

Trelleborg in Scania

Late Iron Age Settlement, Late Viking Age Ring-fort and High Medieval Town

By Bengt Jacobsson

Trelleborg in Scania is a medieval town, first mentioned in 1257 in a letter between the Danish king Kristoffer and Archbishop Jacob Erlandsson in Lund.¹

In 1957, the former head of the the museum in Trelleborg, Harald Lindal, wrote a book about the history of the town.² This book was mostly based on

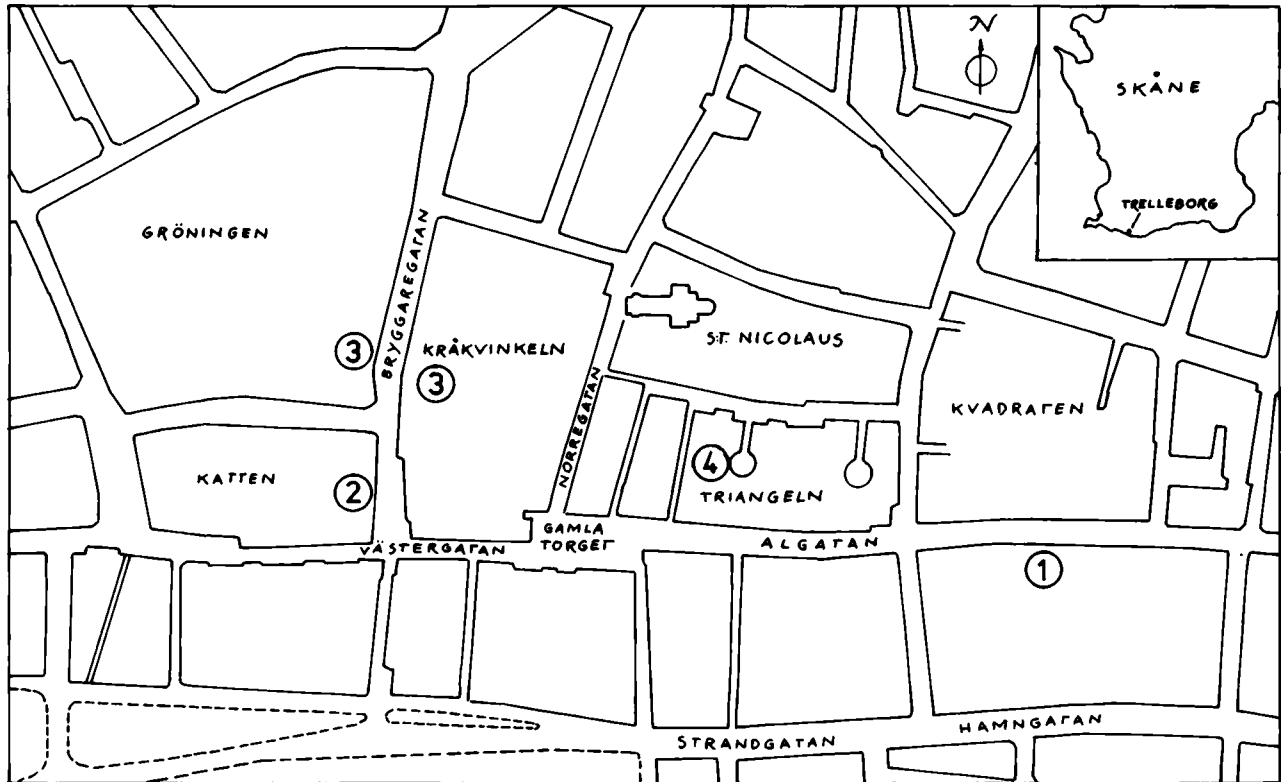


Fig. 1. Trelleborg. 1. Oden 2. Katten 3. Gröningen/Kräkvinkeln 4. Triangeln

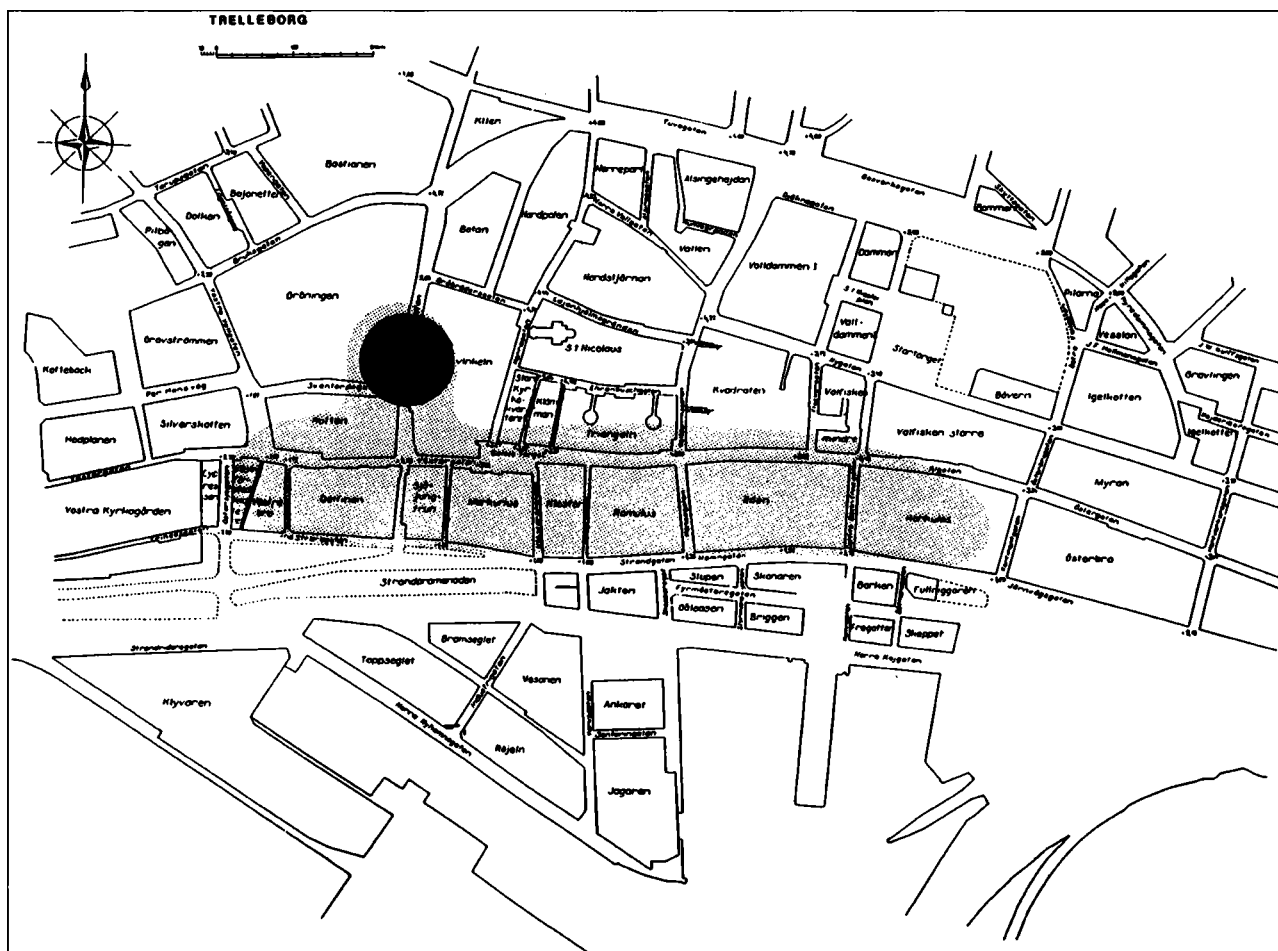


Fig. 2. Trelleborg. The dark area represent the Iron Age settlement with the fort.

written sources, since the archaeological material at that time was very limited. Since then a lot of excavations have taken place in Trelleborg, especially in the last ten years. This has provided us with new information, which gives us a completely new view of the

medieval town and also shows us that the history of this area goes back far beyond the medieval period.

In 1978, when excavations were carried out in a block called Oden, remains of a Late Iron Age settlement were first found within the borders of the

medieval town (fig 1).³ Pithouses, postholes, hearths and culturlayers from the Vendel period (Germanic Iron Age) and the Viking Age were found under the medieval remains. This was something new and left us with a lot of questions about how this settlement was organized and how (or if) it could be connected with the medieval town.

Through the years traces of this settlement have been found in several places within the town, and we now know that it covered an area of about 700-800 meters along the shore. It followed the limits of the shore, but did not lie in the area behind the shore, where there were wetlands at this time which were not suitable for housing (fig. 2).

The material found so far gives us no reason to look upon this settlement as an important trading place. Materials of foreign origin, for instance pottery from the other side of the Baltic, pieces of glass from Western Europe, pearls from Russia and so on have been found, but not to the extent that we have any reason to talk about an extra ordinary trading place. On the other hand, the excavated areas are only a small percent of the total settlement, so there is still a lot to be investigated. This settlement started in the seventh century and ceased to exist in the beginning of the eleventh century, so there seems to be no continuity between this settlement and the medieval town.

In 1988 the eastern part of a block called Katten was excavated (fig 1). Here we came upon another surprise. Two shallow moats crossed the area from west to east (fig 3). The moats were covered by the medieval culturallayers but dug through the culturallayers from the Vendel period and the early Viking Age. Close to the bottom in one of the moats charcoal was found in two different places. C-14 ana-



Fig. 3. The moats under excavation. The dark area between the moats is the foundation of a modern building.

lyses of the charcoal indicated that the moats were dug sometime in the second half of the tenth century.⁴

After having found the moats, the interest now concentrated to the block at the north, a block called Gröningen. In the following years (1989-1991) large excavations were carried out both in this block and in the street to the east called Bryggaregatan and in another block called Kråkvinkeln (fig. 1). Here, a large Viking Age fort was found.⁵ The fort was not quite circular, but had a diameter of approximately 140 meters. (fig. 4). The topography of today in this area is quite different from that of the Viking Age. The fort was built on a flat hill, overlooking the sea. It was surrounded by wetland to the west. To the

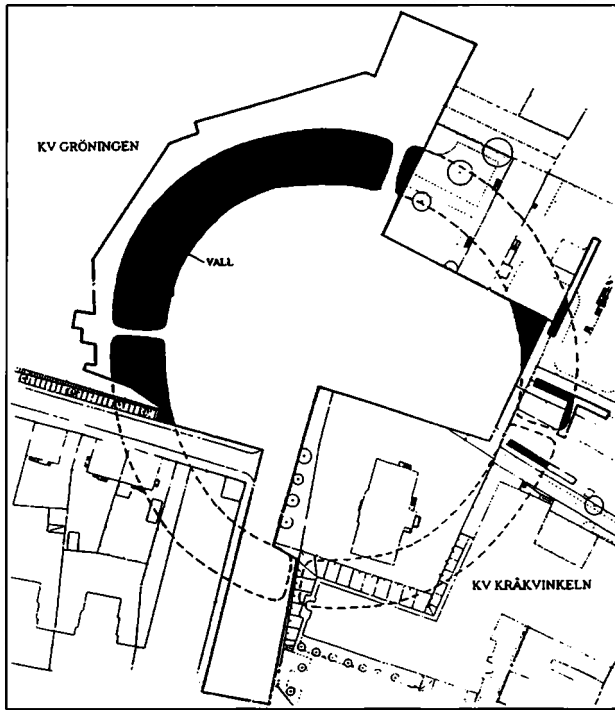


Fig. 4. The Viking Age fort in Trelleborg.

north, south and east there were moats. Today, there are no traces at all of this structure above ground. The rampart has been demolished, the topography has been levelled, the wetland and moats have been filled up and until recently all was hidden under houses.

The fort was enclosed on the outside by a palisade of wooden logs. Inside the palisade there was an earth rampart, about 12-13 meters wide, with four gates. Three narrow ditches which followed the front of this rampart could be seen (fig. 5). The inner ditch represents the first phase in the construction of the fort. In this ditch we could clearly see tra-

ces of rectangular planks, leaning inwards. These planks once covered the front of the rampart and on top of the rampart there might have been a breastwork. Later on the rampart was widened and an upright palisade, consisting of split tree-trunks, was set up in the middle ditch. Outside this palisade another ditch, used as the foundation for supporting logs leaning against the palisade, was dug (fig 6).

The archaeological material and C-14 analyses indicate that the second phase of the fort was built in the tenth century, probably in the second half of the tenth century. The first phase is harder to date, but several C-14 analyses from material lying under the rampart tell us that it can hardly be older than the ninth century.

Within the excavated area there were found three



Fig. 5. The three ditches that followed the front of the rampart.

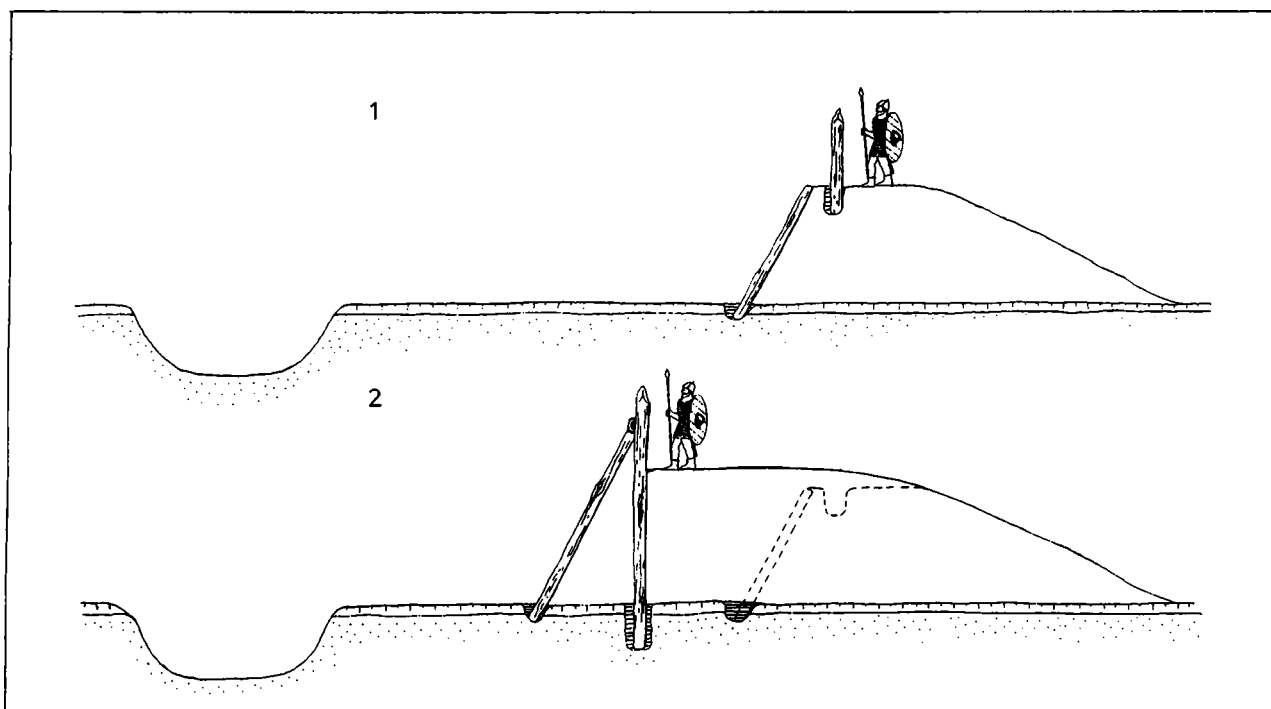


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the two phases.

gates through the rampart, one in the east, one in the north and one in the west. In the south, modern bulldozing and digging for pipelines and cables had ruined all traces of the fort. Only the moats were left. However, we can assume that there must have been a gate here to, giving the people in the fort access to the shore.

There are several similarities with other Danish forts from this time (Trelleborg, Fyrkat, Nonnebacken and Aggesborg) (6), but there are also differences. This fort is not quite circular. There are no traces of any timber-construction inside the rampart, and most of all, we lack the type of houses that

are typical of the other Danish forts. However, phase two seems to have been built in the same time as the four Danish forts, a period when the political situation in Denmark was very unstable, and it is probably built for the same purpose. Like the other ones, the Scanian fort seems to have existed for only a short period. We have no material we for certain can say belongs to the eleventh century, so around the year 1000 the fort seems to have been abandoned, and at the same time the settlement at the shore also disappears.

From this time on and until the middle of the thirteenth century, the area seems to have been desert-

ed. There is no evidence of any permanent settlement here. There might have been some seasonal activities, connected with fishing, but it was not until the thirteenth century that people again occupied the shore and the medieval town grew.

Harald Lindal, the former head of the museum in Trelleborg, was of the opinion that the medieval town occupied a rather small area around the old square in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (fig. 7). In his reconstruction of the town around the

year 1350,⁷ he suggested that the town was defined by two watercourses, one in the east and one in the west. He claimed that the town expanded to the east in the following centuries, covering a considerably larger area at the end of the Middle Ages. His argument for the size of the town around 1350 was the discovery of a wall of stones in a block called Triangeln in the 1950s (fig. 1).⁸ This stonewall was found close to the watercourse to the east. According to Lindal's interpretation, this was a part of a townwall which

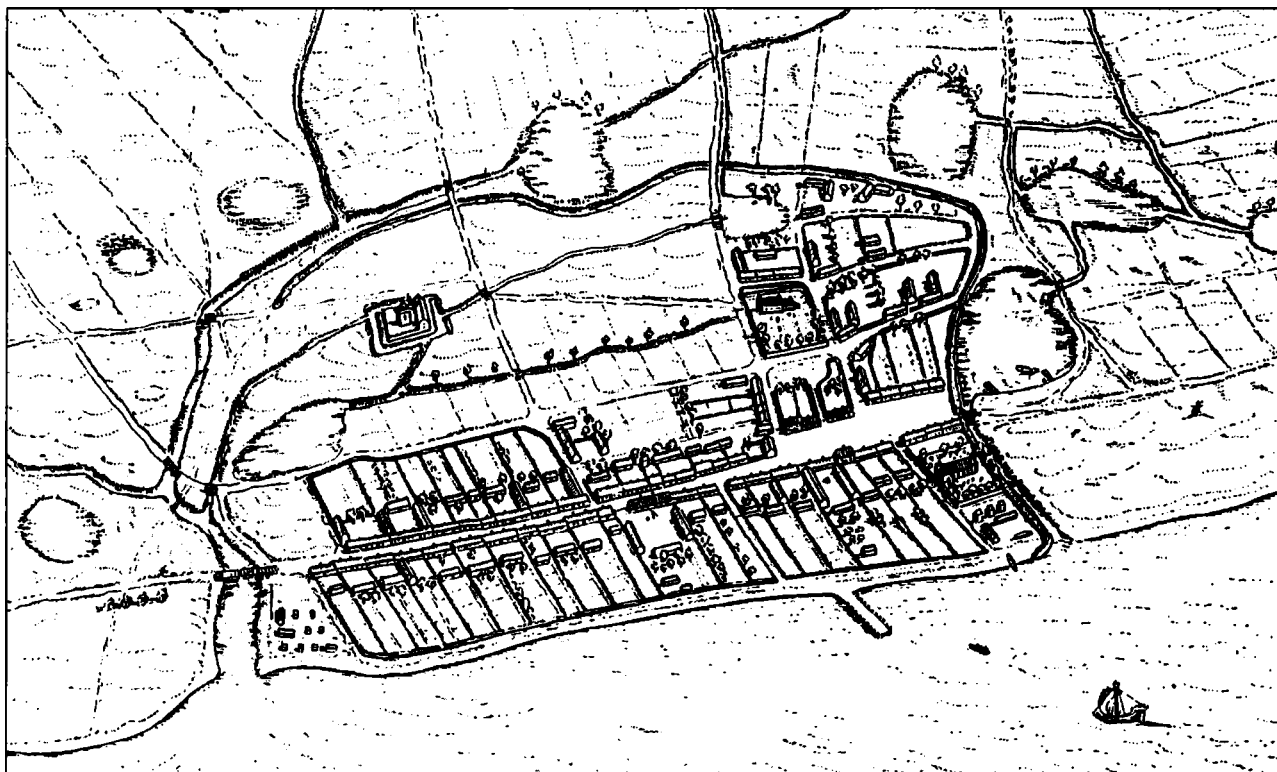


Fig. 7. Harald Lindal's reconstruction of Trelleborg around the year 1350.

had surrounded the town at this time, and the area east of this wall was not occupied until late medieval time. However, in the 1980s, excavations took place in the block Oden, and besides the Viking material that was found there, a lot of material that could be dated to the thirteenth century also appeared. So, according to the archaeological material, the town seems to have occupied a larger area already in the thirteenth century than was previously known. Furthermore, excavation has later taken place close to the area where the stonewall was found, and at that time a millpond was found. It could clearly be seen that the water level in the pond had risen and sunk periodically and rapidly, which indicated the existence of a watermill somewhere nearby. Several large millstones were also found in the bottom of the pond. It is tempting to look upon this stonewall, not as a townwall, but as the foundation of a watermill at the edge of this stream, which could be an artificial channel dug sometime in the thirteenth century.

The results from later years' excavations in this part of the town have consequently showed us that as early as the thirteenth century Trelleborg covered a much larger area than was earlier thought.

The situation is similar in the northwestern part of the town. In the area where the Viking Age fort was found, we also found a lot of houses dated to the Middle Ages. This was somewhat surprising, as we thought this area to be a marginal area in the town. But the tradition since the Viking Age has obviously been very strong. Bryggaregatan, the street that today divides the fort into two equal parts, existed al-

ready during the Viking Age, when it was the main street through the fort (The gate at the north was found in the street and another gate at the south has probably also been in the street). When the fort was abandoned, the street instead turned into a communication line between the shore and the inland. In the Middle Ages, when the remains of the fort were finally demolished, the street was widened and surfaced, and at the same time several houses were built on both sides of the street. So this street has obviously been of great importance since the Viking Age and it was in the Middle Ages, together with another street a bit further to the west (Norregatan), one of the main streets that connected the town with the inland.

To summarize, one can say that the recent years' excavations in Trelleborg have given us a completely new history of the area. Our knowledge of the medieval town has increased considerably, and we now also know that here was once a large settlement from the Late Iron Age and a Viking Age fort, similar to the Danish ones built by Harald Bluetooth in the late tenth century.

Since the conference on Town Archaeology took place in Ribe in 1992, about one quarter of the Viking Age fort has been reconstructed within the block Gröningen (fig. 1). The rampart, the palisade, the western gate and one of the best preserved houses from the Medieval settlement have been rebuilt. The results from the archaeological excavations are now partly published.⁹

Notes

1. Lindal 1956 p. 35.
2. Lindal 1956.
3. Jacobsson 1987 p. 1-10.
4. C-14 analyses by Göran Skog at the University of Lund, Department of Quaternary Geology, Lund Sweden.
5. Jacobsson 1990 p. 53-54.
6. Olsen & Schmidt 1977.
7. Lindal 1956 p. 157.
8. Lindal 1956 p. 156.
9. Jacobsson & Arén 1995 p. 1-156.

Litteratur

- Lindal, H.: *Trelleborgs Medeltid*. Trelleborg 1956.
- Jacobsson, B.: Oden. Ett vikingatida kvarter i staden Trelleborg. *Ale, Historisk tidskrift för Skåneland* 1987:2, Lund 1987.
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- Jacobsson, B., E. Arén, E. Arén, & K.A. Blom: *Trelleborgen – en av kung Harald Blåtands danska ringborgar*. Lund 1995.
- Olsen, O. & H. Schmidt: *Fyrkat 1. Borgen och bebyggelsen*. Köpenhamn 1977.