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*Published in:*  
Castella Maris Baltici 11

2015

*Document Version:*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Hansson, M. (2015). The Aristocratic Landscape at Bergkvara Castle, Småland, Sweden. In A. Gutehall, & C. Ödman (Eds.), *Castella Maris Baltici 11: proceedings of a symposium held in Malmö, Sweden, on the 27th of May to the 2nd of June 2012* (Vol. XX, pp. 89-98). (Archaeologia Medii Aevi Finlandiae; Vol. XX), (Malmöfynd). Society for Medieval Archaeology in Finland.

*Total number of authors:*  
1

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Martin Hansson

# The Aristocratic Landscape at Bergkvara Castle, Småland, Sweden

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## Die aristokratische Landschaft am Schloss Bergkvara, Småland, Schweden

Die Erforschung von Burgen hat sich lange Zeit auf einzelne Standorte konzentriert: Die Herkunft der einzelnen Burg, seine verschiedenen Phasen und Datierungen, Ort der Burg und die Bedeutung im politischen Prozess. Gleichzeitig wurden die Burgen und deren Studien unter dem Blickwinkel einer militärischen Struktur betrachtet. Heute ist eine umfassendere Sicht auf die Burg entstanden. Zweck dieser Arbeit ist es, die Anwesenheit und Landschaft einer spätmittelalterlichen Adelselite auf der Burg von Bergkvara in Småland zu diskutieren. Auf dieser Burg finden wir viele typische aristokratische Elemente, die aus einer europäischen Perspektive, mit aristokratischen Milieus verbunden sind, wie z.

B. Schlösser. Bei Bergkvara finden wir eine befestigte Residenz in einer wässrigen Umgebung vor, mit Gräben, Teichen, einem Garten und einer Mühle, sowie einer nahe gelegenen Kirche, die dem Burgherren angeschlossen war. In den mittelalterlichen Raum wurden die sozialen Bedeutungen eingebettet und für den Herrn des Schlosses war dies ein wertvolles Gut im Bemühen um die Herrschaft fortzusetzen und weiter zu erhalten. Eine Möglichkeit, die aristokratische Ideologie zu erfüllen, war es Adelskultur im Raum und in der Landschaft nachzubilden. Die Landschaft bei Bergkvara ist eine spürbare Materialisierung der aristokratischen Kultur des Mittelalters in einer skandinavischen Version.

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## Introduction

During the last couple of decades, several scholars have shown how the medieval aristocracy used space and landscape to strengthen their position in society. It has become obvious that the aristocracy created elite landscapes around their castles and residences. This type of research has for a long time been restricted to a European context, mainly the British Isles, but the purpose of this paper is to discuss the presence of late medieval elite aristocratic landscapes in Scandinavia as well. The castle and landscape around Bergkvara in Småland is presented as one example.

Castles have formed an important subject for historical, art-historical and archaeological research since the nineteenth century. During most of this period castle studies were usually concentrated on single sites: the origin of the individual castle, its different phases and dating and the castle's place and importance in the political process. At the same time, castle studies were mainly concerned with seeing the castle as a military structure. The scholarly view of the castle as a military object and the concentration on studying single settlements, especially larger castles built in stone that could be connected to kings and the higher nobility, is found all over Europe (Thompson 1987, 1991; Stocker 1992; Liddiard 2000; Mogren 1995). In the last twenty years, however, a broader view of the castle has emerged. Castles have started to be seen as symbols of power, whose military impression to a viewer has more to do with symbolism than actual military strength. Studies have shown that careful planning and design were behind the layout and display of castles. The castle's importance as a gendered space has also been studied (Hansson 2009). The importance of the castle in the landscape has been studied, for example, by Oliver Creighton, who has shown how the castle influenced settlements and landscape, but also how castle builders were involved in creating and designing elite landscapes around their castles (Creighton 2002, 2009).

This broader view of the castle has emerged as a consequence of a more theoretical awareness of space and landscape. A space or a landscape can be created in many ways, by erecting walls and houses, building roads and raising borders and so on, but the landscape is also created by the way in which people use it in their daily practice. This means that people are constantly creating and reproducing landscapes. It is people's practice that gives the landscape its meaning, and the daily practice is a reflection of social order on many levels. There is thus in all periods strong links between this daily practice and the creation of space and landscape. The social organization of a society is embedded in the landscape, and is thus detectable (Lefebvre 1991; Dodgshon 1987, 1998).

During the Middle Ages lordship and dominion became territorialized and embedded in the landscape. Towns, churches, villages and fields, borders and not least castles,

materialized lordship and control on various levels of society. Each piece of land was connected with specific dues, making the question of borders, control and ownership highly important. People's privileges and obligations became materially as well as immaterially detectable in the landscape. A lordship embedded in the landscape is also a preserving structure, consciously as well as unconsciously functioning to prevent changes in the prevailing social order. That the castle was an important node in such a landscape is not only obvious, it also means that in order to be able to understand the meaning and importance of castles, they have to be studied in a landscape context.

The landscape surrounding the castle was important for emphasizing the importance of the lord of the castle. It was in the castle and its vicinity that much of the aristocratic life took place: courtly love in the garden, hunting in the park, processional routes approaching the castle, tournaments and jousts, and so on. The castle and its surrounding landscape were visible evidence of the power of the lord, showing contemporary visitors that the lord truly belonged to the aristocracy. Together with the castle itself, these surroundings were intended to impress visitors and create an aristocratic setting (see Hansson 2006).

Aristocratic life was materialized in a number of features which, when found together, can indicate the presence of an aristocratic milieu. Based on a study of literature, various aristocratic elements can be found. They consist of different sort of elements, varying from architectural elements to more economic-functional features (tab. 1). What unites these elements is the fact that they are often found in and around castles and residences and that they can be connected to various parts of aristocratic life (for a discussion, see Johnson 2002:136ff.; Hansson 2006:129ff., 2009; Creighton 2002:65ff., 2009). Sometimes all of them are present, on other occasions fewer features, or just a single feature, are found. These features all materialize important parts of aristocratic life. For example, moats, walls and crenellations symbolize the martial dimension of knighthood, while the ornamental garden was the location for the courtly love. Being placed in a watery setting, the view and scenery, both of the castle from the outside, as well as the view from the inside of castle over the surrounding controlled areas, contributed to enhancing dominion and lordship. In a European context mills and dovecotes are visible evidence of feudal grants, while deer parks were perhaps the highest form of "conspicuous consumption" of arable land. To go hunting in your own deer park was a distinctive mark for a true aristocrat. Dovecotes, fishponds and rabbit warrens are other features that are often found in the vicinity of a castle or residence, being used as a constant supply of fresh meat, but also being feudal symbols, placed in prominent positions in the castle area. A church or abbey is also something that can often be found, instigated by the lord of the castle and functioning as a family memorial.

Tab. 1. Aristocratic elements discussed in the text.

Moats
Crenellations and walls
Ornamental gardens
Watery setting
Scenery
Fishponds
Mills
Rabbit warren
Deer park
Dovecote
Religious institution – abbey/monastery

It must be stressed that this type of features and elements of course can be present without implying aristocratic connotations, but when found grouped together the aristocratic implications must be considered. It is also a very disparate list, where some of the elements are highly material (walls and moats), while others are rather immaterial (the importance of scenery). What unites them, however, is their importance for various parts of chivalric life, and that they emphasize different aspects of this culture. Searching for this type of features and elements is one way of localizing aristocratic landscapes.

## The history of Bergkvara and the stone house

Bergkvara is a late medieval castle situated west of the medieval town of Växjö in Småland in southern Sweden (fig. 1). The manor and estate are known in written documents since the middle of the fourteenth century (Larsson 1974; Hansson 2005). Still today the estate is one of the largest in the province and centred round a manor from the late eighteenth century located just beside the medieval castle ruin.

In the year 1328, the knight Håkan Karlsson came into possession of his brother's share of the mill at Örsled at Bergkvara. His son, the knight Magnus Håkansson, had Bergkvara as his manor and residence in the 1350s. In the 1420s the estate came into the hands of the Trolle family. Birger Trolle the Elder, and his son, also named Birger (the Younger), were successful in buying property, but also in marrying, which resulted in the control of a large number of farms in various parts of Småland. The original hamlet at Bergkvara, which is mentioned in documents from the early fifteenth century, eventually disappeared, and all the farms in the village seem to have been in control of the manor around 1420. The farmers were probably transformed into crofters. The hamlet disappeared completely and its former location is not known. It has been suggested that it was situated a little bit north of the manor (Hansson 2005).

This development was fulfilled by Arvid Trolle, son of Birger Trolle the Younger, who controlled Bergkvara in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Arvid can be seen as one of the best collectors of farms and estates in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. By inheriting his sister Katarina, who had died without issue, he got control of around 200 farms, and through his three marriages he also got hold of a large number of farms. Most successful in this respect was his marriage to Beata Axelsdotter (Thott), daughter of one of the richest men in Denmark, Ivar Axelsson. As her dowry, Beata brought with her 400 farms and the castle of Lillö in north-eastern Scania (Larsson 1974).

The cadastral register of Arvid Trolle from the late fifteenth century is preserved (Almquist 1938). It shows that he owned around 1000 farms, mills, tofts and other utilities in Sweden and Denmark. In the late fifteenth century he definitely belonged to the wealthiest and highest aristocratic stratum in Scandinavia, being a rich knight, a royal counsellor and sheriff in Tiohärad and Östergötland. Against this background, it is no surprise that Arvid Trolle was responsible for erecting the medieval stone house at Bergkvara which today stands as a ruin.

The residence at Bergkvara had been burnt twice, in 1467 and 1469, in the fights between Swedish and Danish forces. Being a landowner in Sweden and Denmark, Arvid Trolle belonged to the part of the Swedish aristocracy that supported the union with Denmark. What the old manor looked like, or even whether it was situated at the same place as the new stone house, is not known. No archaeological excavations have taken place at Bergkvara.

The stone house at Bergkvara, according to written sources, was built around 1470, shortly after the previous manor had been burnt. It is not known how long the build-

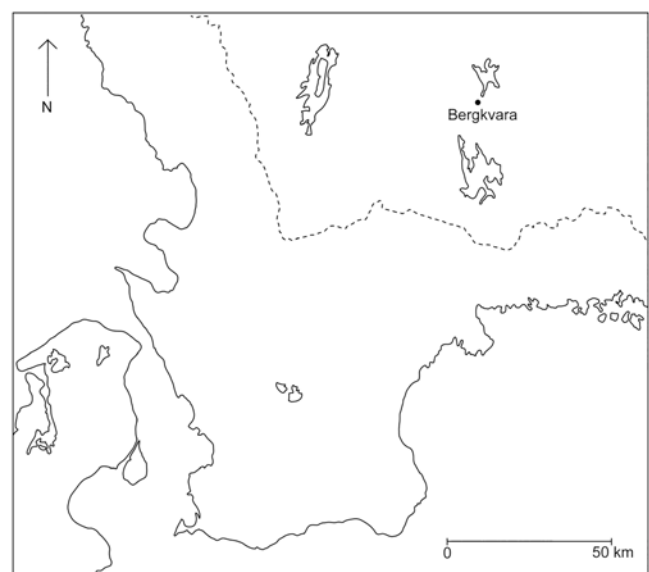


Fig. 1. The position of Bergkvara in southern Sweden. The dotted line show the medieval border between Denmark and Sweden.

ing process lasted. The stone house has been a ruin since the middle of the eighteenth century, but the substantial remains that still exist, together with older descriptions and images, make it possible to reconstruct what the castle looked like. With the aid of older maps in the archive of the manor, it is also possible to shed light on the surroundings of the castle.

The new castle, or tower house, was modern for its time, and large. The stone house was originally a six-storey building and built as a rectangle, 20 by 15 metres. The preserved walls are about 20 metres high, and in some of the corners of the building one can still see that the house had four hanging protruding turrets, one in each corner. These turrets are present on a picture of Bergkvara made by Erik Dahlbergh for his *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna* and dated 1707 (fig. 2). While the large stone house probably is reproduced correctly, many of the surrounding buildings on the picture have probably never existed. Dahlbergh's picture was drawn when the stone house had lost much of its original function as a residence. During most of the seventeenth century the estate was owned by lords residing elsewhere. In a description from 1690 it is said to be old and in decay (Hansson 2005; Menander *et al.* 2008).

The castle is situated on a spur in a lake, and today one can see a moat that delimits the stone house from the mainland. Judging by the measurements of the building, each floor had an area of almost 300 m<sup>2</sup>. The total area in the house was almost 1800 m<sup>2</sup>, which shows how large the building was. According to a description made by Carl Linnaeus in 1746, who saw the stone house that had recently become a ruin, the bottom floor was used for storage, as was the first floor

(fig. 3). The present entrance on the eastern gable of the house seems to have led only to the lower store room. Linnaeus claims that the entrance to the building was on the second floor on the northern side of the building. Apart from a probable entrance on the northern side, visible in the masonry at the second floor level, no traces of this external staircase can be seen today. The preserved masonry does not give many clues to how the building was used, but it is evident that the many fireplaces in the upper part of the building show that the upper floors were the living quarters of the noble family. While the upper parts were the private apartments for the family, the lower parts were probably used for storage. Linnaeus mentions a kitchen on the third floor, and there must also have been a hall, probably on the third or fourth floor. It is possible that the house had a shooting gallery below the roof (see fig. 8). Older renovations of the masonry, without any documentation, however make it difficult to analyse how the building originally functioned internally (Menander *et al.* 2008:10).

Judging by the masonry and Dahlbergh's picture, however, one can see differences in how the windows were placed in the building. The windows have been reconstructed, probably in the early twentieth century, but they still show late medieval appearance. It is evident that the northern façade of the building had very few and very small windows. The northern façade was the façade that faced land. This side of the building welcomed guests or enemies and gave a heavy, military impression. The eastern and southern façades, facing the lake, had large windows, which must have given these floors ample light and a splendid view of the lake from the

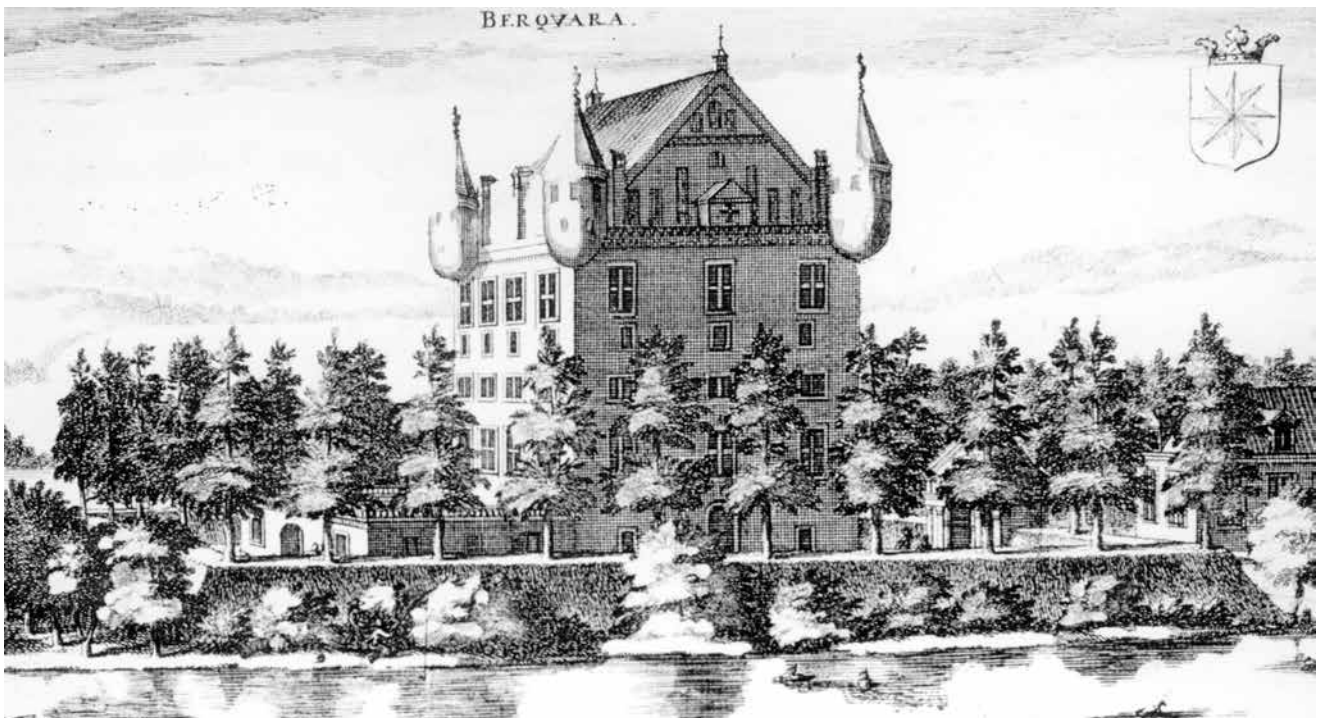


Fig. 2. The image of the tower house, dated 1707. From Erik Dahlbergh's *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna*.



Fig. 3. The ruined tower house. Photo: J. Ludwigsson, Kulturparken Småland.

inside (fig. 4). Here we can see a completely different architecture, where comfort is put before military needs. It was not reckoned that an enemy would cross the lake. In this aspect Bergkvara is an interesting mix between older castles where military needs structure the architecture, and the younger Renaissance palaces where comfort and light are given priority over military needs. One can, for example, compare with Månstorp in Scania, built in the 1530s, where thick earth walls surrounded a stone house in Renaissance style with large windows (Ödman 2002:112ff.). The importance of the scenery looking out from inside the castle is an aspect that have recently been emphasized (Creighton 2009:168ff.).

There is no doubt that the stone house was a very impressive building. As Anders Ödman has shown, it is interesting to note that many of the large stone houses that were built in the fifteenth century in Scandinavia actually were related



Fig. 4. The eastern gable of the stone house facing the lake had large windows. The same types of windows are present on the southern wall. Photo: J. Ludwigsson, Kulturparken Småland.

to each other through their owners (Ödman 2004:7). Arvid Trolle, who built Bergkvara, was father-in-law of Jens Holgersen (Ulfstand) who built Glimmingehus in Scania. Jens Holgersen's brother Olof Holgersen (Ulfstand) had Örup in Scania as his residence, and Arvid Trolle's father-in-law, Ivar Axelsson (Thott), built Lillö, while Ivar's cousin Claus Nielsen (Sparre) had Vik in Uppland. The highest aristocracy in Scandinavia married each other and lived in the same type of castles. The stone houses were not just functional defensible residences, they were also intended to impress others and to underline that the owner belonged to highest stratum in society. The stone house in Bergkvara was Arvid Trolle's contribution, probably a successful one.

## The aristocratic landscape at Bergkvara

The impression of the castle in Bergkvara was further underlined by the landscape setting of the place. By using the older maps of the estate that are present in the manorial archive it is possible to reconstruct, at least in a hypothetical way, the late medieval landscape around the castle. The reconstruction presented below has been made with the aid of a detailed map of the centre of the manor, from the late seventeenth century. This map is unfortunately undated, but the layout of the manor on the map is the same as on another map in the manorial archive dating from 1684, which probably means that the map shows the centre of the manor around 1700 or shortly thereafter. The map also gives an image of the manorial centre that precedes the changes made by a new owner in the 1730s. Another map from the manorial archive, dating from 1858–1861, has also been used, as well as a map of the whole estate from 1683. It should however be noticed that no excavations have been made on any of the landscape elements that are mentioned below (see also Hansson 2005).

Bergkvara, as mentioned earlier, lies on a spur on the northern side of a lake. A little further to the east of the castle, the Mörrumså river runs into the lake on its way from Helgasjön north of Växjö to the Baltic. At the outlet of the river into the lake, the Örsled mill is located. The mill has belonged to the manor/castle since the fourteenth century. The castle also lies just south-west of Växjö. From Växjö runs the main road towards Scania and Denmark, a road of prehistoric origin. The road passes Örsled, where today the remains of the road can be seen in pasture land. From this main road a traveller on his/her way to Bergkvara had to turn at Örsled. Here it is interesting to notice two things.

The first is the bend the road makes in the pasture land, a bend that takes the traveller closer to the river valley (fig. 5). The bend is not caused by any topographical obstacle in the pasture land. The road could just as well have continued straight on (as the present road does). But by forcing the trav-



Fig. 5. Parts of a map from 1858–1861 showing the former main road passing Bergkvara while making a noticeable bend. 1 The tower house. 2 The mill at Örsled. 3 Smithy. 4 Mechanical industry. Drawing: Petter Lönegård.

ellers on the road closer to the river, the great castle became visible in the distance on the other side of the lake in the west. And to the east the medieval church tower of the parish church in Bergunda was probably also visible. Depending on the nature of the vegetation in the Middle Ages, the church tower could have been seen from the road. This was the case up until a couple of decades ago. Since then an increasingly forested landscape has made this view impossible.

The great western tower of the church was probably built in the late fifteenth century and most likely instigated and perhaps financed by the Trolle family (fig. 6). The tower is younger than the nave of the church, and a previously exist-



Fig. 6. Bergunda church with the large western tower. The oldest parts of the church probably date to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Photo: Martin Hansson.

ing vault in the tower, which has been interpreted as being original, has been dated to the late fifteenth century. In the late seventeenth century a coat-of-arms resembling the armorial bearings of the Trolle family is said to have adorned the south side of the tower. In the same period, the owner of Bergkvara had patronage over the church (Liepe 1984:40ff.). There are thus a lot of indications that the tower of the church was built at the same time as the stone house and by the same lord, Arvid Trolle. For passers-by on the main road it must have been clear that they were now entering a very special type of landscape of power, seeing the large stone house in the west and the church tower in the east. The secular and spiritual powers were united and guarded the landscape.

Secondly, when a traveller to Bergkvara came to Örsled and turned off the main road to the west, he or she has the great castle in focus in the distance when passing the mill. All the rest of the way towards the castle, a traveller could see the impressive great stone house on the other side of the lake. On a day when the lake was calm, the castle became even larger as the masonry was reflected in the water. Here we find an analogy to the watery setting which has been emphasized when it comes to English castles (Johnson 2002:19ff.; Creighton 2009:77ff.). The impression of the castle becomes

even greater when we consider that this was one of very few stone buildings in the region in the late Middle Ages. Besides Bergkvara, the Bishop of Växjö had some stone buildings at his castle Kronoberg, including a tower, but the dimensions of these buildings were much smaller. Almost half of all churches in the region were still built in timber at the end of the Middle Ages (Hansson 2001:101). For the peasantry a huge castle in stone must have meant power and permanence. Apart from the bishop and Arvid Trolle, only God could afford a stone house.

By analysing the detailed map of the manor from the late seventeenth century, it also becomes possible to get an impression of what the traveller met when he/she arrived at the castle (fig. 7). The great stone house lay protected behind two moats, of which only the inner one is visible today. Bergkvara was thus like an ordinary castle with an inner part with the living quarters for the lord, and a relatively large bailey with various economic functions. In the seventeenth century this is where we find the kitchen, warehouses, a brewery, and the seventeenth-century residential building, a two-storey timber house. Before entering the castle, a traveller had to pass a large geometrical garden that, judging by the map, gives a Renaissance impression. It is not possible to date the garden, but since no lords resided at Bergkvara after 1580, it is probable that the garden was created in the middle of the sixteenth century at the latest. It is not likely that absent lords would have used resources to create this kind of garden at a manor that they seldom visited. We cannot rule out that the garden actually was created by Arvid Trolle at the same time as he had the stone house built.

Another typical aristocratic feature can be seen, the two fishponds by the shore of the lake. Fishponds are often found in an aristocratic landscape, and they are also present at Bergkvara. It is interesting to find fishponds by a lake which in itself is a large fishpond. In the nineteenth century one of the crofters of the estate paid his lease in fish from the lake. The digging of fishponds can thus be seen as something unnecessary from a strictly functional point of view. One can always argue that the fishponds were useful when large parties of visitors come and that fish could be stored here, waiting to be used. But similar "fish storing" could be done in wooden boxes in the lake. The fishponds should rather be seen as an aristocratic element, something that should exist at a castle of this type; they belonged to the aristocratic concept. And the fishponds were also needed if the lord was herding foreign fish, such as carp. Today the fishponds are not visible in the manorial park. The fishponds were filled in during the 1740s.

A large number of aristocratic elements can thus be found in the landscape around Bergkvara. The residence was a true castle. Defended by two moats and a bailey, and partly lying inaccessible in the landscape, the castle gave an impression of power and status. By forcing the main road to make the



Fig. 7. Detailed map of the Bergkvara around 1700. 1 The tower house. 2 The manor. 3 Kitchen. 4–7 Storehouses. 8 Bathhouse. 9 Fishponds. Drawing: Petter Lönegård.



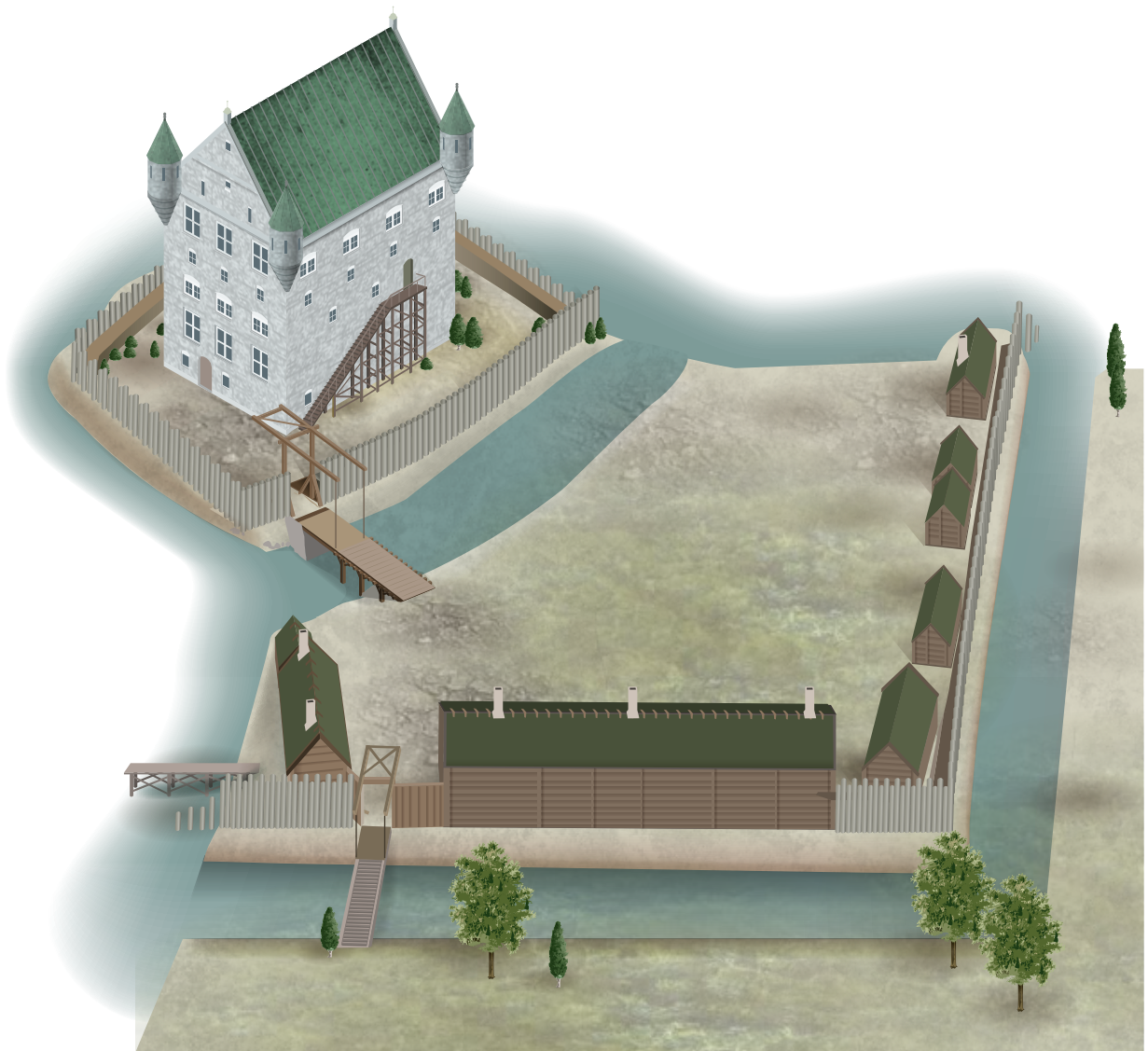


Fig. 8. A reconstruction of how the castle looked in the late fifteenth century. Drawing: Petter Lönegård.

bend, the glory of the lord of the castle became visible even to passers-by, and to travellers to Bergkvara this became even more obvious, when the garden and the fishponds fulfilled the aristocratic ambitions of the place. This type of signalling was probably meant to impress Arvid Trolle's fellow members of the high aristocracy (fig. 8). For the ordinary peasants in the area, many of whom had to pay their lease to the castle, the aristocratic landscape contributed to making social change impossible and embedded the social conditions and the status of the lord in the landscape.

There is of course a problem with the dating of many of the elements discussed above, but I would argue that most of them probably have a late fifteenth or early sixteenth century dating. Different maps from the 1680s show that the layout of the manor, with the garden, the fishponds, road system and the location of the mill, existed at this time. The fact that no lord resided at Bergkvara between the 1580s and 1732, is in my opinion circumstantial evidence that the ele-

ments in question probably date to a period earlier than 1580. It seems rather unlikely that an absent lord would spend resources on creating gardens and digging fishponds at a manor which he hardly ever visited. Most probably the landscape of Bergkvara was created sometime between 1470 and 1580.

## Conclusion

Of the aristocratic elements mentioned earlier, several can be found in Bergkvara. We have the fortified castle in a watery setting, with moats, fishponds, a garden and a mill. However, we do not have any notion of a formal delimited hunting ground, a dovecote or a monastery by the castle, even if the western tower at the parish church is tangible evidence of how the lord also controlled religious affairs in the area. And the possibilities to hunt must have been good in the surrounding forested landscape. Even if the dating of the various

elements discussed above can be questioned, I would argue that there can be no doubt that the landscape around Bergkvara should be regarded as an aristocratic landscape. So far this is one of few landscapes of this type that has been identified in Scandinavia, but it can hardly be unique. Future research into this matter will certainly find other examples.

There can be no doubt that the concept of space during the Middle Ages was embedded in social meanings. For the aristocracy space was a valuable asset in the struggle to maintain and reproduce lordship. The European aristocracy shared a common ideology about what it meant to be a nobleman and they used the landscape to strengthen their dominion (Hansson 2006). The ideology and the culture of the medieval European aristocracy can to some extent be equated with the chivalric culture that permeated the ruling classes during the Middle Ages. A nobleman balanced the role of the chivalric knight with the expectations of being a nobleman by the way they dressed, behaved, acted, both in their daily routine and in exceptional circumstances (Duby 1977; Bengtsson 1999). One way to fulfil the aristocratic ideology was to recreate aristocratic culture in space and the landscape. By filling the space of daily routine with aristocratic elements, status was further underlined and could not be questioned. By controlling the landscape, the village and its people, the church and the priest, the aristocracy controlled the world. The landscape at Bergkvara is a tangible materialization of aristocratic medieval culture in a Scandinavian version.

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