

**SMALL THINGS  
WIDE HORIZONS**

**STUDIES IN HONOUR OF  
BIRGITTA HÅRDH**

**Edited by**

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## Preface

The 16th of August 2015 is Professor Birgitta Hårdh's 70th birthday. At the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund, an editorial group was set up for the publication of a Festschrift in her honour.

For several decades Birgitta has been an important staff member and researcher at the Department. Her doctoral dissertation was based on Viking Age silver deposits in southernmost Sweden. This is a field that she later developed in several national and international publications. As a result she is regarded as one of the leading experts on the Northern European Viking Age, engaged in diverse research projects both in Sweden and internationally, and she is a vital collaborator in various networks specializing in the Viking Age.

Through time, Birgitta has extended her research to comprise other periods in the Iron Age. This is particularly clear in her research on the major site of Uppåkra outside Lund. Here she has devoted articles to a detailed treatment of the finds from the Late Iron Age. She has also edited several of the volumes in the series Uppåkrastudier, with both national and international contributions.

Another special field examined by Birgitta Hårdh is the megalithic graves in south-west Scania. Both find material from individual sites and broader perspectives on the Middle Neolithic have been covered in these studies.

Besides doing research, Birgitta Hårdh has for several decades been a lecturer and professor, with long experience of teaching students and supervising doctoral candidates in the subject. She has also been director of studies and served on a number of committees in the Faculty of Arts and Theology.

A feature common to all Birgitta Hårdh's research is that she has been able, through analysis of a body of finds, to broaden the perspective, not least geographically through her profound knowledge of phenomena in Northern Europe and indeed all of Europe. This book has been given the title *Small Things – Wide Horizons*, which is a good summary of Birgitta's research hitherto.

Thanks to the large network of contacts to which Birgitta Hårdh belongs, the call for papers for this Festschrift met a great response. A total of forty titles were submitted to the proposed volume.

Through this Festschrift we wish to thank and honour Professor Birgitta Hårdh as a fine colleague and an excellent scholar. We all look forward to coming years and many more important contributions to archaeological research.

*Lars Larsson, Fredrik Ekengren,  
Bertil Helgesson, Bengt Söderberg*



BIRGITTA HÅRDH

# The Trelleborg constructors

Anders Ödman

## Abstract

*This text builds on a manuscript written for a lecture at the Trelleborg Museum in Scania. At the museum one can read that Harald Bluetooth built the ring fortress, just like all the other Trelleborg forts, but is this so? This article looks at the datings, finds and surroundings of the East Danish trelleborg forts and presents another interpretation. A strong aristocracy with an interest in trade may have been the constructors and the slave trade may have given some of the forts their names.*

## What is a Trelleborg and how many are there?

In connection with the foundation of the kingdom, Harald built a number of ring forts—Trelleborg, Nonnebacken, Fyrkat and Aggersborg. A few datings of timber to the time around 980 from Trelleborg in Zealand confirm this. The ring forts are supposed to have been camps for warriors in combination with settlements for craftsmen. This image of the Trelleborg-style ring forts is what most people have in mind. Despite the fact that other interpretations are available, these have had difficulties making themselves heard. The definition of a trelleborg is in smallest detail conformed.

The rigid definition of a *trelleborg* covers only Fyrkat, where all the parameters are met. Aggersborg has really no dating at all linked to the ring fort, Trelleborg in Zealand shows a large number of stages and a dating that can be called into question (Nielsen 1990). Nonnebacken is so badly damaged that the wall construction and building blocks cannot be established.

But sometimes other fortresses may also join this group. In the publication for the Copenhagen National Museum exhibition in 2013—*Viking*—Trelleborg in Scania is mapped together with Denmark's trelleborg ring forts, but not Borgeby (Williams *et al.* 2013). In the book *Kongens Borge*, which is a report on the project with the same name, however, Trelleborg in Scania is dismissed in seven lines, while Borgeby is shown on the map (Dobat 2013, 19). The full reason for these positions is not stated.

## What have they got in common?

As part of the ongoing project *Kongens Borge*, the first report deals with the extension of trelleborg forts to a maritime environment. If we accept a higher water level during the Viking Age, Fyrkat and Trelleborg in Zealand

would have been situated in fjords, beside river mouths. In this new light, Aggersborg proved to be in a location very near the coast next to the Limfjord. The excavations uncovered large quantities of ship rivets, which shows a shipbuilding industry in the vicinity of the three forts. If we continue to the Scanian coast we find the ring fort in Trelleborg beside a lagoon with a dyke as an outlet in the sea. This requires a one-metre higher water level. Borgeby is located by the river Lödde Å, which was navigable as far up as the village of Hög. A higher water level here too creates a lagoon east of Borgeby church. On this point – maritime extension—the sites are almost all the same. After this it is difficult to find similarities. If we consider the shape, only Aggersborg and Fyrkat, both built in one stage right from the beginning, are built as exact circles. Borgeby, built in four stages, has seen only negligible examination, so its form is impossible to establish. Trelleborg in Zealand, which was built in as many as six stages, has in its first stage an irregular circular shape, in the first fencing that was found, but in later stages it was made circular. Trelleborg in Scania, which is built in at least two stages, has an irregular compressed circular shape.

The timber construction with horizontal beams inside the embankment between the outer and inner palisades is persistent at all the investigated forts, but not in the two Scanian ones. Trelleborg in Zealand, however, was only in a secondary stage supplemented with these beams in connection with the raising of the embankment and the digging of the moat. Therefore Trelleborg in Zealand initially did not fulfil the criteria for a trelleborg, according to Nielsen's (1990) interpretation.

In the Danish debate the form of the moats is of great importance for the investigation. All the Danish fortresses have pointed-bottomed moats, while the Scanian ones have rounded-bottom. In the first stage Trelleborg in Zealand was without a moat. The dump from digging the moat can be found in the upper rampart over layering the oldest rampart (Nielsen 1990, 118).

## The Dating—the Danish fortresses

The dating of the fortresses is a complex problem. The simplest solution would be that all were built by Harald Bluetooth in 980, which also is the public perception. Nonnebacken, with an internal diameter of 120 m, we again leave aside. Aggersborg, with an internal diameter of 240 m, is located on a large older settlement. The find

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material is in a sequence from the Iron Age to modern times without any tangible stratigraphic distinctions. The fort was established in an already active cultural environment, used only partially for a short time and then again returned in to a “civil” active cultural environment. Fyrkat, 120 m in internal diameter, was also built in one stage, which is dated by dendrochronology to approximately 980 (Andersen 1984, 15). The fort was used partially, only for a short period and then abandoned. The consistent building blocks within the exactly circular courtyards, together with the other specific details, show us that these two forts in Jutland emerged from the same view and needs at the same time.

A different case is Trelleborg in Zealand, 136 m in internal diameter. After the archaeological investigation in 1934–1942, Nørlund’s report (1948) remained largely undisputed until 1990, when L-C Nielsen published a new interpretation based on stratigraphic studies and a new survey of the finds. Nørlund’s interpretation was that Trelleborg was built in one sequence. The dating was unsure in the 1940s, but Harald Bluetooth or Sweyn Forkbeard was preferably seen as the initiator.

Nielsen, however, finds a number of phases in the building process which has its beginning in a not completely circular ring fort with long-houses together with pit-houses.

This first ring fort was probably burned down before the actual trelleborg was built. The dating of the oldest ring fort is uncertain. Nielsen’s reasoning leads gently up to the 970s (Nielsen 1990, 144). Other reviewers would put the fort considerably further back in time in uncertain but interesting ways (Rasmussen 2006, 5). Later the fort was regenerated into a regular trelleborg. This also was burned and rebuilt with a long-house and pit-houses. The gates were converted into workshops. The radially positioned houses outside the rampart were built in this stage. At this stage we find a palisade set at the bottom of the moat next to the rampart. This wooden fence, together with a pillar, which supported a bridge that is likely to be later than the actual ring fortress, gave material for a dendrochronological dating in 1979. Both samples were dated to 980–981 (Bonde & Christiansen 1984, 133 ff.). This may not, however, be the date of the actual trelleborg but dates later parts of the fortress.

In the studies that have been made in connection with *Kongens Borge*, new <sup>14</sup>C datings were presented. These samples date various objects and layers around the fortresses (Dobat 2013). Of the ten samples six are dated before Harald Bluetooth’s days.

### The Scanian fortresses

This fortresses are sometimes described as trelleborg forts but usually not. Borgeby, which is  $\geq 135$  m in internal diameter, has been examined on some occasions. The pioneering investigation was in 1998 when Fredrik Svanberg and Bengt Söderberg made a cut through the

rampart. The surface under the rampart showed signs that a settlement had burned before the fortress was built. In the first stage it was built as an earth/turf rampart with a moat with rounded bottom, 2 m outside the rampart. In phase 2 the embankment was built higher and wider. The berm was widened to 11 m and the moat became 7 m wide. Gradually up to stage 4 the rampart became higher and wider and at this stage there was also a rear embankment front of wood facing the courtyard (Svanberg & Söderberg 1999).

A larger area was dug within the south-east quadrant in 2008. No signs of regulated blocks of houses could be seen. The primary settlement, pre-dating the ring fort, was observed in the form of post-holes and pit-houses. But no one was sure. This might also be remains from the time of the ring fort (pers. comm. Bengt Söderberg). No Fyrkat houses were found, nor did there seem to be either residences or barracks.

The datings are few and uncertain. The only thing that they shows is activity during Iron Age. Inside the ramparts is found a gold smithy where jewellery in Hiddensee style was produced. The objects are unreported and lost (Svanberg & Söderberg 1999, 13 f.).

A unique feature of Borgeby is that it continued to operate as a fortress when all the others were abandoned. Visitors to Borgeby even today understand that it is a castle.

Finally, we have Trelleborg in the city of Trelleborg in Scania with an internal diameter of 125 m. It was examined in 1988–1991 (Jacobsson 1999). The remains of the ring fort were surprisingly undamaged by the industry that had occupied the plot. No timber was preserved. The material that could be sampled for dating was carbon and humus from trenches for palisades, pit-houses, post-holes and the moat.

In the youngest deposit layers, through which the ring forts moat was dug, 1055 fragments of domestic AIV sherds and 60 fragments of western Slavonic Baltic ware, such as Fresendorf, Feltberg and Teterow ware, were found. The Baltic ware shows a clear similarity to ceramics from Wollin in the period 775–800. Also Frisian tin-decorated Tatinger ware from the same time was found. The remains of the settlement, which had its most intense period around 800, are interpreted as showing that Slavonic people settled in the area and made their traditional pottery—all according to Jacobsson’s report (1999).

According to the original interpretation, in the mid eleventh century this culture and settlement layer was suddenly covered with a humus layer up to 0.7 m thick, generated by cultivation, containing highly fragmented pottery and small iron fragments. A pastoral serenity have descended on the place.

But just as suddenly the site lost its peacefulness with the erection of the ring fort. On top of the cultivation layer the ring wall was built, while its palisade and moat were

excavated through the cultivation layer and down into the older occupation layer. The fortress in its first stage consisted of an earthen embankment with an outward-leaning. All surrounded by a moat with a rounded bottom.

In the second stage, the embankment was increased and broadened. Vertical planks supported the embankment, and to support these planks there was an outward-leaning wooden escarp. The four old gates were maintained and attached together with the new embankment front. In none of these stages have cross-streets or regulated blocks been found within the embankment. No residence or barracks were found, just a large circular area as in Borgeby.

The first stage of the castle is supposed to have been built at the beginning of the tenth century and the second stage in the second half of the century, during the traditional “trelleborg age”.

This was a difficult dense chronological sequence to fit in, from the settlement around 800 with elements of trade and a foreign population, with intense continuity up to 900, and then the thick cultivation layer starting to accumulate. The accumulation of soil was assumed to be interrupted in the first half of the tenth century when the castle was founded, and rebuilt half a century later.

These datings were called into question by M. B. Olesen, who in *Kuml* 2000 published a review of the 28 <sup>14</sup>C analyses, the stratigraphy and the finds, which had formed the basis for dating the fortress (91 ff.). His thesis was that the fortress had no similarity to the Danish trelleborg forts, as established by his investigation. The dating possibilities are deemed poor when artefacts and stratigraphic chronology are missing. After a thorough review he shows that the first stage of the fortress was probably to be in the last part of the ninth century and the second stage soon afterwards (Olesen 2000, 103ff.). The Frisian ring forts are proposed as models as they are located in the same period

### Archaeological hinterland and local aristocracy

#### *Trelleborg in Scania – a training field in management*

The settlement that became the city of Trelleborg was founded along the seafront. The settlement had a great spread with pit-houses in the eighth and ninth centuries. It decreased in intensity and disappeared at the beginning of the tenth century when the ring fort was built in the coastal area. The fortress was abandoned around AD 1000, at the same time as a *köpinge* village was established east of the present town area. Sporadic seasonal commerce took place on the beach ridge. In the thirteenth century the town was established on this site (Jacobsson 2003, 191 ff.).

Parallel to the settlement by the shore there was a residential area, dated to the period 700–1000, at Västervång, 2 km in land. By excavations in the southern part of this area was found a normal village settlement with ordinary long-houses, while in the northern area there were 16 Viking

Age long-houses, some of which had a length of up to 50 m (Björk *et al.* 2009). The report compared the houses with hall buildings at the huge Viking Age residential farm at Järrestad, and parallels to Uppåkra were cited. The houses had bowed walls, three aisles with a large central room (hall), of the type known as Fyrkat houses.

The report’s total picture of the settlement is that in no respect does it show anything exclusive (Björk *et al.* 2009, 34 ff.). In contrast to this overall picture, the houses seem so exclusive that they loudly proclaim their special position among the other houses in the area.

It is clear that the establishment of the residential farm and village was synchronous with the emergence of the pit-house settlement by the shore. The houses at Västervång represented what is described as “three residential farms on the same plot”, but it is more likely that it is a residential farm of a size seldom seen. According to the <sup>14</sup>C dating, it disappeared around AD 1000. In the same stage a *köpinge* village arose as a preurban modernity. Someone in the dynasty of the great farm stayed and built a fortress in Svenstorp a few hundred metres west of the former hall buildings. The fortress was examined by Prof. E. Cinthio in 1956 and dated to the eleventh century according to the artefacts (LUHM 30750). The dating seems probable. This is a unique early fortress in Scania.

The ring fort is 1.5 km away from the residential manor, by the sea, and at half the distance is a grave-field. Over the years, 80 graves were found. It was pointed out by the investigating archaeologists that the grave-field has nothing to do with a marketplace or exclusive groups (Björk *et al.* 2009, 38 f.). But still we find signs of exclusivity among the graves.

Two of the buried men have teeth modified with filed furrows on the labial surface (Arcini & Jacobsson 2008). The filed teeth phenomenon has been known for a long time, and there are currently about 80 known male individuals from Birka, Sigtuna, Bollstanäs, Öland and Scania. Gotland has the largest number but Denmark only four (Kjellström 2014; Arcini 2005).

The men with teeth furrows are found in rich graves, together with their weapons, in peripheral “poor parts” of cemeteries or killed and sacrificed in aristocratic graves. Sometimes they are cremated and secondary, in connection with mortuary ritual, entombed in the aristocrat’s skeleton grave. Some of them have been involved in fights with sharp weapons.

The custom of being accompanied by a helper to the other side is well known in contemporary sources (Samuelsson 2001). The filed teeth may be a sign of a battle-trained slave—an exclusivity. We have found an aristocratic environment in Trelleborg, and we will return later to the question of slaves.

***Borgeby, Löddeköpinge and the Thott family***

In the vicinity of Borgeby there are a number of features that can be related to the fortress, just as in Trelleborg. In the late eighth century, there was a scattered pit-house settlement (Svanberg & Söderberg 2000, 310 ff.). East of Borgeby, north of the Kävlinge River at Löddeköpinge, a trading place, encircled by a semicircular wall by the river bank, was settled. Up the river from the trading place, on the northern bank, a pit-houses settlement extended. Also south of the river, adjacent to Borgeby, areas with pit-house spread widely. Here too, there is the middle Slavonic ware with types like Feltberg and Fresendorf, followed by the later Baltic ware.

To find an aristocratic manor, as in Trelleborg we have to go to the village of Hög, 2 km up river from Borgeby. The village seems to have been the ancient homeland of the Thott clan, with a *Capitolo Curia* known from written evidence, and some exclusive Romanesque tombstones garnish the cemetery. The oldest known Thott was buried in Hög in the twelfth century (Thott 1983, 24). A Vendel period ship grave is also found in the vicinity (Strömberg 1961 I, 62).

The Thott family stands out for the first time when a member signs himself as being of Löddeköpinge at the end of the thirteenth century. The family chronicle writes about many generations of Thott people populating a domain from Trolleån and the Ringsjö area down to Öresund (Thott 1983; Raneke 1982, 92 ff.). What is unique is that the churches of Hög, Barsebäck, Hofterup and, to a certain extent, Löddeköpinge have walls built of flintstone, which is an English characteristic. Hofterup also exhibits a number of other English criteria. These traits are generally interpreted as early—maybe eleventh-century. This can be a sign of a common set of values, relationship and accountability within a domain which subsequently was divided up by inheritance and marriage. In central Sweden we find runic texts that tell us about the man who took the whole domain from the beginning. “The Jarlabanke that took the Täby and the whole hundred.” Such messages are absent from Scania, and our knowledge of the many small kingdoms which were merged in the tenth and eleventh centuries is non-existent.

A grave-field like the one in Trelleborg in Scania is missing at Borgeby castle, but there are indications of a skeleton grave-field in the village of Löddeköpinge. However, there is a large cemetery with 2,500 skeletons from a period around 900–1100 right opposite Borgeby, on the northern river bank (Cinthio 1980; Anglert and Jansson 2001). The stave church that was built on this site is second largest in the province.

In the church there are two patrons’ graves – a man and a woman. One of them might belong to the heirs of the Hög dynasty that occupied a subdivided part of the old domain. Löddeköpinge may have been a burial site for the region

around the eleventh century, and in this respect replaced Borgeby church.

Finally, the similarity to Trelleborg can also be found in the *köpinge* village. Here the element of Baltic ware significantly increases around 900 and a restructuring of Löddeköpinge can be seen in this century. In the eleventh century a possible *Curia Principalis* may have been built by the present church (Svanberg & Söderberg 2000, 310 ff.). Among the graves here is a coffin of riveted ship planks (Classon 1986). This habit went out of time before 1100, according to what is known from Lund (pers. comm. Maria Cinthio).

There might have been several churches with different functions in Löddeköpinge/Borgeby simultaneously, and clearly the Thott family was involved.

The primary function of the ring fort at Borgeby is not yet established, nor its ownership. It is only after 1040 that we can be sure the King owned the castle when Sven Estridsen struck coins there. Royal ownership ceased in the twelfth century when the Archbishop became the owner (Norvin 1932, 30).

**Eastern and western Denmark**

A boundary ran between the islands of Zealand and Funen during the late Viking Age. West of the border were the domains of the royal family—Jelling dynasty. East Denmark, however, was characterized by a conglomerate of dynastic domains. The Jelling kings came to East Denmark during the late Viking Age and established *kungalev* (royal estates) for control and organization. This form of organization did not exist in the West, where we find the families’ private estates, while these are almost absent in East Denmark (Andrén 1983, 31ff.). Not until around AD 1000 did the Jelling kings exert influence over south-west Scania, as displayed by the post Jelling runic stones and tribute treasures (Randsborg 1980, 27).

The great manors of the petty kings’ appears in a different contexts but their domains are diffuse. Already in 1951 Lauritz Weibull brought up the idea that it was great chieftains who had built the trelleborg fortresses (1951), and in 1957 Johan Larsen continued along this line. (Larsen 1957, 56).

At both Borgeby and Trelleborg in Scania there was a local dynasty and Trelleborg in Zealand is situated in an area where the Hvide dynasty had extensive ownership. These three fortresses, in addition to their locations outside the royal sphere, had a common denominator in that they seem to be older than the time of Harald Bluetooth. Trelleborg in Scania goes back to the ninth century. Then follows Trelleborg in Zealand and Borgeby, both of uncertain age. Trelleborg in Scania was the oldest and built with a round-bottomed moat, just like the oldest ditch of Dannevirke from AD 737 (Andersen 1977, 24 ff.). The form of the ditch shows a typological change towards the pointed bottoms

like the one at Kovirke. A further similarity between the three East Danish forts is that both Trelleborg in Scania and Trelleborg in Zealand in their first stage formed an irregular circle, and all three were rebuilt and modified twice or more. All three forts also show a continuity before and/or after Harald Bluetooth's trelleborg age.

### Trälborgar – Slave forts

In Nørlund's publication about Trelleborg in Zealand there is a chapter the name Trelleborg by Gunnar Knudsen (Nørlund 1948, 189 ff.; Knudsen 1948). The conclusion of his work is that it can be divided into two parts: *borg* (fortress) and *trell* (slave) (Nørlund 1948, 212). Knudsen points out that it is not possible to ignore the meaning of *trell* as servant/slave.

However, scholars have managed to ignore this, as slave research has not been *comme il faut* (Ödman 2013, 150 ff.). By modern methods it is now possible to see the slaves in their shackles, not to speak of the pottery they manufactured in most households. Men, women and children from foreign regions have been identified in the graves which were previously considered to hold Haralds warriors (Price *et al.* 2011, 476 ff.). The amount of Baltic ware in the forts has been awkward in the discussion of the extension of the forts to the campaigns in England. Not until Mats Roslund began publishing his works about Baltic ware it was noted that this can be linked to a big resident captive population. (Roslund 2001 and other titles; Zachrisson in press).

Slaves were one of the most important trading goods. In the vicinity of Borgeby and Trelleborg in Scania we see initially an incipient long-distance trade. In Trelleborg in Scania the long-distance trade, according to the report, was interrupted by a period of agricultural activities.

In a different context, I have written about the presumed slave trading station on the island of Mölleholmen by Ystad (Ödman 2013). Here Slavonic people, in the period 950–1050, lived in an area of 1500 m<sup>2</sup>. A 0.4 m thick culture layer with a lot of very fragmented and trampled Baltic ware was found (Kelm 2000). The very fast-rising layer at Trelleborg in Scania is a problem. It is conceivable, however, that before the trelleborg was built there was an activity area, as at Mölleholmen, where many people moved around, trampling and fragmenting potsherds in a limited space.

This would mean that there was no interruption in trade at Trelleborg in Scania, and the slave trade may have been a part of the import, which could explain the name of the fortress. Trelleborg in Scania is maybe the oldest and may have given its name to some of the later forts

A Trelleborg was not built to defend itself against external attackers. Through experiments at the reconstructed Trelleborg in Scania it has been proved that a man can run up the sloping escarp. My view is that it was instead

built to keep people trapped inside a “slave-fort”, as on the island of Mölleholmen in Ellestad lake where the farm of Trollsborg is located on the beach.

The dynasties in Scania, influenced by Frisian and Slavonic ring forts, had possibly built private fortresses to use in their trade in slaves and other goods. The market place was established at a distance from the residences. On Öland dynasties from the Migration Period up to the Middle Ages built their stone ring forts. Royal control can first be envisaged there in the thirteenth century. This may also have been the case in Scania. The greater the chieftain, the larger the fortress, the more the trade. This could be the explanation for all the hypothetical Scanian ring forts proposed in recent years (Rosborn 2004).

At end of the tenth century the West Danish fortresses were built, of megalomaniac size and only equipped and used to a small degree. Was it a bubble like the Dutch tulip mania? They were inspired by the older fortresses, but never acquired the function for which they were planned.

After the Scanian royal extension the dynasties remained within their domains as vassals. The nobility in Trelleborg in Scania is unknown, but in the vicinity of Borgeby, Denmark's oldest still living aristocratic family—Thott—continued to reside for a long time. Were these dynasties the developers of the East Danish trelleborg forts at a time when royal control had not yet reached their domains?

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