CHAPTER TEN

FORTIFICATIONS AND URBANISATION

10.1. Introduction

The construction of large buildings and monuments, involving the labour of large numbers of people, has long been recognised as a mark of social organisation. Even in chiefdom societies it is assumed that there was some central accumulation and redistribution of wealth. In Sweden prior to the Folkunga Period monuments such as the Romanesque churches that sprang up all over the country required the investment of the local community around them, the socken, or of a local magnate. The same has always been assumed of Sweden’s Iron Age hillforts. The union of götar and svear under one king led some scholars to seek evidence of increasing state power in the twelfth century, particularly during the long reign of Knut Eriksson, a possible candidate for the construction of a chain of fortified coastal towers known as kastaler.

In fourteenth-century Swedish sources the words kastell, borg, hus and fäste may all refer to castles. For the purposes of this book the word castle is taken to refer to a structure with defensive features and at least one tower, with or without walls attached to it. Even within this definition a castle may have a wide variety of functions, many of them unrelated to warfare. The most obvious function is defensive: to enable the garrison, which usually served a member of the nobility, to withstand attacks by both internal and external enemies. Although some European castles are known to have offered refuge to the local population as well as their garrison and lords, no instance of this is known from medieval Sweden. Many medieval sieges resulted in a duel of endurance because of limited resources, both within the fortification and in the countryside round about; the issue was decided by who held out longest, besiegers or besieged, and starvation or disease often played as important a role as military force.

In the construction of castles in the High Middle Ages there was a heavy emphasis on defensive strength, an ability to withstand long
fortifications and urbanisation

Sieges, often with a comparatively small number of defenders. In this respect they differed from early imperial Roman forts and the circular ring-forts of late Viking-Age Denmark, which were primarily garrison sites, albeit defensible. Castles did not merely have defensive military functions, but could also act as bases for offensive action, or supply depots for friendly forces. For both defensive and offensive purposes they were usually placed in strategic locations, whether to block approach routes into a given region, to act as jumping-off points for offensive action, or to dominate a town or territory. As such the castle was as much an instrument of internal control as a defence against invaders. Because of their strength they could also provide secure centres for local administration and perhaps for valuables, but in addition functioned as symbols of the power and status of their owners. Even the construction of moats, on the face of it clearly defensive features, could become a matter of fashion rather than serving any military purpose. Town walls might fulfil the same functions as those of castles; while substantial walls might be difficult to defend, even those of stone, they enabled the inhabitants to control entry and exit, and also functioned as a symbol of the town’s stature.

Castles were not the only substantial buildings that functioned as symbols of power, as medieval kings and nobles also made use of palaces. The heyday of the palatium as a regional administrative centre, centre for the king’s itinerary and the preferred place for kings to meet with their most powerful subjects had been the Carolingian period, but by the high Middle Ages castles had taken over many of their former functions. Nevertheless, palaces continued to be built.

1 The period of occupation for the Danish ring-forts was short, and they were arguably constructed during the reign of Harald Bluetooth specifically because of the threat of German invasion (a more likely reason than as preparation for invasions of England, as none are on the coast). The forts had four gates and artefacts found within them have been almost exclusively domestic. On this basis some have drawn the conclusion that they were not intended for warfare, but this is not necessarily valid, since garrisons were engaged in peaceful pursuits for most of their existence even in forts that were clearly intended for defence. See Roesdahl 1987 pp. 136–40.

2 Such an argument has been advanced, for instance, as an important motive for the building of powerful stone walls round late imperial Roman cities, and the same no doubt applied to medieval cities. See, for instance, Millett 1990 pp. 137–42.

3 See Renoux 2002 pp. 59–72, on the development of the palatium with reference to state-building in France, and also Schieffer 2002.