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## Kärnan 700 years

### From royal keep to city symbol

Thomasson, Joakim; Dieden, Alison

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

Joakim Thomasson

# Kärnan 700 years

## *The first footsteps in the snow*

**During the winter** of 1315–1316 some, for us unknown, peasants strode through the deep snow in one of the forested areas of north-western Scania, performing what seemed like one of an endless array of corvée works for the monarch. They had been on similar missions before, and this was not the last one. It did not take long to find the solid, pollarded oak trees.

They probably lived in one of the many settlements that had been established in the forested areas of the landscape, outside the wealthy, ancient settlement areas. The population had increased since the 8th and 9th centuries, which did not only force and encourage people to emigrate; more commonly they colonised the very peripheries of the known landscape. More and more land that had previously been regarded as unsuitable was put under the plough. It was during that hard winter that people started to realise that this could not continue. What made it impossible was the change in climate. The weather had changed for the worse and become colder. The deluge began in 1315 after Easter. The continuing heavy rains lasted until August and were followed by a grim, cold autumn; needless to say, the harvests of that year were disastrous. A famine was not far away, and it was especially hard for

settlers like the ones who strode through the snow. The yield from their lean soils was in normal circumstances just enough to sustain them and there was not much left in the barns. The year 1315 marks the beginning of the Little Ice Age. As if that were not enough, by the middle of the century the worsened weather conditions and the colder climate were followed by the Black Death. That was the first of many waves of plague pandemics that came to curse people for centuries to come. An evil spiral of population decline, deserted settlements and scarce resources started to permeate the communities.

Corvée was a form of unfree labour that ordinary people had to perform in order to work their farms. They were also forced to pay a rent, in the form of a share of their harvests and animal husbandry or sometimes as monetary payments. The recipients were either the crown, a clerical institution or the nobility, which together held most of the land in Scania. On top of that, the local parish churches charged a tenth of what was produced on the farms in order to care for people's souls. The peasants who undertook the tree felling and the resulting timber transport were probably performing this as part of their obligations towards the crown.



Illustration from the French book *Chronique de la Bouquechardière* by Jean de Courcy from the end of the 1400s, showing the building of the Tower of Babel. The image shows the use of the same type of scaffolding as when Kärnan was built.

Source: British Library



Reconstruction of the tower, apron wall and little tower by Armin Tuulse (1949) and Joakim Thomasson (2020).

Illustration: Carl Nordahl

The main task of the sovereign was to maintain the peace. The monarchs were responsible for the external military defence and the domestic rule of law. Apart from *corvée* and rents, the kingdom was financed through taxes. In Scandinavia, trade was a monopoly that was taxed mainly by the crown. Customs, court fines and other duties also went to the royal coffers. If, for example, people wanted to catch salmon in one of the great rivers or exchange old coins for new, they had to pay levies. A substantial yet unreliable source of income for the kingdom was also external appropriation, such as the continuing plundering of mainly Slavic and Baltic-speaking communities.

The feudal system was controversial; when the church and the powerful aristocrats wanted to establish a social order, differentiating between those who prayed, those who battled and those who worked, far from everyone ag-

reed. Written sources do not record all the complaints that were raised on the thing assemblies. They cover the tip of the iceberg when describing the countless rebellions and uprisings that occurred during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Helsingborg was the scene of some, such as the uprising against the unfair taxation by archbishop Absalon at the end of the 12th century, or the siege of the royal castle in 1243 and 1263.

The feudal system was also warlike. The social prestige, honour and wealth of kingdoms, monarchs, the nobility and clergy, depended on their military capital in order to exploit the peasants through rents and taxation and their capabilities for external appropriation. Along with continuous efforts to raise taxes and find new levies for the peasants, feudalism was characterised by armed domestic conflicts for the throne and between the kingdom and the church, as well as wars with external powers. It was a case of struggles and battles for finite resources, fought in an environment of climate change and population decline.

### **Medieval brutalism**

The oaks that were felled by the peasants during the grim winter of 1315–1316 were intended for the keep. After drying, the trunks were carved by carpenters to serve as joists for the first floor. When the building season started later on during the spring, a crane was used to lift them into the specifically made niches in the mighty walls. The peasants made the delivery of the timbers for the next floor the following winter. After a devastating fire and financial difficulties, followed by a reorganisation of the construction works, the keep could be inaugurated in 1320, some 700 years ago. It was the centre of the almost completely rebuilt royal castle. The modern fortress was something completely different to the royal manor that had been established on the same site during the 11th century. It was the



Map of Helsingborg's "castle province" dated 1522. Originally the province probably consisted only of the "hundred" (judicial district) of Luggude. In 1231, Södra Åsbo and Rönneberga hundreds had been added. Önsjö, Harjager and Frostå hundreds were incorporated sometime prior to 1369. Torna, Norra Åsbo and Göinge hundreds were part of the castle province in 1486, when it was at its most extensive.

Source: Helsingborgs historia del 2:1

local peasants in the surrounding district, Luggude herred, who in the beginning provided corvées, rent and taxes to the crown. In the 13th century, fragmented written records suggest that a fief comprising three herreds supported the castle. The financial backing continued to expand. In the 14th century, the fief comprised six herreds and in the 15th century eight. It reached the peak in the 16th century, when there were nine. The castle in Helsingborg was part of a wider development in the Danish kingdom. The power was concentrated to a few heavily fortified castles, which burdened ever more people with more obligations.

The 30 metre high tower is a medieval equivalent to what we today would recognise as a military concrete bunker. The architecture was not intended to shine, but to express power, brutality and fear. There are few exterior

decorations. It was the massive impregnable walls, which are occasionally interrupted by conspicuously small openings, that met the contemporary visitor. When the keep was finalised it was probably perceived as a functional castle, thereby rendering positive reviews of its design. But to claim that it was a beautiful tower, such as the contemporary Gothic cathedrals, does not ring true. The aesthetic feelings regarding its appearance have evolved over time in completely different circumstances.

The architecture of the keep and the castle reflect the double, conflicting nature of the feudal kingdom. The king at that time, Erik Menved, realised their importance in having experienced several riots, uprisings, civil wars and battles. Climate change, decrease in the taxable population and domestic exploitation created an evil spiral of strugg-



Photographs with Kärnan in the background taken from Stortorget square and dating from before and during construction of the Terrace steps and before and after the reconstruction of Kärnan. The steep cliff ledge is evident. The first descent from the castle area was built in 1679. It was part of a retreat route down to the harbour, which also meant that buildings were demolished to make room for a fortified trench, now Stortorget. The Terrace steps were built to provide access to the 1903 Industry and Crafts Exhibition, which took place in the newly created Slotshagen Park.

Photo: Helsingborg's museums

le for the finite resources. Domestic order and peace had to be maintained. The presence of blatant strength was an important architectural argument to convince people to commit to higher rents, more corvées and new taxes. After the Hanseatic campaign in Scania in 1312, with the successful siege and looting of the castle in Helsingborg, it probably was an easy decision to order the peasants to collect the necessary timber. In the Zealand Chronicles it is mentioned that in 1313 the king commissioned new castles as well as the strengthening of old ones.

Due to Erik Menved's early death in 1319 and the ensuing financial difficulties, it was neither he nor his successor who could walk up the 146 steps to the crenellated rooftop and enjoy the mighty view over the Sound. Instead, it was the lord high constable Ludvig Albertsen Eberstein, to whom the king had granted the castle, and who finalised the construction works.

#### **Avenues, postcards and plates**

The popularity of the old tower peaked in 1955. There were as many as 109 773 visits to the keep that year. Their purposes were different than during the Middle Ages, likewise the investments. Instead of refurbishments in order to enhance the military capabilities, measures were taken to make the tower more accessible. That year, brightly tiled toilet sections for Ladies and Gentlemen were installed in the upper floor to facilitate services for the many visitors. The keep had become a popular tourist destination and was no longer a feared fortress.

The transformation started when the entire castle except the keep was demolished during the 1680s. After further strains during following wars, the tower appeared as a ruin in a battered, languishing and, for the many, also a forgotten town. The turn of fate was powered by industrialism, which enabled the town to grow, and was electrified



It is more of a rule than an exception that the covers of tourist and travel guides have depicted Kärnan. The guide in the illustration is from 1931. Photo: Anna Bank/Helsingborg's museums

by nationalism. The lonely tower on the escarpment became a mutual concern for vacationing royals, antiquarian agencies and the patriotic urban gentry.

All involved parties could conclude that the ruin was about to collapse. After painstaking negotiations, the refurbishment finally started in 1893. It was then that the tower gained its current appearance. The ambition was to restore the tower as close to the original as possible but there were many deviations. Among the most conspicuous is that the height was increased by one floor, and that the stair turret with the important flagpole was projected over



The building of the Terrace steps for the 1903 Industry and Crafts Exhibition meant that for the first time there was an unbroken promenade from the harbour, via Drottninggatan and Stortorget square, up to Kärnan. Suddenly, Kärnan was in the town centre. It was difficult to visit the town without visiting Kärnan. This is evident from the number of visitors to the H55 exhibition, making 1955 a record year for Kärnan. The postcard dates from the 1950s.

Source: Helsingborg's museums

the rest of the tower. Instead of the militaristic brutalism that permeated the original tower, it was transformed into a romanticised interpretation of a gothic castle tower.

The restoration of the keep was not the only expression of the worship of a constructed glorious past. Pretentious buildings reviving better versions of classic, gothic and renaissance architecture crowded along the main streets

and new avenues. An imposing equestrian statue depicting field marshal Magnus Stenbock was erected in 1901 at the most important junction in the town, celebrating what had been decided to be the decisive battle at Helsingborg in 1710, when eastern Denmark became southern Sweden. The peak was reached in 1903 during the Industry and Craft Exhibition, which took place in a newly created



park by the foot of the keep. Monumental stairs, designed in the gothic revival style and dedicated to the king, were constructed to connect the main public space by the shore with the keep. The entrepreneurial ventures at the harbour were finally connected with the glorious past on the escarpment. The town's heritage was presented as a national concern, a place of vital importance in a Sweden permeated by nationalism.

In 1955 a world fair, the Helsingborg Exhibition H55, focused on the future. The new modernistic architecture and designs on display, with simple geometrical forms, new materials, bright colours and functionalistic approaches, were something other than the worshipping of a gloomy and unequal past. People poured into the exhibition area by the harbour, but also found their way to the medieval keep. This was not to experience the modernistically inspired toilet facilities. The reasons were rather that the keep, since the restoration, had been reproduced on postcards, ornamental plates and souvenirs. The landmark had become the popular image of Helsingborg. It was difficult to visit the exhibition without enjoying the view from the old medieval tower.

### **Troubling memories**

It is now more than 700 years since those peasants strode through the snow during the grim winter of 1315-1316. The keep is a must when visiting the town, but above all an integral part of the town and the identity of its inhabitants. The tree-felling peasants living at the beginning of the little ice age would not have regarded the castle as something glorious or beautiful. For them and their descendants it was a hostile reminder of a disputed social order, in times of climate change, pandemics and wars. For the aspiring urban gentry in late 19th century Helsingborg, the keep was part of an idealised past, a ticket to

honour, legitimacy and important networks. For the most committed visitors to the Helsingborg Exhibition in 1955, the keep was probably perceived as a remnant of a stage in the historical development of society that would ceaselessly progress to better times. As visits to the tower are part of the local school curriculum, and the surrounding park serves as a public venue for a wide range of events and activities, people continuously generate memories that are related to the keep. These narratives are mainly not connected to its original purpose of inducing fear, or to the problematic agendas of the flag-waving urban gentry. But this should not prevent us from feeling proud of the links to past and present inhabitants that the tower symbolises today. The old keep on the escarpment is part of a troubling heritage that challenges us to remember many conflicting narratives.

In the year of 2022 Helsingborg is about to arrange yet another major exhibition: H22 – “a city expo exploring a smarter and more sustainable urban development and city life”. This manifestation will take place in an age permeated by climate change, the outbreak of a virus pandemic and growing nationalism. It is therefore important not make the same mistakes as during the 14th and 19th centuries. The history of the only remaining part of the mighty castle reminds us that it is not advisable to build mighty fortresses and maintain excluding patriotic narratives. Because who in these times of climate change and inequality would commission impregnable monumental buildings for the few and powerful? Shouldn't sustainable urban development be characterised by solutions for the many? One thing, however, is beyond doubt. Like the visitors to the major exhibitions of 1903 and 1955, many of the people visiting the H22 expo will not be able to resist climbing up the 146 steps inside the old keep. ●