The Religious Orders of Knighthood in Medieval Scandinavia: Historical and Archaeological Approaches

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In 1204, when the crusader army was standing at the gates of Constantinople, Scandinavia was still a remote part of medieval Europe. However, when the news of the fall of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade reached Scandinavia the concept of crusading was nothing new for the population. It is likely that at least some Scandinavians were in the armies that were sent from western Europe to Jerusalem during the First Crusade. Other crusading armies had probably been sent to Finland by the Swedish kings as early as the 1150s, and in 1201, only a few years before the attack on Constantinople, German crusaders started a colonizing project in what is now the Riga area in Latvia. Even the Danish kings were interested in taking part in this Baltic crusading enterprise. These Swedish, Danish and German campaigns quickly expanded the frontiers of Latin Christianity into the Baltic area.

Early on in the German crusading-campaign in the Baltic region the Order of the Sword-brothers played an important role. Religious Orders of Knighthood such as the Sword-brothers were, however, rather new elements in the religious life of early thirteenth-century Scandinavia. Even if the various Orders of Knighthood reached Scandinavia somewhat later than most of the Christian civilization they soon became important religious institutions in Scandinavian societies in the same way as they already were in the rest of western Europe. Even if the Order of the Sword-brothers probably never controlled any land of its own in Scandinavia, other and similar orders certainly did so.

5 Benninghoven, “Der Orden der Schwertbrüder.”
Fig. 1 The major houses of the religious Orders of Knighthood in medieval Scandinavia with their approximate years of foundation
1: Antvorskov (c. 1165); 2: Odense (c. 1275); 3: Horsens (c. 1350?); 4: Dueholm (c. 1370); 5: Viborg (c. 1280); 6: Ribe (c. 1310?); 7: Lund (c. 1300?); 8: Kronobäck (1479); 9: Varne (c. 1190); 10: Eskilstuna (c. 1180); 11: Stockholm (c. 1332); 12: Årsta (c. 1260?)

The first of these orders to be established in Scandinavia was the Order of St. John known generally as the Hospitalers. This order was probably given its first Scandinavian donation in Antvorskov in Denmark in the 1160s by the Danish king Valdemar the Great (see Fig. 1).7 They later spread to Sweden in the period 1170–85 when they were given land in the city of Eskilstuna.8 During the 1190s Varne, the first and only commandery in Norway, was donated to the order.9

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
The later part of the twelfth century was, however, a time of great political turbulence in the various Scandinavian countries. But, although many of the leading Scandinavian families were fighting against each other in this period, these same families also contributed to the establishment of the Order of St. John in the region. By giving land to the Order it was possible for the leading aristocracy in Scandinavia to acquire a powerful ally in the ongoing conflicts. It is, however, a difficult task to prove that there were specific political intentions behind the first donations to the Hospitaller in Scandinavia.

The political situation in Scandinavia was still unstable when the next Order of Knighthood, the Teutonic Order, reached the region. This group was probably given its first Scandinavian donations in Sweden in the period 1260–1308. In 1308 a kontur of the Teutonic Order is mentioned in Årsta, a konturi on the Swedish east coast, but it is likely that by then the brothers had already been active in the area for some time.

The only Scandinavian country where the Teutonic Order had land in the Middle Ages was probably Sweden. The reason for this is that perhaps amongst the Scandinavian countries, it was Sweden that had the closest contact with the Baltic Sea. The Baltic region became, after all, the Teutonic Order’s main area of interest when the Grand Master moved to Marienburg in 1309. The establishment of the Teutonic Order in Sweden was, as seems to have been the case with the Order of St. John, the result of donations from different noble families with specific political intentions. According to Erikskrönikan, a Swedish medieval source of great importance, the Swedish nobleman Karl Ulfsson died in the battle of Durben in 1260 in the service of the Order. Ulfsson belonged to the elite in the country and was related to the powerful jarl Birger, the actual leader of Sweden in these years. Birgitta Eimer has also shown that the noble family Ångel seems to have had much interest in the Order from about the 1260s onwards and according to her it is likely that at least some individuals from this family were members of the brethren.

The early history of the Order of St. John and the Teutonic Order in Scandinavia is, however, filled with problems. Few written sources from the earliest period still survive, since much of the medieval documentation concerning the two groups was destroyed shortly after the Reformation. The history of these two Orders in the region must therefore be studied from both a historical and an archaeological

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11 Birgitta Eimer, Gotland unter den Deutschen Orden und die Konturei Schweden zu Årsta (Innsbruck, 1966), pp. 53–118.
15 Eimer, Gotland, 1966, pp. 53–118.
perspective to help redress this dearth of material. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to present the archaeological material from the Scandinavian houses of the Orders of Knighthood as it is known today and to point out some areas for further studies.

In all the Scandinavian countries archaeological artefacts from sites that once belonged to the Orders have been preserved in various museums. Although so far mainly used in rather limited and local studies, this archaeological material, if used together with the written sources, offers a far greater potential since archaeological information can sometimes fill the gaps in the written sources, and vice versa. The archaeological material must nonetheless be used with great care. One major methodological problem is that most artefacts from the houses of the Orders of Knighthood are local products that do not differ from those found in other religious houses in the region concerned. Some Scandinavian archaeologists have even claimed that it would be almost impossible to separate archaeological material from the Orders of Knighthood from other archaeological material. This is not always the case, however, since it is actually possible to identify artefacts such as coins from the Teutonic state, seals from the various Orders and building-features with symbols that are specific to the different groups.¹⁶

During the 1960s the Swedish archaeologist Sune Zachrisson undertook excavations in the medieval building complex that once belonged to the Order of St. John in the central parts of the city of Eskilstuna.¹⁹ Most of the former commandery had actually been destroyed shortly after the Reformation when the sons of king Gustav Vasa erected a new castle on the site, however, it was still possible for Zachrisson to reconstruct the plan of the most central part of the site (see Fig. 2).²⁰ This part of the complex had been built around a squared yard with the chapel in the north and priory buildings on the southern and eastern sides. There were no traces of the west wing, but it is likely that there was some kind of building on this side as well.

The excavation in the chapel with its thick walls, its many altar-foundations and its numerous graves revealed further information about the commandery. One important discovery was that the chapel seemed to have had at least three different

²⁰ Ibid., Planach III.
Fig. 2  The plan of the commandery in Eskilstuna. Walls from the Romanesque chapel, the commandery of the Order of St. John and the sixteenth-century castle are marked. Based on Zachrisson, 1963

building phases. From a small Romanesque chapel dating from the twelfth century, it had gradually expanded to a large Gothic commandery church.\textsuperscript{21} The second half of the fourteenth century and the fifteenth century seems to have been a period of particularly intensive building activity.\textsuperscript{22} Finds from inside the chapel consisted of different bricks from the vaults, items from the graves and fragments of medieval gravestones.\textsuperscript{23} Inside as well as outside the chapel a large number of graves were discovered, representing at least four hundred years of burial activity. Some of the skeletons in these graves were of particular interest since it was possible to identify them on account of personal seals that were found in the graves together with the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 68.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., pp. 65–70.
bones. The most famous individual to be identified in this way was a former donor to the commandery named Hemming Hatt Pedersen. Hemming’s life has been studied by modern historians and we know today that he died in the commandery in Eskilstuna as a donati in about 1475.

Coins and pottery are other examples of artefacts from the excavations in Eskilstuna. Unfortunately these have not yet been subjected to detailed study, but since the excavation was carried out with great care most artefacts can still be tied to different contexts. One way of using these items would be to establish their places of origin and distinguish between local and imported artefacts. This may give an indication of the contact network of the commandery. Another way of using the material would be to identify and date different periods of greater building activity. Enlargements or alterations of the commandery could indicate periods of comparative wealth in the Scandinavian branch of the Order of St. John or in the institution as such. This last point is of particular interest since similar archaeological material is available from the other Scandinavian houses that once belonged to the Order, so this material can therefore be used in a comparative study.

The second commandery in Sweden that belonged to the Order of St. John during the Middle Ages was Kronobäck on the east coast. This commandery was given to the Order in 1479. Excavations in the complex were carried out by the archaeologist Nils Lagerholm in the 1940s (see Fig. 3). They were, however, mainly concentrated on the chapel, the best preserved part of the complex, and no traces from the other buildings were ever identified, although it is likely that the living-quarters were situated to the south of the chapel. Inside the church was a lot of stone rubble from the vaults that had collapsed shortly after the Reformation. Lagerholm removed all this material in order to clear the interior of the chapel. He also identified and dated different building phases in the walls of the chapel and collected a large number of smaller artefacts such as pieces of pottery, coins and liturgical items from the cultural layers inside the church. This material can therefore be used in a similar way to the material from Eskilstuna.

Unfortunately Lagerholm was not as careful during his excavations in Kronobäck as Zachrisson would be in Eskilstuna some twenty years later. This makes it a lot more complicated to work with the archaeological material from Kronobäck since few artefacts can be tied to specific cultural layers. We simply have to trust that Lagerholm’s interpretations of the layers inside the chapel are correct.

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24 ibid., p. 69.
26 Johan Peringskjölds Diplomatarium, 18, letter dated 26 July 1480.
27 Nils Lagerholm, “Johansiterordens.”
28 ibid., p. 31.
29 ibid., pp. 50–62.
and that he is right in saying that the building activity in the fifteenth century was especially extensive. Further studies of the standing walls can hopefully confirm this picture.

Prompted by construction work on the former graveyard east of the chapel, further excavations were carried out at Kronobäck in the 1950s. During these investigations some late-medieval skeletons were found, most of which showed signs of recovering from severe war injuries. These individuals must have lived for some weeks after the injuries were inflicted, so it is likely that they had been treated in the commandery for some time before finally dying from infections. If this is the case, the skeletons can hopefully tell us something about the medical skills that existed among the Order of St. John, if studied in more detail by a pathologist.

Excavations have also been carried out in the many Danish commanderies that once belonged to the Order of St. John. From Antvorskov, the headquarters of the Order in the province of Dacia, archaeological investigations between 1887 and 1960 have provided us with much useful information about this large complex. These excavations have now made it possible to reconstruct the commandery and to say something about the functions of the various buildings (see Fig. 4). A more recent excavation was carried out on the site in 1995 by the Danish archaeologist

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30 Ibid., pp. 65–66.
31 _The Kronobäck Infirmary Church_, Länstyrelsen i Kalmar, 1999 (Kalmar, 1999), p. 4.
32 Ibid.
33 Excavations c. 1887–1960 by Magnus Petersén, Terje Schou, H. H. Schou, C. M. Smidt, Poul Nørlund, Mogens Clemmensen and Mogens Brahde. This material is mostly unpublished, but plans, artefacts and documentation from the excavations can be found at the Nationalmuseum in Copenhagen.
The commandery at Antvorskov in the eighteenth century. Reconstruction in Danmarks Ruiner, 1991

Kirstin Eliaisen. This excavation is important since it is the only modern investigation on the site. Eliaisen has, for instance, used a modern contextual digging method where the artefacts have been linked to the various occupation layers right from the start.

From the former commandery in Ribe there exists also much archaeological material from two excavations in the 1990s, but this material has so far only been published in local archaeological reports. In the area of the former commandery in

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Odense some small-scale excavations were carried out in the 1990s and in Dueholm a number of such investigations have been made since the 1920s. Even the commandery in Viborg has been the subject of some smaller archaeological excavations. Taking all these investigations into account, there now exists enough archaeological material for a larger study of the Scandinavian commanderies. In total, the material has good potential and is now being assessed to determine how it can be used in such a study.

Further information can be obtained by using the various methods that modern archaeology has at its disposal. Demolition-layers and standing walls from reliably dated archaeological contexts, together with detailed studies of the artefacts, can be used to identify periods of more intensive building activity in the various houses. Modern archaeological dating methods, such as dendrochronology, C14 dating and luminescence dating, can be used on both artefacts and standing structures to provide results that can be used in local chronologies for the various sites. All this has so far only been done to a very limited extent.

Årsta, the medieval headquarters of the Teutonic Order on the Swedish mainland, was probably very different from the commanderies that belonged to the Order of St. John. To begin with, Årsta was not situated inside or near a city. Furthermore, the site probably did not have typical convent-buildings, but rather a cluster of different houses. This was at least the situation in the seventeenth century when the complex was documented in a picture by the Swedish architect and artist Erik Dahlberg (see Fig. 5). The site seems to have been a larger farm in the countryside rather than a traditional commandery complex. It is not certain when the Teutonic Order came in possession of the site, but there must have been at least some kind of representation in the farm in 1308 when a komtur of the Order is mentioned for the first time.

On account of the economic and administrative problems inside the Teutonic Order that followed its defeat at Tannenberg in 1410, all the Order’s land in Sweden

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was sold in 1467. The building complex itself was finally destroyed in a fire in the 1680s. The site has never been excavated and has therefore a good archaeological potential. An excavation at Årsta, applying modern archaeological standards, can therefore teach us more about the conditions inside the Teutonic Order during the period when it operated as a military organization in the Baltic area. A small-scale excavation on the site is therefore planned to begin in July 2005. When more is known about Årsta it can be compared with similar places in the Baltic region.

While the early history of the Order of St. John and the Teutonic Order in Scandinavia has many problems, the sources from the Later Middle Ages are usually a lot more informative. There exist numerous historical and archaeological sources dating from the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, the period shortly before the Reformation, that concern the history of the two Orders. This material is suitable for an international comparative study in which economic, political and religious changes inside the two institutions during the Later Middle

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Ages can be studied. The economic and religious situation within the Scandinavian branches of the two groups during that period has so far mainly been considered from a local historical perspective.

In a work by the Danish researcher Thomas Hatt Olsen from 1961, founded on information that he found in the archives of the Order of St. John on Malta, the economic situation in the province of Dacia has been studied on the basis of factors such as the ability to pay the responses and other taxes to the priory on Rhodes between the years 1310 and 1522. Hatt Olsen identified several shorter periods of improving, as well as declining, economy in the Scandinavian branch of the Order. One of his most important conclusions was that the Order of St. John often seems to have had extensive economic problems in the province of Dacia until the later part of the fifteenth century.

A similar picture can be seen in a 1997 study by Magnus Wahlberg, in which he identified economic changes in the commandery of Eskilstuna in the Later Middle Ages on the basis of the increasing number of new donations given to the house in this period. Wahlberg also discussed the commandery's increasing ability to pay for new land in the region in these years. Both these factors are seen as indications of an improved economic situation in the commandery from the end of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth century. This period of better economic conditions for the Order of St. John in Eskilstuna lasted, according to Wahlberg, until the Reformation finally led to the dissolution, in the 1520s, 1530s and 1540s, of all Catholic institutions in Scandinavia. It is therefore tempting to see the increased building activity from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as indicated by the archaeological material, as a result of the better economic conditions in the province in these years. Unfortunately there does not yet exist any similar study for the Scandinavian branch of the Teutonic Order that left Sweden in 1467.

Another important factor that must be considered when discussing economic changes inside the Orders of Knighthood during the later Middle Ages is that these institutions still were closely associated with the crusading movement. In times of resistance against new crusades and new taxes for these campaigns, criticism was also put forward concerning the Orders of Knighthood. This is a question that Helen Nicholson has dealt with in one of her works on the Orders of Knighthood. During periods when the Military Orders became less popular the number of new donations often went down. This had effects on the economic situations of the different organizations on an international, as well as a more local, level. By adding this economic-historical analysis to the information that we have from the

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44 Ibid., pp. 316-30.
45 Wahlberg, Johanniterordens forn i Sverige, pp. 16–34.
46 Ibid., pp. 30-34.
archaeological excavations, new perspectives will hopefully open up, perspectives that can serve as a base for further discussions.

In many countries outside Scandinavia there exist numerous archaeological and historical studies about various Orders of Knighthood. The reason for the lack of larger studies in Scandinavia probably has something to do with the complicated source material in combination with different academic traditions. Scandinavia was, after all, not the most important province for these Orders in the Middle Ages. The Scandinavian sites that once belonged to the different institutions cannot, however, be studied as an isolated phenomenon. The international character of these Orders gives us the possibility to make comparisons across the frontiers of modern countries. Further information about the Orders' Scandinavian houses can therefore probably be obtained through studies of their international history.

The key point is this: the full potential of the historical and the archaeological material from the sites that once belonged to the Orders of Knighthood in medieval Scandinavia has not yet been seen. In the SSCE there exists an established tradition of studies focusing on various Orders of Knighthood. Archaeological studies of the Orders have in recent years been carried out and published by researchers such as Adrian Boas, Ronnie Elenblut, and Denys Pringle, and historical studies have been published by scholars such as Jonathan Riley-Smith, Malcolm Barber and Helen Nicholson, just to mention a few specialists in this particular field. By using these scholars' studies the history of the Orders of Knighthood in medieval Scandinavia can be placed within a more international context and new questions can be raised about the Scandinavian source material. This would not only develop the Scandinavian crusading research but it would also teach us more about the medieval phenomenon of Orders of Knighthood.

Denys Pringle, "Templar castles on the road to the Jordan," in *MO. 1*.
Helen Nicholson, *Templars, Hospitalers and Teutonic Knights*. 