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Wienberg, Jes

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LUND UNIVERSITY

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

# Churches and Monasteries of the High Gothic

*Jes Wienberg*

## *Plague and the death of the churches*

The plague epidemics that recurred regularly from the mid-fourteenth century on sent shock waves through the whole of society and inevitably also affected the building of churches. This was not because of any decline in piety, for people were shaken by what they could only regard as punishment from God, and turned to the churches. Nevertheless, there was a dramatic decline in church-building and decoration.

The main reason for this was the drop in the population, which had many consequences. The revenues of the churches in the form of tithes and manorial dues, and the incomes of the nobles, decreased, so they had less to give away. Benefices became difficult to fill, so parishes had to be merged. In some cases the depopulation meant that parish churches became superfluous. Building became more expensive because the scarcity of manpower meant higher wages for stonemasons and brickmakers. Building plans were shelved, walls and vaults were given no new decorations and acquisitions of inventory came to a halt. Everything pointed in the same direction.

The rupture this meant is perhaps clearest from the prosperous Gotland, where church building was booming until the middle of the fourteenth century. In 1350 the Black Death went ashore on the island, which was in addition captured in 1361 and punitively taxed by Valdemar Atterdag. Ambitious building projects were stopped, never to be resumed. The result was situations where large Gothic chancels dominate far smaller Romanesque naves which were never renewed according to plan.

The decades after the plague were a period when many of the smaller parish and manor churches may have been closed down because of the scarcity of priests, people and money. The ruined churches are many, especially on the infertile lands of Jutland, in Västergötland and in Norway, but the actual abandonment can be difficult to date.

Only a few written sources from the period mention the closing-down of churches. In 1397, according to the Sealand Chronicle, Valdemar closed down eleven churches around Randers to use the materials for a castle in the town. And in 1426 the Bishop of Skara got

permission from the Pope to merge poverty-stricken parishes.

## *Cathedrals, town churches and country churches*

After the stagnation and the decline, there followed a new boom in both the population and the economy. Towards 1400 church-building seems to have grown again, but to a smaller extent than before and partly with new geographical centres of gravity. While Romanesque construction had been distributed over most of the Nordic region more limited High Gothic construction, with few exceptions, was concentrated in the towns, and along the coast with its trading centres and fishing villages and its fertile clay soils. Construction followed the economic surplus created by trade, the crafts, fisheries and agriculture. Church-building was thus extensive in Sealand, Scania and central Sweden.

In Denmark this applied to market towns like Skagen, Nibe, Grenå and Husum in Jutland; Nyborg in Funen; Køge, Næstved and Vordingborg in Sealand; Helsingborg and Landskrona in Scania; and Halmstad and Varberg in Halland.

A few new churches were built in the countryside. A fine example from the years immediately before the plague is the manor church of Ångsjö in Västmanland, which was built on the initiative of the knight and "lawman" Nils Abjörnsson. The church consisted of a nave ending in a polygonal chancel. A later example is Roholte in Sealand, which also takes the form of a nave with a polygonal ending. A beam below the rood bore an inscription in Latin which translates as "*This temple was founded in King Christoffer of Denmark's time, in the year 1441, Bernt Nielsen*".

The new construction may be interesting in terms of art history, but the most extensive construction work quantitatively consisted of innumerable changes in the existing Romanesque parish churches, both urban and rural. While relatively few churches were rebuilt from scratch, many were now expanded, given annexes and vaults. The old churches were modernized or "Gothicized", i.e. they were expanded towards the east with a

larger chancel or to the west with a longer nave, and acquired annexes such as sacristies, chapels, porches and towers, ribbed vaulting and larger windows – in the new Gothic forms with pointed arches.

The construction work on the Nordic cathedrals was less striking. The impressive chancel expansion of c. 1420 at the collegiate church in Haderslev reveals an effort to establish a new bishopric. Erik of Pomerania had plans to create a diocese with Haderslev as its centre. The intention was to reduce the influence from Schleswig, which was then occupied by an enemy of the Danish kingdom – the Duke of Schleswig-Holstein.

### *Monastic houses*

The development of monastic life also clearly shows how the Nordic countries regained their economic strength, not least in the Union years. An important factor here was the foundation of the Brigittine Order, called after Birgitta Birgersdotter of Uppland – Saint Birgitta.

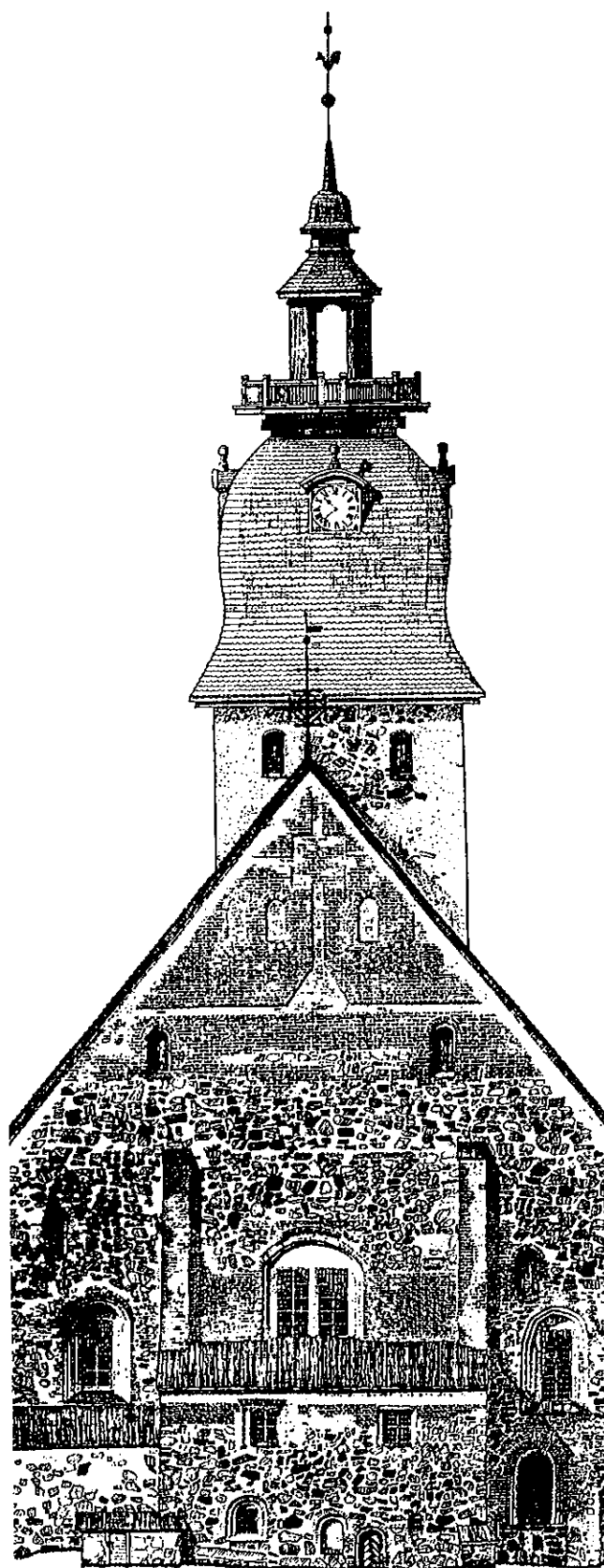
The first convent was consecrated in Vadstena in Östergötland in 1384. It was organized in accordance with Birgitta's detailed instructions as a convent/monastery for both nuns and monks. The friars' monastery in the south west and the nuns' convent in the north shared a large vaulted "hall church", i.e. a well-lit interior where nave and aisles were equally high below one mighty roof. Contrary to custom, but at the wish of Birgitta, the chancel was placed in the west, since the sisters were to use the prestigious eastern part. The convent was begun in the 1370s and could be consecrated in 1430, while the church – "humble and strong" – was not ready until the 1440s.

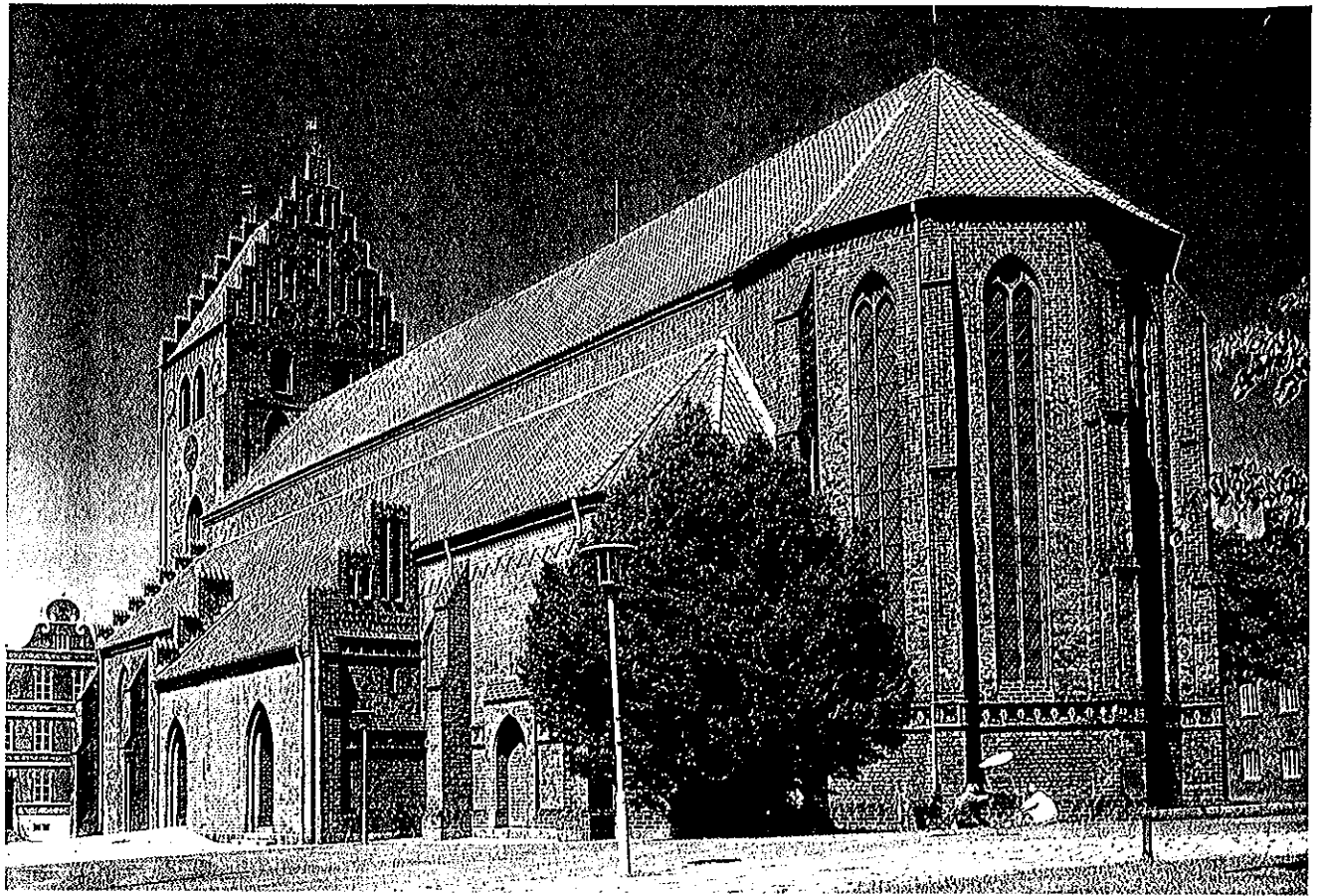
Several Brigittine convents were founded by the parent convent in Vadstena, first on the initiative of Queen Margrete and later of Erik of Pomerania. A new convent was founded at Maribo on Lolland in 1416 with roughly the same plan as Vadstena. The Brigittines took over the Benedictine monastery of Munkeliv in Bergen in 1426. From Maribo a convent was founded at Mariager in Jutland in 1446. Finally, the Swedish national council, despite local resentment, founded a Brigittine convent at Nådendal in Finland in 1438–42.

The Vadstena convent church was vaulted with a so-called star vault, i.e. a vault whose ribs form a star shape. The form soon became popular, especially in Svealand, Norrland and Finland throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

With Royal support, the Carmelites now also gained a foothold in the Nordic region, as did several Franciscan and Dominican monasteries. Erik of Pomerania

*Survey drawing of Nådendal Brigittine Abbey Church, Finland, built in the mid-15th century (cf. cat. 348).*





*Skt. Peders Church in Næstved, Denmark.*

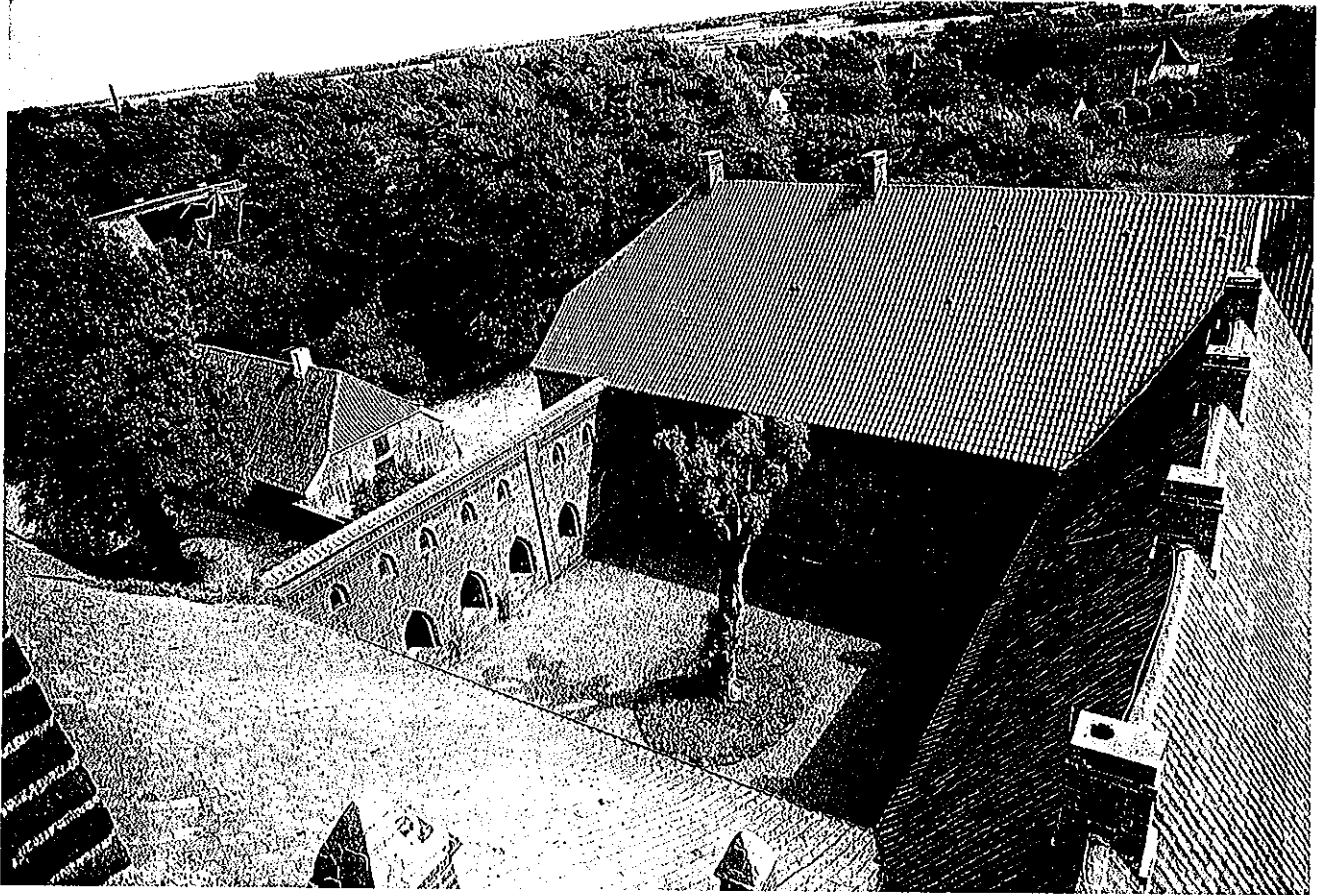
founded three Carmelite houses – in 1410 in Landskrona, in 1418 in Skælskør and in 1430 in Helsingør. Franciscan monasteries appeared on his initiative in Malmö and Nykøbing Falster in 1419, and in Helsingør in 1420. His successor Christoffer of Bavaria founded a Dominican monastery in Helsingør in 1441. At Viborg in Finland a Dominican monastery was founded in 1392, and a Franciscan in 1403. A Franciscan monastery was also founded at Raumo before 1449. In addition, many abbey churches were expanded with larger chancels or naves like those of the parish churches. The new abbeys too bear witness to the economic expansion in the coastal towns – along the Sound, at the Great Belt, at the Gulf of Finland and the bottom half of the Gulf of Bothnia.

### *Light, fair and good*

Outside the writings of Saint Birgitta, it is very rare to find statements about the aesthetics or architectural views of the Middle Ages in contemporary sources. An exception is from 1411, when Queen Margrete had a

chapel founded in the south tower of Roskilde Cathedral in honour of the executed knight Abraham Brodersen. The chapel was to be furnished “with vaulting, and with good, new glass windows, and with ornaments and pictures and other appropriate pieces, so that this chapel will be both well lit, fair and good with the aid of God”.

The churches undeniably acquired vaulting, murals, larger windows and stained glass, but the ways of fulfilling the wishes of the age varied considerably. Light, fair and good churches could be widely different in architectural terms. Between about 1330 and 1450, new churches were built with greatly varying appearances. The churches might be basilicas, pseudobasilicas – whose nave is higher than the aisles, but which lack windows – or hall churches. They might be formed as extended naves without any clear marking of the transition between nave and chancel. The plan might be the traditional Romanesque one where the chancel was narrower than the nave. The chancel might have a straight ending in the east, might have a polygonal ending or in exceptional cases might even be rounded off with an apse, as in the Romanesque period. The Mary Magdalene church in East Jutland was built as a small “Romanesque” brick church with an apse, narrow



chancel and nave at some time between 1426 and 1449. The architecture here must be regarded as a deliberate anachronism, where the intention was to build "traditionally".

The churches and monasteries of the high Gothic period, as in the Gothic period as a whole, thus exhibit no uniformity, but rich variation in size, type and transitional forms. If anything can be described as typical of the high Gothic, it is the pseudobasilicas of the towns. This was a transitional form between the Romanesque basilica and the Gothic hall church, where the semi-darkness of the nave inevitably forced the gaze towards the light chancel and thus the altar.

The Middle Ages are normally regarded as the period between antiquity and the Renaissance. The Middle Ages began with widespread Romanesque church-building and ended with equally intensive late Gothic construction in the fifteenth century and especially in the decades before the Reformation. The Middle Ages' own "middle age", the high Gothic period, is easily but undeservedly overshadowed by the earlier and later activity. The time between the plague and the dissolution of the Union exhibits rare dynamicism and a variation between devastation and a building boom which resembles the situation in far later times.

*Above: A view down into the cloister at the well preserved Dominican monastery in Ribe, Denmark. The buildings are late medieval. Below: The Brigittine Abbey Church in Maribo, founded in 1416.*

