

The Royal Castles during the Reign of Erik Menved (1286–1319)

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The military and economic role of castles in medieval society was such that it is interesting to examine their existence during a limited period, without a chronological or typological selection of the monuments, with the objective of examining their function. In this case the royal castles in function during the reign of Erik Menved (1286–1319) will be discussed. During this period castles played an increasing role in the maintenance of power. Furthermore the severe charter imposed on Christopher II, 1320, is a natural limit, since it included a paragraph which demands the demolition of several royal castles: *Item ut omnia castra in Nøriucia destruentur exceptis Ripis, Kolding et Scandelburgh* (1). Only castles in medieval Denmark are considered, although Erik Menved built some fortresses in Northern Germany e.g. Warnemünde 1312. In order to clarify the development of the castles during Erik Menved's reign, they will be analysed in context with the surrounding periods and their own history – from the Valdemarian kings (1157–1241) to Erik Menved, as well as with Valdemar Atterdag's (1340–1375) castles (2).

HOW OLD ARE THE CASTLES?

The castles cannot be examined without considering major methodological problems, especially concerning the dating of the monuments. The poverty of the written sources is well known and there are no documents on even such impressive castles as Bastrup and Borren in Northern Sealand. However the situation is improving throughout the Middle Ages and the sources, mainly epistles, charters and annals, are rather numerous about 1300. Still they do not exist on a larger scale until the end of the fourteenth century.

Archaeological evidence presents similar difficulties. Several monuments have disappeared, others have ne-

ver been examined, some – generally the large and famous castles – have been partly excavated. But most of these excavations are old and incomplete. Nor is the typological way of dating sufficient when working on a limited period, especially when numerous castles were erected in the period following Erik Menved's death, either by the Holstenian creditors or by Danish noblemen, or later by Valdemar Atterdag. Nor are anachronisms unknown in military architecture, as illustrated by the late-medieval tower-keeps, and in Denmark by the "motte-like" fortifications, of which not a single example can be shown to have been built earlier than about 1300. Even when earlier in existence, the Danish castles were only used in war at a late stage compared with Western Europe (3).

Several royal castles are completely unrecorded prior to the second half of the fourteenth century, even those connected with a town. In fact, several important urban communities never had a castle (e.g. Århus and Lund), or only had it at a distance from the town (e.g. Roskilde and Odense). Some castles are currently dated as built in the earlier part of the Middle Ages, e.g. Gurre, Sjørring Volde and Ålborg, but a critical examination shows that none of them can be proved to be as old as supposed. It has earlier been suggested convincingly that Valdemar Atterdag built the whole of Gurre, and not, as often supposed, only the surrounding walls (4).

Is it by mere chance that Christopher II's charter only exempts the castles of Ribe, Skanderborg and Kolding from destruction, or does it indicate that they were the only old and well established castles in Northern Jutland? As so far nothing final can be said about the age of several castles, it would be more prudent to wait for sure evidence before using them in this connection.

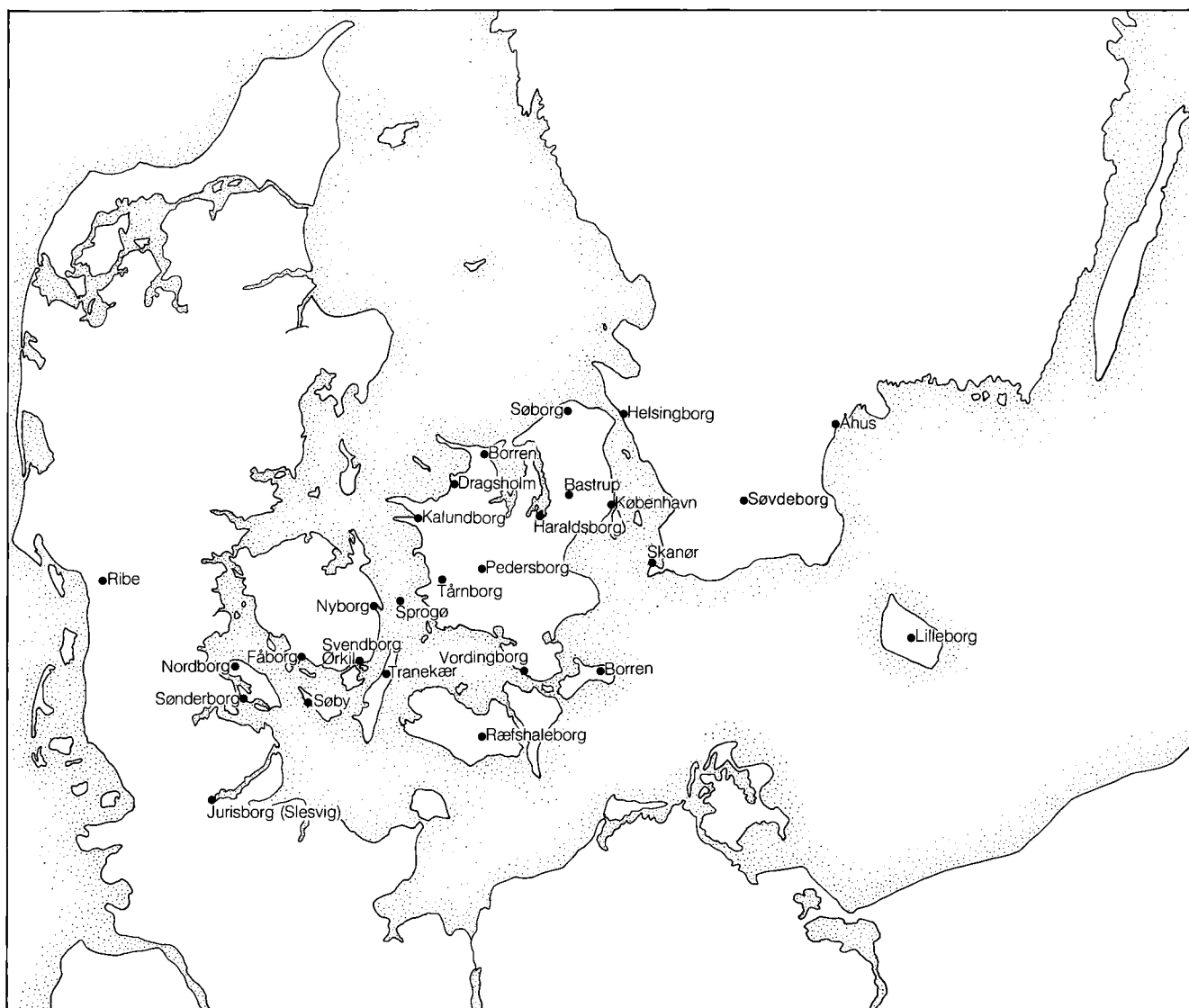


Fig. 1. Map of castles during the Valdemarian period (1157–1241).

THE DISPERSION OF THE CASTLES

The building of castles was very expensive and so was their maintenance and their garrisons. The geographical dispersion of the royal castles to a large extent reflects the important regions and those that the central power thought were threatened.

During the *Valdemarian period* (1157–1241) the crown had become rather strong. It was supported by the mighty Hvide family and the majority of the Church. Politically and military the main involvement was with the southern countries. First the sea coast was threat-

ened by the Slavic pirates, later the Danes attacked and conquered the Slavic areas. Furthermore Valdemar I (1157–1241) had become the German Emperor's vassal, and the king's need to maintain relative independence from his feudal lord is easily imagined (5).

The map (fig. 1) shows the distribution of known castles during the Valdemarian period. Even if some of the castles were erected by the Hvide family or the Church, they served in most cases as public fortifications. The majority of the fortresses are situated on the seacoasts in the southeastern parts of the kingdom. It is interesting to observe the case in Jutland. All the castles

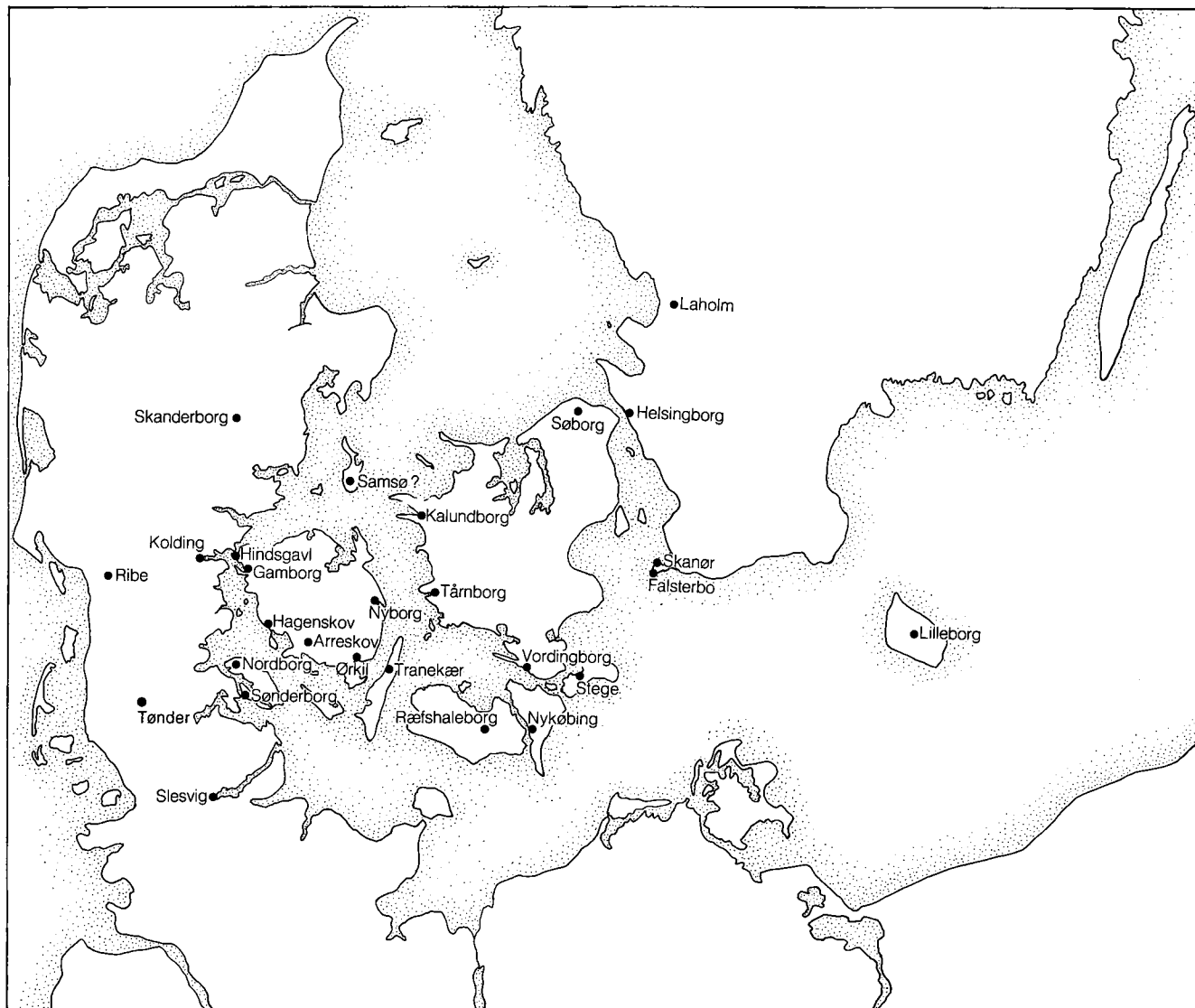


Fig. 2. Map of castles during the period 1241–1286.

except Ribe are concentrated in Southern Jutland. The island of Als was hard hit by the Slavic raids and is protected by two castles – Sønderborg and Nordborg. Anyway the Valdemar's wall at Dannevirke was hardly meant as a protection against the Slavs, but must have been built in view of the German danger. The location of the castles fits very well with the historical context. It is obvious that they were meant to defend the crown against external dangers. It might be due to the new fortifications that Knud VI (1182–1202) was able to refuse to accept the German Emperor's feudal sovereignty. This does not exclude an internal use of the castles in

other situations, but it was not their main purpose.

When Valdemar Sejr died 1241, he left several sons. Only one of them could become king. The others were expected to be satisfied with a duchy, or if illegitimate with a minor territory. However they were not satisfied, and this involved serious internal conflicts. Each legitimate son succeeded in becoming king, and afterwards their male heirs fought for the royal title. In this context the South Jutland duchy rapidly became a constant and serious threat to the crown. Besides, the archbishops and an important part of the Church came into often violent conflict with the king (6).

In this period we learn about a number of previously unrecorded castles, especially in Funen and Jutland (fig. 2). Certainly we do not know all of them, as some of them lost all military importance once conquered and destroyed, e.g. Arreskov (1264), which only reappears as a manor. Some of the old castles were also abandoned, generally being replaced by new ones more concordant with the existing situation. Probably this explains almost neighbouring large castles like Gamburg and Hindsgavl, Stege and Borren, and perhaps Ræfshaleborg (1255†) and Nykøbing Falster. In the same period castles in Northern Jutland appear for the first time in the sources, and Ribe has been reinforced (7). Most likely they are contemporary with and owe their existence to the establishment of the South Jutland duchy.

ERIK MENVED'S PERIOD

Erik Menved's reign started very dramatically, his father being murdered in a barn at Finderup. Some of the magnates were sentenced to outlawry for the murder – probably unjustly. They took refuge with the Norwegian king, and with his assistance they built castles in northern Halland and on the small island of Hjelm. From these strongholds they organized raids with the Norwegians in Denmark. In addition came a violent conflict with the archbishop, Jens Grand, the increasing hostility of the king's brother, Christopher, and of course of Valdemar, the duke of the South Jutland duchy (8). However Erik Menved was able to start warfare in Sweden and particularly in Northern Germany. Although a successful warrior, the expenses of his ambitious military policy provoked several revolts at home. The most serious revolt took place in Northern Jutland 1313. Its organization seems to indicate the participation of important magnates, especially the bishop of Århus, Esger Juul. When the revolt was crushed, new castles were built and others were reinforced to assure the dominance of the crown. We know several of the castles by name, yet the sources are not explicit enough to exclude the building of others, now unknown (9). At the end of Erik Menved's reign, one especially notices the struggles with the duke of southern Halland, Christopher.

In spite of the numerous internal and external conflicts, the crown had surprising strength. It must mainly

have been due to the king's military superiority based on the castles and German mercenaries. In the long run this method was too expensive, and gradually it obliged the king to pawn the crown's lands to his creditors. The true frailty of the crown became obvious at Erik Menved's death, 1319, when to become king Christopher II was forced to accept a charter. It is significant, that the charter prohibited German castle tenants and demanded the destruction of the north Jutland castles (1).

The map (fig. 3), showing the castles' dispersion during the period 1286–1319, also includes the magnates' and the Church's known fortifications. In the beginning it was mainly enemies who built castles, particularly the outlaws in northern Halland and on Hjelm. The royal castle of Stege was enlarged, starting in 1307–1310, no doubt in connection with the military involvement in Northern Germany. This may also be the case of Glambeek, which is first known from 1307. In Scania we learn about the castle of Örkelljunga, 1307, and the erection of the big tower, Kärnan, in Helsingborg castle is dendrochronologically dated to 1317–1318 (10). Taking the historical context into account, Örkelljunga was probably a new fortress. Christopher became duke of Southern Halland in 1306 and immediately began conspiring against the king (11). The fortifications are probably related to the brothers' struggles. It is also characteristic that the south Halland fortifications are better known from this period.

The most important phase of the building of castles was certainly provoked by the Jutland revolt (12). The known castles were rather widely dispersed. Ulstrup near Limfjorden is certainly identical with the large manor, Volstrup, belonging to the Ribe-bishops in western Jutland, and is likely to have been built by bishop Kristian, the king's faithful ally. The new castle in Viborg probably controlled the "landsting" connected with this town. Documents testify that the "landsting" played an important role in the revolt (13). Two castles were built in the bishopric of Århus – Bygholm and Kalø. The latter is one of the largest Danish castles ever built. Kalø seems very isolated but it should be noted that the distance to Århus by sea is very short. Probably this impressive fortification was meant to control Århus from the sea, so the castle confirms the presumed role of the Århus-bishop in the organization of the revolt. Perhaps the nobility had Borgvold in Viborg and Kalø most in mind, when it demanded the demolition of the castles. Archaeological and written sources indicate

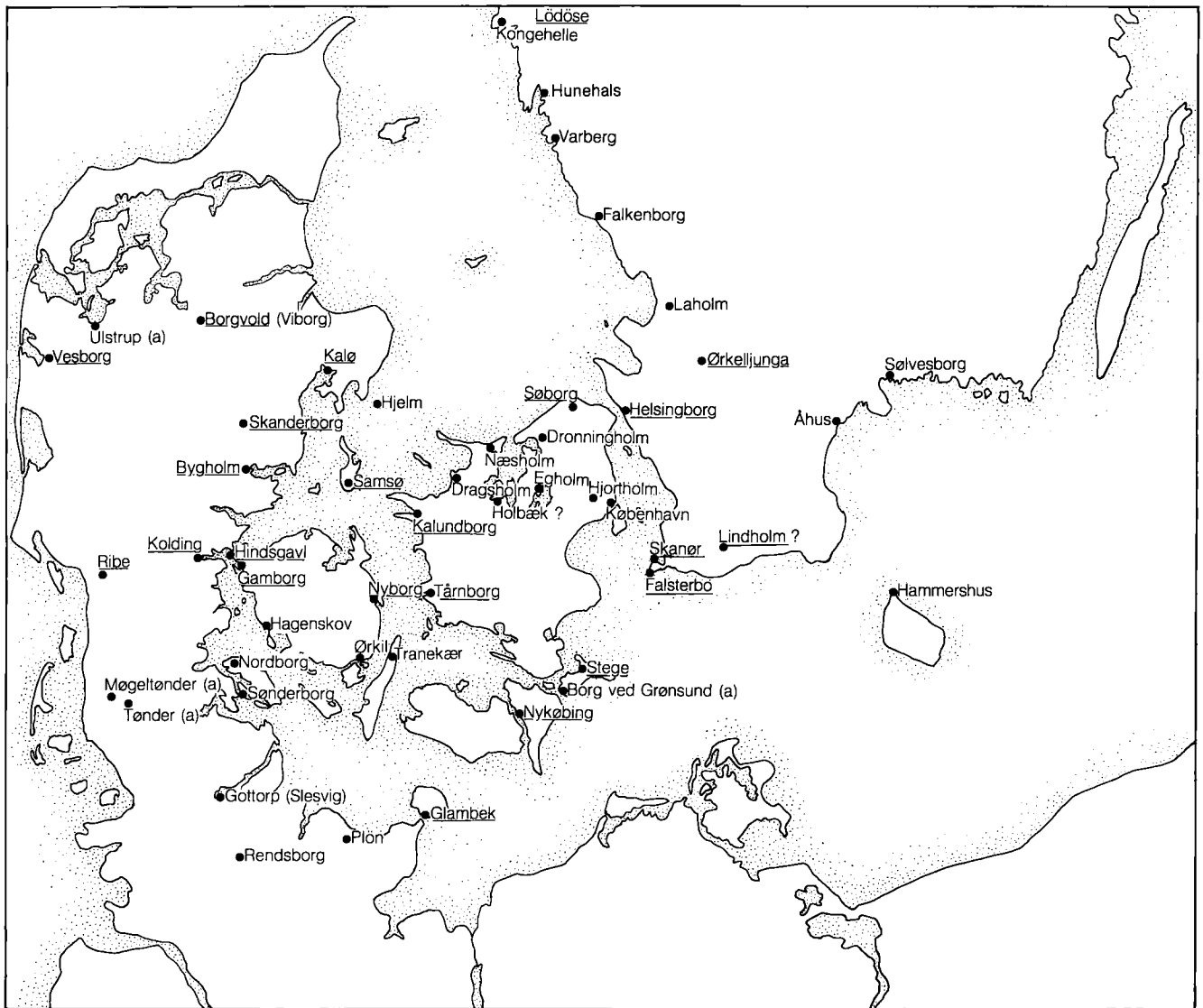


Fig. 3. Map of the known castles at the time of Erik Menved (1286–1319). Hindsgavl: royal castle. – Tønder (a): castle of the King's allied. – Hammershus: other castle – often of the King's enemies.

that Kalø was destroyed at least to a certain degree – though in the end it survived (14). The large castle of Hald near Viborg perhaps owes its existence to the destruction of Borgvold, but in reality nothing certain can be said. Unlike the majority of the older fortresses these castles clearly had an internal function. Lindholm in Scania was equally built to assure internal domination. This castle is not recorded before 1332, but the context in the charter and the archaeological remains indicate that it was built in about 1300. Lindholm may be one of the castles the nobility wanted destroyed in the charter of Valdemar III, 1326 (15).

Finally it can be observed that even if the building of castles increased considerably during Erik Menved's reign, their location is, to a large extent the same as before and the defences were still mainly based on the old fortifications. Economically it is striking that the majority of the castles built in these periods, were connected with urban societies: e.g. Vordingborg, Søborg, Nyborg, Kalundborg, Ribe. But these castles date mainly from the Valdemarian period and in many cases encouraged the establishment of the town. The castles built by Erik Menved at Horsens (Bygholm) and in Viborg (Borgvold) were made for other reasons and were

apparently not naturally integrated with the towns. The country was still mainly not administered from the castles.

The topographical protection was generally based on wet and boggy areas, if possible combined without any chronological distinction with a minor mound. However, a surprising consistency in the topographic choice of the seashore-castles can be observed. Nearly all the old fortresses were hidden from the open sea behind an isthmus, a little island, or – in the absence of these possibilities – retired on a hilly range. If the castle was replaced by a new one, this will now be situated very exposed on the point of an isthmus or peninsular e.g. Borren – Stege, Tårnborgh – Korsør (only about 1340) and most probably, Gamborg – Hindsgavl, Brattingborg – Vesborg and Ræfshaleborg – Nykøbing Falster. Is this motivated by changing harbour conditions, related to the use of the cog – or should it, more likely, be explained by an evolution from a protection against the sea to domination of the sea and its traffic? Anyhow, this evolution is not connected with one king, but seems to have taken place from about 1250 to at least about 1350.

THE LAY-OUT AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE CASTLES

As has been indicated, the majority of Erik Menved's castles were in fact constructed by his predecessors (c.f. figs. 1 and 2). It is therefore not surprising that the ground-plans and construction-methods of the royal fortresses show wide-ranging differences. This observation, however, is also valid for those of the building-works which can with reasonable certainty be ascribed to Erik Menved – as regards both new castles and modernizations of older structures.

A comparison of the Northern Jutland castles built by forced labour in 1313 reveals major differences between them (16). Even the differences in terms of size alone are striking: the surface areas of Borgvold and of Bygholm could be fitted inside the curtain-wall of Kalø (fig. 4) 3 and 5 times respectively. Information about the construction of the castles is rather more sparse, but here too the differences seem considerable. The remains of the earliest structure at Kalø show that here from the start a strong up-to-date curtain-wall was planned. The original Borgvold and Bygholm are little-known, but in all probability they would have been surrounded by palisades. It cannot be established whether

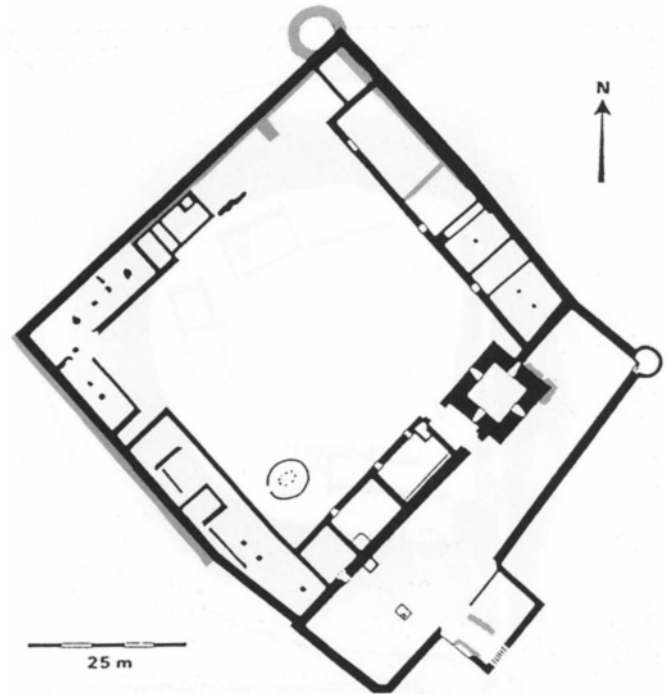


Fig. 4. The traces of older walls (grey tone) under the curtain walls of Kalø show that from the start the castle was planned on a large scale. The size of the fortress superpasses far that of the other castle-constructions from 1313; it is actually one of the largest castles in Denmark.

they included a stone house or two on the castle-mounds, or whether there were only wooden constructions in the beginning. Similarly, there are differences of emphasis as regards the castles' outworks. Kalø is constructed on a small island, on which the bailey also stands. The castle itself sits at the crest of the island, where it is cut off from its surroundings by deep dry moats. The connection to the mainland is provided by a stone-built causeway, 500 metres long, which is undoubtedly original (17). Borgvold also seems to have had rather substantial outworks. This castle-structure moreover wrought significant changes in the topography of Viborg, where a milldam intended to provide water for the rampart-ditches brought about a partial flooding of the town-area near the lake-side (18). Against this background Bygholm appears in a much more modest light.

Erik Menved was probably also responsible for the erection of the conventional curtain-wall structures of Glambek and Lindholm, together with the later Falsterbo. In other cases earlier buildings such as Stege, Hel-

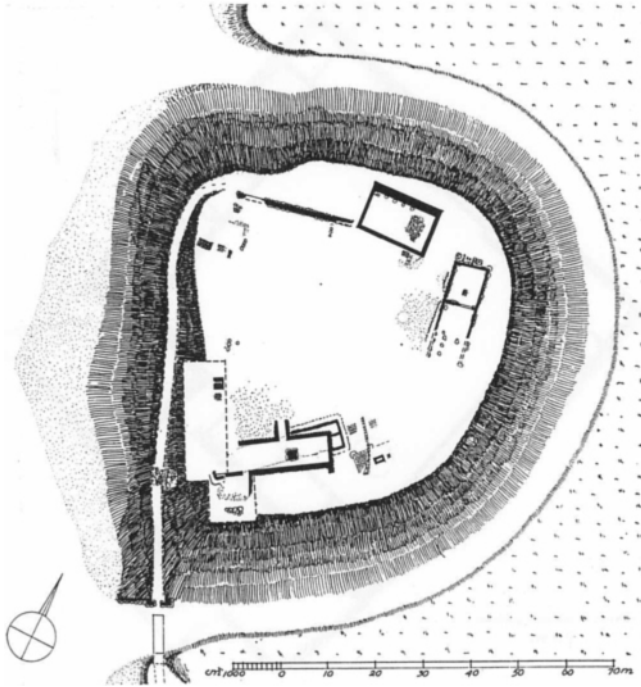


Fig. 5. Hindsgavl on Funen stands on the shore of Lillebælt, at a point where it could also control the seaward approach to Kolding Fjord. The castle is first mentioned in 1295, when Erik Menved made peace with the outlaws there. The castle cannot be dated more precisely. Probably it superseded the older fortress of Gamborg, which stands further back in the fjord of the same name. Apparently there was neither a curtain-wall nor a palisade at Hindsgavl. On the other hand the high castle-mound is surrounded by water-logged salt marshes. As in the case of Kalø, the castle was connected with land by a causeway. (Ill. from Elna Møller, 1944).

singsborg and probably Søborg were modernised during Erik Menved's reign (19). The latter two were extended with new curtain-walls, whereas Helsingborg was given an impressive keep, "Kärnen". It is not possible to distinguish significant common features in these fortresses which could categorize them as genuine royal military architecture. European examples of a specific royal architecture can be found e.g. in the castles built in Wales by Edward I (1272–1307), or in particularly distinguished form in the almost stereotyped fortress-building of the slightly earlier French king, Philippe Auguste (1180–1223). It is not possible either to ascribe to Erik Menved a smaller group of typical buildings, as was done in the case of Valdemar Atterdag, with the curtain-walls of Vordingborg, Kalundborg and Helsingborg (20). Erik Menved's master-builders to a great extent fitted in with the opportunities of the moment and

with local requirements and thus there is no typological basis for differentiating between his royal fortresses and the other castle-building of the high Middle Ages (21).

The majority of the royal castles can however be described in the same general terms. On the whole the castles are rather large, often ringwalled as at Kalø, Stege, Søborg and Glamek, or more modestly only surrounded by palisades. Sometimes they have neither, as in the case of the very important castle of Hindsgavl (fig. 5), perhaps because the site was thought sufficiently protected by nature.

VALDEMAR ATTERDAG'S PERIOD

In reality Denmark was governed by the Crown's creditors during the period 1320–1340, and in several years was without any king at all. Numerous castles were erected during this period. When Valdemar Atterdag became king in 1340, he began an impressive re-establishment of the power of the crown from an almost hopeless situation. He regained the country bit by bit, either by redeeming the pawned territories, or very often by military strength. The war about the castles was more intense than ever.

The map (fig. 6) of Valdemar Atterdag's castles reveals a much more complete geographical distribution than in the earlier periods, even if some were only under the Crown for a short time. For the first time strongholds are reliably known North of Limfjorden. Valdemar Atterdag's castles are thus clearly distinguished from those of the former kings by their dispersion and number, but also by their even greater variety. Valdemar Atterdag built the very large ringwalls around Vordingborg, Helsingborg, and Kalundborg, as well as small castles like Torp, probably Gurre, and Aggersborg. This should certainly be explained by differences in the structure of society and government. The administration of the castles was very important in Valdemar Atterdag's rule of the country, and several of them more likely to have been administrative centres than military fortresses (22).

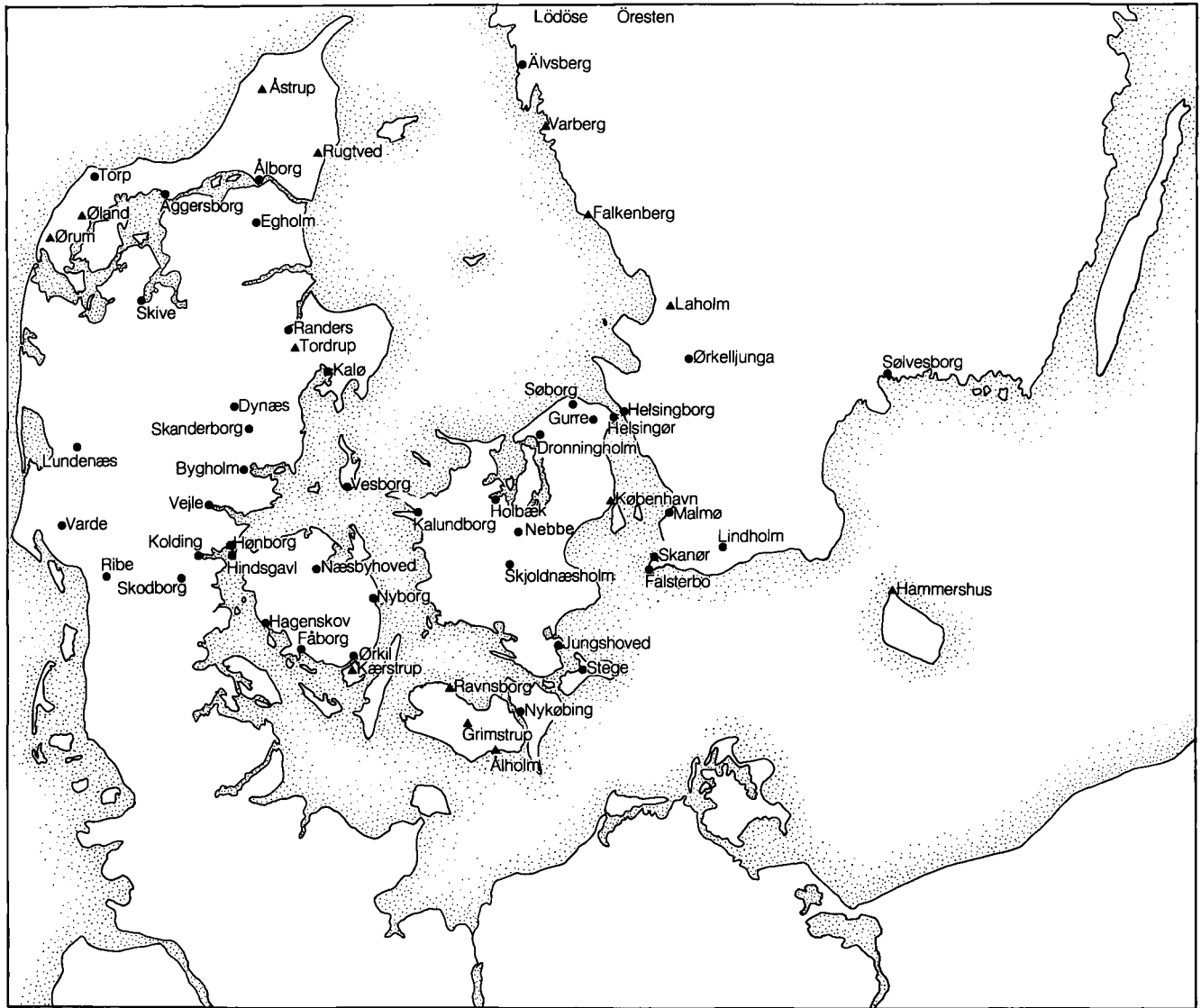


Fig. 6. Map of King Valdemar Atterdag's castles (1340–1375). ▲ private castle acquired by the Crown.

CONCLUSION

Even if Erik Menved's reign showed an important increase in the building of castles, exaggeration should be avoided. The majority of the castles were built by his predecessors, and to a large extent, Erik Menved's castles are more in the Valdemarian tradition than in that of Valdemar Atterdag. That is: rather few castles, but of great military superiority. This does not exclude an administrative use of the existing fortresses, but this was hardly the reason for their construction, and the territories were generally not governed from the castles at that

time. This was the case only in Valdemar Atterdag's period, which in many respects differs fundamentally from the previous ones, It is also worth noticing that Erik Menved's and the other kings' tours around the country were more associated with the towns and political events than with the castles. Some of the very large castles seldom or never housed the king e.g. Skanderborg and Kalø, whereas towns without any important royal castle like Roskilde, Lund, and Copenhagen, were very often visited (23). So the royal tours, even if numerous, are not sufficient to indicate the existence of a castle.

The analysis that has been made depends naturally on present knowledge drawn from different sources, and the maps of the castles cannot claim to be complete. But even if some of the late recorded castles were really built earlier, it would hardly change the tendency proposed here.

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NOTES

The manuscript was submitted in March 1988.

1. H. Paludan in A.E. Christensen 1977, p. 466–471. Dipl. Dan. 2. rk. VIII nr. 176 § 15, § 14 about castle tenants.
2. E. Kroman 1980, p. 209 Ann. Ryenses. The maps fig. 2 and 3 are results of my own work on the written and archaeological sources, whereas the other maps are revisions of other authors' works. Fig. 1 is thus based on R.A. Olsen 1980, p. 20 and V. la Cour 1972 II, p. 201; and fig. 4 is based on the list of Valdemar Atterdag's castles in A.E. Christensen 1968, p. 190 n. 3, p. 246.
3. R.A. Olsen 1982.
4. A. Tuulse 1952, p. 204–205.
5. A.E. Christensen in do. 1977, p. 333–334, p. 342–343.
6. A.E. Christensen 1968, p. 68–93.
7. E. Kroman 1980, p. 105 (Ann. Sorani), p. 174 (Ann. Ryenses). p. 276 (Ann. 980–1286), p. 318 (Ann. 1246–1265).
8. K. Hørby 1977, p. 82–90, p. 93–106, p. 129–138. H. Paludan in A.E. Christensen 1977, p. 453–454.
9. K. Hørby 1977, p. 124–129. H. Paludan in A.E. Christensen 1977, p. 455. E. Kroman 1980, p. 266 (Ann. Ripenses), p. 283 (Ann. Es-senbecenses).
10. T. Bartholin 1978. J. Bekmose & S. Nielsen 1978 (Stege). Dipl. Dan. 2 rk. VI nr. 63, nr. 85 (Glambeek). A. Wihlborg 1981, p. 37 (Kärnan).
11. Dipl. Dan. 2. rk. V nr. 52, nr. 62.
12. A.N. Jaubert 1987.
13. Dipl. Dan. 2 rk. VII nr. 89. H.K. Kristensen 1986.
14. C.M. Smidt 1944, fig. 2 p. 96–98. E. Kroman 1980, p. 283 (Ann. Es-senbec.)
15. Dipl. Dan. 2. rk. X, nr. 403. E. Kroman 1971 nr. 23 § 13 S. Skansjö 1981, p. 115–120.
16. A.N. Jaubert 1986 a, p. 91–96. Ibidem 1987.
17. R.A. Olsen 1982 a, p. 12–13.
18. H.K. Kristensen & J. Velle 1982, p. 7–9.
19. T.S. Bartolin 1978. A.N. Jaubert 1986 b, p. 67. A. Wihlborg 1981, p. 37.
20. A. Tuulse 1952, p. 206–207.
21. E.g. R.A. Olsen 1986, p. 24–88.
22. R.A. Olsen 1985, p. 66–68. K. Hørby in A.E. Christensen 1980, p. 66–67.
23. T. Riis 1981.

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