

Engelborg on Slotø – Shipyard, Fortress and administrative Centre from the Time of King Hans

By Ingolf Ericsson

On the tiny Danish island of Slotø, at the fairway to Nakskov, the ruins of Engelborg still can be seen (figs. 1-3). Since the beginning of

the 19th century reports about the monument were sent to antiquarian authorities. Drawings from 1877 and 1904 exist, as well as a geodetic documentation with iso-lines from 1947 (figs. 4-6). A large-scale excavation in the 1940s was mainly done by volunteering pupils. In 1985 antiquarian work was carried out to preserve the monument.

Engelborg consists of a round tower of 11 m diameter, with a 3.5 m thick brick-wall with a core of mostly nature stone. From tower to sea run two brick flank-walls. Together they form an open V to the sea. Tower as well as flank-walls were armed with embrasures. The main part of the tower is surrounded by two moats and an earthen rampart (figs. 2-7).

In 1509 King Hans came into possession of the island of Slotø. Building activities must have started almost immediately. In 1511 and the next few years several royal letters were dated here. Building activities must be seen in connection to political conflicts and war. But several functions were combined on the tiny island. The Engelborg of King Hans was a naval shipyard, where already in 1510 two great warships – “Engelen” and “Maria” – are said to have been built. Shipbuilding activities are also clearly demonstrated by the archaeological sources. It is beyond doubt that Engelborg, with its tower, flank-walls, embrasures, moats and rampart, was a strong fortification – a fortress. The third main function was that of an administrative centre. From 1510 until 1523 Engelborg (also known as “Nyslot”, i.e. Newcastle) was a main fief. The king’s first “commander” at Engelborg was Oluf Holgersen Ulfstand (1510-1514).

The new fortress was planned also to protect the town of Nakskov against attacks. But already in 1510 Nakskov was burnt down by a Hanseatic navy from Lübeck. In 1523 an inventory tells about military equipment, i.e. six breech loaders and twelve harquebusses. In this year Engelborg lost its function as an important administrative centre and became a minor fief. In 1549 Engelborg lost also its last administrative function. As a fortress the site became unimportant before the mid 16th century. As a naval shipyard Engelborg lost its importance in the 1530s – or even earlier.

The glorious plan, that can be presupposed behind the Engelborg of King Hans turned out to be a great mistake. Just 40 years after its foundation the site was neither an administrative centre, nor a naval shipyard, nor a fortress of any importance.

From 1588 till 1631 Slotø was part of the jointure of the Queen Mother Sofie. Engelborg was without importance and the queen just kept very few people on it. King Christian IV, however, tried to re-establish the shipyard-activities. About ten great ships were now

built on Slotø under the direction of Daniel Sinclar; the last of these ships was in 1633 "Norske Løve". An ivory-model from 1652-1654 with this name might depict this ship of Christian IV (fig. 8). During this second, very short period (ca. 1623-1633) as a shipyard Engelborg was neither fortificationally nor administratively of any importance. Besides the early 16th century tower, flank-walls, moats and rampart, some of the buildings, which can be seen on a picture (fig. 7) from the 1680s probably date to this period.