

Trelleborg fortresses near Slagelse



The Trelleborg fortresses near Slagelse in Odense is characterised by having a circular rampart with a moat and four roofed gates. The fortresses have a severely geometrical street system, the inner area being divided into squares, each with four longhouses arranged in a quadrangle. The architecture of all four fortresses is uniform and strictly symmetrical, as clearly illustrated by the circular shape of the fortifications and the location of the gates at the four points of the compass - apparently without regard to the terrain.

The Trelleborg fortress was built around 980. But it probably did not last very long, perhaps only 10 to 20 years. It has traditionally been linked to Harald Bluetooth's efforts to unify Denmark and Norway and make the Danes Christian in accordance with his runic stone proclamation. Another interpretation links the fortress to the conquest of England and therefore to Harald Bluetooth's son, Sweyn Forkbeard. Whatever the case, the fortresses must be viewed as a monumental and military manifestation of the central power of the late Viking era.

Today, the visible elements are the fortifications, which include the ring fortress and the related defences and a perimeter fort and moat. The original ramparts consisted of a complex oak-wood structure with an inner skeleton and outer lathing. As any buildings on the parapet and above the gates can only be reconstructed on a hypothetical basis, the fortresses are only visible in the landscape today in the form of reconstructed embankments without woodwork or moats. In addition, reconstructions of the longhouses traceable in the fortress have been built. The landscapes surrounding the fortress clearly demonstrate the strategic location of the fortress and the military reasons for building them at what must be described as Viking era junctions.

The ring fortresses, Trelleborg, Aggersborg and Fyrkat, represent the most prominent archaeological evidence of the monumental defences of the Viking era in present-day Denmark. No contemporary counterparts exist in either the Nordic countries or Europe. The fortresses should probably be viewed in relation to the unification of Denmark and Norway referred to on the large runic stone in Jelling and therefore as part of the lengthy process that resulted in the integration of the Nordic countries into the European community of culture and the establishment of the Scandinavian states.

No similar fortresses from the Viking era exist. Therefore, it is hardly possible to tell what inspired the construction of the Trelleborg fortresses. However, they must be considered in a historical context that includes the Jelling burial mounds. Jelling should be considered because the construction of the Trelleborg fortresses is traditionally ascribed to Harald Bluetooth, who buried his parents in Jelling and erected a runic stone for them describing his own achievement of consolidating the realm.

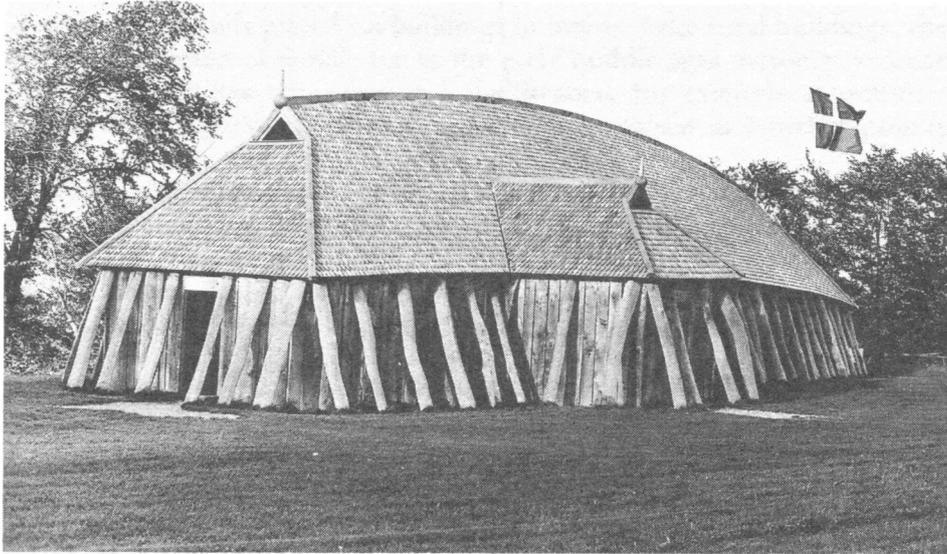


Fig. 7.10 The 'Trelleborg' type of house carried the weight of the roof on the walls. Oblique buttress timbers were needed to counteract the thrust of the roof. This is a reconstruction of a building at Fyrkat, Denmark (Photo Björn Ambrosiani)