enemy general (on the march to Poltava) and said they should take the buttons from the general's coat. They were round, and afterwards the King carried the buttons always on his uniform. The buttons were fastened with sinews.”

“ My Drabant has seen both the ‘ Turkish button ’ and ‘ Sike ’ the hired assassin.”

“ It is related that a soldier from Råryggan in Sättila had shot Charles XII with a button from the King's coat. The buttons were taken from Turkey. It was easy to recognize them, for there no others like them.”

The button, then, was unusual to look at, round in shape and of either Russian or Turkish origin.



By courtesy of the Kungl. Livrustkammaren, Stockholm

*According to tradition, a talismanic button was missing from his coat; the uniform of King Charles XII, worn at his death*

Such is the traditional evidence concerning the death of Charles XII. To what extent can it be corroborated from more orthodox historical sources? It has been shown to be



accurate in the case of the name and company of the soldier of Öxnevall. If "Sivert" and "Sike" are corruptions of Sicre, it is accurate in this point too. Another suggestive point of corroboration is the fact that from 1722 onwards one of the rectors in the parish of Öxnevall was a certain Johan Aurelius who in 1723, the year in which Sicre confessed to the murder of Charles XII, became a member of the Swedish Parliament's Secret Committee. This Committee was particularly concerned in that year with the rumours of assassination that were sweeping the country. Thus Aurelius was concerned with these rumours, and it is quite likely that he had heard of the soldier of Öxnevall and his button, and had a hand in the decision to throw it away. It may have been from him that the soldier of Öxnevall heard the

disturbing report of the man who had confessed to the murder in Stockholm.

The principal corroboration, however, concerns the button. According to tradition it was unusual to look at, round and of Russian or Turkish origin; it was thrown away near a myrtle bed, close to where a gravel pit now stands at Deragård, a short distance from Öxnevall. The Commission of 1917 stated that the wounds in the King's head were caused by a bullet, not made of lead, of between eighteen and twenty mms. in diameter. The hole in the King's hat points to a bullet of about 19.5 mms. diameter. Such a bullet could have been fired only by the rifles issued to Swedish officers in 1716.

The button that was found in 1924 came in a load of gravel from the pit at Deragård close

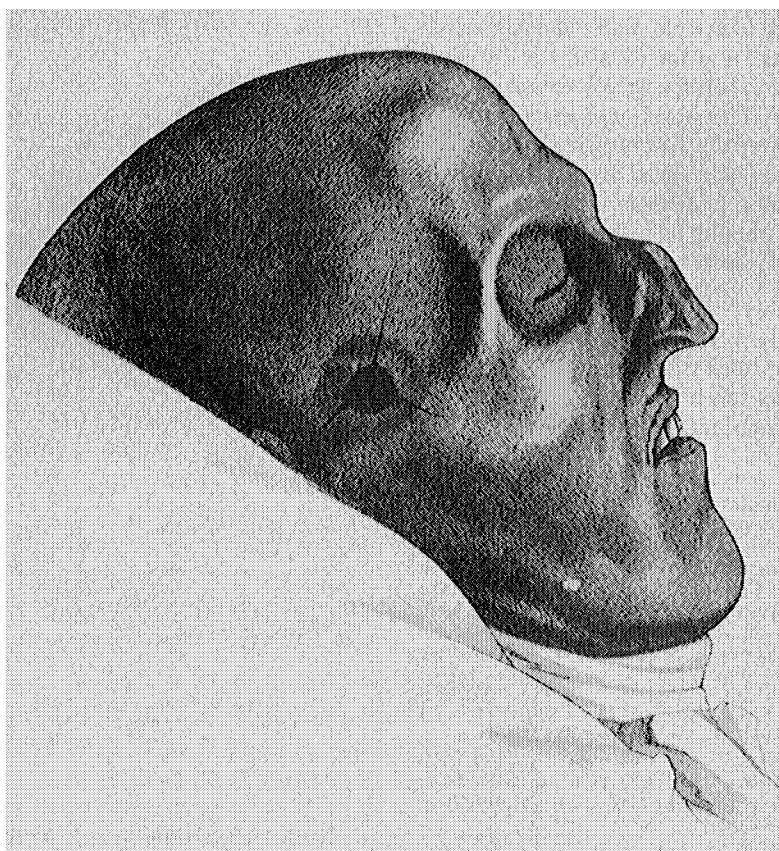


Photo: Antikvarisk Topografiska Arkivet, Stockholm

*The skull of CHARLES XII, showing the fatal bullet-hole; from a drawing of 1859*



to the myrtle bed mentioned in tradition. Its finder was a master-smith who had already been collecting local traditions about the soldier of Öxnevalla. In 1932 he brought the button to Dr. Sandklef, curator of the Varberg Museum, and there it is now exhibited. The finder received no reward. In shape the button is round, and made up of two hemispheres of brass soldered together, with the stump of a button-eye on one of the hemispheres which was cast as one piece with it. The inside of the button is filled with lead. One side of the button is flattened and punctured as though the button had struck a hard object. Its maximum diameter, apparently caused by the impact, is 20.8 mms., and its minimum and possibly original diameter is 19.6 mms. Its total weight is 38.2 grammes. The button found in 1924 is therefore round, not made of uncovered lead, is within a millimetre of the required diameter, and could have been fired by the 1716 rifles.

The type and style of the button has occasioned much fierce controversy. Those favouring the theory of assassination are insistent that it is quite unlike any produced in Scandinavia at the time, and to Swedish eyes would have been "unusual." In addition, officials at the Louvre and the Topkapisrail Museum, Constantinople, have identified the button as Turkish. Perhaps more decisive are the results of a spectographic analysis carried out on the brass and lead of the button. This shows that neither of these alloys are of modern origin, and that the ores of which they are composed are not found in northern but only in southern Europe, thus arguing a non-Scandinavian origin for the button. An experiment carried out by Dr. Sandklef has also shown that the deformation of the button is consistent with its having passed through the King's skull, and with it subsequently striking a stone.

Against this it has been argued that in fact there do exist buttons of similar style to the Öxnevalla button which were produced in Scandinavia at the time of Charles XII, and that there is no reason why after an extended war brass and lead should not have been imported into Sweden from southern Europe. It has also been pointed out that the deformation of the button would have been far greater if the button had indeed been fired at close range, and

had struck a stone as some claim. Critics of the assassination theory have also raised doubts about the finding of the button. Its finder, the master-smith of Horred, first said that it was found in a load of gravel in 1924, but later changed the date to 1927 and the place to the actual gravel pit at Deragård. Also the finding of the very button by a man who had been collecting folk traditions about it previously is considered somewhat suspicious.

Has the case been made out for assassination? It all depends on how the evidence derived from folk tradition and the evidence of the button found in 1924 is weighed. Are tales handed down from generation to generation among country people to be accepted as reliable, and how far should they be corroborated from independent sources before they are taken as evidence? And even if they are found to be in the main reliable, in the sense that they have not changed materially since they were first told soon after the death of Charles XII, what exact bearing do they have on the mystery of the King's shooting? They can still be dismissed as folk-tales invented by Charles's soldiers to explain how a man believed to have been invincible came nevertheless to be shot. This is where the button found in 1924 is of key importance. If this is proved to be the button that was thrown away by the soldier of Öxnevalla a short time after Charles's death, and if it is shown that this button could have caused the wounds in the King's skull as investigated by the Commission in 1917, then the traditions are not just inventions but enshrine the truth about Charles's death. In other words, he was assassinated.

On the other hand, the traditional evidence and the evidence of the button have been forcibly challenged. In particular, the evidence of the button has come under much fire. Its discovery has been found suspicious, and it has been denied that it is of Turkish origin. It is also claimed that the marks on it are not consistent with its having been fired from a rifle at close range. The historical evidence is not conclusive, and while it can support the idea of assassination, it is not inconsistent with the idea that the King was killed by a stray bullet.

Who, then, fired the bullet that killed Charles XII at Fredrickshall?