

Why Is the Church Round?

Today, the round churches are emblematic of Bornholm, but what many people do not realise is that round churches are also found in other parts of Denmark: Bjernede Church (Zealand), Horne Church (Funen) and Thorsager Church (Jutland). They share the same circular shape, but are otherwise dissimilar. The closest parallels to Bornholm's round churches are found in southern Sweden, including Hagby Church. Although there are many educated guesses about why Østerlars Church is round, nothing is definitive. What do you think...?

The Knights Templar

Journalist Erling Haagenzen put forward the theory that Bornholm's round churches were built by the Knights Templar. He bases his theory on the close friendship between Eskil, the then archbishop of Lund, and Bernard of Clairvaux; the latter played a key role in founding the Knights Templar. We know that the Templars built round churches and that this inspiration could have reached Bornholm through Bernard. Several leading Templars were Burgundian noblemen, including Bernard, and there are theories that "Burgundaholm", from where the Burgundians emigrated, was in fact Bornholm.

Most historians are not convinced by Haagenzen's theories, however, criticising them for their lack of factual, historical basis. 2006 marked the release of the Danish family film "Tempelriddernes Skat" (Treasure of the Knights Templar), which was filmed on location at Østerlars Church and the other round churches on Bornholm. This popular feature film helped to fuel the theories about the Knights Templar. The film about brave and clever children who solve the churches' mysteries can be borrowed from any public library in Denmark. The gravestone which, in the film, marks the descent to the crypt beneath the church can be seen to the left of the church porch.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is situated on Golgotha in Jerusalem and is where Jesus is believed to have been entombed before the resurrection. The site has a long, complicated architectural history; for example, a temple to the goddess Venus was also situated here. The construction of round churches in both Scandinavia and the Slavic region of Europe are believed to have been inspired by the round shape of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. We know that in 1032 the monk Wino was sent from Paderborn in northern Germany to Jerusalem to survey and measure the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Afterwards, the Busdorf Church, an exact replica of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was built in Paderborn. In 1072, Rikval, a Busdorf monk, became bishop of Lund, under whose episcopal see Østerlars belonged. Perhaps this very same Rikval was the source of inspiration that prompted archbishop Eskil to subsequently build round churches on Bornholm? Round churches were built in Poland as early as the 10th century, also with inspiration from the Byzantine area. So the idea of a round church could also have reached Scandinavia through Poland. The fact that both Harald Bluetooth and Sweyn Forkbeard were married to Slavic princesses could support this theory.

Fortification

The round shape can also be explained by the fact that Bornholm's round churches were built as fortifications. Many architectural features support the fact that Østerlars Church possibly served as a fortress, as does its elevated position in the countryside with good views of the coast and the sea. The church was originally built without a roof, as shown in the reconstruction drawing, and the outer ring wall was not as high back then as it is today. This made it easier to move around on the outer passage. In addition, there was a platform over the chancel from where it was also possible to keep a lookout and to fire weapons.

Written sources state that in 1376 the bishop of Lund donated a catapult to Aa Church on Bornholm, which, like the round churches, is also believed to have been built as a fortification. The argument against the fortification theory, however, is the uncertainty surrounding whether there was a sufficient range of vision to fire a crossbow, for instance, from behind the embrasures of the inner ring wall, considering that one had to take aim out across the outer ring wall. As not a single arrowhead has ever been unearthed around the church, we must assume that the church has never been attacked.

Observatory

One of the most recent theories to emerge to explain the round shape of Østerlars Church is Erling Haagenzen's idea that the church was built as an observatory. He bases this theory particularly on the perception that Bornholm's round churches are situated within a special geometric pattern in relation to Christiansø Island. He even goes so far as to believe that it was possible to calculate the navigation route to India from here and report this to Portugal.

In addition, he has suggested that the church may have been built on top of a passage grave from the Stone Age, a monument whose position is also believed to have cosmological significance.

