Kärnan

Helsingborg Castle was a castle of the realm in the 1100s under the Danish king. A castle of the realm was the name for the main castle in a castle county and was controlled by a country sheriff of noble birth who was loyal to the king. Castles of the realm were located at specially chosen places, strategically important for exercising political and military power. For the castle and the growing city, the high elevation and proximity to the strait were important factors, as it enabled monitoring of shipping. Later, a corresponding fortress was built on the western shore and thus Denmark had control over shipping in the strait and customs duties became one of the country’s most important sources of revenue from the early 1400s until 1857 when collection ceased. The Öresund customs duties were also a cause of war between Denmark and other countries around the Baltic, including Sweden.

The castle’s keep was initially a round tower with 4.5-metre-thick sandstone walls on a foundation of granite. The castle was encircled by a ring wall, which connected the defensive complex’s different buildings and devices. The oldest part of the town grew up in secure proximity to the castle, but gradually the narrow strip of land between the castle and coast was also built on, and thus developed the important trading city and port of Helsingborg.

During both the 1200s and the troubled 1300s, Helsingborg was at the centre of events in many different contexts. Several of the uprisings led to the castle being stormed and besieged. A remarkable event happened in 1332, when the Swedish king, Magnus Eriksson, in negotiations at the castle bought the German right of pledge to Scania and Blekinge for 34,000 silver marks. Denmark had pledged the provinces to raise money for war. The result was that Scania and Blekinge were to belong to Sweden until 1360, when the dynamic king, Valdemar Atterdag conquered the provinces for Denmark. At what was an unhappy conclusion of peace for Denmark signed in Stralsund in 1370, Helsingborg Castle was again involved in a loan deal, when Denmark was forced to pledge western Scania to German lenders for 15 years. In the 1300s, when Erik Menved was Denmark’s king, the old tower had been replaced by a new one, intended as royal quarters when the Danish king stayed in Helsingborg. The old one was demolished and the new square-shaped brick keep was built only a few metres away. Outside the tower, a strong curtain wall was built, which in turn was encircled by a 500-metre-long ring wall, which was protected by a moat along its eastern section.

When Scania became Swedish in 1658, an expansion of the fortress began in order to protect that part of Scania where a Danish attack was most feared. It was a justified fear, but when numerous attacks were made against Scania, the fortress had no power to resist. It was only after the Swedish victory in Helsingborg in 1710 that the Danish threat against Scania was averted.

“Kärnan”, as the keep came to be called in the 1700s, fell into ruin, but the owner since 1741, Helsingborg City Council, saved the building for posterity through a restoration in 189

The era of the stronghold-builders

Scania has the remains of more than 150 strongholds, and some preserved examples, from the period 1050-1520. Those castles built before the prohibition of 1396, which banned nobles from building private castles, can in general only be traced as “ripples” on the surface of the land, whereas those built after the ban was lifted in 1483 and until the 1520s have in several cases been preserved to the present day.

A stronghold, or fortified complex, is defined as an area that is on one or more sides demarcated or characterised by constructed walls, embankments, palisades, moats or a combination of these. The building as such is usually adapted for three main functions: defence, living quarters and storage. Defence or protection functions were aimed at both external and internal enemies. External enemies could have warlike intentions, whereas internal adversaries could have a more disruptive aim for the community. Early castles were society’s and the church’s ”police stations”, with a considerable
symbolic value for the spiritual and secular authorities. The medieval time’s warlords went to great
trouble to develop techniques for besieging and attacking individual strongholds. A castle was no
defence for the people of the surrounding countryside, who were often subject to plundering and
suffering in times of war.
The simplest form of stronghold was the Viking era’s ring stronghold or “Trelleborgen”, which
consisted of a circular earth mound and a simple house for living quarters surrounded by a ditch
with wood palisades. The ring stronghold later developed into the ring wall castle, in which a wall
replaced the primitive earth mound and the ditch became a moat. On the top of the wall was a
guards’ walkway and devices intended for defensive purposes. Necessities were stored within the
ring wall and the lord of the castle lived in the central building. The next phase of development was
the tower stronghold with a solid ring wall and defence devices, often with a moat and a centrally-
located keep, where functions such as defence, guardroom, storage, living quarters, kitchen, etc.
were ”stacked” on each other, in respective storeys. Kärnan in Helsingborg, if you ignore the ring
wall, is the only remaining example of a tower stronghold in Scania. The most lavish castles, the
church’s archbishop’s castles, had a representative rather than defensive role.
In certain places, castles were built to defend business interests and during the 1300s many
magnates built private castles to protect life and property.