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## The Decline and Fall of the Church

### The Middle Ages, the Gothicization, and the Reformation

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# The Decline and Fall of the Church

The Middle Ages, Gothicization, and the Reformation

JES WIENBERG

**I**t was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind. (Gibbon 1966, p. 136, note 7.)

This is how inspiration is supposed to have come to Edward Gibbon, who wrote the famous work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), in which Christianity is made to share responsibility for undermining the Roman Empire. It is a thesis in line with the Enlightenment critique of the contemporary Church. The Church was said to have literally taken possession of classical Rome (Christiansen 1993).

The actual fall of Rome and thereby the transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages is therefore supposed to have taken place in the 320s, when Christianity was promoted to become the state religion under Constantine the Great.

Christianity, however, is only one of many much discussed explanations for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Christianity or the Church marks the essence or true core of the subsequent period – The Middle Ages.

## The Middle Ages and the Church

The periods of archaeology are named after materials such as stone, bronze and iron, after peoples such as Celts, Romans and Germans, after pirates, namely, the Vikings, but not normally after religions. That we cannot or dare not do.

We would nevertheless be justified in speaking of “the Christian age”, “the era of the Church” or “the monastic era” instead of the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages, the period “in between” antiquity and modern times, is normally connected to the Church as an institution. With Christianity and the Church not only a new faith arrived, but also a new ideology, the doctrine of the estates of society, the Latin language, and the stone buildings. The parish churches became central places in people’s lives and settlements.

As a rule, the Middle Ages in Scandinavia are said to begin with Christianization and the establishment of the Church in the tenth or eleventh century, and the period usually ends with the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

In the 1980s the French *Annales* historian Jacques Le Goff (1988) introduced the term “the long Middle Ages”. The long Middle Ages are supposed to extend beyond the Renaissance (and Reformation), lasting from the fourth century right up to the nineteenth century, from the Roman Empire to the Industrial Revolution. It signifies a *longue durée* held together by the feudal mode of production and the Christian ideology.

This is an idea in accordance with Michel Foucault, who claimed that it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the monopoly of the Church as a pastoral power ended and was replaced by institutions such as the family, the police, medical science, and the educational system (Foucault in Dryfus & Rabinow 1982).

## The churches as sources

Can we – as archaeologists, church archaeologists, or perhaps archaeologists of religion, all those specialist disciplines that divide up reality – help to illuminate when the Middle Ages come to an end? Is a long medieval period probable in Scandinavia as well?

Can the churches with their foundation dates, numbers, size, design, decoration, and fixtures be used as sources or testimony to show when the power of the Church was built up, when it changed and was broken down? Can they also be used to tell us why this happened?

One possibility is to study the monasteries, a central institution within the Church, since the source material is fairly lucid and is dated with reasonable precision.

## Monasticism

There are numerous surveys of monasteries in the specialist literature. The expansion and development of monasteries within certain orders or countries can be seen in distribution maps and tables. Frequently the time of foundation is mentioned, but hardly ever the time of its closure.

Recently, however, I discovered an article concerning the Premonstratensian order, written by a British church archaeologist with the well-known name of James Bond. The article focuses on the number of Premonstratensian monasteries through time (fig. 1) by considering the establishment as well as the closure (Bond 1993).

The Premonstratensian order was founded by St Norbert of Xanten in the year 1120. In total, monasteries were established in about 700 places in Europe. The foundations are especially numerous in the twelfth century, reaching a maximum with about 500 simultaneously existing monasteries around the year 1250.

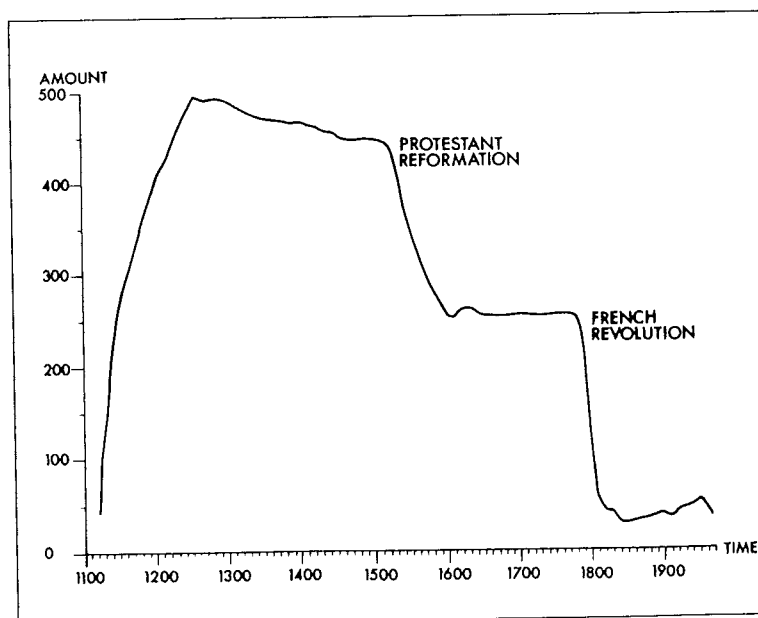


Fig. 1.  
Premonstratensian  
monasteries.  
Redrawn  
after Bond  
1993.

Thereafter a sharp reduction in the numbers, almost by half, occurs, during the sixteenth century, as a result of the Protestant Reformation. The monasteries disappeared in Britain, Scandinavia, the Netherlands and northern Germany. A new decline took place after the French Revolution. All monasteries in France were shut down in 1790–91, and a minimum was reached around 1840, when there were only 25 monasteries left in Europe.

The curve for the numbers of Premonstratensian monasteries shows two distinct declines or breaches, one corresponding to the “normal” end of the Middle Ages in the sixteenth century, the other to the termination of “the long Middle Ages” around the year 1800. On a general European level it thus seems as if both the “short” and the “long” Middle Ages are relevant periods from a church-archaeological perspective. But what is the picture like if we instead focus on Denmark?

### Monasteries in Denmark

With the aid of the information in a handbook (Garner 1968) it is possible to show the development of the monastic system as a whole in the archbishopric of Lund, that is, medieval Denmark (present-day Denmark, Skåne, Halland, and Blekinge in Sweden and also southern Schleswig in Germany) (fig. 2).

The first monasteries were established around 1050. The greatest number of institutions existing at the same time,

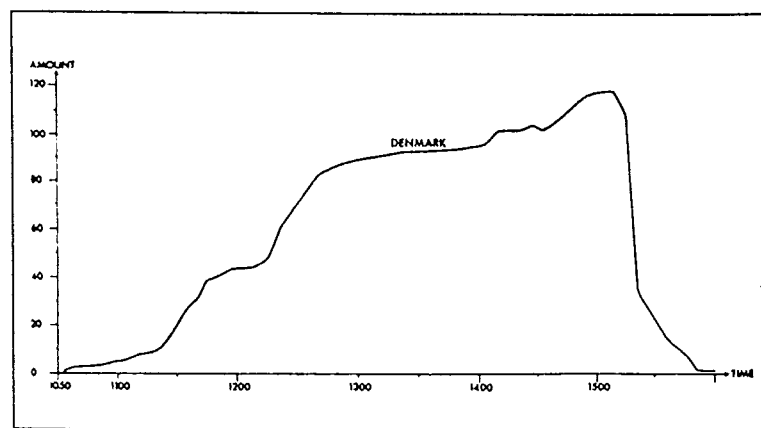


Fig. 2.  
Monasteries in  
medieval Den-  
mark. Drawn  
after data in  
Garner 1968.

117 monasteries, is reached around the year 1500 with the foundation of a Carmelite monastery in the town of Assens on Fyn. The last monastery of all was founded in the year 1521 – St Clara’s Franciscan friary in Odense, also on Fyn. This was followed by a sharp reduction between 1527 and 1536. First the mendicant friaries in the towns disappeared, then the monasteries in the countryside. Occasional ones survived until the 1580s, when the last friars and nuns passed away.

The disappearance of the monasteries during the sixteenth century, both as living institutions and as material remains, is here completely in accordance with the ending of the “normal” or “short” Middle Ages. This is hardly a surprise, but – as some archaeologists perhaps would put it – now we know this quantitatively as well.

There have, however, been attempts to introduce “the long Middle Ages” as a term within medieval archaeology in Scandinavia (Ersgård 1990, p. 60; Wienberg 1990), but the concept is hardly relevant here, at least not from an ecclesiastical perspective. The long Middle Ages are obviously connected to some specifically French or southern European experiences, where it was not the Reformation but the later revolution that was decisive for the Church as an institution.

## The Reformation

In Denmark the Reformation can be linked to historical dates such as 1530, when iconoclasts smashed the images in Our Lady’s Church in Copenhagen, and 1536, when the Danish bishops were jailed.

In archaeological or material terms, however, we have a chance to supplement the historical and political picture of the chronology of the Reformation. We can demonstrate how town churches, abbeys, and chapels were closed, demolished, or given new functions over a long succession of years. We can demonstrate how altars were removed and how new altarpieces, pulpits and pews changed the interior of the church through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But can we as medieval archaeologists contribute to an understanding of why the Reformation took place at all? Let us take a closer look at the period up to the Reformation.

## Gothicization

During the century leading up to the Reformation we can in fact observe large-scale construction work at churches – a real building boom. The Romanesque churches (fig. 3) were expanded, given additions such as sacristy, chapel, porch, and tower; they received Gothic vaults, larger windows, new murals and fixtures. In short, the exterior and interior changed from the Romanesque to the Gothic – they were “Gothicized” (Wienberg 1993, pp. 12 ff., 32 ff.).

We can follow the development especially well when it comes to the pilgrimage churches (fig. 4), but also when it comes to the ordinary parish churches, almost all of which changed. Still, it is hazardous to date the building of churches more exactly, and hence to evaluate the quantitative development of building activities in the approximately 2,700 medieval parish churches in Denmark.

The art-historical datings of the construction work, occasional inscriptions and dendrochronological investigations point towards extensive building activity between the years 1450 and 1520. Church bells and wooden sculptures show the same tendency. With the aid of a survey of the mural paintings, which follow the Gothic vault-building, the development can be further specified (fig. 5). The Gothicization seems to culminate in the decades around the year 1500, that is, shortly before the Reformation (Wienberg 1993, pp. 115 ff.) Is this a coincidence?

Let us take a quick look, both backwards in time to the Christianization in the tenth century, and forwards in time to the dechristianization of the nineteenth century, to obtain a perspective on Gothicization.

## Christianization

Archaeologists often interpret, and rightly so, monuments such as dolmens and barrows as expressions of a material symbolic language. The monuments can be understood as traces of a rhetorical landscape, where the message is power, justice, or continuity. The erection of the monuments can thus testify to social changes and crises, to unrest before a breakdown (Gren 1994).

Recently a Norwegian archaeologist, Brit Solli, has pointed out that the largest pagan barrows are the youngest, and

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE CHURCH

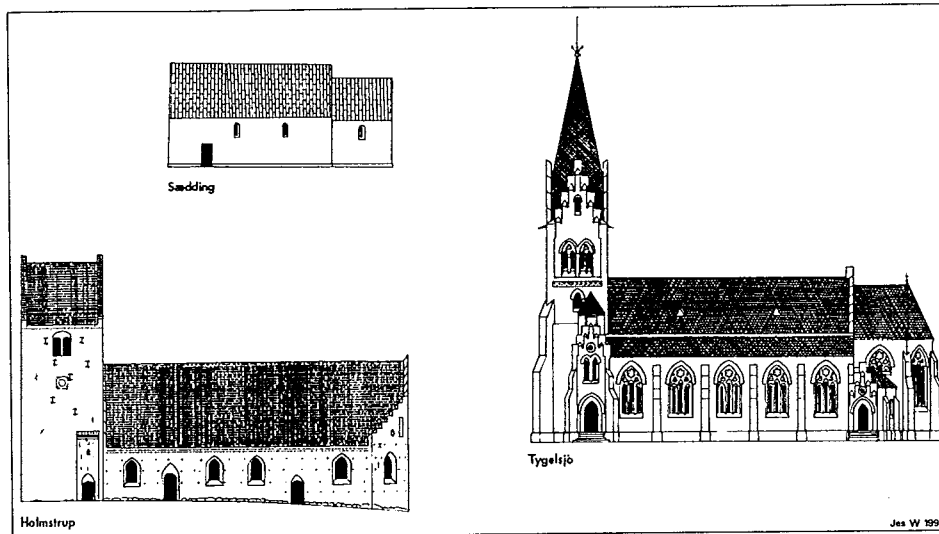


Fig. 3. The parish churches in Sædding in Jutland, Holmstrup on Sjælland, and Tygelsjö in Skåne. The churches represent three epochs in Danish church-building, namely, the Romanesque, the Gothic, and the neo-Gothic.

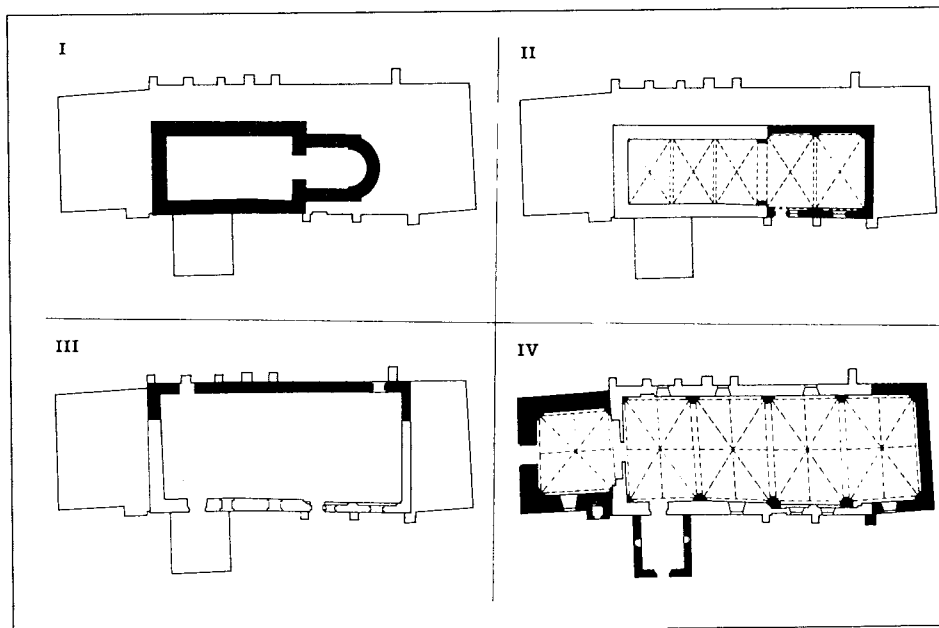


Fig. 4. Frørup pilgrimage church on Fyn, which was extended and rebuilt several times during the late Middle Ages. Drawn after reconstructions by Morten Aaman Sørensen 1981.



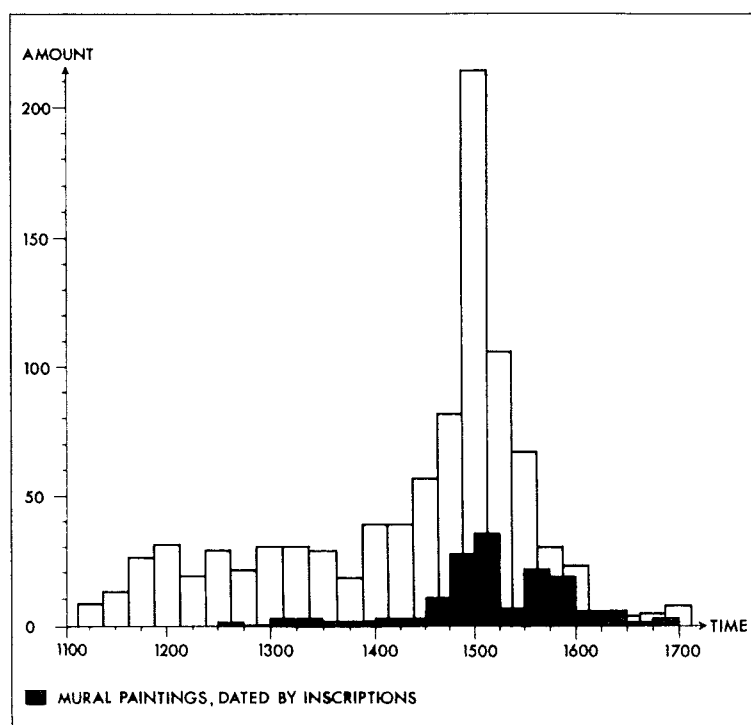


Fig. 5. Mural paintings in Denmark's medieval parish churches. The development is divided into 25-year periods from 1100 to 1700. The survey shows 928 phases of murals in 663 parish churches. Excluded are the churches of southern Schleswig and Fehmarn. Drawn after data in Banning 1976-82 and Saxtorph 1986.

that the richest funerals need not be signs of strength, but rather show powerlessness in the face of new rival dynasties. The great barrows of the Late Iron Age and the early churches are found in different places, as an expression of social discontinuity in the transition from paganism to Christianity (Solli 1995).

On the other hand, a situation characterized by social continuity can be found at the old Danish royal seat of Jelling in Jutland (fig. 6). Here remnants of a huge stone ship have been found, and this is the site of the two largest barrows in the country. The barrows were constructed immediately before Christianization. The pagan king Gorm the Old was buried in 958, while his son Harald Bluetooth was converted to Christianity some time between 960 and 965. The conversion was marked by a runic stone, a wooden church,

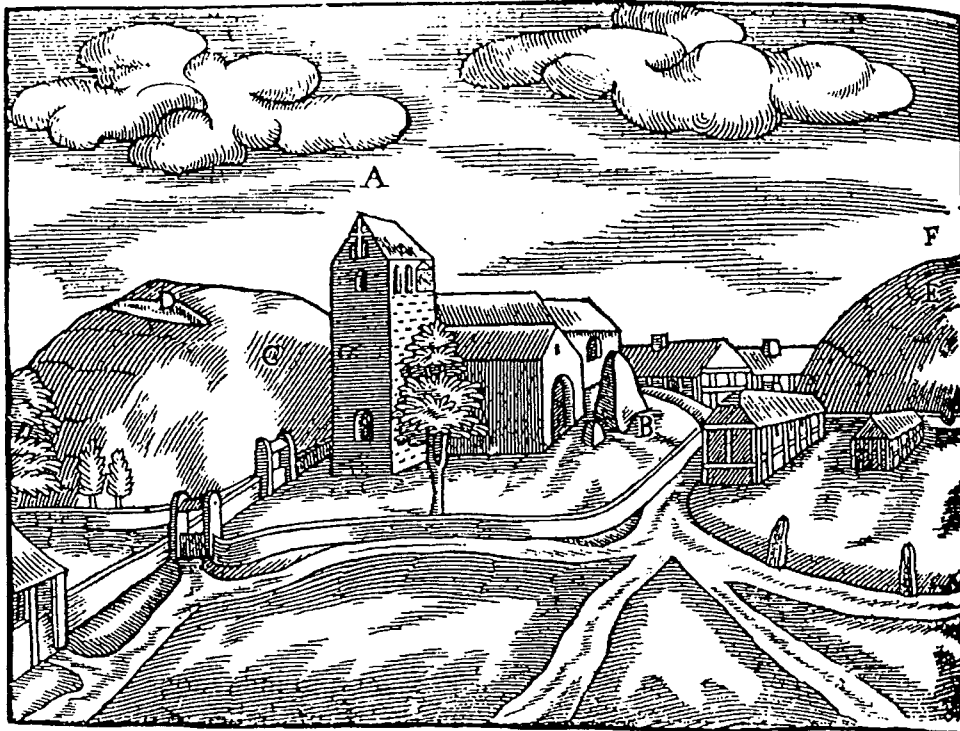


Fig. 6. The monuments at the royal seat of Jelling in Jutland. Woodcut in Ole Worm's "Monumenta Danica" 1643, here after Krogh 1993.

and the transfer of Gorm's remains from the chamber in the northern mound to a grave in the church (Krogh 1982).

In both cases we see a somewhat panicky manifestation of the status quo immediately before a change in religion. We see striking building activity, which soon became out of date.

### Dechristianization

The nineteenth century likewise can bear witness to extensive church-building activity. Old churches were expanded or replaced by completely new churches. The building activity, which culminated in Skåne in the 1860s (fig. 7), is normally explained in terms of variables such as population growth, an economic boom, and new ideals in church architecture (Fernlund 1982; 1989).

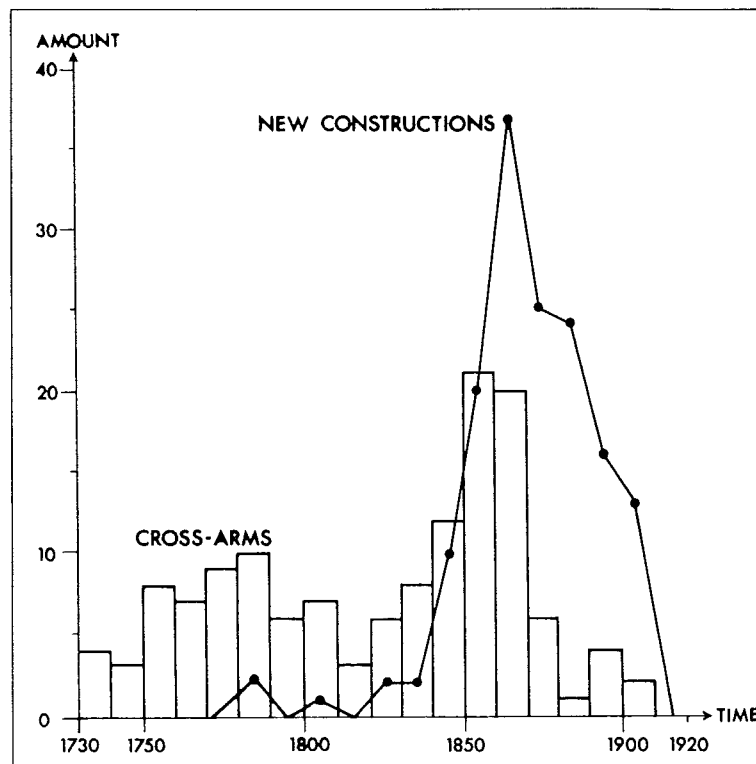


Fig. 7. The building of churches in Scania 1730–1910, classified according to cross-arms and new constructions (completely or partly). Redrawn after Fernlund 1989 with certain additions.

The building of churches can instead be interpreted as an ecclesiastical restoration after the Enlightenment criticism and the attacks of the French Revolution. We see the building of churches in neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic styles, which symbolically refer to the Church's own era of greatness, the Middle Ages. We see a building boom in the very same period when the power of the Church was decreasing. It is a time when free churches were established, when parish bonds were dissolved and villages broken up.

The church-building activity was not followed by a reformation, but instead by a secularization or a dechristianization, with the First World War being a turning-point. The old class society, which was closely linked to the church, came to an end (Wienberg 1993, pp. 192 ff.). But let us now turn back to the time before the Reformation.

## The decline and fall of the Church

While the building of churches was hectic, the fifteenth century was also a time of crisis for the Church as an institution. The Pope's authority had been undermined and the potential of the Church to interpret reality was decreasing all the time. The period shows an increasing opposition between old religious ideals and new civil realities, between the doctrines of the Church and its own practice, between religious ideals of poverty and the patent wealth of both secular and spiritual leaders. Inspired by Johan Huizinga (1924), we can paint a picture of the waning Middle Ages, a period with a sense of impending doom.

Construction work at churches in Denmark was intense where there was an economic surplus, that is, on the good clay soils and especially in the towns. But the investment of a surplus in churches is not a matter of course. A financial boom and a surplus are thus not in themselves a sufficient explanation for the building boom. Why this waste – by the standards of our own times – of accumulated capital?

The building of churches during the fifteenth century becomes understandable however, if we see it against the background of the Church's crisis and people's longing for salvation. We can demonstrate an almost absurd increase in indulgences to help souls through purgatory. The period shows an aspiration to build the Church out of the crisis. The pilgrimages, the pious gifts and donations were intended to diminish the sense of guilt. The religious desperation of the middle Ages is described by Oswald Spengler in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*: "Die Domen richten sich immer bittender zum Himmel auf, die gotischen Gewölbe werden sie ein Hände falten" (Spengler 1919–22, II, p. 359).

We can also try to describe the development with the aid of terms inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, pp. 177 ff.): The social field in Denmark of the late Middle Ages was characterized by three competing élites, namely, the clergy, the aristocracy, and the burghers, to which was tied religious, agrarian, and mercantile capital respectively. Prestige within the estates of the Middle Ages was reached by saving religious capital. The aristocracy transformed part of their revenue, their agrarian capital, into religious capital by founding monasteries, parish churches, chapels, and altars. The Church

and its prelates received and demanded capital from the aristocracy and the burghers and could then themselves invest in building. More than any other estate, the burghers, who made their living from unpopular transactions such as money lending and commercial profits, invested their mercantile capital in the ecclesiastical sphere of the towns. Behind the intense construction of Gothic vaults and pious donations of the fifteenth century, a dispute now arose about power between individuals and estates, a dispute mediated through material symbols (Wienberg 1993, pp. 64 ff.).

The Gothic aspiration failed. Monasteries, chapels, and numerous town churches were torn down. Monks and nuns were banished or converted. The flames of purgatory, the intercession of the saints, and the letters of indulgence disappeared, and building work on churches was drastically reduced. The surplus found new channels, being spent on the estates of the nobility, the houses of the bourgeoisie, and private life. The monasteries in the countryside were transformed into noble estates. And over the ruins of the towns' mendicant friaries, new market squares were created.

It was at Lund in 1984, as I sat musing amidst the excavated ruins of the Trinity Church, while the shopkeepers were on their way to their daily work, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the Church first started to my mind.

### Acknowledgement

This article, which briefly presents the main thesis of my doctor's dissertation (Wienberg 1993) concerning the interpretation of Gothicization in medieval Denmark, was given as a lecture to a postgraduate course in "The Archaeology of Religion" at Lund University in February 1996. My thanks to Bodil Petersson for comments on the manuscript.

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