

A Short Story about the Grevlunda Motte by Vitaby in Scania

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Abstract

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One of Scania's earliest castles, Grevlunda, has been reinvestigated. The first excavation in 1913 gave an interesting result but the time was not ripe for understanding what really was found. In 2002 archaeologists in cooperation with historians and historical geographers found out that the Grevlunda was a motte of a rare construction. The pottery gave a dating to the late 12th century. The castle had been privately owned and the place had a continuity back to the Viking Age. Grevlunda castle is the first known motte in Scania and also the only privately owned early medieval castle yet known in the province. The article is a reprint from Château Gaillard.

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From Bronze Age grave to Viking castle

The farmer Axel Montan, in Grevlunda village, had a big mound next to his farm (Vitaby Parish, Scania). Scholars who passed Grevlunda classified the mound as a Bronze Age burial mound and the villagers told a tale about Count Lund who was buried in the mound (count = *greve* in Swedish). In the 1880s Axel Montan decided to make a new road from his farm to his fields in the north. The road was dug in to the western side of the mound, and a few metres inside the slope the workmen found a stone wall that enclosed the mound. During the work, a spear and some other finds were discovered in the excavated slope. It was still considered as a grave mound, but of an odd form. The next owner of the farm

continued the excavation and uncovered the wall on his side of the boundary line.¹

In 1913 curiosity about the mound had risen so high that the Society of Antiquities in Ystad raised 200 kronor (20 euro) for an excavation. The young art scholar Andreas Lindblom – later professor of art history – came to Grevlunda and with the help of local workmen excavated during a couple of summer weeks. He wanted to find the central grave and therefore dug a big hole into the middle of the mound. The hole reached a depth of 5.5 metres, from the top of the mound down to the peat that formed the virgin surface. Some potsherds were found but no grave. The most curious find was a stone-encircled post-hole



Fig. 1. The location of the earliest castles in and around Scania, all built before or around 1200.

going all the way from the peat up to the surface. The post was about 10 centimetres in diameter and had the astonishing length of more than 5 metres. Two trenches, laid out at right angles on top of the mound, found a circular wall at four places. To the south the wall was completely excavated on both sides all the way down to the peat level. According to a newspaper article, pieces of a boat were found outside the wall. In the article the mound is called a “Viking castle”; it was no longer a burial mound.² The report that Lindblom sent to the Board of Antiquities in Stockholm is very short and the list of finds mentions only a couple of objects: a knife, some iron objects, three parts of the boat and two pieces of pottery, one glazed and one unglazed black earthenware decorated with parallel grooves.³ That was all.

In 2001 the examination of the Grevlunda castle continued. During my work with the book *Borgar i Skåne* (Castles in Scania, Ödman 2002) there was a need for more information about this castle. At the same time the historical geographer Mats Riddersporre and the

historian Sten Skansjö had been looking at Grevlunda – both working on a project about medieval estates in Scania. They had found out that the castle was lying within the site of a Viking Age manor house. The site was very big and included a Viking Age cemetery in the hills to the west of the castle. The first written source mentioning Grevlunda is a description of the legacy of Niels Erlandsen Galen’s daughter Marine in 1313 (Dipl. Dan. 2:7, no. 18). Niels had five brothers, two of whom became archbishops of Denmark, with their seat in Lund Cathedral. Niels Erlandsen was very close to the three kings Abel (1250–1252), Kristofer I (1252–1259) and Erik Klipping (1259–1256). The Galens were the most important family in Scania, as the Hvide family was in Zealand. Niels’s mother was from the Hvide family. He himself was married to the granddaughter of Esbern Snare of the Hvide family – another powerful marriage.

In 1313 Marine Nielsdotter died as a widow and her children shared the inheritance. Several historians are convinced that her property in Grevlunda did not come from her husband, Jens Rönninge, but from her father Niels Erlandsson. Marine had six sons, all of whom received a share of the Grevlunda property. There is not a word about any castle but at several places in the document the mound in the lake and the levee nearby are mentioned. As late as the 18th century the Grevlunda castle was situated in a pond held back by an embankment north of the castle. The earliest detailed descriptions of the geography around the castle are from c. 1900. They mention a brook running to the north in two arms on each side of the mound and then passing the ruined embankment over which the main road through the village passed.⁴

Before the excavations started we knew that the castle was abandoned before 1313. The will does not even give a name to the site, which would be evidence of castle remains on the mound, so perhaps the destruction of the

castle took place a long time before the will was written. We also knew that Andreas Lindblom had found some sherds of black earthenware which indicated that the castle had been used in the 12th century and the first half of the 13th century. All the finds from

Lindblom's excavation have disappeared, so an examination of the sherds was impossible. We also knew that this was a private castle from the earliest castle-building period in Denmark, and this is unusual. In Scania there are over 160 known medieval castle sites. Only



Fig. 2. Picture from about 1930 taken from the Viking Age burial site to the west of the castle. Photo: LUHM.

seven are known to have been built before 1250 and among them Grevlunda castle is the only known private castle: the King or the Archbishop of Lund built the rest.

From unidentified object to motte and shell keep

After the mound was surveyed, the circular wall was shown to form an exact circle with Lindblom's post-hole in the centre. It is known that Bronze Age burial mounds sometimes have a pole in the centre. A rope attached to the pole with a length of the radius of the mound was able to draw an exact circle with a stick in the sand. The only acceptable interpretation of Lindblom's 5.5 metre deep post-hole is that this had been the place for a measuring pole that was used through the whole construction period. The building-contractor came to the place with a pole and a rope. He selected a place in the very low-lying terrain between the two arms of the brook. There he hammered the pole down into the peat and supported it with smaller stones. He marked the circle with a radius of 20 metres and begun the construction of the wall on this circle. At the same time as the wall was built higher, sand, gravel and clay were filled inside and outside the wall. The measuring pole was also continuously supported with stones to make it stand firm. After the wall was built 12 layers of stones high and two stones wide, the desired height (5.5 m) above the surrounding terrain was reached and the wall was completely embedded in soil so that only the top could be seen. On this subterranean wall the shell keep was built and inside it were placed the castle's buildings.

The height of the shell-keep wall and the type of stone with which it was built are not known. Not a single piece of the material from the wall has yet been found. The only well preserved shell-keep wall in Scania is at

Skeingeborg in the northernmost part of the province. This castle is also 40 metres in diameter but built by Archbishop Absalon (Hvide) as a perfect octagon around 1200 (Ödman, 1992, pp. 321 ff.). Roughly cut granite stones in mortar form the walls at Skeingeborg and all stones at the external corners have been cut to an angle of 132.5 degrees. Although it is sited in waste forest land it has never been used as a quarry so all the stones are left where they fell around 1250. Therefore it is possible to measure the height of all eight corners by addition of the fallen angle stones, giving the sum of about 4 metres high. Both the material – granite – and the height of the wall – 4 metres – are reasonable also at Grevlunda.

The small excavations at Grevlunda in 2001 and 2002 were done in cooperation with the University of Kristianstad, the board of antiquities in Malmö and my own department at the University of Lund. The aim was to find the structure of buildings inside the wall and to find objects that could date the castle. We had finances to work only for nine days but some answers were given. On the southern side of the courtyard were found the foundation walls of a house, presumably for a masonry building. The foundation walls had a breadth of about one metre and were quite shallow, only 20–40 centimetres deep. At Skeingeborg and at other Romanesque buildings we find the same very shallow foundations for the walls. The house had an internal breadth of about 4.5 metres and it was about 19 metres long. The foundation of the interior walls indicates that they were built of timber framing. The floor level in the house was approximately 0.4 metres below the courtyard. In an attempt to make a survey of more walls and other houses, the entire courtyard was examined with geo-radar, but despite all the stones under the surface there was no distinct pattern to see. A lot of time was spent on this but it gave no result at all. This means that it will only be possible to find

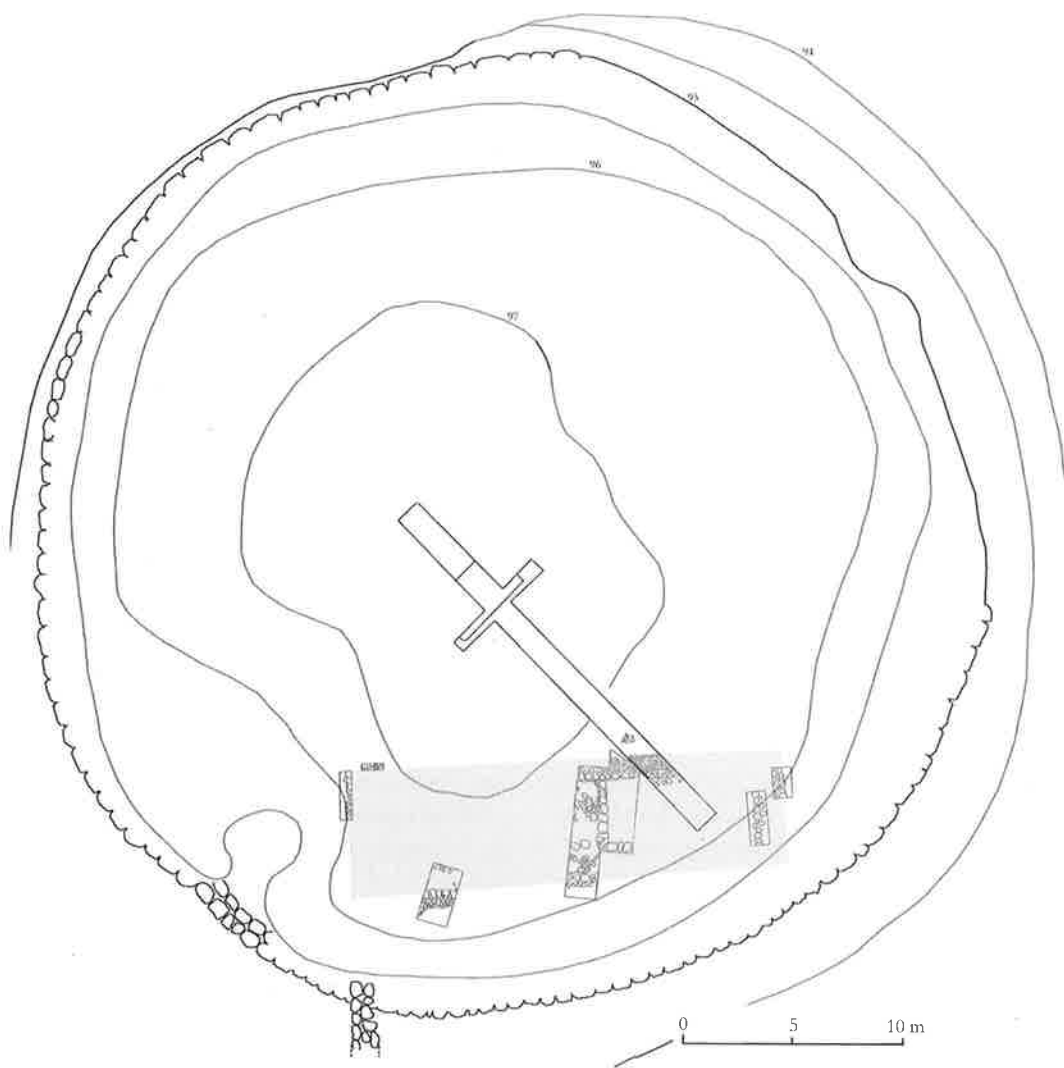


Fig. 3. Plan of Grevlunda castle. In the southern part of the courtyard are the remains of an 18-metre-long house.

the buildings by excavations in the courtyard.

Among the debris that filled the house were found some bricks which indicate that the castle was in use after 1192, when the first known use of brick is documented in the province. Brick was not the building material in Grevlunda, despite its rare occurrence, but was probably used for high-status details such as fireplaces and decorations around windows and doors. The rare occurrence also indicates

that the castle was built at the beginning of the brick-using period – from the end of the 12th century to the middle of the 13th century.

The entire courtyard was also searched with a metal detector but the only medieval find was a crossbow bolt. The finds in the excavated house consisted of iron nails and some pottery. The oldest pottery is of three types. Most frequent are handles, bases and body sherds from big, externally glazed, jugs.

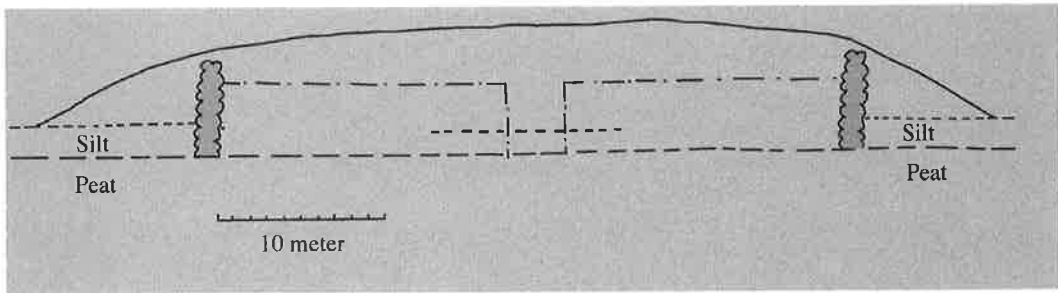


Fig. 4. Section of the motte and the supporting walls. No supporting timber has yet been found under the walls.

There are two small sherds of black unglazed earthenware called Östersjökeramik (Baltic ware) which is probably also the kind of pottery described in the newspaper article from 1913. Then there is also one sherd of green glazed earthenware of Flemish production. All these three types of pottery were in use at the same time around 1200, and this is also the oldest dating of the castle.

The nearest parallel to Grevlunda castle is to be found in the Netherlands where early medieval mottes had their timber palisades replaced by stone walls. One of the closest examples is the castle of Leiden in Holland. There the shell keep is placed on the top of a 9-metre-high motte (Besteman, 1985, pp. 211 ff.). The shell keeps at Cardiff, Arundel and Windsor castles also show a development beginning with a motte from the time of the Conquest to which a shell keep of masonry was later added. The nobleman from Grevlunda might have seen English or continental shell keeps built on old mottes. The Scandinavian upper class sent their sons to universities in France, England and Germany. As an example, Archbishop Absalon went to the University of Paris for his education in the middle of the 12th century. It is very possible that the relatives of Absalon in Grevlunda received a similar education somewhere abroad and returned home with new ideas.

Building shell keeps on mottes is a hazardous project. The artificially built up

mound consists of any available material. Stone, sods, earth, clay and gravel form an unstable surface for building. The wooden towers on the mottes often had their foundation posts placed in the solid ground under the mound. But in phase two when the wooden palisade and the wooden towers were replaced by masonry structures, there was no possibility of digging all the way through the old motte down to the solid ground. Therefore the walls and buildings were constructed on foundations dug as deep as possible into the artificial mound. In many cases the weight of the masonry made it sink into the soft mound and after a time the walls cracked and fell. During the excavation in the courtyard a lot of cracks were found in the earth. The explanation given by the geologists was that these cracks had arisen because of the radial expansion caused by vertical earth pressure. This shows how unstable a motte can be. The builder knew of this problem and therefore he founded the shell-keep wall on the solid ground, probably by supporting piles, and embedded it all in the motte. This method is unique and anachronistic. The houses in the courtyard were not given this kind of very strong foundation. The one house so far excavated was built of stone and founded on very diminutive foundation walls. This might have been a fatal mistake considering the compression and movement in the mound.

The castle was abandoned long before 1313. The most sensible reason for its destruction is

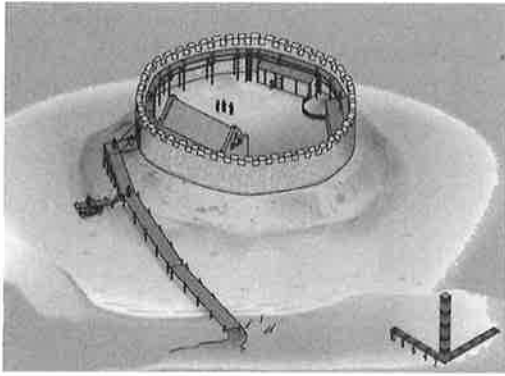


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of Grevlunda castle. Illustration by Petter Lönegård.

twofold. The first reason might be that the houses and walls were destroyed because of movements in the motte. The second and more likely reason is that the castle was destroyed around 1250 when some other castles in Denmark were besieged and destroyed during the fights between the King Kristofer I (1252–1259) and the Archbishop Jacob Erlandsen (Galen). In 1259 the Archbishop had help from the king's enemy, Jaromar of Rügen. Together with the Archbishop's brother, Andreas Erlandsen, Jaromar invaded Bornholm and burnt the royal castle of Lilleborg. This could have been in revenge for the king's destruction of the archbishop's family castle, Grevlunda. Or the destruction of Grevlunda castle was in revenge for what happened at Bornholm. The archbishop's castle of Skeingeborg was also destroyed and abandoned in the 1250s according to the numismatic dating of the castle. The king's great revenge may have come in 1259 when Archbishop Jacob Erlansen, visiting Rügen, was killed by a crossbow bolt.

The Galen family left Grevlunda and Vitaby parish. Later we find them spread all over Skåne living in new castles and always maintaining their struggle for power and always in the political centre of Denmark's medieval history.

This is all we know at the moment about

Grevlunda castle. The excavations will continue and we will try to find all the houses that may have existed in the courtyard. We will try to find timber and wooden revetments at the foot of the motte, where it was exposed to the running water. We will also try to find the bridge connecting the motte to land and of course also the curious boat described by Lindblom in his report. This ought to give material for dendrochronological dating and better knowledge of the history of the site. This has been a very short presentation of one of Scania's most interesting castle sites: one of the oldest castles, one with a most unique form and one of the very few private castles in medieval Denmark.

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Notes

- 1 All information about the former history is found in the archives of the National Heritage Board in Stockholm (ATA) and at the Historical Museum in Lund.
- 2 *Hvar 8:e dag* 1913.
- 3 ATA, Vitaby, 21 October 1913.
- 4 Letters in ATA, Stockholm.

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