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# Tower Houses in Medieval Scanian Towns

KENTH HANSEN

## Abstract

*Towers in medieval towns is something normally connected to southern Europe. In Scandinavia, towers are seen as something belonging to castles and residences in the countryside, not to urban milieus. However, they are to be found even in Scandinavian towns. In this paper the existence of private urban tower houses in medieval Scania will be presented and discussed, and a hypothesis about a previously unknown tower house in Lund will be introduced.*

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the existence of tower houses in medieval Scanian towns. Such buildings were not uncommon in other parts of Europe. Particularly prominent were the very tall and narrow buildings found in north-Italian cities, many of which are still preserved, especially in San Gimignano. These tower houses constituted centers of power for urban aristocratic families (Hansen 2020, 36). In Ireland, a special category of smaller castles is known as tower houses. These are characterized by fortification features. Normally they were rural but they could also be found in towns where they were erected by rich townsmen or priests (McNeill 1997, 201, 209, 217).

At a first glance the medieval Scanian towns do not seem to have any tower houses, except for the royal tower in Helsingborg called Kärnan (Fig. 1). But what are the characteristics of a tower house? Let us take Kärnan as an example.



Fig 1. Kärnan in Helsingborg. Photo by Irene Hansen 2018.

What is most obvious is that it is taller than it is wide. Furthermore, it is raised above its surroundings, either by being a tall house in itself, or by being placed in an elevated position, for example on a hill. Tower houses are usually quadratic or rounded, or, at least, almost quadratic or round. Considering the height, they should have at least two storeys, and usually only one room on each floor. They may serve as living quarters and/or be used as fortification. In the latter case, it can fill an actual military need but could also be used simply to impress.

### The Dean's House, Lund

There is one house in Lund that is usually called a tower house, namely the Dean's House (Fig. 2). Today you will find the Dean's House at the Museum of Cultural History, Kulturen, in Lund to where it was moved in the beginning of the 20th century. It consists of three parts, which were built at different times. An archaeological investigation was made before the building was moved. The three parts of the house can be identified in the cellar (Fig. 3). The oldest house was building A-C to which a square building, D, was later added on the north side, and finally an extension was made to the west, E. The part which is considered to be a tower house is the northern part, D. The remains of the first floor belong primarily to this house, with only a small part from the original house, C, remaining. From the second floor practically only the tower house is left. It should be noted that there is a fireplace on this floor and that the tower house had one room on each floor (Blomqvist 1946, 85 ff.).

Figure 3 and 4 shows what the remains of the house looked like when it was moved. A comparison of this drawing with the photo in figure 2 shows that there has been some recent addition to the top floor of the remaining



Fig. 2. The Dean's House in Kulturen, Lund. Photo by Irene Hansen 2014.

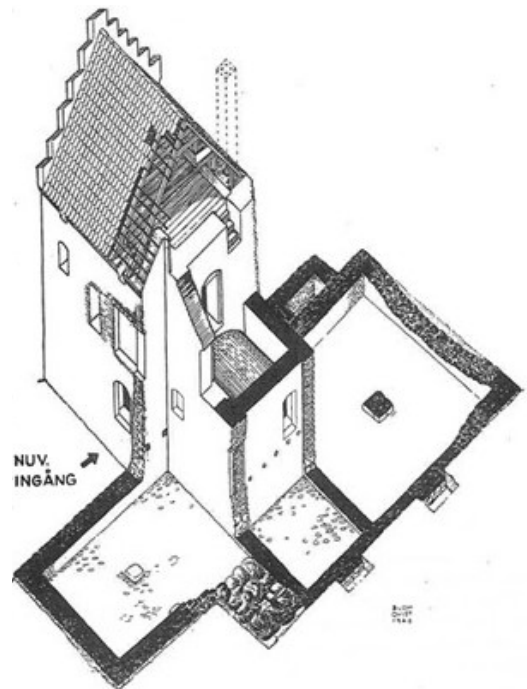


Fig. 3. The remains of the Dean's House. (Blomqvist 1946, 71).

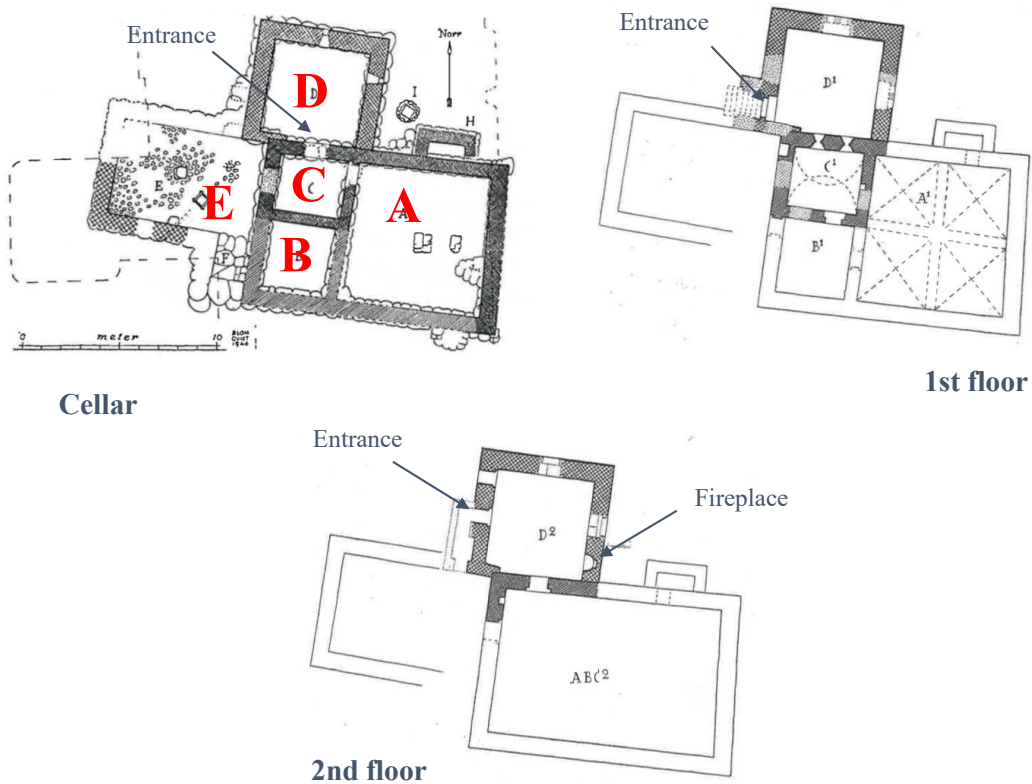


Fig. 4. The Dean's House, reconstructed plan. (Blomqvist 1946, 72f).

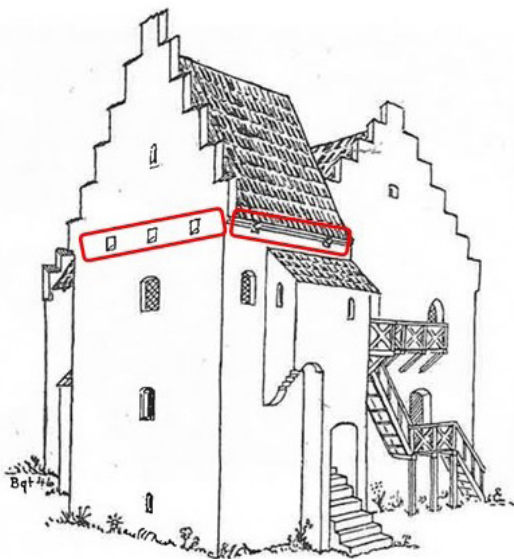


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the Dean's House. Assumed embrasures marked. (Blomqvist 1946, 101).

part of the oldest house. An attempted reconstruction of the two oldest parts of the building has been made (Fig. 5). In front is the tower house with its entrance and beyond you will find the original house. Some holes, originally interpreted as embrasures, can be noticed above the second floor. They can also be seen in the photo, which shows the other side of the house. It has thus been assumed that the house was a defence tower. However, this is probably not the case, since the openings are far too small to be of any practical military use. Possibly the holes have been where the upper floor rested (Ericsson 1995, 65).

The building is square with 6.5 meter long sides, and 13-14 meters high. The house is built with bricks on a stone foundation. The whole house complex was used as the Dean's residence. It is not clear which functions the

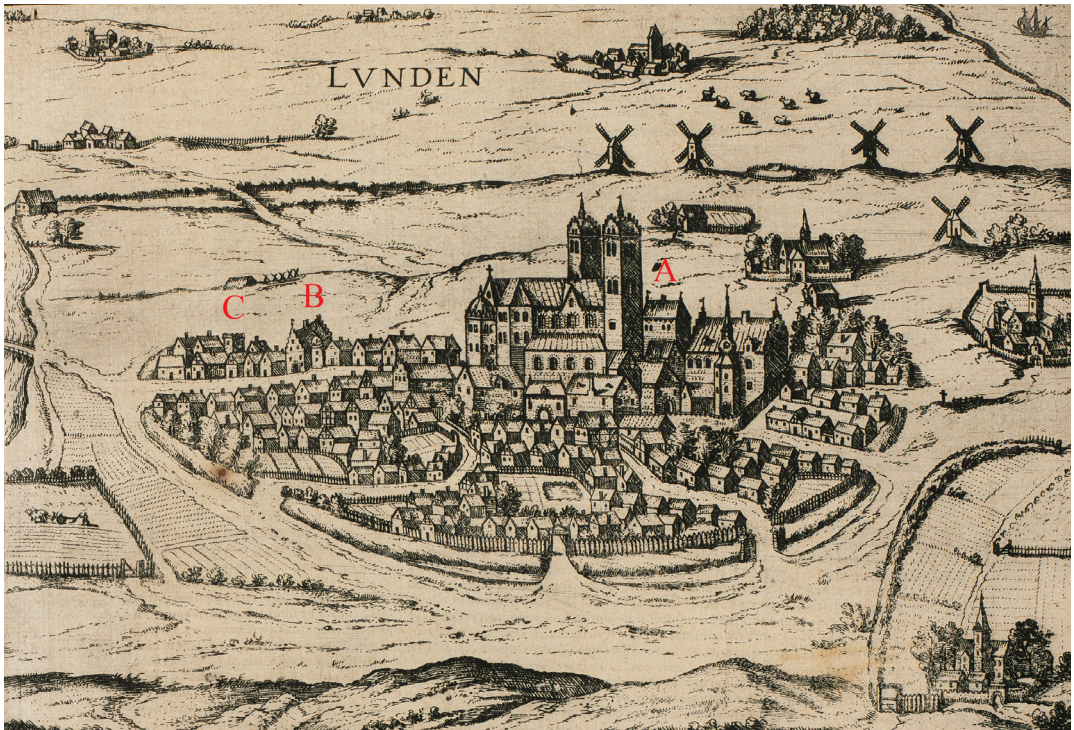


Fig. 6. Franz Hogenberg's copper plate of Lund. Houses discussed in the article: A: the Dean's House, B: Stäket, C: possible tower house at the Bille manor. Source/photo by Lund University Library, Alvin item no. 76516.

different rooms in the tower had. Probably the cellar served as a storage space and it has been assumed that also the room on the ground floor was used for storing goods. Considering the fireplace on the second floor, this room could have been used as living quarters. There was no inner communication between the floors in the tower, the different floors were reached from the outside, and in the case of the second floor, access to this was probably from the older house via an outer gallery.

It is believed that the oldest house was built sometimes during the second part of the 13th century, the tower house sometimes during the 15th century and the last extension probably during the second part of the 16th century (Blomqvist 1946, 96 ff.). The first known owner is *domina* Ingerd Madsdatter, who probably belonged to the local nobility. It could have been she, or some earlier relative,

who built the original house. In any case it was she who, as a widow, sold the house to the dean Jakob Esbernsen in 1325, and he, in his turn, donated it the same year to the chapter of the Cathedral (DD 2:9, 175, 176, 189).

In the 1580s *Civitates orbis terrarum*, a great atlas of cities, was produced by Georg Braun. For the atlas, Franz Hogenberg made a lot of copper plates showing cities all over Europe. Among these is a picture of Lund, probably seen from the south-east (Fig. 6; Hansen 2020, 395 ff.).

In the copper plate the Dean's House is visible between the Cathedral and the large house in Lundagård, and somewhat behind these (Fig. 7). The visible part is the oldest house, not the tower house since this was located to the north of the original house and thus is hidden behind it in the plate. The part that is visible, the east and south part of the



Fig. 7. The Dean's House in Hogenberg's copperplate. Source/photo by Lund University Library, Alvin item no. 76516.

second floor, as well as the roof, was not among those parts that remained of the building but fits fairly well with the reconstruction earlier shown.

## The Thott House, Halmstad

There is a building very similar to the tower part of the Dean's House, only a little wider. This house was located in Halmstad, a town on the west coast, a little more than 100 km north of Lund. I call this house the Thott House, since I believe it was built and owned by the Thott family, belonging to the highest nobility in Scandinavia at that time. There have been several attempts to attribute the house but written as well as material sources supports a connection to the Thott family (Hansen 2019). Parts of the house,

considerably changed and re-built, remained until the 1960s, when it was demolished to give room for a department store and a bank. It was not until the 1920s, when the plaster was removed, that it was realized that Halmstad had a medieval, privately owned, stone house left. A drawing of the house was made then (Fig. 8). Figure 9 is a reconstruction of the house.

When it was to be demolished in the 1960's an archaeological investigation was made. Among other things, it then became clear that the house originally was planned to be taller and to have a groin vaulted ground floor (Fig. 10). The small house to the east of the main building has been assumed to be a two-floor kitchen utility building, attached to the ground floor of the main building. The groin vaulting never took place, the house was finished without vaulting and with a lower ceiling height (Fig. 11). There is no reconstruction plan of the second floor, but this also consisted of one room only. Access to this room was via an outer gallery and a wooden staircase from the ground level. The walls of this room had traces of decorative paintings.

This house was larger on the ground level than the tower part of the Dean's House in Lund but had approximately the same height. The building material in the foundation and walls was similar to the Dean's House, but the Thott House lacked a cellar. The ground floor may have served as a common hall while, considering the decorative wall paintings, the second floor probably was used by family members for accommodation and entertaining guests.

The assumed owners of the house have been these: Aage Axelsen Thott bought the grounds, his son built the house around 1486, and his son, in turn, Ture Bengtsen, who died in the Plague during the same year as his parents, in his will left the building to the Alter of Our Lady in the town church S:t

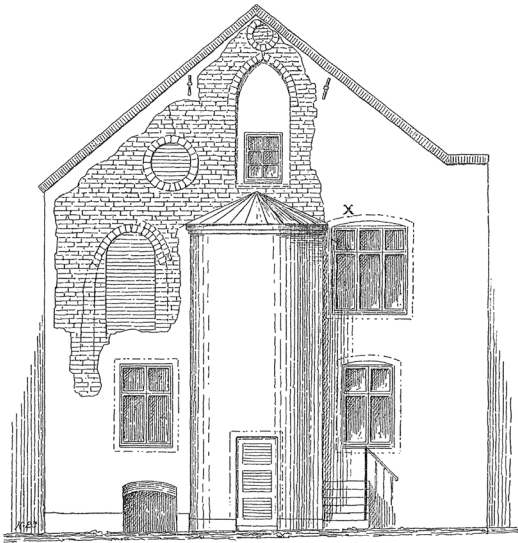


Fig. 8. Uncovered parts of the eastern gable of the Thott House. (Bissmark 1926, 18).

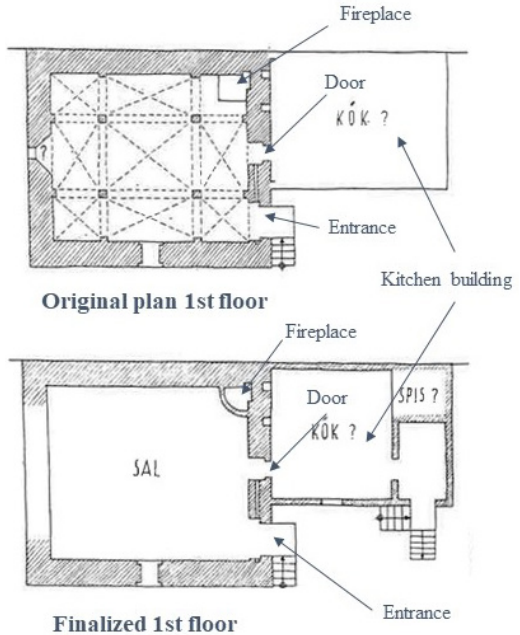


Fig. 10. The Thott House, reconstruction of the 1st floor. (Anderson 1964, 30).

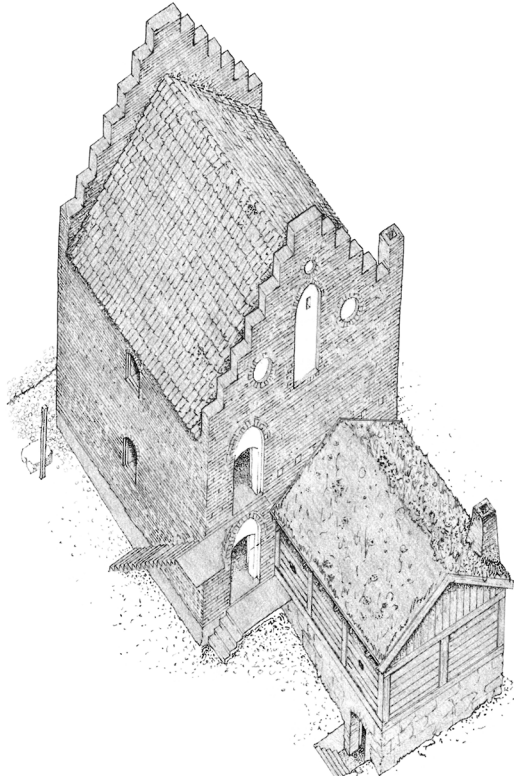


Fig. 9. A reconstruction of the Thott House in Halmstad. (KHA, 1340).

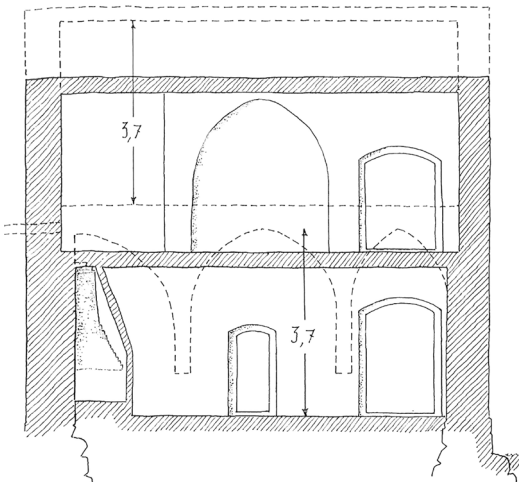


Fig. 11. The Thott House, reconstructed profile. (Anderson 1964, 13).

Nikolai. After the Reformation, his cousins, Claus and Anne Thott, bought the house back from the church sometimes during the middle part of the 16th century. Aage Axelsen Thott was one of the well-known sons of Axel Pedersen Thott, who played an important part in the political life in Scandinavia during the second half of the 15th century. They held posts as privy counsellors in both Denmark and Sweden, and one of the sons was also regent in Sweden for a time (Hansen 2019).

The reason why a branch of the Thott family built a stone house in Halmstad was probably that they owned extensive properties in the area north of the town, and that they might have exported the surplus from these estates through Halmstad. The town was also an important political meeting place for the realm during the 15th century.

## The Bille manor, Lund

But were there any other tower houses in Scania? Most of the buildings in Hogenberg's copper plate of Lund seem very schematically drawn. There are few houses of distinction, apart from the Cathedral and its immediate surroundings. There is, however, one house that has distinctive features (Fig. 12). It is probably not medieval but could be Görvel Fadersdotter Sparre's house at Södergatan, commonly known as Stäket. This was built after 1560. Furthermore, it does not have the characteristics of a tower house.

But there is another house which stands out (Fig. 13). The fact that it is distinctly differently pictured must mean that it was drawn so on purpose and not randomly. The house is not particularly prominently displayed in the picture but is visible behind other buildings along Södergatan. Such a house is very much in agreement with the visual idea of a tower house. A tall and apparently square house with a flat, crenelated roof. Which

house could this be? In my opinion this could be the main building of the Bille manor. This estate was owned by the Danish noble family Bille during the 16th century, possibly already from the late 15th century, and it became in time an areawise large estate in Lund (Andrén 1984, 104f).

The Bille manor was situated to the west of Södergatan (Fig. 14). Archaeological investigations were made in this area in the 1980s. Among other things, a narrow elongated sewer shaft was dug. Remains of the foundation wall and of an area with an inner floor with tiles were found in the south part of the shaft (Fig. 15; KSA, Billegården 49 [3], 1984). The north foundation wall was sturdy with ashlar stones at the top. The northwest inner corner of the building was found here. It was assumed that the western wall of the building was to be found close to the west of the shaft. In the southernmost part an assembly of considerably smaller stones were found, which did not connect to the wall to the west. So, it was probably not the southern wall of the building, more likely some interior building unit.

The remains indicated a building that probably was at least 15 meters long. How tall and wide the building was, and its purpose, could not be established, given the few remains. The ownership of the grounds is documented in the Bille family. At the time when the copperplate was made it was owned by Beate Bille, a wealthy widow and mother of the famous astronomer Tycho Brahe (Andrén 1984, 105).

What could the building have looked like, considering Hogenberg's copper plate and the archaeological remains – if it, indeed, is the same house? A square building would have had at least 15 meters long sides, which is the same as the outer measurements of Kärnan in Helsingborg. Also, the top part of the building, with a flat, crenelated roof, looks like Kärnan. Could it have been Kärnan on a smaller scale,



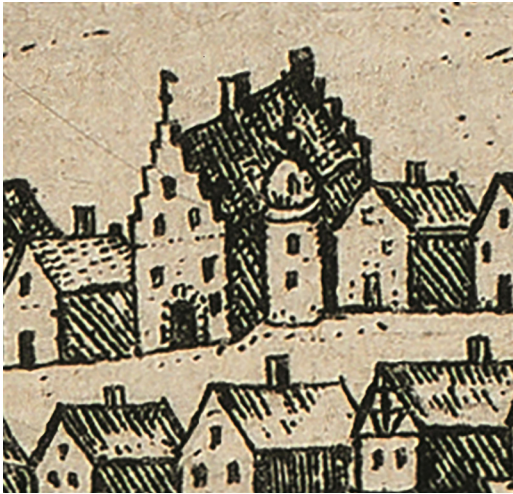


Fig. 12. Stäket (the house of Görvel Fadersdotter Sparre) in Hogenberg's copperplate. Source/photo by Lund University Library, Alvin item no. 76516.



Fig. 13. Tower house in Lund, maybe the main building of the Bille Manor. Source/photo by Lund University Library, Alvin item no. 76516.



Fig. 14. The location of the Bille manor. Reconstruction of the town plan of medieval Lund (Andrén 1984, 19).

only 2 or 3 storeys high (Fig. 16a)?

It could also have been an oblong building, something which cannot be ruled out when we look at the building in the copper plate (Fig. 16b). Another possibility is, of course, that the remains that were found had nothing to do with the house in the picture. However, in my opinion, it is quite possible that there was a crenellated tower house in, or nearby, the Bille manor in Lund.

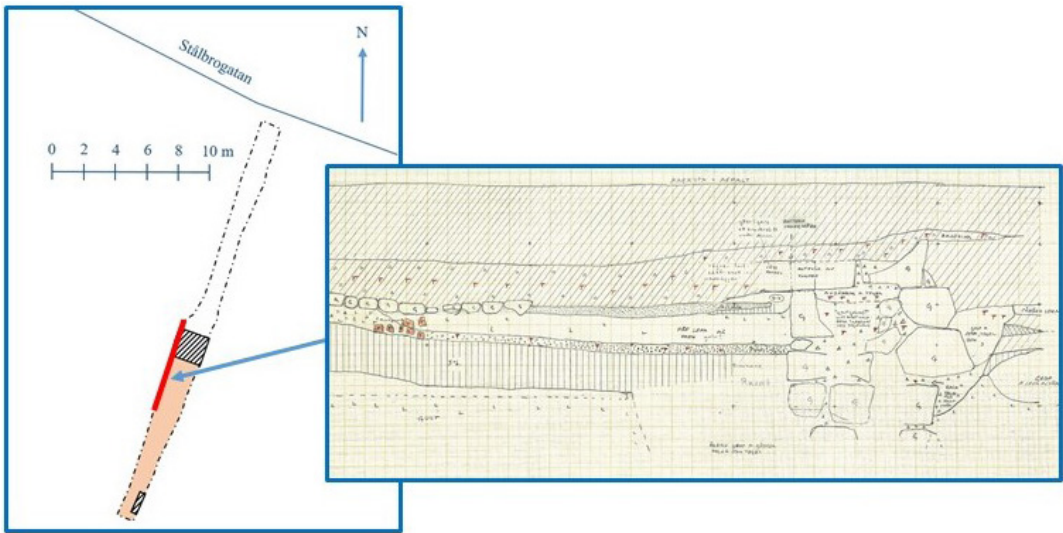


Fig. 15. Possible remains of the main building of the Bille Manor. (KSA, Billegården 49 [3], 1984).

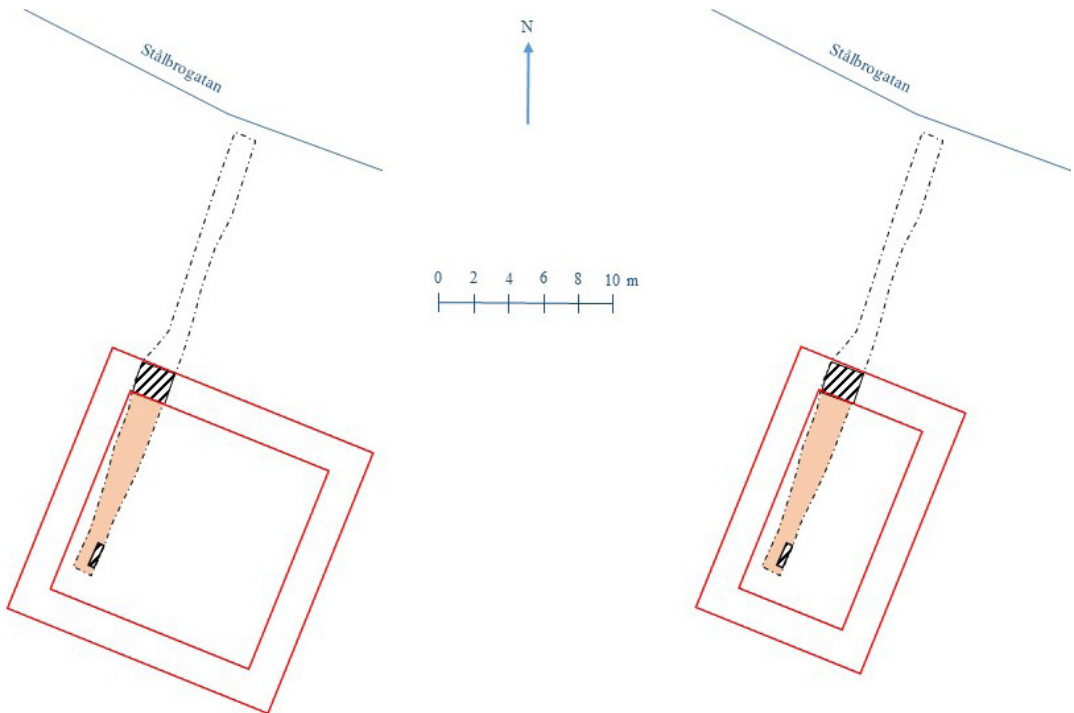


Fig. 16a-b. The main building of the Bille Manor. Two different reconstruction hypotheses. Drawing by the author.

## Conclusions

Finally, some conclusions about medieval urban tower houses in Scania. There are examples of these in the Scanian towns, at least based on my characteristics, but they are few. They were far from being as impressive as the ones in the cities of northern Italy.

They belonged to the nobility and high church officials, not to the burghers of the towns, possibly similar to the presumed owners of the tower houses erected in Irish towns. But unlike the Irish houses I have not found that the Scanian tower houses had any military functions. They seem generally to have been built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century merely for residential purposes. The building material was brick and normally they seem to have consisted of at least two storeys, even if the Bille house might have been higher.

More research is needed before we can say if urban tower houses was a general phenomenon in medieval Scandinavia. The Scanian examples at least shows that the concept of urban tower houses existed.

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