Architectural History

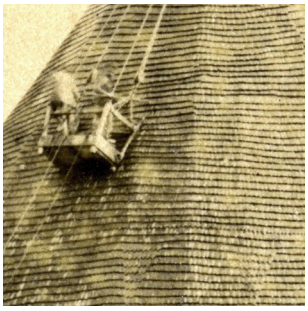
From its construction in the mid-12th century up to the present, Østerlars Church has been an outstanding and dominant feature of the landscape. Despite limewashing, additions and refurbishments, the same thick walls still make up the round church. Every stone in the massive masonry structure was hauled here and laid by people, in an era without modern cranes or scaffolding.

With and without a roof

In the Middle Ages, the Round Church of Østerlars did not have a roof. It is uncertain when the conical roof was added. The present interior roof structure was erected in 1744, but a drawing from 1675 shows that the church also had a similar conical roof at the time.
Without a roof, the church looked quite different from the way it looks today and presumably resembled a fortress rather than a house of God. There is no doubt, however, that the church was built to serve as a church, as both chancel and apse date from the same time as the nave, i.e. the main building. Thus, it is possible to assert that the Round Church of Østerlars was built for both physical and spiritual protection.

Woodwork both inside and outside

Not only the inner roof structure is made of wood; every single roofing shingle is also wood. The church's existing shingles are made of split Bornholm oak shingles from Almindingen Forest, sawn oak shingles from Kofoeds Sawmill in Østerlars and sawn Swedish oak shingles from Säljebygdens Hemslöjd. The shingles are remarkably durable when you consider that they are only tarred on the section of shingle exposed to wind and weather, whereas the rest is untreated to allow the wood to breathe. When the roof needs to be tarred, we now have modern equipment at our disposal, but the work chair set up here on the church's second storey was used in the past. The photo shows the chair being used to work on the church roof.



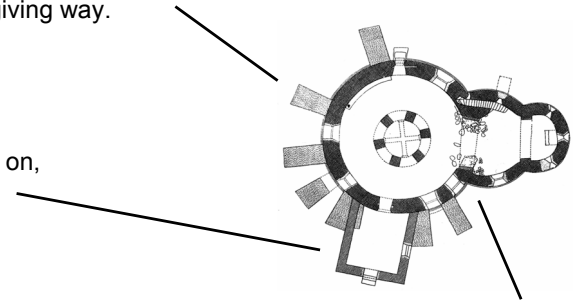
Limestone and fieldstone

The church walls are a double-wall structure with facework both inside and outside, and the cavity is filled up with soil and gravel. The primary building material was fieldstone from the fields surrounding the church, but the finer details, such as portals and embrasures, are made of local "Limensgade limestone" from Aakirkeby. The stone is named after the lime burning plant that was once in Aakirkeby where lime was burnt into mortar (in this context, "lim" means mortar, "ens" means kiln and "gade" means road, thus "mortar-kiln road"). Limensgade limestone is so-called Silurian limestone that was deposited 400 million years ago. It is also the only limestone in Denmark that can be burnt into hydraulic mortar which can draw off water and moisture, thereby preventing frost erosion. The same mortar was used at Hammershus.

When the roof was added to the church, the outer ring wall had to be heightened to support the roof structure. This heightening is faintly visible on the church's upper storey. It cannot be seen from the outside, as the transition is concealed under the white limewash, but from within, a closer inspection reveals where the large fieldstones in the original wall are supplemented by small stones mixed with brick. At the bottom of the brickwork on the upper storey – all the way down by the floor – are a series of holes that served as scuppers to drain off rainwater back when the church did not have a roof.

Buttresses

The seven buttresses that now support the church were not part of the original church structure but were added later on. An eighth buttress previously shored up the north side of the chancel but was removed in 1850. The purpose of the buttresses is to support the heavy walls and prevent them from giving way.



The porch

The porch was added to the church later on, presumably around 1500.

Nave and chancel

The church's nave and chancel have been structurally joined from the beginning, but excavations have proven that the original opening between them was smaller. The chancel of many medieval churches was completely or partly shielded from the rest of the church. The chancel was the most hallowed space of the church and was not open to the public. Two holes in the chancel are faintly visible in the brickwork into which a beam could have been inserted to hold a wooden crucifix.