

Örtofta Tower House – a Roadside Checkpoint

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Abstract

In the parish of Örtofta in the province of Skåne (Sweden) a tower house has recently been identified, concealed inside a manor house that was rebuilt in the 19th century in a medieval style. In the 11th–12th centuries, the site was probably a checkpoint to control a road and a bridge where all the stone was transported for the construction of the cathedral in Lund. A manor house was built, a village was moved to the place, and a church, along with a stone chapel, were erected. The remains of a medieval tower house have been found inside the present manorial building. The dendrochronological datings showed that the beams for the third floor were of oak from the surroundings, cut down in the winter of 1419–1420. The owner of the manor at this time was a nobleman of the Has family. Only some details have, as yet, been revealed by the preliminary examination of the house, but much more remains to be found.

Introduction

After having written a book about the relationship between the two parishes of Örtofta and Lilla Harrie in Skåne, the southernmost province of Sweden, it was clear to me that Örtofta was the later of the two to be established, for certain reasons occupying half the territory of Lilla Harrie (Ödman 2018b). Örtofta today is a railway village with a large industry and with a manor house on its outskirts. The manor house and the farm buildings were sold to a private owner in 1987 and the farming land has since then been administered from a farm called

Slättäng, which is still the property of the ancestral owners, the noble family of Bennet. After the book was published, the manor's owners, the Melinder family, asked if it was possible to write a leaflet about the history of the manor house, from the Ice Age to modern times. My wife/colleague Chatarina and I started this limited project, and it grew (Ödman & Ödman 2019). In the County Archive, *Landsarkivet*, we found seven metres of documents from the 17th century until modern times and a series of medieval letters in the Danish *Rigsarkivet* in Copenhagen



Fig. 1. Örtofta in summer 2019. The side wings and the towers were built in the middle of the 19th century by the Danish architect Ferdinand Meldahl. The right part of the central building, from the gable to the chimney, is from the beginning of the 15th century (photo by Anders Ödman).

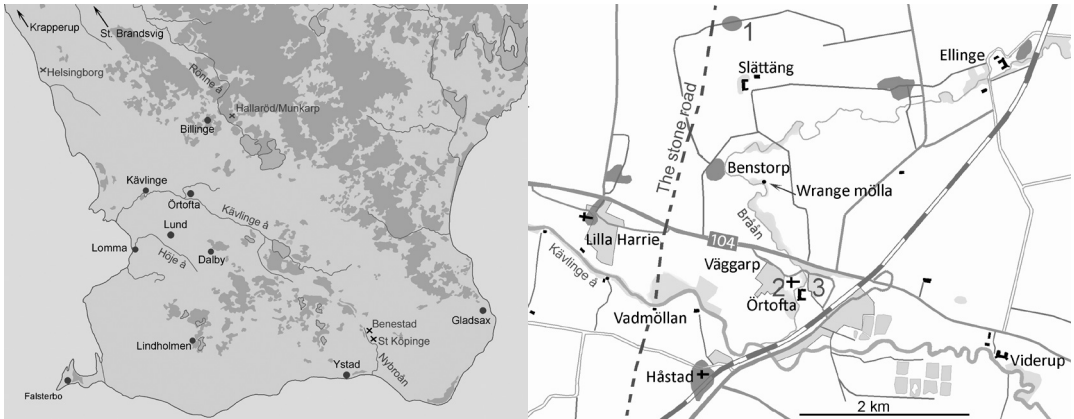
dealing with this manor and its owners. In this article, I will present a small part of the results. It concerns a tower house that was identified in 2019 and examined in a very limited manner (Ödman 2019). It is hoped that further investigations will be carried out in the future (Fig. 1).

Background in the time before the tower

This report deals with a tower in the medieval Danish province of Skåne, which since 1658 has been the southernmost part of Sweden.

In 1085, the Danish king Knut the Holy decided to build a cathedral in the town of Lund, on a plot where a monastery was established around 1040. The monastery was built with the region's softest sandstones, processed by English stonemasons. The stone probably came by boat from quarries on the Öresund coast at Helsingborg, north of Lund, and from quarries a few kilometres up the river Nybroån near Ystad in the south of the province (Ödman 2018a, 127 ff.).

The cathedral, on the other hand, is built of a hard sandstone from quarries located in the middle of the province, near the town of Höör. The masons now came from



Figs. 2a, b. Maps showing the location of the places mentioned in the text. 2a shows Scania with the quarries marked as crosses. On map 2a are the phosphate concentrations marked in dark grey. 1. Vaggarp's original location. 2 Vaggarp's current location. 3. Örtöfta village's location (drawing by Chatarina Ödman).

Italy, Germany and France and they were accustomed to working with harder stones. The only way to transport these stones to Lund was by land with oxen and wagon. The trip from Lund to the quarries by Hallaröd/Munkarp was 35 kilometres long and took four days back and forth, with two rests overnight roughly halfway at Näs (Trollenäs) castle (Figs. 2a, b)

Along the road, the wagons had to cross two big rivers. Ten kilometres north of Lund, at the site of an old riding ford, called Fladmandsvad (Ferryman's Ford), was the first crossing over the river called the Kävlinge Å. The second crossing was near the quarries, 33 kilometres from Lund, over the Rönne Å.

The bigger transports of material for pillars, tympanums and other long and heavy stones had to use extra towing power in the form of men pulling ropes attached to the axles of the wagons. Having more oxen attached to the shaft would have had the result that they pulled the wagon apart. Therefore, up until the 17th century, men with ropes were used.

There were probably more than 50 wagons travelling the road for more than a hundred years. The wagons were built in the Billinge

district along the road. They were made entirely of wood, most likely including the pulling- and drawing-bolts. The total length of all the men pulling and the wagon with the long load could have been as much as the width of the rivers. A ferry for the stone transports would have been inconvenient, as would the nearby deep riding fords. Bridges were needed. The remains of a bridge can still be seen at Vadmöllan by the old Fladmandsvad. The neighbouring bridge at Kävlinge is mentioned in an account of a battle from 1020 and the bridge upstream, at Getinge, was mentioned as the site of another battle in 1181 (Ödman 2015b, 10 ff. Ödman 2018a, 155 ff.). So already in Viking Age, there were bridges over the river. An archaeological trench dug through the road at the higher part of the northern river valley showed a sunken road, two metres deep and 47 metres wide. The gradient up and down the river valley required many people to help with the pulling.

The checkpoint

Around 70 000 tonnes of stone crossed the river en route to the building site at Lund. Beside the road north of the Kävlinge Å, a settlement called Benstorp was situated a kilometre or so north of the river crossing, and here we find a cathedral canon as the recipient of the income in the middle of the 12th century (DD 1R2:302). Another settlement called Väggarp (“road croft”) was probably established earlier on the road, some two kilometres north of the river. These might have been the first control points for the vulnerable section of the road.

Örtofta, which means “sandy plot”, is situated two kilometres east of the bridge over the Kävlinge Å, by Vadmöllan, on the eastern bank of a smaller affluent (the Bråån) flowing from the north. The site originally seems to have belonged to a royal domain called Skåven. Pictures and maps from the 17th–18th centuries show the small castle situated

by the Bråån, surrounded by a moat, with the farmhouses in the east and with the mill a few hundred metres upstream (Fig. 3).

The first mention of the place is in the middle of the 12th century, when a man named Håkan Paulsen *de Ertifte* was generous to the canons at the cathedral, donating four marks of gold and a quarter of a farm, as a gift in memory of his dead wife Gudtrum. A series of men from this family can be associated with Örtofta, and largely they are canons and deans of the cathedral. The Håkan line ends with the archdeacon Håkan who in 1283 donated some farms in Örtofta, where his dead mother had probably lived – and finally, the canon of the cathedrals of Lund and Roskilde, Niels of Bunkeflo. He donated his maternal inheritance consisting of four farms and two houses at Örtofta/Väggarp to pay for a new altar foundation in Lund cathedral in 1346 (Ödman 2018b, 56 ff.).

At the beginning of the 14th century, a family of nobles named Has seems to have

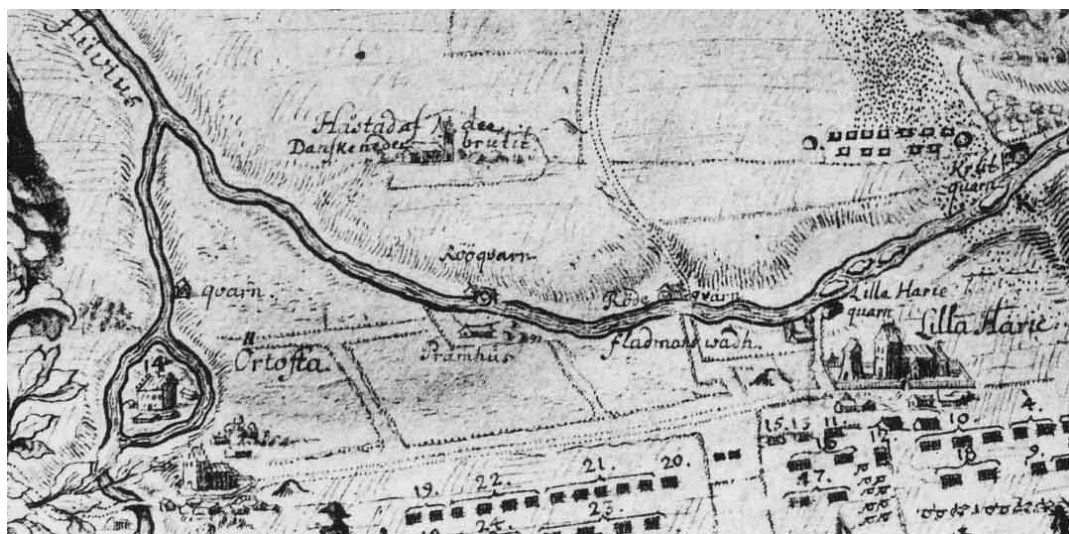


Fig. 3. Örtofta castle around 1676. The manor house is seen surrounded by a moat connected to the river Bråån. The mill (*quarn*) was moved downstream from Örtofta manor at this time. The church and village of Väggarp are next to the moat. The medieval bridge was situated at Fladmans wath to the right. The Swedish army had its encampment in the fields between Lilla Harrie and Örtofta in the weeks before the Battle at Lund on 4 December 1676 (Dahlberg, by permit. KB Stockholm). South is up.

married into the Håkanson family (FSM H: 95 ff.). In this family too, there were sons serving as canons at the cathedral but also members belonging to the group of fighting knights. The only trace of buildings belonging to this early period is dendro-dated timber details secondarily used in the younger house.

The buildings

The soils on the site of the manor house have a very low content of phosphate. This means that no farms were established on the site before the introduction of the intensive use of stable manure to fertilize the fields, around the late 10th century. Before this the manure stayed at the dwelling site. The only place in the domain with high phosphate values is the old location of Väggarp village. Väggarp was moved to the western side of the Bråån, where the new manor called Örtofta was built on the eastern side, surrounded by a village with the same name. In the new Väggarp village a stone church was built in the 12th century, and a stone chapel was built beside the Kävlinge Å, near the bridge and the road. The men of the church had built themselves a powerful checkpoint beside the “stone road”.

In this environment the descendants of Håkan were living as supervisors of the road transports, and perhaps also river transports. The noble family of Has took over during the 14th century and changed the status of the manor by building dwelling houses of stone. On the eastern bank of the Bråån a tower house was built at the beginning of the 15th century.

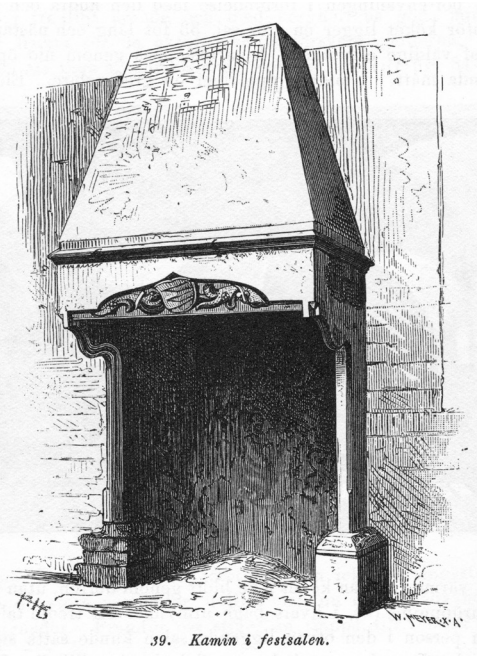
The tower house and its master

The remains of a medieval tower house have been found inside the present building. It was six storeys high, with the basement in sandstone and the upper part in brick. The external size is 10.7 metres × 11.6 metres with

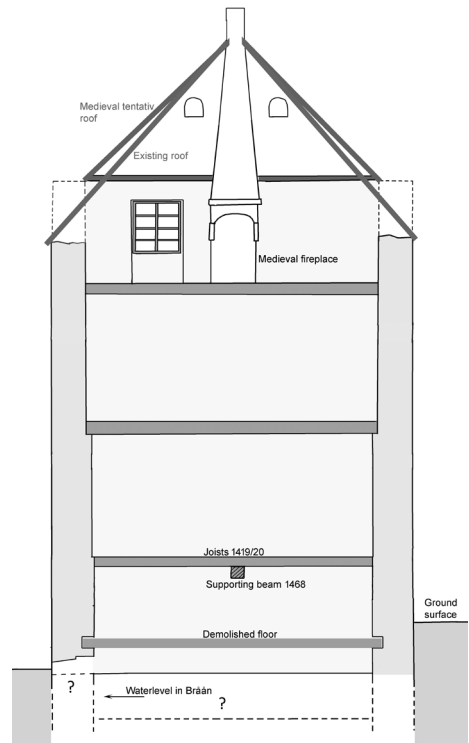
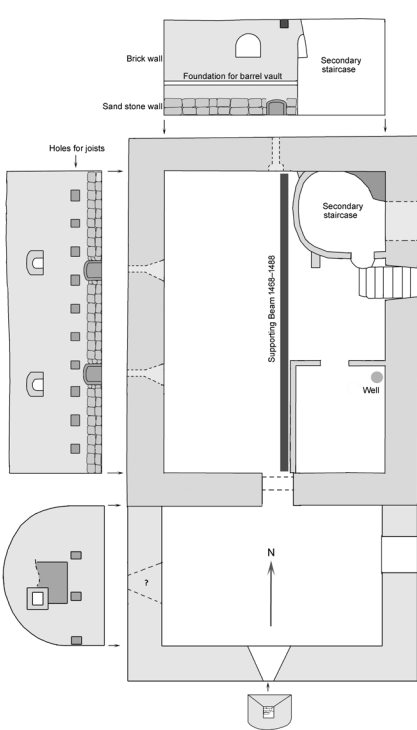


Fig. 4. The holes in the cellar wall indicate a demolished wooden floor. The cellar was once much deeper before it was drowned when the mill was moved downstream and the water level in the river was raised (photo by Anders Ödman).

1.1-metre thick walls. The height is estimated at about 20 metres. When visiting the house in 2019 we noticed that boilers, pressure tanks, pipes, heat pumps, old oil tanks etc. occupy much of the basement. The medieval parts are difficult to measure and are hard to identify. We did discover, however, that there had been an older floor under the existing cellar floor. A line of holes in the eastern and western walls, at about knee height over the existing cellar floor, indicates a system of joists for a demolished second floor (Fig. 4). These joists also display the original width of the house – 10.7 metres (externally). Why the first floor had been demolished was a mystery, but the answer is probably that, after the mill was moved downstream from the manor house in the 17th century, the old cellar was flooded and filled up to the present floor level.



Figs. 5a, b. In the northern gable, on what is now the top floor, are the remains of a medieval fireplace. What it once looked like can be seen in the preserved fireplace at Glimmingehus from around 1500, made by Adam van Dürer (Hildebrand vol. III: 230).



Figs. 6a, b. Plan and profile of the house (drawing by Chatarina Ödman).

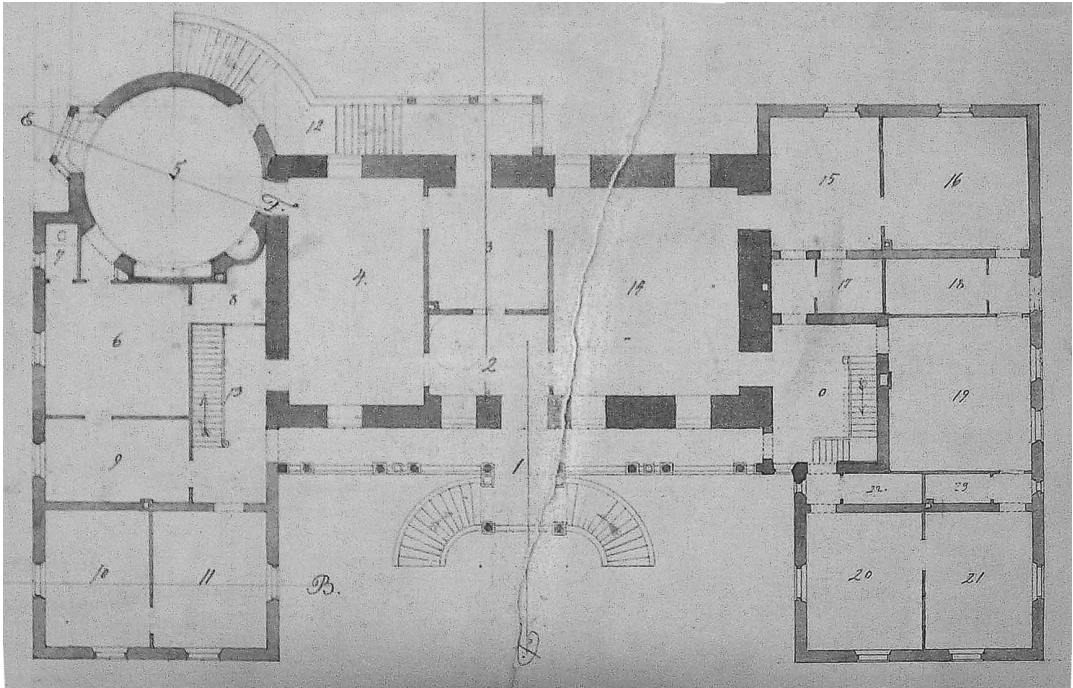


Fig. 7. Before the architect Ferdinand Meldahl started his extensive rebuilding project, he measured the original house and drew a plan. One can see that the thick walls to the right (north) are expanded to the south with thinner walls. This expansion and demolition of the top floor might have been implemented around the year 1500, at the time when unfortified stone houses were spreading all over Denmark (the county archive, Lund).

When we later visited the attic, an exclusive but badly damaged medieval fireplace was found at the northern gable (Figs. 5a, b). The floor over the fireplace had been demolished and the brick roof was lowered one storey. The fireplace had the chimney flue inside the northern gable. There is also a chimney at the southern part of the roof, which indicates the original exterior length of the house – 11.6 metres (see Fig. 1). This floor might have been the big hall, 75 square metres in area, with a fireplace at each gable (Figs. 6a, b). The tower was six storeys high including the attic and cellar, which gives a height of about 20 metres. The first floor is built of sandstone and the rest is built in brick. When the building was extended to the south and lowered one floor is still uncertain (Fig. 7).

The man who built the house

The beam holes in the cellar are 0.4 × 0.4 metres, and oak beams of the same dimension still carry the remaining floors of the house. The dendrochronologist Hans Linderson of Lund University has dated the beams to the winter of 1419–1420 (Hans Linderson 2019). An internal staircase was built around 1470. At this time, then, the exterior staircase was replaced. Older timber of heavy dimensions from the period 1337–1351, secondarily used, was also found, which might indicate earlier large timber buildings in the vicinity.

In the winter of 1419–1420 the nobleman Truid Has was owner of the manor. He was a knight and a lord of the king's council. He was an overlord of different castle fiefs in

Denmark, and at the time as he was erecting the tower at Örtofta, he was overlord of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. There, in 1412, under Queen Margret I, he took over the big castle-building project – Visborg – that the Teutonic Knights had started before they were bought out from the island. After Margret's death, in the same year, King Eric of Pomerania ascended the throne, although he had already been crowned in 1396.

Margret was a powerful queen who managed to implement a law against castle building in 1396 that lasted until the coronation of King Hans in 1483.

During the reign of Eric of Pomerania (1397–1439), the king lost most of his land

and all his allies. One of his few friends was Truid Has. The king occasionally lived on Gotland and showed Truid Has his gratitude by giving him a silver spoon (Fig. 8) with the text SPES MEA IN GOTHLANDIE ET MAR – TRUED HASEE. (My hope lies in Gotland and the sea – Trued Has). (Erslev 1905, 464 f.).

Truid Has stayed at Visborg for more than three decades until his death in 1437, and at the same time he had the opportunity to work on the construction of his own castle at Örtofta, even though it was prohibited for noblemen to build castles. Perhaps he did not call it a castle. The merchant houses in Visby are quite similar to what he built. If we look at a drawing of a



Fig. 8. It is very unusual to find medieval objects that can be associated with a known person. This spoon was given by Eric of Pomerania to the owner of Örtofta, Trued Has, in gratitude for his sacrifices as overlord of Gotland and for his friendship to the king (Erslev, bind II: 465. The translation can be found in the text).

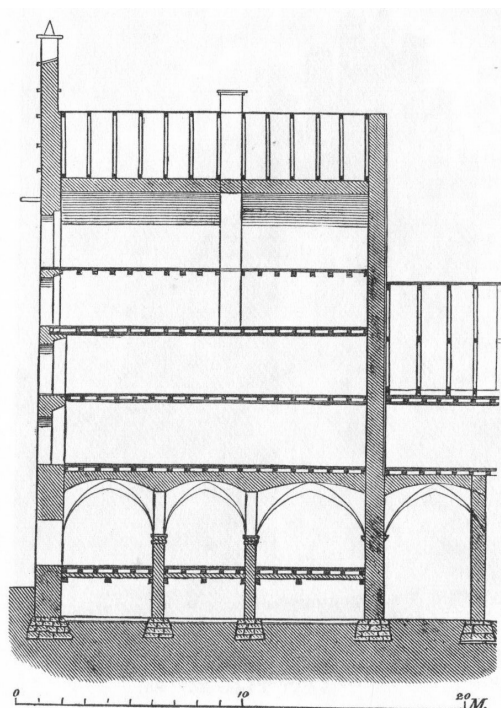


Fig. 9. The merchant houses in Visby have some similarities to the medieval tower house in Örtofta. Many storeys, quite narrow, and in the cellar at Örtofta there are signs indicating that the two lowest floors were covered with a row of barrel vaults, just as in Visby (Hildebrand, vol. II: 424).

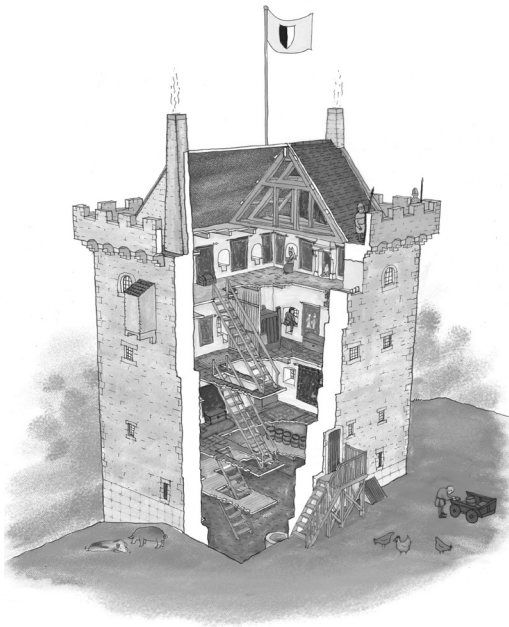


Fig. 10. Is this what Örtofta once looked like, with similarities to all the other dwelling towers in Europe (drawing by Anna Jonsson, Lund).

merchant house (Fig. 9) we see that it could have six to seven floors, including two cellars. In the cellar of Örtofta there are foundations for barrel vaults, above the missing cellar floor, in both the northern and the southern walls. Is Örtofta perhaps a copy of a town house and perhaps not a tower house with a defensive parapet on the roof, but an ordinary “town house” with a pitched tile roof?

What the Örtofta tower looked like is hard to tell, but Truid Has might have been inspired by the fortification architecture that was part of his day-to-day work, and he was such a good friend of the king that he could allow himself to build a fortified tower with all the expected details (Fig. 10).

Towers were being erected all over Skåne at this time: at Helsingborg (Fig. 11), Falsterbo, Lindholmen, Stora Brandsvig, for example.



Fig. 11. The biggest tower still standing in Skåne is Kärnan (“the Core”) in Helsingborg. This too is a checkpoint – a place where the king had visible control over the inlet to the Baltic Sea (photo by Anders Ödman).

But they were mostly, as far as we know, built by the king. In Örtofta it was a nobleman. In addition, another curiosity is that it is still standing, but concealed inside a castle pastiche from the 19th century. It is thus still “alive” and inhabited.

Some other towers in the region

Kärnan in Helsingborg is still standing, a royal tower dated to 1316/1317. It is built of brick. The basement, however, is of secondarily used sandstone, quarried in the neighbourhood and probably used in the circular tower that was the first tower on the site on the rock above the town. It is the same stone that we find in the oldest building in Lund from around 1040. This was the core of one of Skåne’s biggest

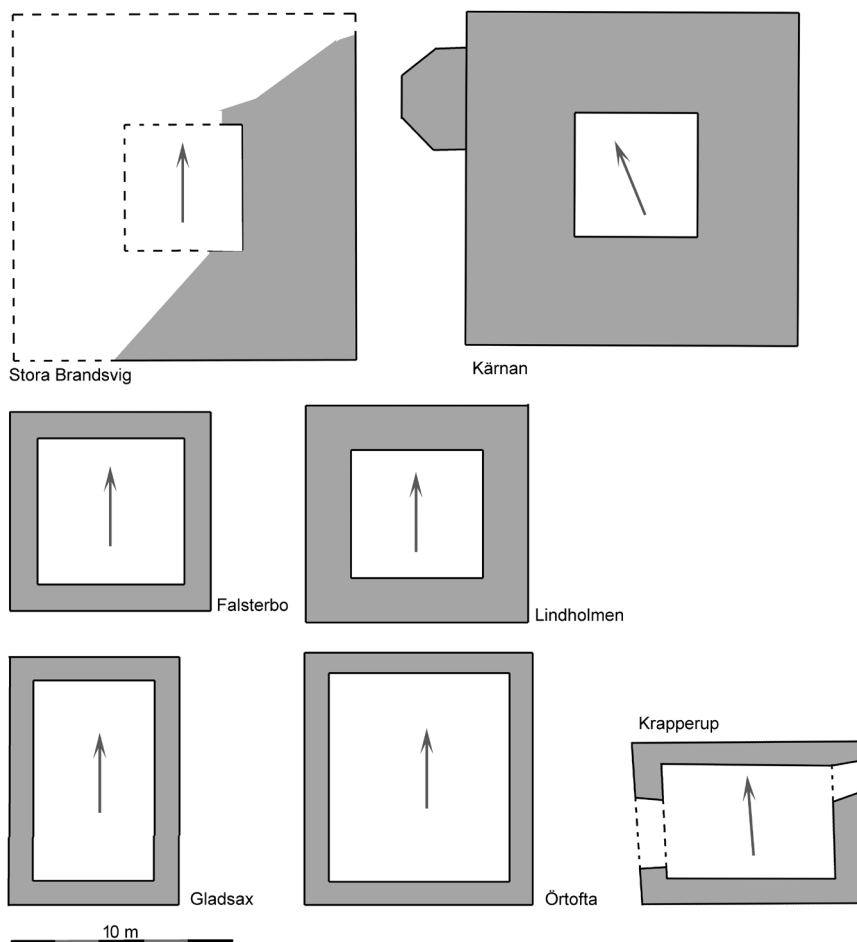


Fig. 12. Some of the right-angled towers in Skåne (drawing by Chatarina Ödman).

castles, still standing with the top floors reconstructed (Etting 2010, 114 ff.).

Stora Brandsvig next to the town of Ängelholm is a largely unknown and destroyed ruin, first recorded in 1425, but it is probably quite a bit older. The basement is built of sandstone from Helsingborg in the interior and with boulders of bedrock in the exterior. It is very similar to Kärnan at Helsingborg, but in fragments (Ödman 2002, 140 f.).

Falsterbo castle has a keep built of brick and walls of modest thickness. This is a royal building, first recorded in 1311. The keep is surrounded by a mantle wall. It is visible as a

reconstructed ruin (Etting 2010, 119 f.).

Krapperup castle was built no later than 1314. Inside the mantle wall, with its attached buildings, there was a tower like Örtofta with a size of 10.5 × 7.5 metres and a wall thickness of about one metre. The remains are now under the courtyard of the existing castle (Carelli 2001, 9 ff.).

Gladsax castle had a tower of bedrock boulders surrounded by a mantle wall. This was a private estate that was taken over by Queen Margret I. It is mentioned in writing in 1322 and is now a ruin (Jönsson & Waldeborn 2011).

Lindholmen is mentioned for the first time in 1332. The entire castle is built of brick and has a mantle wall with two tiers of shooting galleries. The castle complex is comparable to Helsingborg castle in size. Lindholmen is in ruins (Mogren & Wienberg 1995. Ödman 2015a, 20).

All these towers (Fig. 12) are dated to the 14th century, and the Öртоfta tower house was erected in the following century. Perhaps it was not described as a tower but as a house, like the other manor houses in Skåne, such as Glimmingehus, Bollerup etc. from the 15th century (Olsen 2014, 176; 180 ff.). All these are built of stone and usually comfortable dwelling houses without defensive arrangements – at least on their roofs. They did not break the law against castle building.

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