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UNFORTIFIED ELITE BUILDINGS IN 13th-CENTURY SWEDEN



Martin HANSSON¹

Introduction

A palace is often defined as a large and elaborate, exclusive building where comfort and representative needs were in focus. In the hall of the palace, the lord received important guests, held banquets and feasts, while in other parts of the palace he and his family resided. The palace could be a specific building in a castle, in which case it was an integrated part of a fortified structure. In other cases, the palace was the main part of a complex of buildings that lacked fortifications. The latter is the case with the group of palaces discussed in this paper. The purpose of this article is to discuss three royal palaces, Lena, Vadstena and Alsnö in medieval Sweden (fig. 1), which are all dated to the mid- and late 13th century. What unites them is the fact that they were unfortified when built, despite the fact that 13th-century Sweden at the same time saw the erection of large numbers of heavily fortified castles containing representative apartments of similar types. The article will discuss these palaces as an example of a particular type of medieval elite architecture, where military force was not part of the toolbox used for dominion and to portray lordship.

Scholarly research on Scandinavian palaces has not been extensive. In connection with the investigations of Alsnö hus, Bengt Thordeman discussed how this building

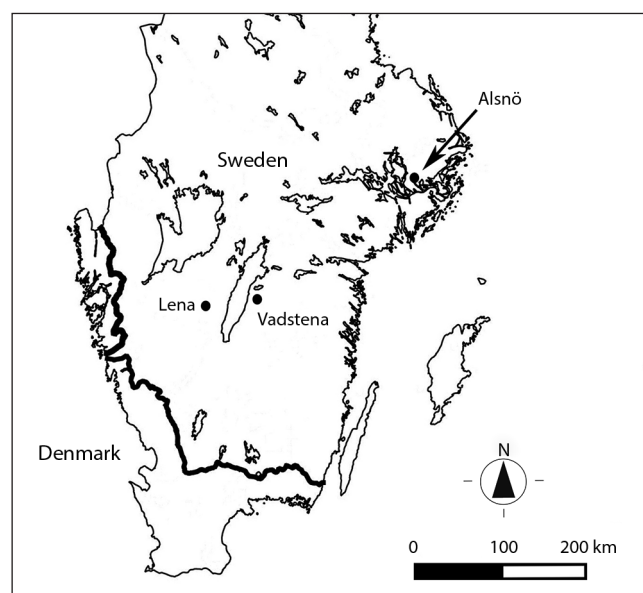


Fig. 1 The location of Lena, Vadstena, Alsnö. The thick black line marks the medieval border between Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Doc. M. Hansson.

fitted into the wider picture of European palace architecture. Thordeman's ideas and opinions have been valid for a long time. When Iwar Anderson worked at the palace in Vadstena, the building was discussed within the same European perspective. Apart from an article where Christian Lovén discusses palaces connected mainly to the

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so called “Folkunga-family”, there has been surprisingly little scholarly research focusing on this interesting group of buildings².

Elite buildings, palaces and elaborate residences can be found all over the world, from many periods of human history. One could probably argue that special types of buildings have always been connected to the social elite³. In a western European context during the medieval period, elite buildings owed much of their inspiration to the palaces of the Roman emperors and Roman villas. The Great Hall of Charlemagne’s palace in Aachen, which is dated to around 800, was inspired by the Roman basilica in Trier, and palaces were built in several locations across the Carolingian empire⁴. These palaces were multi-functional settlements, which in some cases were fortified, being surrounded by some sort of perimeter wall. Sometimes these fortifications were the result of later additions, and sometimes these palaces were not fortified at all⁵.

Usually a large building, often seen as a palace, can be found incorporated into medieval castles in Scandinavia. Perhaps the most well-known and best preserved are the palace buildings at Nyborg in Denmark, which are dated to the mid-13th century and were erected within a courtyard enclosed by a curtain wall, and Håkonshallen in Bergen, which is dated to the same period⁶. At this latter site, an earlier royal timber residence was successively transformed into a fortified stone castle over the course of the 13th century. Also in many other places traces of a combination of an early stone tower adjacent to a large rectangular stone or brick building can be found. This combination can, for example, be seen at Kalmar, Borgholm and Stockholm in medieval Sweden, but also at Helsingborg in Scania, which lay in medieval Denmark. However the exact dating of these combinations is often obscure, apart from a general dating to the early Middle Ages, or to the earliest phase of the castle in question. Beside this “normal” type of palace in a castle context, we also find another group of palaces that seems to lack functional fortifications.

Lena

The palace in Lena, sometimes called Lenaborg, is situated in Kungslena in Västergötland. Little is known about it and not much can be seen at the site today. Lena was the location

of a famous battle in 1208 between rivals to the Swedish throne. In the battle, the forces of Erik Knutsson defeated the army of the Sverker Karlsson, who was supported by the Danish king Valdemar II⁷. It is however uncertain whether there existed some sort of royal residence in Lena at this time or not. What is known from written documents is that Earl Birger of Sweden in 1257 was visited in Lena by King Haakon VI Haakonsson of Norway. In 1267 the Swedish King Valdemar was at Lena, and in 1287 Lena was donated by Bishop Bengt of Linköping to his cathedral in Linköping, a donation that does not seem to have been fulfilled since Lena probably belonged to the crown and not the royal family (Bengt being the brother of King Magnus Barnlock). The last mention of Lena is in 1304 when the nobleman Torgils Knutsson was arrested here, before being taken to Stockholm where he was later executed⁸.

The palace in Lena is sometimes referred to as a castle, but actually it was an unfortified site. The remains of the palace are situated on a plateau on a northern slope, c. 350 m south of the church at Kungslena. The location on the slopes of Varvsberget gives the palace a great view of the landscape around Kungslena and towards the village of Dala to the north (fig. 2). It must also have meant that the palace was visible to anyone approaching from this direction, but also that the view from the palace itself was rather spectacular. Lena is situated in an area that has a large number of Iron Age monuments within it. About 50 m north of the palace complex are the remains of an Iron Age grave-field, today consisting of four stone settings, but also other mounds and stone settings can be found in the vicinity. At the church in Kungslena, two early medieval grave slabs point to the presence of elite settlement in the area at that time⁹. The present church in Kungslena has been dated to the 12th century¹⁰.

The building complex is c. 120 m x 95 m in area and consists of the foundations of the palace and four other houses, as well as three terraces. The palace itself seems to have measured c. 32 m by 18 m, making it a substantial building of stone, which was divided into between four and six rooms. Just east of this building, two almost quadrangular house remains can be seen (fig. 3). They are connected with each other by a wall and have been seen by some to have been some kind of towers, but this is an uncertain interpretation. Further south, two more houses can be found, one 21 m in length, the other 13 m long, both being 8 m in width. About 30 m east of the palace a wall dams a small stream.

2. THORDEMAN 1920; ANDERSON 1972; LOVÉN 2000; see also HANSSON 2011, 46ff.; STIBÉUS 2017, 472–481.

3. See for example STEANE 2001; ROLLASON 2016.

4. FEHRING 1991, 130; TUULSE 2002, 18f.; ROLLASON 2015.

5. FEHRING 1991, 126–129.

6. FISCHER & FISCHER 1980; SKAARUP 2014.

7. HARRISON 2009, 214.

8. LOVÉN 1996, 106; LOVÉN 2000, 46.

9. Ancient monuments register FMIS, Kungslena parish RAÄ21, RAÄ105, RAÄ2005.

10. THELIANDER 2004, 209.



Fig. 2 The spectacular view from the palace at Lena towards the north. Photograph M. Hansson.

The lower parts of the palace walls were of fieldstone in mortar; higher up the walls were a mix of fieldstones and bricks. The palace seems to have had an internal axial partition wall, slightly offset to the south, which possibly indicates that the upper floor had a gallery facing south, on the backside of the building in relation to the position of the church. In a cellar northwest of the palace, a natural well occurs and the water led in a stone lined culvert. Everything indicates that this was a very luxurious building¹¹.

What is also evident is the lack of fortification. The presence of towers is hypothetical and very uncertain and there are absolutely no signs of a surrounding wall, moat or palisade of any sort. The large palace at Lena lay in a visually impressive location but was seemingly undefended. That this was the place for an important meeting in 1257 indicates that the building existed at this time. It is also interesting to note the use in the building of the new material of bricks. Fireplaces and window frames seem to have been made of brick. Brick was a new building material in Sweden at this time, having been introduced to the country in the early 13th century¹².

Vadstena

The royal seat in Vadstena is mentioned for the first time in 1268, when the brother or half-brother of Earl Birger, Elov, issues a letter from here. In 1275 the king, Valdemar Birgersson, summons the aristocracy to a meeting in Vadstena and in 1306 and 1313 Duke Erik and King Valdemar



Fig. 3 Today the appearance of the palace in Lena is dominated by the foundations and the cellar of the building. Photograph M. Hansson.

respectively issue letters from there¹³. It is obvious that the royal “Folkunga”-family had a large manor and palace at Vadstena, probably by the middle of the 13th century at least. In the 1370s the palace complex became the base for a nunnery convent. Since the palace in Vadstena was located in an area that saw dense settlement during the Viking Age, it is likely that a manorial estate already existed here by the 11th century¹⁴.

From the revelations of Birgitta Birgersdotter, Saint Birgitta, who was born and raised in nearby Ulvåsa, we can get a description of the palace at Vadstena. It is obvious that she must have visited the place herself. She mentions the great stone house (*stoora stenhuset*) as well as a wall that extended from the southwestern corner of this house, while another wall extended from the northern side of the building encircling the garden. A third wall went from the southeastern corner of the building towards the abbey church¹⁵. Birgitta also mentions an earthen wall, which delimited the area south of the buildings¹⁶. The dating, appearance and exact position of this wall is not known. It is clear, however, that this was not a proper fortification.

Investigations made during the 1950s and 1960s revealed that parts of the preserved nunnery were indeed a medieval palace. The palace complex, apart from a large brick building, seems to have consisted of at least five other brick and/or limestone buildings. Two of them were placed as wings in relation to the palace, and a third one was placed to the south, but parallel to the palace. These ancillary buildings formed an open courtyard, in front of the palace (fig. 4). Yet two other minor stone buildings

11. SIGSJÖ 2000; LOVÉN 2000, 47.

12. SUNDNÉR 1982, 10-12; SIGSJÖ 2000; KONSMAR 2013.

13. ANDERSON 1972, 4-5; FRITZ 2000, 59-61.

14. STIBÉUS 2000; TOLLIN 2012; SIGURDSON & ZACHRISSON 2012, 41-43.

15. ANDERSON 1972, 8.

16. *Ibid.*, 52-53.

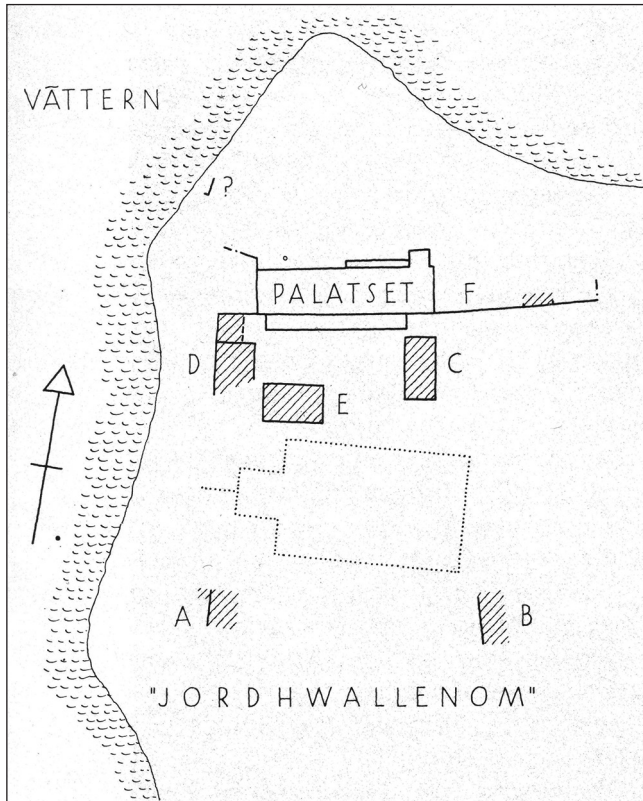


Fig. 4 Schematic plan of palace complex in Vadstena, with contemporary buildings marked. Palatset = the Palace. A-E = ancillary buildings. "Jordhwallenom" = tentative location of the earthen wall mentioned in the 14th century. After ANDERSON 1972, fig. 64 (p. 53).

further south are probably contemporary with the palace. These ancillary buildings were probably used for cooking, storage and the like.

The palace, a brick building, was built in monk bond and was c. 56 m long, 14.5 m wide and at least 14 m high¹⁷. It had two floors and a basement under the western part of the building¹⁸. The ground floor consisted of three rooms, one larger one to the west and two smaller ones to the east (fig. 5). The first floor was reached *via* an external stairway and gallery that seems to have been present along the southern side of the building. It is possible that the gallery could have functioned at some stage as some form of balcony¹⁹. From the gallery people could enter the rooms on the upper floor, but also view and be viewed



Fig. 5 The present appearance of the palace in Vadstena. Photograph M. Hansson.

from the courtyard. The great hall in the western part had a large fireplace and pointed arched windows. The outer sides of the windows were decorated with round mouldings. In the eastern part, another large hall could have functioned as a meeting place / throne hall for the king or as a chapel. The exclusivity and high status of the building is evident²⁰.

An ornamental garden seems to have existed north of the palace, just as mentioned by Birgitta Birgersdotter. Parts of the garden wall are still intact in the southeastern part of this area, while traces of the connecting garden wall have been found in the northwestern corner of the palace²¹. The palace is dated to the second half of the 13th century. This dating is based on evidence from the written sources, but it is also due to the construction technique used and the appearance of the building. Monk bond and early gothic traits in windows and door openings make a dating before 1300 likely. The palace was probably finished at some stage before the meeting between the king and the aristocracy at Vadstena in 1275²².

The church of St Peter lay outside of the palace complex and was later to be the parish church of the town of Vadstena. The church, with origins in the 12th century, was located c. 250 m from the palace. Topographically the palace in Vadstena was sited on a rather flat, wide promontory and lay about 75 m east of the shores of the Lake Vättern. This gave the palace an excellent position in relation to communications along the lake's waterways.

17. The following description follows ANDERSON 1972 and SIGURDSON & ZACHRISSON 2012.

18. For example, *ibid.*, 56.

19. ANDERSON 1972, 44-46.

20. *Ibid.*, 40-41.

21. *Ibid.*, 133.

22. *Ibid.*, 45-57; LOVÉN 2000, 44.

Alsnö

A royal manor is mentioned on Adelsö in 1200 and, again, in 1279/1280. The “Alsnö Statute”, the meeting where the Swedish nobility got its legal code and became exempt from tax in return for military service, was held here. From 1279 to 1304 a number of royal letters were issued at Alsnö, but after 1304 the site disappears from the written records²³.

The palace of Alsnö is located on Adelsö beside Lake Mälaren. The palace lies on a spur above the eastern shores of Adelsö, overlooking the island of Björkö in the distance, where the Viking Age town of Birka once existed. The position was central in relation to the waterways that led to the different parts of the region around Lake Mälaren. Several large grave mounds, an assembly site and runic inscriptions indicate that the place was a magnate’s site already in the Viking Age²⁴. The runic stone, U 11, mentions a king’s steward in its inscription. It is obvious that a royal manor was present on the site already in the 11th century, if not earlier. In the 12th century, a Romanesque stone church was erected c. 200 m southwest of the palace²⁵.

The palace lies on small height on a relative flat plateau somewhat elevated in comparison to the surrounding ground level (fig. 6). The complex must have been visually dominant for anyone approaching on water²⁶. Apart from the palace, a number of timber buildings seem to have existed as well²⁷. The palace itself was in a secondary phase surrounded by a dry, shallow moat and a low earthen wall. On the inside of the moat, traces of a weak palisade were found. However, the site cannot be regarded as being originally defended militarily, since the palisade is stratigraphically a later addition²⁸.

The palace at Alsnö was a brick building, c. 30 m by 15 m in size. When excavated, the walls were preserved to a maximum height of 2 m. An illustration on a map dating to 1751 shows a ruined building with two rows of windows (fig. 7). The ground plan of the building, with small buttresses in the corners and in its middle, also indicates that it must have had at least two floors, and also that the upper floor had been vaulted. The building was built in monk bond on a foundation of fieldstones. The ground floor had two rooms – a larger western one and a smaller eastern one. The latter room had a fireplace and floor of brick tiles, partly ornate. Under the western room on the ground floor, a cellar had

been dug. Facing south, and somewhat displaced to the western part of the building was a protruding entrance. This entrance was according to Thordeman, the foundation for a stair tower that served the upper parts of the building²⁹.

The first floor consisted of a large hall with cross vaults in three bays. Finds of ornamented bricks and details of ornamented chiseled sandstone indicate that the building was richly decorated originally, probably more lavishly than the palace at Vadstena. Some fragments showed that the building had tracery windows. These window fragments lacked rims, which clearly indicated that the windows themselves had lacked window glass. The windows also had limestone colonnades and capitals, shown by fragments found in the excavation³⁰.

The artefacts found on the excavation, especially the oldest coins, indicated a date in the late 13th century for the palace. This date fits well with the style of the building as well. Thordeman believes that the building was finished in 1279, and used for the meeting that led to the “Alsnö Statute”. He sees King Valdemar as the instigator of the project, but his brother and successor King Magnus as the one who finished the building³¹. The palace on Alsnö was then used as residence for the royal family, but also as a meeting place. Thordeman noticed that all royal diplomas signed at Alsnö were issued between early May and early October. This led him to the conclusion that the palace was mainly used during summer. The lack of glass in the windows in the hall probably contributed to making the place unsuitable as winter living quarters for the royal household³².

Just as at Vadstena, the palace of Alsnö was placed in a visually dominant position within the landscape, but was also located at a place where monuments told stories of the place as having been a long-term seat of royal power. Excavations in the 1910s, 1960s and 1990s have shown the presence of a Viking Age cultural layer beneath the palace. It has been suggested that the palace was most likely placed on the site of an earlier Viking hall. Both buildings had been erected on an artificially created plateau in order to make them more visible³³. The monumental graves and the runic stones show that the near past was integrated into the present at Alsnö, when the “modern” palace was built in the second half of the 13th century. If this was done on top of an earlier Viking Age royal hall, this would be even more so³⁴.

23. THORDEMAN 1920; see, also, BRUNSTEDT 1996; AMBROSIANI 2016.

24. BRUNSTEDT 1996; AMBROSIANI 2016, 8-9.

25. TUULSE 1954-1957, 1-38; BRUNSTEDT 1996; AMBROSIANI 2016.

26. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

27. THORDEMAN 1920, 25-27.

28. *Ibid.*, 29-30; LOVÉN 1996, 105.

29. See also LOVÉN 2000, 58, note 4; AMBROSIANI 2016, 16, for an alternative interpretation.

30. THORDEMAN 1920, 6, 65-67.

31. *Ibid.*, 5, 55, 67-68.

32. *Ibid.*, 6.

33. AMBROSIANI 2016, 20-21.

34. See HANSSON 2006, 87-90, on the use of history in aristocratic milieus.

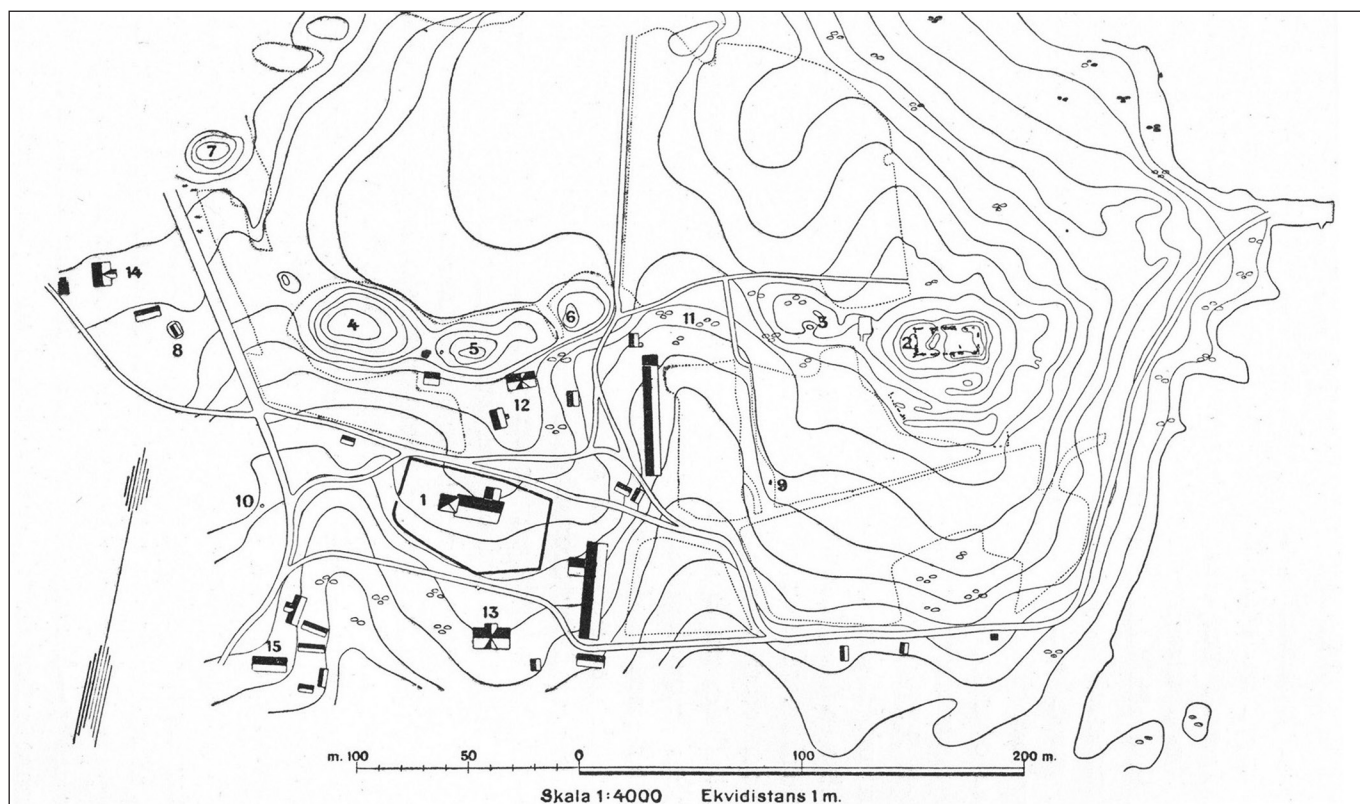


Fig. 6 The palace complex and ancient monuments at Alsnö. Some of the monuments marked on the plan: 1) parish church; 2) palace; 3) cellar; 4-6) grave mounds; 9) runic inscription. After THORDEMAN 1920, fig. 1 (p. 3).



Fig. 7 Extract of the 1751 map of Adelsö. To the east the surveyor has noted "Remains of an old castle". To the west the parish church and the farms at Hovgården. File number A1-11:1, Lantmäteriet, surveyor Gabriel Boding.

Concluding discussion

A comparison between these three palaces shows that they had many traits in common. They were all large buildings, built in several floors, which gave them an aura of verticality. Their size and verticality were emphasized by their location in the landscape, especially in the case of Lena. The palaces in Lena and Alsnö were located in elevated positions, both visible from a distance, which contributed to their exclusivity. One might also consider the spectacular views outwards from the palaces. These were probably especially spectacular at Lena, but to some extent at Alsnö also³⁵.

It should also be emphasized that they all were located in places where land and/or water routes met or passed. What is also striking is the use of new, modern building methods and materials. The new brick technology was chosen for the palaces, either completely, or in combination with masonry. In Scandinavia, traditional timber-building techniques were replaced in the Middle Ages by stone and later brick building techniques for important buildings like churches, castles and palaces. To be able to build in stone or brick, new type of techniques and knowledge systems were required in comparison to earlier periods³⁶. The use of brick in the palaces, therefore, communicated an aura of “modernity” and Europeanisation at this time.

The size of the buildings varied, but what was common was the presence of a second floor. Using the first floor for the sovereigns’ performance of power in a great hall can be found in many European palaces. Another common trait is the presence of openings towards a courtyard, either directly from the first-floor hall, or *via* a gallery or balcony that functioned as an entrance to the first floor³⁷. Some form of gallery constructions existed at Vadstena and Alsnö. The fact that the great hall in Vadstena and Alsnö lacked glass in the windows, suggest an intimate and close relationship between what took place inside and outside the hall. A performative function of the gallery/balcony in relation to ceremonies connecting the inside and outside of the building can be suspected. We know that all three palaces functioned as high-profile meeting places for kings and the high nobility and this must have created a ceremonial milieu, where these galleries would have held important functions.

The most striking common trait to all three palaces is the complete lack of military fortifications and defence. It seems certain that none of these palaces were fortified.

None of them evolved into defended castles at some later date either. The 13th century otherwise saw the erection of a number of large, heavily fortified castles in Scandinavia. These castles often included important apartments and halls with palace functions. The examples discussed in this article seem a bit odd in this respect. Despite the fact that some sort of demarcation around the palace complex may have existed, it seems certain that none of these palaces were ever fortified militarily or later evolved into castles.

According to Christian Lovén, who has studied the issue, the reason why the king built unfortified palaces was twofold³⁸. First, it was a clear example that the royal family wanted to show that their control of the country, after a period of unrest and internal fighting, was unchallenged and that they now felt secure. Secondly, inviting the aristocracy and other royal personages to meetings in an unfortified palace, like in Alsnö in 1279, showed that the guests did not have anything to fear from the king³⁹. This could, for example, have been the reason why the meeting between Earl Birger and King Hakon took place in Lena in 1257. The unfortified palace functioned as some form of neutral, friendly space – its lack of physical defences giving a strong message of peace and goodwill to all.

However, it should be noted that the imperial palaces in both Goslar and Ingelheim in their first phases were unfortified⁴⁰. This shows that the idea of having unfortified palaces was not unfamiliar in a wider European context. Unfortified residences could also be used by the aristocracy. One example is the residence at Hultaby in Småland. It was probably erected around the year 1300. This was a complex consisting of a large number of timber buildings surrounding a stone-built plateau that housed a partly stone-built residence. The whole complex was not surrounded by either a moat or a palisade. The fact that a high cliff just outside the complex overlooked the buildings underlines that this not a place where dominion and control were based on military force. It was a site where its location in the landscape and the existence of stone-walled buildings showed its importance. Hultaby was probably destroyed in the civil wars of the 1360s⁴¹.

There is a general lack of fortified settlements in Scandinavia dating to the Viking Age and early Middle Ages. Apart from walls around Viking towns, the well-known Danish Trelleborg-ringforts and the occasional use of hillforts, there is a clear lack of fortified sites dating to these periods. The Viking elite resided in unfortified hall-buildings of

35. See THIS-EVENSEN 1998 about architecture and power.

36. SVANBERG 2013; EKROLL 2017, 209-244.

37. ROLLASON 2016, 13-49.

38. STIBÉUS 2017, 472-480.

39. LOVÉN 2000, 49-50.

40. TUULSE 2002, 38.

41. HANSSON 2006, 107-109.

substantial dimensions, often in visually dominant positions in the landscape⁴². To some extent, one could argue that the absence of fortifications at Lena, Alsnö and Vadstena was a way for medieval kings and royal families to symbolically connect to the distant past, implying that the elite in these palaces saw their position as self-evident. This was another

way, besides the grave mounds and runic stones at Alsnö, to capitalize on the legacy of the past in the present. The palaces, when built, therefore, represented something new, when it came to architecture, building material and appearance, but when it came to location in the landscape and the way power was exercised, these buildings partly continued in a time-honoured fashion. Lordship was exercised by style, not by violence. That these palaces soon became derelict shows that this strategy did not work in the long-term.

42. SÖDERBERG 2005; OLAUSSON 2009, 60–61, 65–66; HEIJNIS 2018, 35–36.

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