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The Medieval Towers on the Island of Gotland

MARTIN HANSSON

Abstract

This paper discusses early medieval stone towers on Gotland. It summarizes the scholarly interpretations of their functions and dating, and analysis the towers in different spatial settings; towers at farmsteads, at churches and at harbours. Generally, we should see the towers on Gotland as concrete symbols of the presences of different types of elite. The towers at churches and farms reflects the presence of wealthy tradesmen and farmers that for security reasons fortified their farmsteads. In some cases, this included the local church, which was built beside the tower. In other cases they were built by a group of local elite families, in order to serve a more common function. This was most likely the case with the towers at harbours. While the former towers gives a more private and defensive impression, the latter must be seen as more offensive and public. The closed architecture, with few openings, entrances on the second floor, loopholes and crenelated walls clearly shows that the towers were connected to the martial side of medieval society.

Introduction

The landscape of the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea is filled with monuments from the Middle Ages. The well-preserved medieval town of Visby, with its curtain wall and many preserved medieval buildings, and the spectacular medieval churches in the countryside has always attracted both tourists and scholars. In the countryside, the scholarly interest has in the last decades mainly been focused on churches and the emergence of the medieval settlement. The purpose of this paper is to present the free-standing medieval

towers on Gotland with a special focus to their spatial contexts.

To understand the historical context of medieval Gotland, we need to acknowledge that the island during the Middle Ages never were a fully integrated part of the Swedish kingdom. This happened first in 1645. In the thirteenth century, the island payed an annual tribute to the Swedish king, but the king did not own any property on the island. From ecclesiastical point of view, the island was part of the diocese of Linköping on the Swedish

mainland and the bishop had a residence in Visby. In 1361, Gotland was conquered by the Danish king Valdemar and became a Danish province in the late fourteenth century, after being ruled by the Teutonic Order during a short period. For the first time Gotland became firmly controlled by outside powers. This, together with the effects of the Black Death, profoundly affected the island. The royal castle Visborg was built in Visby in c. 1410, making sure that much of the economic surplus in the island came into new hands. This of course affected the economy of the island, a development that is clearly visible in a decline when it comes to building activities. The churches on the countryside and most of the profane stone houses can be dated to the period before 1350 (Yrwing 1978; Wienberg 2004; Blomkvist 2005, 377 ff.; Andrén 2011; Westholm 2015).

Gotland experienced a spectacular development in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages, as a centre for the Baltic trade and later a focal point for the crusades to the Baltic countries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Viking Age runic stones and hoards as well as the erection of 94 medieval parish churches in the countryside are a witness of this development. Visby emerged as the island's only urban centre in the eleventh century eventually becoming member of the Hanseatic League and one of the largest towns in the northern part of the Baltic region. Intense building of churches and townhouses in stone took place in the thirteenth century (Yrwing 1978; Blomkvist 2005, 478 ff.; Andrén 2011). From c. 1140 until the sixteenth century, Gotland had its own mint, with minting probably taking place in Visby (Myrberg 2008).

Another consequence of the early medieval economic boom on Gotland are the c. 200 medieval stone houses that were built on the countryside by wealthy peasant traders. They are to be found all over the island and



Fig.1 Gotland in the Baltic in relation to south Sweden.

functioned both as accommodation and storage (Qviström 2020, 264 ff.).

The Gotlandic society had a somewhat different social structure compared to Sweden and Denmark. No formal domestic aristocracy can be traced in the sources from the island. The noblemen that appear on Gotland in written documents have their roots elsewhere and never established any manors on the island. This does not mean that the society should be seen as equal from a social point of view. On the contrary, the Gotlandic society seems to have been controlled by a collective of elites, the judges with families and relatives, and wealthy peasant traders, belonging to a group of leading persons. These families can be seen as some kind of elite cooperative (Gardell 1986, 101 ff.; Lerbom 2003, 183 ff.; Andrén 2010, Svedjemo 2014, 191 ff. for a discussion). From a functional point of view, they fulfilled the same tasks as the local nobleman did on the mainland, but the loose connection between Gotland and the Nordic kingdoms prevented a formal aristocracy from

being developed (see Hansson 2001, 245 ff. for a discussion regarding mainland Sweden).

Castles and towers on the Swedish mainland

The process of medieval castle building in Sweden follows the general European pattern, being closely connected to the state formation process and the development of lordship. Today the ruins of around 320 medieval castles can be found mainly in the southern parts of Sweden, often dating to the period 1250-1450. The castles include anything from simple motte like structures, very often using natural hilltops as well as spurs and peninsulas in lakes and wetlands, to large masonry castles of continental type. Very often, the castle consisted of timber buildings (Lovén 1996; Hansson 2011). There are also a number of freestanding stone towers, which will be in focus here.

The first scholar to focus on the medieval stone towers in Sweden was Martin Olsson, who in an article in 1932 described the round towers along the Swedish east coast. Some round towers were the first phase of later large castles, like the ones in Kalmar and Stockholm; others were freestanding in rural areas, several along the coast. Olsson interpreted them as being part of some sort of coastal defence instigated by the Swedish king (Olsson 1932). The connection to the Swedish kingdom in some cases seemed evident, since the round towers in Kalmar, Borgholm and Stockholm later on were integrated into royal castles. There are however no written documents that mentioned any royal castle building at this time. Olsson also had problems with the dating, since none of the towers he discussed was dated with any accuracy.

One of the towers he discussed was the round tower in Kalmar. It belonged to the first phase of the castle that later were to be

developed on the site, becoming one of the largest medieval castles in Scandinavia. Olsson excavated the foundations of a round tower and an adjacent rectangular building, but could not get any firm dating of either. Recent excavations outside the thirteenth century curtain wall, has shown the presence of intense settlement activities in the area dating to the early twelfth century (Olsson 1944; Stibéus 2015; 2017). Maybe this settlement is at least partly contemporary with the tower.

The history of the round tower in Kalmar is quite typical for many towers on the Swedish mainland. After having functioned together with an adjacent hall building, they either were replaced by, or became integrated in larger masonry castles. We can see this development both in medieval Denmark and in Sweden (La Cour 1972).

Apart from along the east coast of Sweden and in Norrland, free-standing towers have also, just like on Gotland existed at a number of churches on the mainland, but much less frequently compared to Gotland. Most of these towers have also disappeared without documentation. In medieval Sweden towers existed at the churches in Hamneda and Vrigstad in Småland, but they are also known from individual churches in Närke, Västmanland and Hälsingland. In medieval Denmark this type of towers at churches are known from southeast Scania and on Bornholm, and in Denmark timber and stone towers in coastal areas have been interpreted as being part of a coastal defence and warning system against pirates (Lundberg 1935, 166 ff.; La Cour 1972, 152; Liebgott 1989, 62; Lovén 1996, 365 ff., Prahl 1996; Stibéus 2017, 415 ff.).

The towers on Gotland

In the scholarly literature, the number of towers on Gotland are often said to be between 12-15. The first recording of these

monuments were made in the 18th century, when Carl Linneaus and the antiquarian C G Hilfeling on their journeys around Gotland, visited and described some of the towers. They were seen as buildings for defence and/or storage. In the mid nineteenth century the art historian Carl Georg Brunius described the towers situated close to churches in his study of the art history of Gotland and interpreted them as being intended for fortifications. He was quite convinced that they were older than the nearby churches (Brunius 1864; 112 f.; Linneaus 1975; Hilfeling 1994). Most scholarly interest were aimed at these monuments in the 1920's and 1930's, especially through the work of Nils Tidmark and Nils Lithberg (Tidmark 1931; 1936; Lithberg 1933). Tidmark studied and documented several towers, and excavated the tower of Västergarn. About the same time, Gunnar Svahnström studied many of the "ordinary" medieval buildings that are present on the countryside of Gotland, and excavated a few of them (Svahnström 1952). After these scholars pioneering work the towers of Gotland has been somewhat forgotten. They have of course been mentioned briefly by a number of scholars interested in other topics of the Middle Ages of Gotland, but the work of Tidmark, Lithberg and Svahnström have been instrumental for later research (see Lundberg 1935, 166 ff.; Hinz 1982, Kyhlberg 1991, 174 ff., Prahl 1996; Tuulse 2002, 47; Andrén 2010; 2011, 38 ff.; Qviström 2020, 264 ff. as some examples). Tidmark and Lithberg, as well as others has discussed them in terms of parish fortifications, watchtowers, warehouses for the parish/priest or as a part of the vicarages (Tuulse 2002, 47). The interpretations have varied depending on the local context of the studied tower.

In this paper, seventeen towers are discussed, but originally the number were probably higher. Many of them are today only preserved as foundations at ground level,

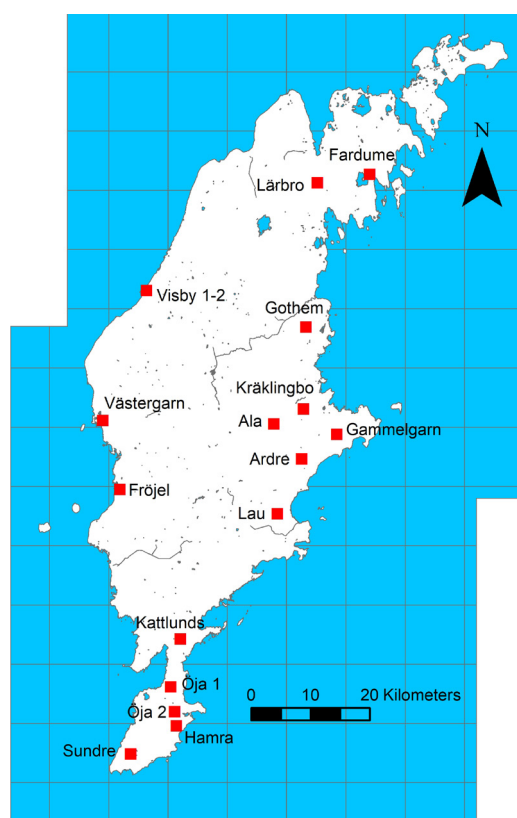


Fig. 2. The freestanding medieval towers on Gotland discussed in this paper. See also table 1

which makes it difficult to determine if the foundation is that of a tower or of another type of stone building. The towers can be divided in two groups due their form. In the south of the island are a group of three round towers (Sundre, Öja, Västergarn), while the northern part of the island has quadratic towers. An in-between and unique type has recently been described after an excavation of the tower in Hamra. It was previously thought to have been one of the round towers, but the excavation showed that is rather a rectangular building with rounded corners. The walls of the tower in Hamra were substantial, c. 2.4 m thick and the once tower like building was on the ground floor divided into two rooms which were covered with barrel vaults (Hoffman 2018; 2019).

The towers, round ones and quadratic, can be found in three different spatial settings. One group of towers are located at harbours. In one case, at Visby, two towers stood by a harbour in the town, in the case of Västergarn at an urban-like settlement. Another group of towers, the largest in numerals, is closely connected to parish churches. To this group belongs towers that today both are standing inside the churchyard, but also towers standing in the direct vicinity (less than 100 meters) from the church. The third group is towers standing on a farmstead in the countryside. The reality is of course more complex. Some of the towers at harbours are also standing just beside the church, and we cannot rule out the possibility that a tower once was standing by a church that today has disappeared. The different spatial contexts might however imply different functions.

The size of the towers are rather uniform. The round ones have an outer diameter of 12-15 metres, while the quadratic ones are usually

between 8 to 11 metres in side. The two largest towers were the round tower in Västergarn and the still standing so called “Gun Powder” tower in Visby (Visby 1). The tower building in Hamra had exceptional size, but it has been questioned if this really was a tower (Hoffman 2019, 6). Most of the towers had between 1.7 to 2.5 meter thick walls, the tower in Västergarn with 3 meter thick walls are the most substantial in this respect. The smallest tower, the one in Ardre, might have been a bell tower. It seems as if none of the towers, with the exception of the ones in Lau and Lärbro, originally had an entrance on ground level. In some cases, like Sundre and Gothem, ground level doors can be seen today, but they are secondary intrusions in the buildings. Where original openings can be seen they are most often located to the second floor of the towers, which could imply a military/defensive function. The same impression is given by the fact that the masonry on the ground floor lacks window openings and those towers that

Table 1. A compilation of some basic data regarding the towers on Gotland. (AMR = Ancient Monuments Register, Fornsök).

Name	Location	Shape	Size	Wall thickness	Source
Ala	Farmstead	Quad.	?	2 m	Tidmark 1936
Ardre	Church	Quad.	7 x 7 m	c. 1 m	Roosval & Lagerlöf 1963
Fardume	Farmstead	Quad.	8 x 8 m	2 m	Svahnström 1943
Fröjel	Church/Harbour	Quad.	9,65 x 9,65 m	1,7 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Gammelgarn	Church	Quad.	9,3 x 9,3 m	2,25 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Gothem	Church	Quad.	9 x 9 m	1,7-2,0 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Hamra	Church (200 m)	Rectangular	14 x 11 m	2.4 m	Hoffman 2018; 2019
Kattlunds	Farmstead	Quad.	10,5 x 10,5 m	c. 2,2 m	Svahnström 1976
Kräklingbo	Church	Quad.	?	?	Lithberg 1933
Lau	Church	Quad.	11,7 x 12,3 m	c. 2 m	Lagerlöf & Stolt 1975
Lärbro	Church	Quad.	9,6 x 9,6 m	2,40-2,70 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Sundre	Church	Round	14-15 m in diam.	2,75 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Visby 1	Harbour	Quad.	10.5 x 10.5 m	c. 2,50 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Visby 2	Harbour	Quad.	c. 10 x 10 m	c.2,0-2,5 m	Svahnström 1968
Västergarn	Harbour/Church	Round	15 m in diam.	3 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Öja 1	Church	Round	12 m in diam.	2,5 m	Tidmark 1931, 1936
Öja 2	Farmstead	Quad. ?	?	?	AMR Öja 19

are preserved to full height, seems to have had some form of parapet on the top. This means that they must be interpreted in a martial context. Something that on the other hand contrasts a military function of the towers are that they all lack any surrounding moat and/or curtain wall.

Most of the towers are demolished but judging by the ones that are more or less preserved, they probably consisted of four to six floor. The tower in Sundre has four floor levels (see below) and the tower in Visby has six (Visby 1). Written documents mentioned that the tower in Kräklingbo, demolished in the late eighteenth century, had seven floor levels (Lithberg 1933, 65). This probably means that the towers normally were 15-20 meter high. The preserved tower in Sundre is 12 to 14 meter high, while the tower in Visby is 25 meter high. Normally, the floor levels consisted of one room, in some cases covered by a barrel vault, in others by a wooden roof resting on wooden beams.

Among the towers where more substantial parts of the masonry are left, we can see that all but one had at least one garderobe, most often on the third floor. The tower in Gammelgarn had an extra garderobe on the fifth floor. The only tower that we can be certain lacked a garderobe, is the preserved tower in Sundre, where none is found. The presence of a gardeobe is often seen as essential if a building should have been able to function for permanent habitation. It is possible that many of the towers, where we lack information about garderobes, originally had one. Judging from this the towers could in many cases have functioned as dwellings. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the later demolished tower in Kräklingbo functioned as dwelling for the local priest.

Kräklingbo is also the only tower where we have any information of the presence of fireplaces inside the towers. They were however probably not part of the original



Fig. 3. The “Gun Powder” tower in Visby, located beside the medieval harbour and dendrodated to c. 1161. Photo by M. Hansson 2009.

tower, but later insertions judging by their inscriptions (Lithberg 1933, 65 ff.). In none of the other more or less preserved towers have any traces of fireplaces been found. This might contradict the idea that the towers were used for permanent habitation. To live in a stone building all the year around in the Scandinavian climate requires a heat source inside the building. This heat source could of course have been moveable, braziers of some sort, but that would have been far from as effective as a permanent fireplace and chimney, which would have made use of the stone masonry for storing the heat. It is interesting to note that many of the large thirteenth century warehouses in Visby, often with four to six floor levels, also lacked permanent heat sources. It has been suggested

that they perhaps only were used intensely during the summer half of the year (Qviström 2020, 291, 295).

When it comes to dating, the general opinion has for long been that the towers on Gotland belong to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This has been confirmed by dendrochronological dating of the towers in Visby and Gammelgarn. The tower in Visby was probably erected c. 1161, which so far is the oldest dating of a tower on Gotland. The one in Gammelgarn is dated to c. 1210 (Bräthen 1995 (note that +7 years must be added to the dates given in Bräthen 1995, see Westholm 1998); Andrén 2011, 38, 118f.). Recently the tower in Hamra has been dated with radiocarbon dating, indicating a date between 1030 and 1260 (Hoffman 2019, 9). The dating is however made by charcoal from a floor layer inside the building, which means that there is some uncertainty what this dating actually represents. The artefacts found inside the tower in Hamra had wide dating ranges, from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, which indicates that the building was used during quite a long period (Hoffman 2019). A twelfth century dating for the tower is perhaps most probable. Stylistically, the towers with their heavy, closed masonry with few and narrow openings with rounded arches at doors and windows, connects to a Romanesque architecture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As the description from Kräklingbo shows, they can have been in use much later.

With the current state of knowledge, it is difficult to see if there is a chronological difference between the round and the quadratic towers. Different scholars have had different opinions regarding this topic. Nils Tidmark regarded the round towers as the oldest, judging by the simple construction of the tower at Sundre. The round towers were soon accompanied by the quadratic, a form that soon would come to dominate (Tidmark 1931, 8). Ola Kyhlberg takes the opposite

position, and regards the quadratic towers as the oldest, and dates them from c. 1150 until c. 1200, and thinks that they are followed by the round towers, which he dates to c. 1200 until c. 1250. His conclusion is based on comparison with the dating of the nearby churches and the idea that the tower in Visby must be seen as an innovative centre (Kyhlberg 1991, 178). In the literature of towers in Scandinavia, it seems as if round towers often are considered to be older than the quadratic ones. This goes for the ones mentioned above, in Kalmar, Borgholm and Stockholm, but also many of the earliest stone towers in Denmark seems to have been round. One example is the Bastrup Tower on Zealand, in Denmark, thought to be dated to c. 1100 (La Cour 1972, 145 ff.; Randsborg 2003). Turning to England, round towers in castle contexts are seen as being later than the quadratic ones. The round tower gave a much better all-round vision from its battlements and reflects a more advanced military architecture in comparison to the quadratic ones (Kenyon 1990, 52). In Germany, many inhabited quadratic towers were built in the eleventh and twelfth century (Tuulse 2002, 33 ff.). Since none of the round towers on Gotland is securely dated, more research is needed in order to be able to answer this question.

Towers at harbours

A distinct spatial location for some towers are by harbours that have functioned as trading places. This is especially true for four towers, the ones in Visby, Fröjel and Västergarn. A connection between harbours, trade and towers was something that already Tidmark discussed in the 1930's (Tidmark 1931). The towers are often located, if not at the coast, close to the coast, and from the top of the tower, guards could have kept watch over the sea, warning for incoming raiders. However,

apart from the ones in Visby, Västergarn and Fröjel, they are not directly located at the harbour sites. In Visby, the preserved tower (Visby 1) was erected c. 1161, just beside and north of the medieval harbour. In the late thirteenth century, it became incorporated in the town wall that circumvents Visby. The tower, six storeys high, had a twin tower on the southern side of the harbour, which foundations today are incorporated in another building in Visby (Visby 2) (Andrén 2011, 119). In 1161, a trade treaty was signed between Gotland and duke Henry of Saxony, regulating the German merchant's right to trade on the island (Yrwing 1978; 114 ff.; Blomkvist 2005, 415 ff.). Visby was the leading trading settlement on Gotland already in the mid-eleventh century. Later on the town expanded significantly (Andrén 2011, 68 ff.). To find two defence towers, guarding the trade and harbour, and perhaps also being used for storage or some kind of official business in relation to controlling the trade, is perhaps not unexpected.

In Västergarn the large round tower was situated close to the Romanesque church at an urban-like settlement and harbour that was surrounded by a rampart (Cassel 1999). At Fröjel, the quadratic tower was built c. 50 meter north of the church, on the edge of the cliff where the church is situated. Just west of the tower, the terrain slopes steeply to the west. Below the slope, remains of a Viking/Early Medieval settlement/harbour/trading place have been partly excavated (Tidmark 1931, 21 ff.; Carlsson 1999). The tower thus had a rather impressive location, visually dominating the harbour. The towers at the harbours had in comparison to their cousins in the countryside a rather offensive and public location/function. Their location by the coast made them more visually dominant, especially for anyone approaching by ship. A function as watchtower for incoming ships are more than likely. If they also were used

as "lighthouses" is not known today. We can also speculate about what activities that took place in the harbour they guarded. One can compare with how the Danish king in the thirteenth century built a castle in Skanör, for controlling the so-called "Skånemarknaden" (the Scanian market) in southwest Scania, which every autumn attracted a large number of merchants (Rydbeck 1935).

Towers at farmsteads

A more private function are probable for the towers that are found at farmsteads, often quite a distance from the local parish church. A direct connection between the tower and the church cannot be seen in these cases, but we cannot completely rule out the possibility that they originally stood by a church. A recent study by Jakob Kieffer-Olsen has shown that the number of medieval churches that have disappeared in Denmark is considerable. The number of medieval churches was once much higher (Kieffer-Olsen 2019, 412 ff.). If the same conditions applies to Gotland is not known, but could change the picture of the local context of some the towers if this was the case.

In comparison to the towers in known church contexts today, the towers at farms are considerably fewer. This can probably reflect a historical situation, but it could also be due to source critical factors. Around 200 medieval stone houses are known from the countryside (Andrén 2011, 38; Qviström 2020, 257 ff.). Some are preserved, others have completely disappeared, or only their foundations are known. Among these missing buildings, several that could have been regarded as towers if they still were visible, can be hidden. When discussing the medieval farmsteads and their stone houses it also becomes problematic to distinguish between towers and other buildings in several storeys.



Fig. 4. The tower at Fardume to the right and the remains of the adjacent dwelling to the left. Photo by M. Hansson 2009.

This can be exemplified with the building at Stora Hästnäs just outside Visby. It is built in four storeys with stepped gables and was originally part of a larger complex. The building is dated to c. 1300 and has a tower-like appearance, but is nevertheless not counted as a true Gotlandic tower. It is probably correct to make this distinction, but it highlights the problems of how to define a tower and how to distinguish them from other types of buildings (Andrén 2011, 49 f.; Qviström 2020, 268).

One example of a tower at a farmstead is Fardume. It is situated c. 3.5 kilometres from the local parish church in Rute. The complex consists of a tower and an adjacent stone building. The tower is situated on a minor ridge along a road, just above a rather steep slope, northeast of the lake Fardume träsk, at the farmstead Fardume. The tower is quadratic, eight meters in side, which makes

it one of the smaller towers on the island. Its eastern wall is preserved up until three storeys height, but the tower has been higher. The walls are c. two meter thick, made in worked limestone. The bottom floor lacks an original entrance and was once covered by a wooden roof. The second floor has been covered by a barrel vault, and probably held the original entrance to the tower. Inside the tower communication was facilitated by an internal stair in the wall. How the upper parts of the tower were designed is not known. Beside to the tower is the remains of a contemporary stone house, which originally was divided into two parts. To the west, the building had been dug into the slope, which created a cellar functioning as a storage room. Above this cellar was the main part of the building, consisting of two rooms, a smaller above the cellar and a larger further east. The larger room had a fireplace. This building must have

functioned as the proper living quarters of the farmstead. The dating of the complex is uncertain, but a building phase in the early thirteenth century has been proposed. Maybe the tower is a bit older than the stone house. How long the buildings were inhabited is not known (Svahnström 1943, Andrén 2011, 44).

The complex at Fardume has been interpreted as the farmstead of a wealthy peasant-trader's family on Gotland. The family's actual living quarters were probably in the building beside the tower, while the tower functioned as a "safe", for both commodities and the profits of trade. It could also function as temporary refuge in case of danger and against raids. It was thus in comparison to the towers at harbours, a tower intended for a much more "passive" defence, and also a tower with a much more private purpose, only to function for the needs of the farmstead. This is also reflected in its smaller size compared to some other towers.

Tower and church – the example of Sundre

The most common setting for the towers of Gotland today is close to a church. Nine of the towers on the countryside is located in close vicinity of a church. These towers have often been discussed in relation to the adjacent church building. Several of the best-preserved towers, like the ones in Lärbro, Gammelgarn and Gothem are all standing inside the churchyard, just some meters from the western parts of the church. Others, like the still standing tower in Sundre are located c. 50-80 meter from the church. As has been pointed out by Andrén, there are, apart from the example of Fröjel, no other case where the church both got a Romanesque western tower and a free-standing tower beside the church. One can almost say that a freestanding tower and a Romanesque church tower excluded each other (Andrén 2010, 47 f.). Romanesque



Fig. 5. The tower and church at Gammelgarn. The tower is dated to c. 1210. The tower of the church is not original. Photo by M. Hansson 2009.

church towers have aristocratic associations in most parts of Scandinavia, even if many of the Romanesque church towers on Gotland lacks aristocratic elements, such as galleries and private, lordly apartments (Wienberg 1993, 154 ff.; Andrén 2010, 47).

The research regarding the freestanding towers by churches has often been focused on the towers themselves, and/or the churches as built structures. This is of course vital for understanding the towers, but what is lacking is a study of tower/church in a landscape perspective. For example, the question if more buildings once were included in the tower complex, just as in the case of Fardume, and if so, which type of buildings this could have been, is seldom raised. Here an attempt to make such an analysis will be made, focused on the tower and church in Sundre, the southernmost tower on the island.

The round tower in Sundre is described and documented by Carl Linnaeus in 1741 and by the antiquarian C. G. G. Hilfeling in 1799. Hilfeling's description of the tower shows that apart from a changed doorway, which was reconstructed in 1959, the tower still has the same appearance as in 1799. The existing opening in the bottom floor level was made between 1741 and 1799. It is not described by Linnaeus, but is present on Hilfelings drawing of the tower. Brunius gives a similar description and thinks that the tower has been used for storage (Brunius 1864, 205). The round tower is c. 14-15 meter in diameter and is today c. 12-14 meter high. The walls are c. 2,75 meter thick, which makes this to one of the more substantial towers on the island. The tower is built in worked sandstone and has a coursed masonry (the description is based on Tidmark 1931, 8ff.; Hilfeling 1994, 164 ff.; Linnaeus 1975, 241f. and archive material at ATA, Antikvariskt Topografiskt Arkiv).

On the inside, the tower consists of four floor levels. The entrance is on the second level, and must have been reached via an

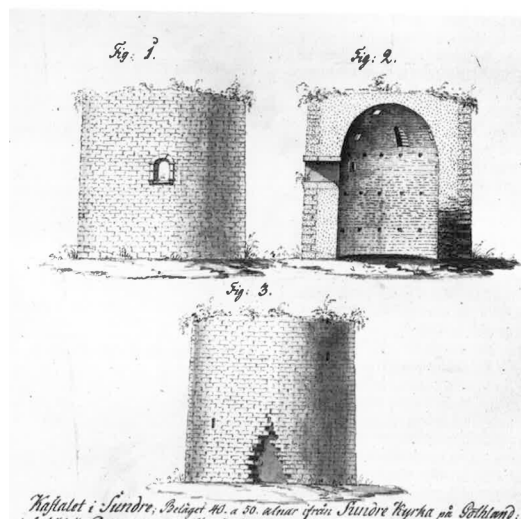


Fig. 6. The drawing of the tower in Sundre by C. G. G. Hilfeling 1799. ATA, Central Board of National Antiquities, Stockholm.

external ladder. The doorway has a rounded Romanesque arch. The ground floor originally seems to have had a dome vault. The second level, where the entrance was, had its floor level on top of the dome vault, c. 3-3,5 meter above ground level. Here, two small light apertures, which today are blocked, once existed. The third floor was carried by wooden beams, situated about three meter above the floor level of the second floor. The internal communication between the second and the third level must have been via an internal ladder, since there are no traces of a stair in the masonry wall at this level. A still existing dome vault covers the third level. The third storey also has two apertures. On the south-western wall, an opening lead into a stair into the wall, leading up to the storey above the vault. The stair ends in a small "stairwell building", on the otherwise open fighting platform on the fourth floor. A crenelated wall surrounds the platform. The stairwell building is too substantial to be only intended for protecting the upcoming stairs, and might have been the base for a watchtower. The dating of the



Fig. 7. The tower and church at Sundre. Photo by M. Hansson 2009.

tower is uncertain and only based on the stylistic impression of the masonry. Tidmark is convinced that this tower is one of oldest on the island (Tidmark 1931, 8). The heavy masonry, the narrow apertures and the absence of more elaborated openings around the door makes a twelfth century dating possible.

The tower is situated c. 50 meter northeast of the church in Sundre. The church is built in sandstone, with limestone in the porches. It consists of a chancel without an apse, a nave and a later western tower. The chancel and nave is thought to be dated to the first half of the thirteenth century c. 1230, while the tower is believed to be built in the latter half of the same century in the 1280's. It is thus a coherent Romanesque church, which originally was built without a tower (Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1966, 228 f.; Andrén 2010, 50 ref lit). In Strelows chronicle from 1633, Sundre church is said to have been built in 1218 (Strelow 1978, 341 f.). If the proposed dating of both the tower and church is valid, this means that the tower was built before the present stone church, maybe in connection

with an older timber church. Wooden planks, dated to the twelfth century, probably belonging to an older timber church has been found in the church (Andrén 2010, 50). It shows the presence of a timber church in Sundre, and from other parts of Gotland, there are examples of Romanesque stone churches being preceded by a timber church (Andrén 2011, 149). About 25 meter south of the church, the remains of the medieval vicarage, a four-room house, was partly excavated in 1947. The vicarage is dated to the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries (Svahnström 1947).

The complex of church, vicarage and tower are located on a round hill, c. 2,5 kilometre from the coast. This means that from the top of the tower, the sea both to the east, south and west could be monitored, but the distant to the coast made a true control of the coastline impossible to uphold from the tower. The natural hill is formed like a round platform, c. 130 meter in diameter and is raised c. 5-6 meter above the surrounding ground. It is the limestone bedrock that here protrudes as a small hilltop. West of the hilltop a small

stream runs from north to south towards the coast. There is neither a hamlet nor a specific farmstead that bears the name Sundre. The oldest map of Sundre, from 1704, shows that the parish then consisted of ten farmsteads, of which three, Vännes, Tomasse and Digrans were situated in the vicinity, northeast, of the church. The same number of farms existed in the cadastral register from 1653 (Revisionsbok 1653). None of the eighteenth century maps that exist of Sundre have any information regarding the tower. It is not drawn on the map, probably since it was no longer of any significance.

Judging by the ancient monuments register, the area around Sundre was densely settled in the Viking Age. Graves from the Viking age have been found in the parish, and in 2006 a Viking Age silver hoard, weighing 3,3 kg, consisting of 1374 Arabic and Byzantine coins as well as arm- and neck rings were found a bit south of the church. Sometimes in the 1960's a Viking Age arm

ring in gold was found at the farmstead Tore in Sundre parish. This is the largest single gold object from Viking Age Gotland found so far (Östergren 1997; Carlsson 2007). The background to the tower complex must be found in the wealthy local society that existed on the southern tip of Gotland in the twelfth century.

Looking at available LIDAR data (Light Detection and Ranging Airborne Radar) over Sundre, the round hill where the church, tower and vicarage is situated is clearly visible. One might from the LIDAR data suspect that there are structures hidden underground. There might be foundations of a surrounding curtain wall to the west, and possibly also a building aligned north-south in the area between the "curtain wall", the tower and the present day churchyard. From the tower, a low, but still visible wall runs southerly, along the edge of the natural plateau. This interpretation needs of course to be corroborated by excavations, but judging by the LIDAR data,

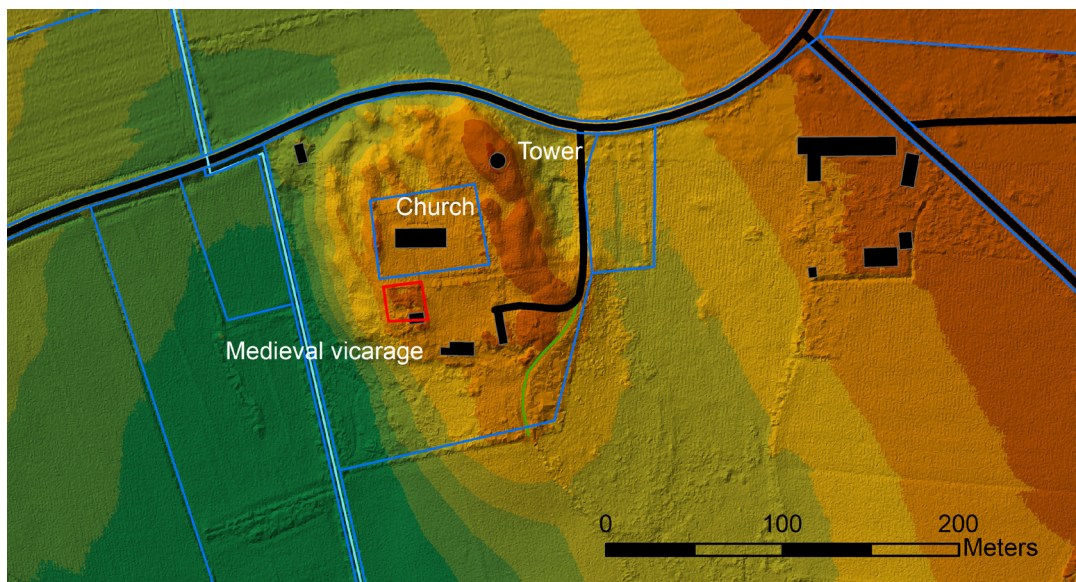


Fig. 8. LIDAR data showing the elevation at Sundre. The hilltop with the tower, church and vicarage is clearly distinguishable. North of the church and west of the tower, a hypothetical curtain wall can be suspected. There are also other structures that might come from different buildings in the area between the churchyard and the tower.

the tower in Sundre can have been a rather typical castle milieu of a standard European type. The number of examples where castle/manor and church are located together can be found all over Europe in the Middle Ages (Hansson 2006, 161 ff.). For Scandinavia, Sundre could be compared with the castles in Helsingborg in Scania and Borgholm on Öland in this respect. At Helsingborg a round tower, an adjacent hall and a round church co-existed within an area that probably were enclosed already in the twelfth century. The same situation existed in the oldest phase at Borgholm (Carelli 2007, 103 f.; Stribeus, 2007).

In this respect, the complex at Sundre resembles a fortified large farmstead with a private church. Hypothetically, the wealthy family that had the tower and later on the church built based its wealth on trade and farming. The Viking age hoard and gold arm ring are examples of the economic surplus in the area. The complex should then be seen as a “manorial” type of complex. The largest farm in the area fortified its farmstead and built a church, as a way of controlling the local community. In a later stage, in the thirteenth century, the private church was transformed into a parish church, the farm became a vicarage. Sundre thus resembles Fardume, but in Sundre the local family also controlled the church. Fieldwork is of course needed to either refute or confirm this hypothesis,

This interpretation of the complex in Sundre is not new. Anders Andrén has previously suggested that Sundre is a clear example of a church that was built in connection with a large farm, of which the tower was the visible materialisation. A person named “Johan in Sundre” is mentioned on a undated grave slab at Gröttingsbo church, which indicates that a large farm once existed in Sundre (Gotlands Runinskrifter G35; Andrén 2010, 50 f.). Andrén has suggested that this pattern was common on Gotland,

that many churches originally were built at large farms and started as some sort of private churches and that the towers of Gotland reflects the presence of large farms. This would put the development on Gotland more in line with other parts of Scandinavia, even if Gotland never got the same type of large estates (Andrén 2010, 50f.). Andrén’s interpretation has been met with critique, but is nevertheless credible (Siltberg 2011; Svedjemo 2014, 194 ff.). Even if the society on Gotland lacked a formal aristocracy, it was run by the local elite. The case of Sundre is probably one of the best examples of how this elite materialised their status using and adapting the complex of “castle and church” on Gotland.

Conclusions

This paper has tried to give an overview of the medieval towers of Gotland, by analysing them in different spatial settings, at farmsteads, at churches and at harbours. Generally, we should see the towers on Gotland as concrete symbols of the presences of different types of elites. The towers at churches and farms reflects the presence of wealthy tradesmen and farmers that for security reasons fortified their farmsteads. In some cases, this included the local church, which was built beside the tower. In other cases they could have been built by a group of local elite families, in order to serve a more common function. This is most likely the case with the towers at harbours. While the former towers give a more private and defensive impression, the latter must be seen as more offensive and public.

The towers were connected to the martial side of medieval society (Hansson 2006, 77 ff.). The closed architecture, with few openings, entrances on the second floor, loopholes and crenelated walls clearly shows this (Qviström 2020, 353). The absence of

curtain walls and moats might be an illusion, or a reflection of what type of raiders that were expected, not large armies on horseback, but small raiding bands. The absence of fireplaces on the other hand suggest that the towers were not permanently inhabited, rather temporarily used, perhaps mostly during the warmer period of the year.

The dating of the towers is still somewhat uncertain, it seems that they started to be built in the mid twelfth century. This is in a period when profound changes of the Gotlandic society seems to have taken place, especially in the period 1120-1140's, according to the historian Nils Blomkvist. The changes, the start of local minting, the emergence of Visby as a town and trade deals with German princes, led according to Blomkvist to a more profound integration of Gotland in the European world (Blomkvist 2005, 400). One might perhaps argue that the erection of new elite residences, were towers played a significant part, is also a reflection of this process. The local elite on Gotland adapted a European way of noble living in fortified residences. The example of Sundre is perhaps one of the best examples of this development. To be able to get any further with the towers of Gotland, we need to look outside the towers themselves, include their immediate hinterland, as well as the landscape context at large if we want to reach any new knowledge about these interesting monuments.

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