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LARGE CASTLES AND LARGE WAR MACHINES IN DENMARK
AND THE BALTIC AROUND 1200
- AN EARLY MILITARY REVOLUTION?

In 1989, the first modern replica in Denmark of a medieval trebuchet was built on the open shore near the city of Nykobing Falster during the commemoration of the 700th anniversary of the granting of the city’s charter, and archaeologists and interested amateurs began shooting stones out into the water of the sound between the islands of Lolland and Falster. From this humble beginning, the place has now, twenty years later, developed into a medieval re-enactment centre with more war machines, medieval houses and food, and its own harbour and replicas of ships and small boats, and the centre is visited each year by more than 60,000 guests from Denmark and abroad* (1). Considerable expertise has been assembled by those working in such centres, and experimental archaeology has contributed significantly to our understanding of how these machines actually functioned; how war was actually conducted; and how we should interpret the often fragmentary descriptions and illustrations of weapons in medieval sources. But the interest in war machines also reflects a new interest in warfare itself.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century Danish historians have generally been uninterested in warfare and more or less directly assumed that Danes in the Middle Ages were as pacifistic and peaceful as their

* University of Southern Denmark.
(1) http://www.middelaldercentret.dk/
modern compatriots have been obliged to be with their transition from a huge Northern European empire in the eighteenth century to a minor and politically insignificant nation-state in the twentieth\(^1\). Medieval warfare has been neglected by Danish historians, but a change seems to have taken place since the early 1990's when the first modern historical analyses of the role of warfare in medieval society began to appear\(^2\)\(^3\). Eventually, in 2008, for the first time ever there appeared a History of Warfare in Denmark written by professional historians\(^4\). Meanwhile after one and a half centuries of neutrality Denmark had actively joined a war with its participation in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Whether this was a result of the renewed historical interest in warfare, or vice versa, is impossible to say At least it reflects a new interest in military history, of which the present article is also a manifestation. It is the aim here to look at castles, at large war machines, and to a lesser extent at ships, in the years around 1200, and to try to argue that what might be understood as a military revolution took place in this period.

**Castles**

Castellology in Denmark has been characterized by two confident, but unfounded assumptions - that in the high middle ages the building of castles was solely a royal prerogative, and that fortifications were erected as a defence against attacks from neighbouring Scandinavian countries and especially the pagan Slavic or Wendic pirates living in scattered settlements in the areas between Holstein and Rügen (in present day Northern Germany). Castles were defensive and not aggressive, it was claimed\(^5\).

There seems to be a marked empty period with no new fortifications between the late Viking Age and the high middle ages, that is from the late tenth century and into the early twelfth century.

\(^{(2)}\) For this transition, see Bregnsbo and fensen 2004.

\(^{(3)}\) Very much inspired by the many studies by Knud J. V. fespersen, which reached a broader Danish scholarly public with fespersen 1992. For all his publications, see Bisgaard *et al*, 2006, pp. 339-346.

\(^{(4)}\) Frantzen and fespersen 2008.