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"The fortified castle on the mighty cliff"

The escarpment, the castle and the town of Helsingborg

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”The fortified castle on the mighty cliff”

The escarpment, the castle and the town of Helsingborg

All that remains of the once powerful castle of Helsingborg is the 700 year-old but still impressive 30m high brick-built keep. It is strategically situated at the edge of the escarpment, overlooking the sea traffic passing through the Sound to and from the Baltic Sea.

This article comprises a review of the development of the settlement on what was to become the castle plateau, from the initial remains until the order from the Swedish king to demolish the castle in 1679. Analysis of archaeological records and the adjacent landscape provide new interpretations of the chronology and character of the site.

The earliest settlement

The seashore below the castle plateau on the escarpment was an ancient landing and gathering place, situated at the narrowest passage of the Sound. It was an infrastructural hub for both roads and seaways.

The earliest known settlement on the escarpment was established during the 8th to 9th centuries. The archaeological remains are fragmented, which obstruct a wider

understanding of the site. Postholes, hearths and patches of cultural layers provide evidence of post-built houses in an area from the current keep in the east to the cliff side in the west.

A royal demesne

Several written sources suggest that the site developed into a seat of government. Helsingborg is listed as a royal centre with an associated market place in Canute the Holy's Deed of Gift to the Cathedral of Lund in 1085. It is one of the crown demesnes that are mentioned in the Cadastre of King Valdemar (c. 1231), which reflects an administrative organisation of the Danish kingdom that was established c. 1000. Later sources suggest that it was also a place where a thing assembled, which was one of the basic governmental and judicial institutions in the kingdom. During the 11th century, additional settlements were established at strategic locations on the escarpment, controlling access to and from the important landing place and market on the shore below. The earliest remains are as fragmented



During the 15th century, the castle in Helsingborg was one of Denmark's most important fortifications, not least due to the Öresund Toll, which was introduced at the beginning of the 1400s. Over the centuries, it became a major source of income for the Danish state. Hand painted copper engraving based on 'Civitates Orbis Terrarum', published by Georg Braun in 1588.

Source: Helsingborg's museums

as within the castle area. However, stone churches with patron galleries were built at the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th centuries, which suggest a clustering of aristocratic manors around the royal demesne.

The royal castle

The first solid manifestations of this status in the archaeological record do however date from the following century. A round keep with the adjoining round church of St Michael were constructed on the castle plateau during the 12th century. It is clear, although the first mention of "castrum Hælsyngaburgh" is from 1263, that the manor had been transformed into a royal castle with a large administrative county. The archaeological record suggests continuous extension of the castle area during the 13th

century. A substantial inner east-west aligned wall was constructed, which indicates an inner bailey. A large adjacent stone house was located immediately to the north of the wall, and an adjoining timber-framed house was built on its southern side. The keep was renovated or rebuilt with a large squared base during the latter half of the 13th century. A limited number of burials in the vicinity of St Michael also suggests the existence of a temporary churchyard, used in the third quarter of the 13th century during the conflict between the king and the archbishop. This occurred at the same time as an urban settlement was developed along the beach below.

The great fortress of the battered realm

After a devastating attack by Hanseatic troops in 1312, the



Illustration by Carl Nordahl efter Joakim Thomasson

The castle plateau in Helsingborg

The castle plateau in Helsingborg with documented building work dating from before Kärnan's construction. The dark grey areas show the edge of the escarpment and the light grey area shows the known approximate distribution of archaeological remains dating pre-1300s.

- ❶ The oldest round keep, dated 1100s.
- ❷ The square reconstruction of the round tower, carried out in the 13th century (probably latter part)
- ❸ St Michael's round church, built in the 1100s.
- ❹ Well, built before the

present keep.

- ❺ Churchyard at St Michael's. Burials performed sometime during 1250-1400s, probably second half of the 1200s.
- ❻ Gutter-like hollows documented during excavations in the 1930s. Probably remains of a stone wall that divided the castle area.
- ❼ Stone building older than the apron wall round Kärnan, probably built at the end of the 1200s.
- ❽ Remains of a half-timbered building, older than Kärnan.

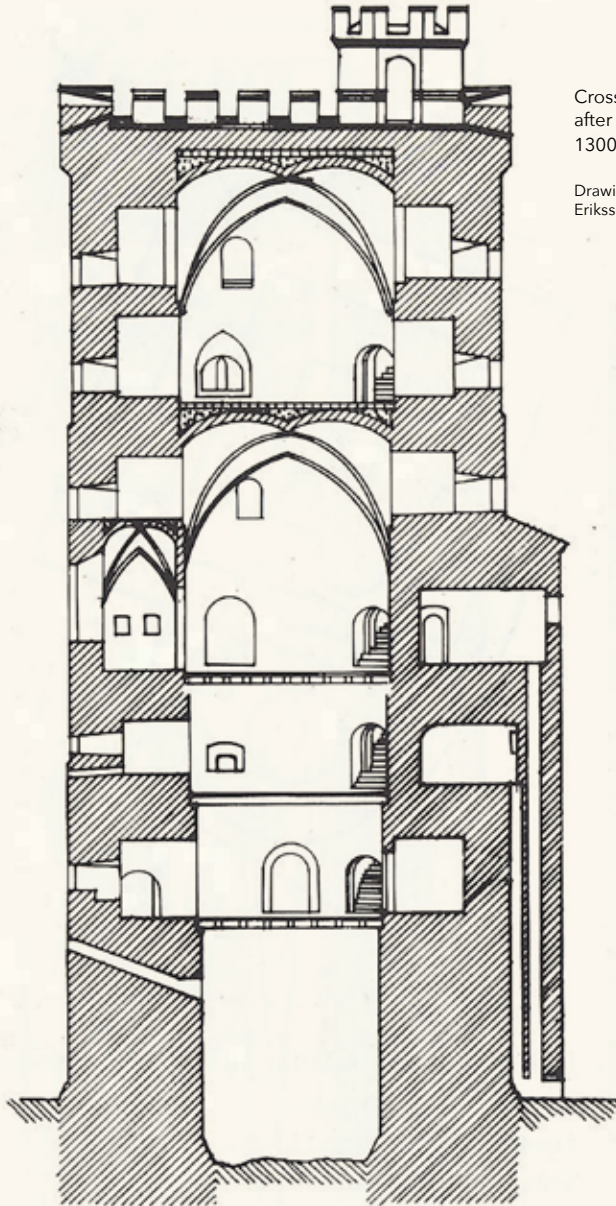


Cobblestones mark the location of St Michael's Church up on the edge of the ridge. The chancel in the foreground, then the long-house, the west part of which had collapsed down the cliffside.

Photo: Anna Bank/Helsingborg's museums

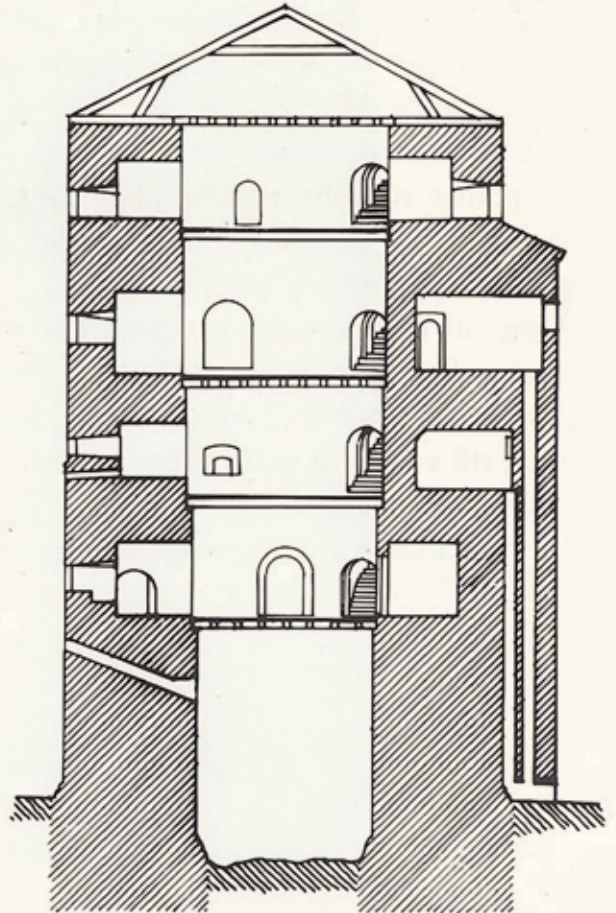
castle was completely rebuilt and reorganised. Brick replaced the locally quarried sandstone as the main building material. The 500m long crenelated perimeter brick wall, with 14 flanking turrets and towers and a barbican with a drawbridge surrounded by a 30m wide and 15m deep moat, must have been completed before 1318. St Michael was integrated as a tower in the new wall.

The present 15m by 15m keep has an octagonal stair turret in the north-west corner and an external privy culvert on the north-eastern façade. Dendrochronological analysis of the joists from the three lower storeys show that the construction works progressed during 1315 to 1318. The slow pace was not only due to the painstaking work of erecting the 4.5m wide walls of the keep. The 4m thick curtain wall with a stair turret, situated about 5m from the main keep, was also a part of the same undertaking. When the walls were about 22m high, a major fire broke out, probably during a siege, and devastated the newly built



Cross-section of Kärnan before and
after reconstruction in latter half of
1300s.

Drawing by Annika Cronsioe after Torkel
Eriksson, 1994





Hans Linderson, research engineer at Lund University's Institute of Quaternary Geology, taking samples to date the remaining parts of the wooden platform that, after construction of the vaults, gave access to the third storey. Note the timber marks that were used to ease the joining of the wooden sections.

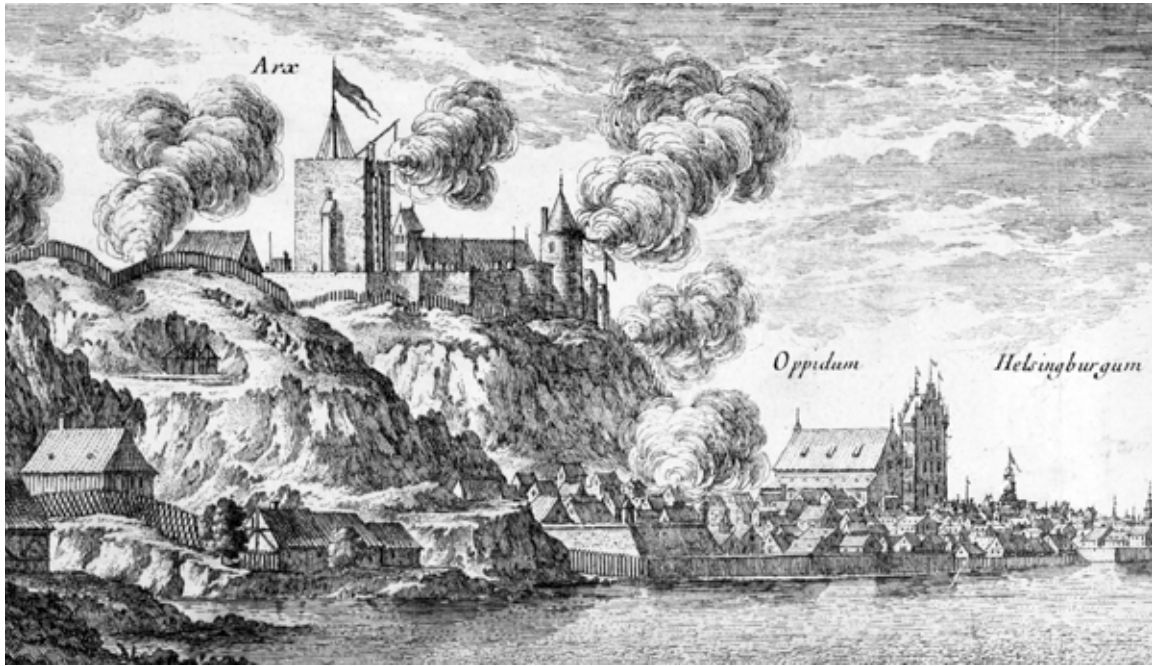
Photo: Anna Bank/Helsingborg's museums

great hall. The kingdom was already in financial distress and there was a lack of resources to finalise the works. The king Erik Menved was forced to grant the castle with adjoining fief to the lord high constable Ludvig Albertsen Eberstien, who committed to finalising the construction works and maintaining the castle. The construction was reorganised. The walls were subsequently built with solid brick that was produced at a different brickworks than before. The 30m high keep and focal point of the castle was completed in 1320.

In 1360 the Danish king finally managed to retake the castle from the Swedish king who had obtained it from Eberstein's estate in 1328. He commissioned the complete rebuilding of the great hall in the keep. The fourth and

fifth floors were merged into one high, vaulted space. The next major change to the keep occurred at the end of the 15th century. Johan Oxe, the bailiff at the castle at that time and a royal councillor, transformed the great hall into his private residence. Two of the niches were enlarged and reinstated as a chapel and a chamber. The two storeys above were merged and vaulted, and probably used as his audience hall.

The former St Michael church is mentioned in 1427 as being part of the royal residence, most probably already then with an attached large timber-framed building as stated in late 16th century documents. During the same century, in 1463, the archbishop was permitted to erect a stone-built residence inside the walls of the castle.



Major changes were undertaken to the keep during the late 16th century. The residence of the bailiff was moved to a timber-framed building north of St Michael. The height of the curtain wall was reduced and roofs were built over the spaces between, towards the keep, and used as kitchen facilities. The former stair tower was used as the residence of the master of the household. Inside the tower, several rooms were rebuilt as prisons and as storage facilities.

The bastion fortress

During the recurring Danish-Swedish wars in the 17th century, Helsingborg and the county of Scania were a frequent battlefield. The old castle did not fulfil the standards of modern defences. A new barrel vault was built on the

upper parts of the keep and the battlements were demolished in order to sustain a platform for artillery pieces. The height of the curtain wall was reduced and the spaces towards the keep were backfilled with soil, creating an inner bastion that enabled the absorbing of artillery fire. All of the buildings as well as the surrounding wall were successively demolished and replaced by poorly constructed inner and outer bastions and redoubts. The order of 1679 came when the Swedish army yet again had retaken the fortress. Although deemed to be too expensive to reinforce and too dangerous to keep, it took 200–300 troops and forced labourers three years to remove most of the battered fortifications. ●