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Romanesque Round Church Towers in Scandinavia

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Enigmatic Church Towers

Round towers fascinate. With their deviant architecture the round church towers attract attention. The towers give rise to both thought and imagination. When were the round towers built? Who had the initiative? Is the cause of their round form the choice of building material, their function as fortresses or function as symbols?

The round churches of Europe have received great attention. It has been discussed vividly, when they were built and by whom and why: Were they built by the Knights Templars? Were the round churches defensive churches? Or were they observatories? Meanwhile the round church towers have been in the shadow of the round churches, even if the form in principle is the same.

The aim is here to present and to discuss the interpretation of the Romanesque round church towers seen from a Scandinavian perspective. Inwardly the knowledge of the Scandinavian round church towers is often restricted to the preserved towers – and outwardly the knowledge is limited because of language.

The article focuses on the 15–19 churches with round towers in medieval Denmark, Sweden and Norway, the greater part in Southern Schleswig and Scania, whereas none are known from Finland. The chronology, social context, function and meaning of the church towers are discussed. Finally a list of the churches with Romanesque round towers in Scandinavia is presented.

Round church towers in Scandinavia

An overview of the Romanesque round church towers in Scandinavia is missing. The Scanian towers are mentioned in a dissertation on Romanesque church towers in East Denmark (Jacobsen 1993; cf. Wienberg 1993b).¹ There is an excellent, but unfortunately not published paper on round tower churches in the diocese of Lund (Cinthio 1997).² Apart from this presentations of individual round towers occur in art historical surveys, in the German and Swedish church inventories and in the literature on defensive churches.

Nowadays in total 15 to 19 Romanesque round towers are known at churches in Scandinavia (Fig. 1). In medieval Denmark there is information from the end of the 18th century on a round church tower in Resen in Northern Jutland, previously the diocese of Ribe. In Southern Schleswig, which in the Middle Ages belonged to Denmark and the diocese of Schleswig, five to six churches with round towers are known: Hadde-



Fig. 1. Romanesque round church towers in Scandinavia. Filled circles marks preserved towers, and open circles marks vanished towers. Numbers refers to the list. Map: J. Wienberg.

by, Kampen, Kosel, maybe Holy Spirit in Schleswig, Süderstapel and Översee. From Scania, which in the Middle Ages belonged to Denmark and the diocese of Lund, eight to nine churches with round towers are known: Blentarp, Bollerup, Dagstorp, Hammarlunda (Fig. 2), Hammarlöv, St. Andrew in Lund, presumably Norrvidinge and Säby, and also Önnarp. In medieval Sweden is known a single, namely Skå in Uppland in the diocese of Uppsala, and finally two in Norway, namely Lunner in Oppland in the diocese of Hamar and probably also Tromøy in Aust-Agder in the diocese of Stavanger. We then exclude Norwegian land in the North Atlantic, where there is a ruin of a Romanesque round church tower at St. Magnus on Egilsay in the Orkneys (Cant 1993, 16 ff.).

Even if polygon towers in principle might have been included in the survey, they are here excluded: Our Lady in Kalundborg on Zealand and Our Lady in Visby on Gotland. Excluded is also the church of Å on Bornholm, where curved ashlar have been interpreted as traces of a vanished western apse, alternatively a round tower, which vanished before the present broad Romanesque tower.³ The ashlar might also come from a staircase. Left out is also square towers with visible round staircases as in Husaby in Västergötland, Örberga in Östergötland and St. Clement in Helsingborg in Scania. Furthermore Gothic towers are excluded such

¹ Here Norrvidinge and Säby are excluded.

² Here the church of Å is included.

³ Danmarks Kirker VII Bornholm 1954, 135 with fig. 3, 142 ff. 177 f. and note 13.



Fig. 2. The church of Hammarlunda, Scania in Sweden. Photo: J. Wienberg, July 1980.



Fig. 3. The church of Bollerup, Scania in Sweden. Photo: J. Wienberg, May 1984.

as the polygon tower in Lärbro on Gotland and Assens on Funen.

Of the 15 to 19 Romanesque round church towers in Scandinavia seven are preserved, that is Kosel, Süderstapel and Översee in Southern Schleswig, Blentarp, Bollerup, Hammarlunda and Hammarlöv in Scania. Of the others eight are known from early descriptions and pictures, namely Haddeby, Kampen and Holy Spirit in Schleswig, all in Southern Schleswig, Resen in Northern Jutland, Dagstorp, Säby and Önnarp in Scania and Skå in Uppland; three are known from excavations, that is Norrvinge in 1951/52, St. Andrew in Lund in 1981 and Lunner in 1987/88; Tromøy is only known indirectly from reused ashlar.

The round tower at Tromøy probably disappeared already during the Middle Ages. St. Andrew in Lund was demolished at the Reformation in 1537. The tower at Holy Spirit in Schleswig was demolished in 1599, whereas Kampen was demolished in 1691–1692. The rest vanished in post-medieval extensions and renewals: Lunner ca. 1780, Norrvinge at latest in 1783, Resen at latest in 1792, Haddeby in 1834, Säby in 1850, Dagstorp in 1861 and Önnarp in 1864.

The original number of round towers must have been higher. Thus the knowledge on round church towers Resen, Kampen and at Holy Spirit in Schleswig is almost accidental. The round towers at St. Andrew in Lund, Norrvinge and Lunner have been surprises at archaeological investigations. Therefore more towers are to be found among the early deserted and later rebuilt churches in the towns and in the countryside.

Chronology and social context

In the literature information frequently occurs on the

dating of round towers: from the 12th or the 13th century, Romanesque or Late Romanesque, primary or secondary. The dating is often only based on expectations on which period or style the towers ought to belong to. In fact it might be very difficult to decide, which century they belong to or if the tower is contemporary with the rest of the church or later.

The only Romanesque church towers, which might be dated on the basis of other than an art or building historical judgement is hitherto at the churches of Hammarlunda and Süderstapel. Beams in the roof construction over the nave in Hammarlunda church have been dated by dendrochronology 1115 and 1130. As a hypothesis the dates might refer to the construction of the stone church, but it remains uncertain (cf. Järpe 1986, 165 f.). In Süderstapel a coin from count Adolf III (1186–1201) was found in 1869 in the foundations of the tower. Therefore the tower ought to have been erected after 1186.⁴ However, even here the dating is doubtful, as the context of the find is not known.

The Swedish architect, builder and art historian Carl Georg Brunius thought, that the Scanian round towers at Dagstorp, Hammarlöv, Säby and Önnarp belonged to the period of the Reformation (cf. Brunius 1850, 17). However the round arched belfry openings with colonettes at the vanished round towers at Dagstorp and Önnarp and also the late Romanesque domed vault at Önnarp (cf. Rydbeck 1943, 169) demonstrate that the dates by Brunius have to be wrong. On the other hand the late date at Säby might be correct, as the tower covered a pointed window in the western end of the nave (cf. Brunius 1850, 220).

⁴ *Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein* 8, Kreis Schleswig 1957, 495.

Obviously the dating of the towers, which disappeared early and only are known from an old picture or a brief description have to be uncertain. It applies to Kampen in Southern Schleswig and Holy Spirit in Schleswig, Resen in Northern Jutland and Norrvidinge in Scania. In none of the cases the identities of the tower builders can be revealed, however there is a pattern of indications, which all point at the crown and nobility: According to three sagas a royal manor lay in the time of Harald Finehair around 900 in Tromøy in Agder (Masdalen 2001/02, 65 f.). The church of Skå in Uppland might be connected to king, “Coli de Sco”, who was killed ca 1170.⁵ The presence of so-called founder’s graves in the round tower of Hammarlunda and maybe also Norrvidinge might be interpreted as traces of an aristocracy (Gustafsson/Weidhagen 1968). Kampen and Säby were royal manors (so-called “kongelev”) in the 1230s, however it is uncertain whether the towers were Romanesque.⁶ In the small urban parish of St. Andrew in Lund was a medieval stone house, which might have been connected to the church (cf. Andrén 1984, 59–64 map 11). Finally the church of Bollerup (Fig. 3) stands near the manor Bollerup, which can be traced down to the 13th–14th centuries, where it belonged to the noble family the Due’s.⁷

Thus the context of the round towers resembles the medieval churches of Scandinavia in general. In most cases it is not possible to date the Romanesque church buildings more precisely. Only as a rare exception the identity of the church founders can be established. Besides, when the king or the nobility appear as church founders in the documents, we must consider that the efforts of other social strata probably are underexposed (cf. Wienberg 1993a, 145–179; 197 f.).

Building materials, function and meaning

There are medieval churches in Scania, where the building material is flint. However flint was not used in the round towers of Scania, neither in the other round church towers in Scandinavia. The most common building material was stone collected from the fields, regardless if the church had a round or square tower, regardless if the church had an apse or not. There were plenty of stone usable for cornerstones. Therefore it was possible to build round or square forms regardless of materials. Thus the character of the local building material is no satisfying explanation for the existence of round church towers in Scandinavia.

Many, all too many medieval churches in Scandinavia have been interpreted as defensive churches. In this way all round churches in Scandinavia have been interpreted as fortified in an influential dissertation by



Fig. 4. The church of Översee, Southern Schleswig in Germany. Photo: J. Wienberg, April 1979.

the Swedish art historian Hugo F. Frölén “Nordens befästa rundkyrkor” (The fortified round churches of Scandinavia; Frölén 1910/11). The whole discussion on fortified or defensive churches since the 19th century was marked by a time-spirit, where a fixed defence was important with constructions such as the fortification of Copenhagen 1885–1894, the Boden Fortress in Norrbotten 1901–1916, the Per Albin-Line in Scania 1939/40 and the German Atlantic Wall 1942–1944. Since the 1980s the so-called fortified or defensive churches have instead been seen as “multi-functional”, that is as churches with several functions (Anglert 1984; id. 1993). Functions as store, lodging house or habitation were arranged in the church, so the functions became protected by the sacredness of the church (Wienberg 2004).

In the older art historical research the round church towers are also viewed upon as fortified or defensive towers.⁸ It is however remarkable, when this viewpoint even occurs in the present (e.g. Masdalen 2001/02, 47 f.). Because there is nothing at the towers, except at Süderstapel and Översee, which support such an interpretation. Massive walls and small windows were common in the Romanesque architecture. If the round church towers are compared with the round – and square – castle towers along the coast and also inland, there is a great difference in architecture. The castle towers normally had thicker walls, a high placed and small entrance, fireproof vaults and a watchman’s gallery (cf. Olsson 1932; Lovén 1996, 433–445; Randsborg 2003), whereas the round church towers had relatively large openings between the tower and the nave, seldom vaults and no galleries. On the other hand there was a superficial, but deliberate resemblance between the many castle towers and the round church towers in the age of the crusades.

⁵ Sveriges Kyrkor Uppland VI, 3 vol. 79, 1957, 392.

⁶ Kong Valdemars Jordebog 1 Text 26; 28; 116; 118.

⁷ According to Kjellberg 1966 Bollerup was owned by Peder Nielsen Due in the 13th century, however no sources confirm this claim. The earliest document concerning Bollerup is from 1310 cf. Diplomatarium Danicum 2 VI 275.

⁸ E.g. Löffler 1883, 150 ff.; Haupt 1902; Beckett 1924, 194 f.; Wrangel 1938, 49.

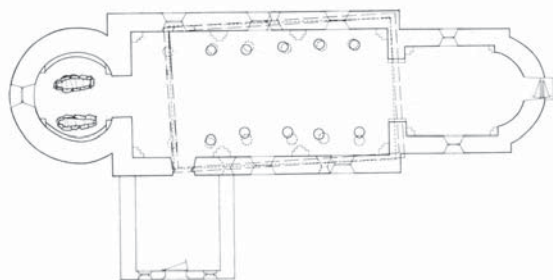


Fig. 5. Founder's graves in the church of Hammarlunda. Drawing: Gustafsson/Weidhagen 1968.

The exceptions are the round towers at Süderstapel and Översee (Fig. 4) in Southern Schleswig, where the walls are extraordinary strong, and where the openings are narrow. Considering the location of the churches at respectively the river Ejder and where the Oxroad is crossing the river Treene, one cannot exclude their function as fortress towers. Thus the church of Süderstapel was attacked at several times in the 15th century.⁹

There are no secure traces of galleries for the nobility in the round church towers in Scandinavia, except maybe in the demolished tower of Dagstorp in Scania.¹⁰ Instead all round church towers might have functioned as bell-towers, as in principle all other Romanesque church towers in Scandinavia (Jacobsen 1993, 57 f.;173).

In the round tower of Hammarlunda in Scania a couple of centrally located graves are known (Fig. 5) with a man, and a woman – and the woman with a child. Presumably the tower has functioned as a founder's mausoleum (Gustafsson/Weidhagen 1968). Founder's graves are also known from other Romanesque church towers, which were square (cf. Stiesdal 1981). However, it is interesting that several of the Late Antique and Medieval round buildings were grave mausoleums, e.g. the rotunda of Galerius in Thessaloniki, the mausoleum of Theodoric in Ravenna and Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The nobility of Scandinavia might have chosen a round tower as its burial place, so that the burial could refer to Christ and the emperor.

Conspicuous symbolism

The concentration of round church towers in Scania might be explained as an expression of a regional building tradition. However such a statement represents only a reformulation of a fact, no real understanding. The key to the problem might instead be the rarity itself of the towers. Round church towers are extremely rare in Scandinavia compared to e.g. Ireland or East Anglia

in England. Even in Scania where they are many, they only constitute around 5 % of the known Romanesque church towers.¹¹ If there once have been a larger number of Romanesque towers, and that is probably the case, then there have also been more square towers. So the relative rareness of the round church towers will hardly be changed in the future as a consequence of new investigations.

The intention of erecting church towers must partly have been the piety in the action, partly to create a strong symbol (cf. Nyborg 1985). The towers have been visible for everybody – just as the sound of the bells has reached all people. Built in stone the towers marked, as the churches as a whole, a new Christian cosmology, which had come to stay (cf. Gren 1989; Magnusson Staaf 1996). If the towers are symbols, then the meaning is reinforced by their round architecture. By choosing a deviant round form the tower attracts even further attention – then as now.

In an age, where many churches still were built in timber, where most churches were without a tower or had square towers, the round towers represented one of several possible strategies to create a “conspicuous symbolism”, using a rewriting of the concept “conspicuous consumption” by the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (cf. Brendalmo 2006, 24-28). The exclusive round tower was erected as a pious action, as a symbol – and as one of several expressions for the rivalry on status within the nobility (cf. Wienberg 1993a, 153-161; Cinthio 1997, 37).

The round church towers in Scandinavia were at the same time deviant and normal: The round church towers belonged to the same period as the great church building of the 12th–13th centuries; their form cannot have been a consequence of which building materials were accessible; they hardly functioned as fortresses in general, but as mausoleums and belfries; as the church architecture as a whole the round towers copied Antique and later models, where the models belonged to an exclusive group of churches, which were attached to Christ and the emperor.

The crusades at the Baltic Sea in the 12th and 13th centuries were just as legitimate as the crusades to Jerusalem and got the same indulgence (Lind et al. 2004). The round tower – regardless if it was added to a church or part of a castle – was an appropriate symbol referring to Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and by that to the ideology of the crusades. Repeatedly it has been suggested, that the round churches were built by crusaders, their relatives or supporters (e.g. Frölén 1910/11, I, 8 f., 13 f.; Andrén 1989; Wienberg 2004). The same social and political context might also have taken the initiative to the round church towers.

Actually, Hugo F. Frölén (1910/11) has already a century ago expressed the thinking of a crusader when erecting a round building, thoughts that unite status,

⁹ Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein 8, Kreis Schleswig 1957, 491.

¹⁰ Drawing by Mandelgren cf. Anderson 1926, 15 fig. 19.

¹¹ Cf. statistics in Jacobsen 1993; Wienberg 1993a, 103.

piety and conspicuous symbolism: “By erecting a copy of the burial church of Christ in his homeland he might not only receive a confirmation on the already achieved indulgence, but even more important, he could rest and receive his death masses in a building – however minor and more simple – might be said to copy holy burial church of Christ himself. However even other motifs might have played a part. By erecting such a memorial at home an abbot or a knight could strengthen his personal reputation and consolidate the memory of his journey” (I, 8).

Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss the interpretation of the Romanesque round church towers in Scandinavia. The article focuses on the 15 to 19 churches with round towers in medieval Denmark, Sweden and Nor-

way, with the main part in Southern Schleswig and Scania; none are known from Finland. The chronology and social context, function and meaning of the church towers are discussed. Finally a list of the round church towers in Scandinavia is presented.

Zusammenfassung

Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, die Interpretation romanischer Kirchen mit Rundturm zu diskutieren. Der Beitrag bezieht sich auf 15 bis 19 Kirchen mit Rundtürmen aus dem mittelalterlichen Dänemark, Schweden und Norwegen mit einem Hauptanteil im südlichen Schleswig und in Scania; aus Finnland sind keine bekannt. Die Zeitstellung und der soziale Kontext, die Funktion und die Bedeutung der Kirchtürme werden dargelegt. Abschließend wird eine Liste der Kirchen mit Rundtürmen in Skandinavien präsentiert.

List: Romanesque round church towers in Scandinavia

Denmark – Northern Jutland
1. Resen (Skodborg district)¹²

Denmark – Southern Schleswig (in present-day Germany)
2. Haddeby, St. Andrew¹³
3. Kampen, St. Mary¹⁴
4. Kosel, St. Lawrence¹⁵
5. Slesvig, Holy Spirit¹⁶
6. Süderstapel, St. Cathrine¹⁷
7. Översee/Oversø, probably St. George¹⁸

Denmark - Scania (in present-day Sweden)
8. Blentarp, 11.000 Virgins¹⁹
9. Bollerup²⁰
10. Dagstorp, St. Andrew²¹

11. Hammarlunda, St. Anna according to tradition²²
12. Hammarlöv²³
13. Lund, St. Andrew²⁴
14. Norrvidinge, maybe St. Andrew²⁵
15. Säby²⁶
16. Önnarp²⁷

Sweden - Uppland
17. Skå²⁸

Norway - Oppland
18. Lunner in Hadeland, St. Olaf²⁹

Norway - Agder
19. Tromøy³⁰

¹² Wilse 1790-1798, V p. 163 cf. s. 233; Trap 1953-1972, IX, 1, Ringkøbing county 216.

¹³ Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein 8, Kreis Schleswig 1957, 279-289; Kunst-Topographie Schleswig-Holstein 1969, 673 f.

¹⁴ Haupt 1887/88, II, 195 f. with fig. 1093; Kunst-Topographie Schleswig-Holstein 1969, 631; Kong Valdemars Jordebog 1, Text 26; 116.

¹⁵ Haupt 1887/88, I, 180 f.; Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein 5, Kreis Eckernförde 1950, 214-225; Kunst-Topographie Schleswig-Holstein 1969, 202 f.

¹⁶ Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein 11, Kunstdenkmäler Stadt Schleswig 3, 1985, 122-126.

¹⁷ Haupt 1887/88, II, 239-242; Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein 8, Kreis Schleswig 1957, 490-502; Kunst-Topographie Schleswig-Holstein 1969, 733 f.

¹⁸ Haupt 1887/88, I, 291 f.; Kunstdenkmäler Schleswig-Holstein 6, Kreis Flensburg 1952, 261-268; Kunst-Topographie Schleswig-Holstein 1969, 307 f.

¹⁹ LUHM archive; Jacobsen 1993, 124; Cinthio 1997, 10.

²⁰ LUHM archive; Brunius 1850, 170 f.; Kjellberg 1966; Jacobsen 1993, 153; Cinthio 1997, 11; Diplomatarium Danicum 2 VI 275 (1310).

²¹ LUHM archive; Brunius 1850, 208 f.; Mandelgren cf. Anderson 1926, 15 fig. 19; Jacobsen 1993, 123; Cinthio 1997, 12 f.

²² Brunius 1850, 171 f.; Gustafsson/Weidhagen 1968; Järpe 1986; Jacobsen 1993, 121; Jansson 1995; Cinthio 1997, 14 f.

²³ LUHM archive; Brunius 1850, 172; Jacobsen 1993, 136; Cinthio 1997, 16.

²⁴ Cultural Museum in Lund, archive; Andrén 1984, 59-64 map 11; Jacobsen 1993, 128; Cinthio 1997, 19.

²⁵ LUHM archive; Håkansson 1954, 32; Cinthio 1997, 17 f.

²⁶ LUHM archive; Brunius 1850, 219 f.; Samuelsson 1982, 247-340; Cinthio 1997, 20; Kong Valdemars Jordebog 1 Text 28, 118.

²⁷ LUHM archive; Brunius 1850, 209 f.; Rydbeck 1943, 169; Jacobsen 1993, 140; Cinthio 1997, 23.

²⁸ Sveriges Kyrkor, Uppland, VI: 3, vol. 79, 1957, 382, 388, 390 ff.

²⁹ Ekroll 1997, 187 f.

³⁰ Ekroll 1997, 242 f.; Masdalen 2001/02; Falck 2008.

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