

# 1. UNCOVERING THE FORTRESS

## A European sensation

The small team of archaeologists digging on the headland to the west of Slagelse had been on the job for several weeks when the leader of the excavation, Poul Nørlund, had a flash of inspiration. Many years later, one of the young students assisting on the dig recalled that morning in the autumn of 1935.

Nørlund had arrived at the excavation later than usual but unusually impatient and agitated. He had come to the sudden realisation only the previous night that there was a system behind all the large and small trenches and holes they had found under the ploughed earth at Trelleborg. In the centre of the ancient earthworks, he gathered the excavation team together to test his theory.

As the archaeologists' spades and shovels slowly removed the dark topsoil, they began to reveal traces of decayed, buried planks and posts, appearing as dark spots in the light, clayey underground. The team recognised among these traces of the massive posts which had once supported the roofs of large wooden buildings. Over the past month they had uncovered several such markings.

In the centre of the fortress, Nørlund began to point out what he expected they'd find: "This will be the corner of a house ... and another one there". Shortly after, traces appeared exactly as he had described. By the time the team broke for lunch, it was clear that the night's epiphany had been confirmed. The halls, nearly 30 metres long, had been arranged in groups of four and set out in an exact square while a geometric network of roads neatly and precisely divided the entire site into four equally large parts - each containing four houses. Circular ramparts surrounded the whole complex, with gates positioned perpendicularly to

face roughly towards the cardinal directions. “Now,” exclaimed Nørlund, “we call in the world press.”

It was the local newspaper, *Sorø Amts-Tidende* [Sorø County Newspaper], which that afternoon stood in for the world press at Trelleborg. A few days earlier, Nørlund had described the site to the same paper as a trading post for travelling merchants. But now everything had changed: “I am now inclined to consider the whole thing a military complex from the Viking Age ... it is surprisingly reminiscent of a Roman legion’s camp, although any connection is unlikely. It’s impossible to say where the vikings learnt to build such a barracks.”

Far from the chaotic merchant town he’d originally envisioned, this carefully planned fort complex was difficult to reconcile with the familiar idea of bold, unruly vikings known from European chronicles and Icelandic sagas. “As an academic discovery, it is a European sensation,” Nørlund declared. The news spread quickly across the country’s newspapers that same day, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1935.

## The riddle of the ring fortresses

The Trelleborg ring fortress is one of the largest and most remarkable historical monuments still standing in Scandinavia (Fig. 1.1). A circular rampart, 170 metres in outer diameter, with four gates aligned at the end of perpendicular roads, surrounds a structure comprising four courtyard quadrants. Each of these contains four large wooden buildings along with various smaller ones, all meticulously arranged with geometric precision.

When the fortress was constructed towards the end of the tenth century, it resembled nothing the people of Zealand had seen before. If they had any experience with fortifications, these would have been entrenchments which followed the natural contours of the landscape and created defensive positions on hilltops or wetlands. Perhaps those who had travelled to Western Europe or to the Slavic regions south of the

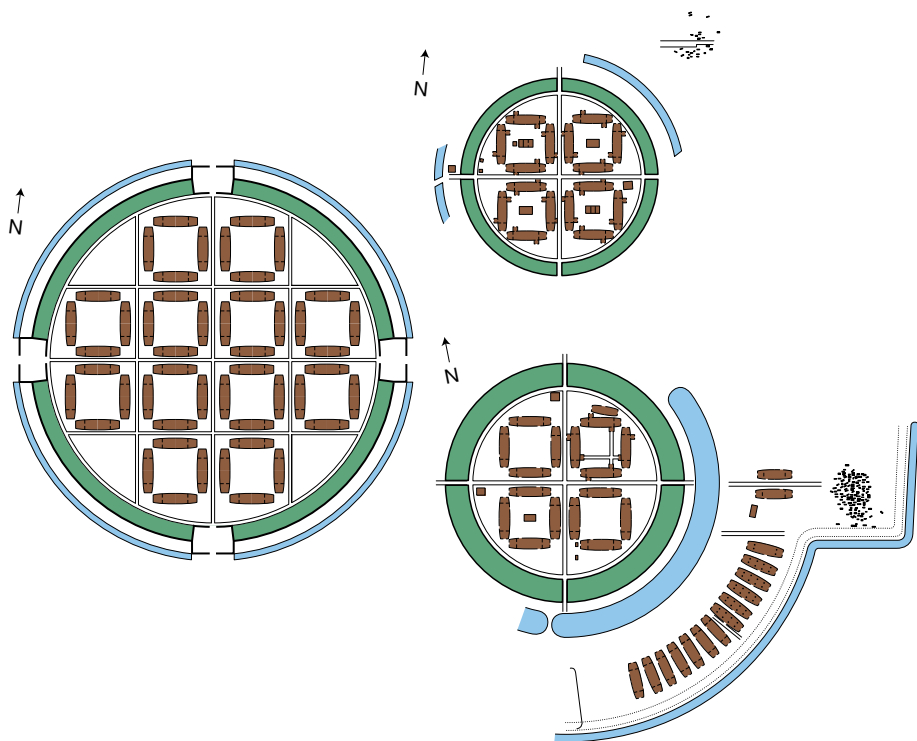


Fig. 1.1 Layout of the geometric ring fortresses from the Viking Age: Aggersborg (left), Fyrkat (top right) and Trelleborg (bottom right). The layouts of the fortresses at Nonnebakken and Borgring are only partially known. The same is true of the structure at Borgeby in West Scania, which was probably constructed at the same time as the fortresses in Denmark but has not been fully excavated. A seventh ring fortress, traces of which have been found in the town of Trelleborg in South Scania, features a somewhat different layout with, perhaps, a distinctive history.

Baltic Sea had seen large fortresses built, like Trelleborg, with heavy timber and earthen ramparts. But not a monument like this one, where all the defences, buildings and roads were arranged according to strict geometric principles, laid out as though following an architectural plan (Fig. 1.2).



Fig. 1.2 From the air, the geometric patterns of Trelleborg appear as a riddle in the landscape. Shown here is the ring fortress with the outer fortress in the foreground and the coast of the Great Belt in the far west.

Trelleborg was the first of a series of similar fortresses later discovered in Denmark, including Aggersborg and Fyrkat in Jutland and Nonnebakken on Funen, all found within the space of a few years in the 1940s and 1950s. Two additional ring fortresses were later discovered in Scania. Traces of the first of these showed up in the centre of the town of Trelleborg in the 1980s and it remains the subject of debate due to its somewhat different design. The second, discovered at the castle of Borgeby, northwest of Lund, in the 1990s, has yet to be properly investigated. Finally, Borgring, west of Køge in Denmark, was found as recently as 2014.

The fortresses are sometimes referred to as trelleborgs, named after the first discovery, or more recently as borgrings after the most recent find. The most common term – *ringborge*, i.e. ring fortresses – is not particularly precise, as round rampart structures were found in many sizes and shapes in the Viking Age as well as before and after this period. Some prefer to call them circular fortresses, referring to the defining feature first seen at Trelleborg, namely the meticulous arrangement with circular ramparts. That's an excellent, although rather technical, term. It's most accurate to call them geometric ring fortresses.

We know today that the fortresses were built within a short period of time in the latter half of the tenth century. Each was an impressive, large-scale complex such as had not previously been seen in this part of the world. What's most surprising, however, is the fact that the fortresses were arranged as a network of fortifications that spanned most of Viking-Age Denmark. How this network was created and its purpose remain the subject of scholarly debate.

The great ring fortresses of the Viking Age – trelleborgs, circular fortresses, geometric ring fortresses – pose a real archaeological riddle. Many have been fascinated by these large and remarkable fortresses, with several books even being written about their connection with extraterrestrials or sacral mysteries. It's hardly unusual for monuments such as the pyramids or crusader castles to take on a life of their own in the popular imagination or feed such fantastic ideas, but it's less common for old rampart structures to do so!

However, the true riddle of the ring fortresses doesn't lie in how they were constructed. That's not particularly difficult to explain, even if we may marvel at the input of labour required for the large earthen ramparts, the huge amounts of timber and in particular their precise arrangement. The central question is *why* and under what circumstances? The riddle of the ring fortresses lies in the story behind them.



Fig. 1.3 A cheerful Poul Nørlund chats with an assistant by the hearth in one of the large houses (House 3W), just as the fortress system was becoming clear to archaeologists. The photo was published in *Sorø Amts-Tidende* on October 3rd, 1935.

Trelleborg and the other ring fortresses are today embedded in our understanding of the Viking Age. They've been the focus of many of the discoveries and insights which, since the 1930's, have changed our perceptions of the past, a time when seafaring created new connections in Northern Europe and brought societies together in unprecedented ways. It is the story of that time which holds the secret of the ring fortresses.