

# Mendicant Brethren and Master Builders: The Building's History of the Mendicant Orders in Medieval Denmark

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This article looks into the building's history of the mendicant friaries of medieval Denmark with the aim of investigating distinct phases of development or decline. It is the article's suggestion that the overall characterization of the building's history can be divided into three main periods distinguished by the level of building intensity. The reasons behind the fluctuating tendencies are discussed, and despite the primary causes should be viewed in an overall religious, economical, and political perspective, the importance of contextually significant factors within each convent are emphasized.

## Introduction

From the early thirteenth century and until the time of the Reformation, the mendicant orders were a central part – religious, cultural and political – of the medieval Danish townscape. By the time of the Reformation several friaries were characterized by a large-scale, extravagant building mass as well as friary grounds consisting of several acres of land in the densely populated towns. This is however a characterization that mostly fits with the early sixteenth century, and it is contrasted to several of the friaries' humble beginnings in the early thirteenth century. This article aims at describing and explaining the different fluctuating periods in the building's history of the mendicant orders and deciphering what mechanisms caused them.

## The material evidence

By the time of the Reformation a total of 29 Franciscan, 19 Dominican and 8 Carmelite friaries had been established in the Danish Realm; this amount constituted approximately 40% of the total number of monastic establishments in medieval Denmark. Both the Dominican and the Franciscan Order appeared in Denmark during the first half of the thirteenth century with the majority of sites being established be-

fore 1300, and their building activities can thus be studied over several centuries until the Reformation. The first Carmelite Friary to be established in the Danish Realm was that of Landskrona in 1410. Regarding this study, it will be difficult to decipher the fluctuation in building intensity for the Carmelites over so few years; however, the Carmelite material is suitable for a characterization of the building intensity of the late medieval period.

The material relating to the study of the building's history of the mendicant orders rely on a variety of sources, both written and archaeological, however in terms of both quantity and quality, the latter is the most interesting.

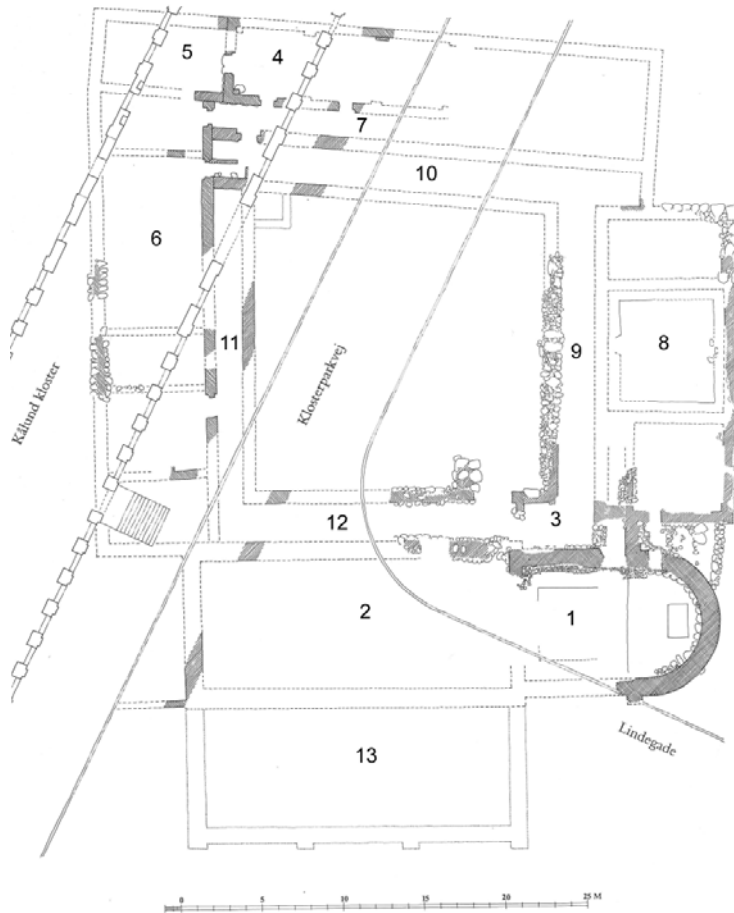
## Chronology

The emphasis on the understanding of the chronological development of the mendicant friaries was greatly enhanced in the years following the Second World War, where medieval archaeology as a professional discipline came of age. In this period methodologies were professionalized, and the notion of stratigraphy became more and more embedded in the field archaeological approach (Olsen 1996: 18–19). The researchers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were well aware of the chronological discrepancies within the different monastic complexes;<sup>1</sup> it was in many cases not their primary focus. Center of attention was put on architectural or art historical studies, and the dynamics of material culture was of lesser interest. Nonetheless, it is often possible on the basis of a detailed analysis and reevaluation of older antiquarian notes and excavation reports – sometimes in context with a new buildings archaeological survey – to give a fairly plausible relative chronology, even for poorly documented sites (cf. e.g. Eriksdotter 1997: 743–748).

As an example, the Franciscan friary of Kalundborg is useful. This site was demolished in the years following the Reformation, and it was not until 1960 that a larger part of the friary was unearthed again. The excavation was published preliminary and an actual report was never written – the actual source material consists of a few photos and a large excavation plan. Nonetheless, detailed studies of the limited source material provide sound evidence for at least 13 different building phases that

<sup>1</sup> Already Vilhelm Lorenzen, who in the years 1912–1941 published a pioneering work (11 volumes) on Danish medieval monasteries, was aware of the chronological differences between primarily the churches (primarily from an early period) and the claustral buildings (mainly from a late period). Also the national Danish church inventory of *Danmarks Kirker*, who began publication in 1933, already from the beginning emphasized the importance of the dynamic development of churches.

to a large degree can be fitted into a relative chronology of the site (fig. 1; DK Holbæk Amt 2001: 3332–3335; Krongaard Kristensen 2013: 97).



*Fig. 1. Plan of the excavated remains of the Franciscan friary of Kalundborg. It illustrates the often fragmentary image of the past object, due to several smaller excavation campaigns. In total, however, the material record provides a valuable insight into the overall stratigraphy of the monument, establishing at least 13 different building phases. After Krongaard Kristensen 2013.*

Thus, it is possible to construct a relative chronological sequence for most mendicant complexes. The real challenge is to give an absolute dating of the different building phases. In older research, typological dating on the basis of stylistic characteristics was by far the most common approach, and still today this is for many sites the only possible approach. The main problem in this is of course that some typological traits might be characteristic for architecture over a very long span of time, and also that many buildings of especially the late medieval period are somewhat anonymous (or minimalistic) in their architectural expression.

Due to the often short chronological intervals between different phases (sometimes not more than a few decades), scientific dating like C<sub>14</sub> on mortar or thermoluminescens are too imprecise, or have not yet been thoroughly tested (Holst 2011: 66–68). Dating by means of dendrochronology is by far the most useful approach. With regards to this, the only problem is the poor preservation of datable timber in the still standing mendicant buildings, e.g. the roof constructions for several mendicant buildings have been replaced in the post-Reformation period. In some cases, datable timber can be found preserved within the construction (beams carrying the upper storey, wooden structures in relation to niches or windows).<sup>2</sup> In relation to archaeological excavations, it is often possible to detect wooden structures in relation to foundations, often well-preserved and suitable for dendrochronological dating.<sup>3</sup>

### **Some examples**

It will be too excessive to give an entire overview of all the Danish friaries and their buildings history, but a few examples should suffice to give an impression of the different phases of development or decline.<sup>4</sup>

#### **The Dominican Church of Viborg**

The friary was established in the first half of the thirteenth century; however, the exact date is unknown. The convent must have been founded before 1246, since a friar participated in the provincial chapter in Ribe that year (Hjermind 2014: 673). During the medieval period, the friary developed into a large complex with dual-cloisters adjoining the heavily expanded church, but in the years following the Ref-

<sup>2</sup> Thus, wood from a niche in the vestry of the Dominican friary of Aarhus was dated to after 1257 (Søvsø 2011: 44).

<sup>3</sup> Stabilizing timber posts have been found at several sites, e.g. the Franciscan friaries of Horsens and Svendborg – in both cases suitable for dating (Krongaard Kristensen 1994: 19; 2016: 104).

<sup>4</sup> A more thorough analysis is presented in Larsen 2018.

ormation, the monastic buildings were torn down. Little is known about the friars' building complex since only a few small-scale excavations have unearthed the destroyed remnants (Levin Nielsen 1974; Krongaard Kristensen 1987: 56–58; Hjerminde 2014: 673–674). The friary church was however preserved due to a new function as parish church, a function it still wields today.

The church of today consists of an originally single-celled church (constructed in two phases) with two adjoining chapels on the northern side (today functioning as a side-aisle) with the remnants of the northern cloister walk incorporated as a southern side aisle. A slim tower construction was added to the west gable in the eighteenth century. Despite heavy restorations in the early twentieth century, large parts of the medieval building can still be studied.

The oldest part of the church consists of the three eastern bays of the original single-celled church. It is characterized by a very refined architecture characteristic for several brick-built monuments on the Jutish Peninsula during the first decades of the thirteenth century,<sup>5</sup> and the best impression of this stems from the elaborate east gable (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> Based on a comparative stylistic study of these monuments, the original church in Viborg should be dated to the second quarter of the thirteenth century.

Probably around 1300, the church was expanded towards west with an addition of two bays (fig. 3). Here the architecture is somewhat more minimalistic. Instead of small pilasters, regular supporting pillars were erected, and the exterior decoration is limited to the doorways, constructed of moulded and glazed bricks. The same architectural trends are common in the Danish Realm as well as in the Hanseatic communities of the Baltic around the year 1300 (as for instance in the Cathedral Church of Odense; cf. DK Odense Amt 1990: 228–230; Steenberg 1935: 179–180).

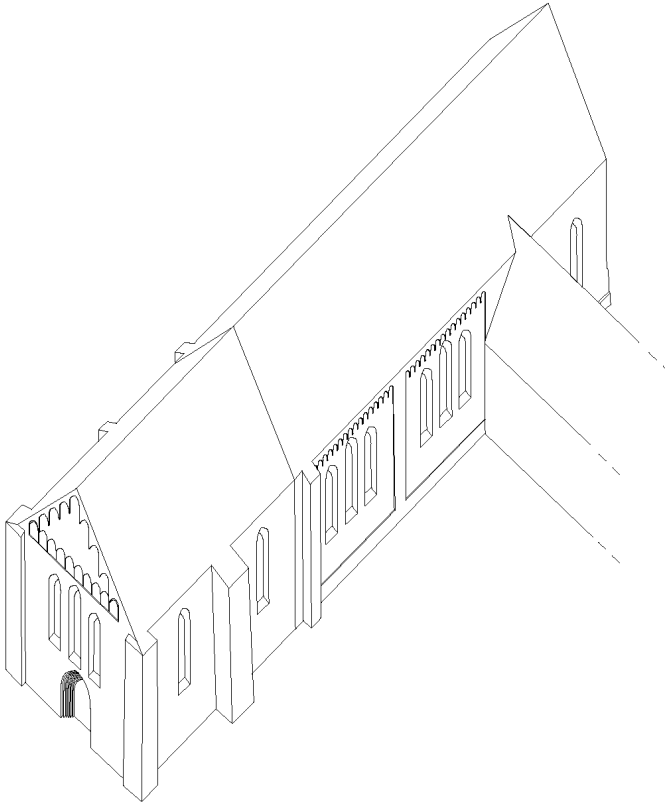
The next phases of construction seem to be the two chapels on the north side of the church, the eastern chapel being the oldest. Both are characterized by late gothic traits – the general simplicity with no use of moulded bricks and the gothic vaulting technique. From written sources it is known that the noble family of Gyldenstjerne erected a chapel by the church, where Mourids Nielsen Gyldenstjerne was buried in 1504, which must be consistent with one of these (Krongaard Kristensen 2013: 411). During the same period, the construction works on the friary buildings must have

<sup>5</sup> The architectural trends of the Jutish monuments are heavily influenced by the brick-architecture on Zealand (coined the Zealand Style) originating in the latter part of the twelfth century (Krongaard Kristensen 2003: 94–96; 2009; Nawrocki 2010: 71–86).

<sup>6</sup> As comparative examples for the church, the Jutish Cistercian monasteries of Øm, Vitskøl and Løgum can be mentioned, as well as the oldest part of the Cathedral in Aarhus, cf. Steenberg 1935: 156–159; Krongaard Kristensen 2009: 60–62, 72–73.



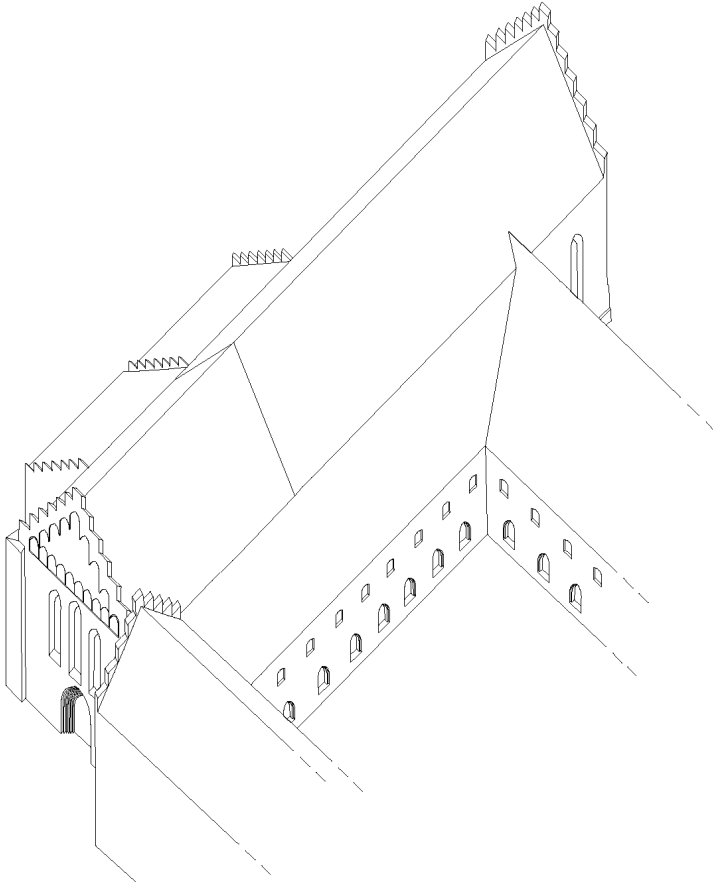
*Fig. 2. The east gable of the Dominican church in Viborg. The gable was damaged by fire in 1726, after which the top was torn down – however, a detailed analysis of the gable makes it possible to partially reconstruct it. Above a granite plinth, the wall face is divided into five sections by half-columns and topped with round arches. In the three central sections, a tall, slim lancet-shaped window is placed and in the outermost sections the brickwork is laid partially in opus spicatum. Apart from the gable the façade architecture on the exterior walls with quatrefoil and circular blindings, the slim lancet-shaped windows (in some bays gathered in groups of three), and the round arched friezes terminating in pilasters, as well as the use of massive ringvaults, all give the impression of high-class architecture. Photo: ML 2014.*



*Fig. 3. Axonometric reconstruction of the Dominican friary in Viborg seen for the southwest around 1300. The church consists of two separate phases with an adjoining east wing. Drawing: ML 2012.*

been massive, and it is also during this period that the cloister walks were built (fig. 4; Hjerminde 2014: 673).

With regards to the remaining complex, the buildings were torn down after the Reformation, and our knowledge of the different buildings are based solely on a few excavations. It appears that the complex during the thirteenth century consisted of



*Fig. 4. Axonometric reconstruction of the Dominican friary in Viborg seen for the southwest around the time of Reformation. The church and cloister building have by this phase expanded heavily. Drawing: ML 2012.*

an east wing that was fairly long, whereas the south and west wing as well as the cloister walks were constructed in the late middle ages (Levin Nielsen 1974).

In sum: Larger construction works are seen during the century immediately after the convent's establishment, and again a veritable building boom can be detected in the decades around 1500.



### **The Dominican Friary of Ribe**

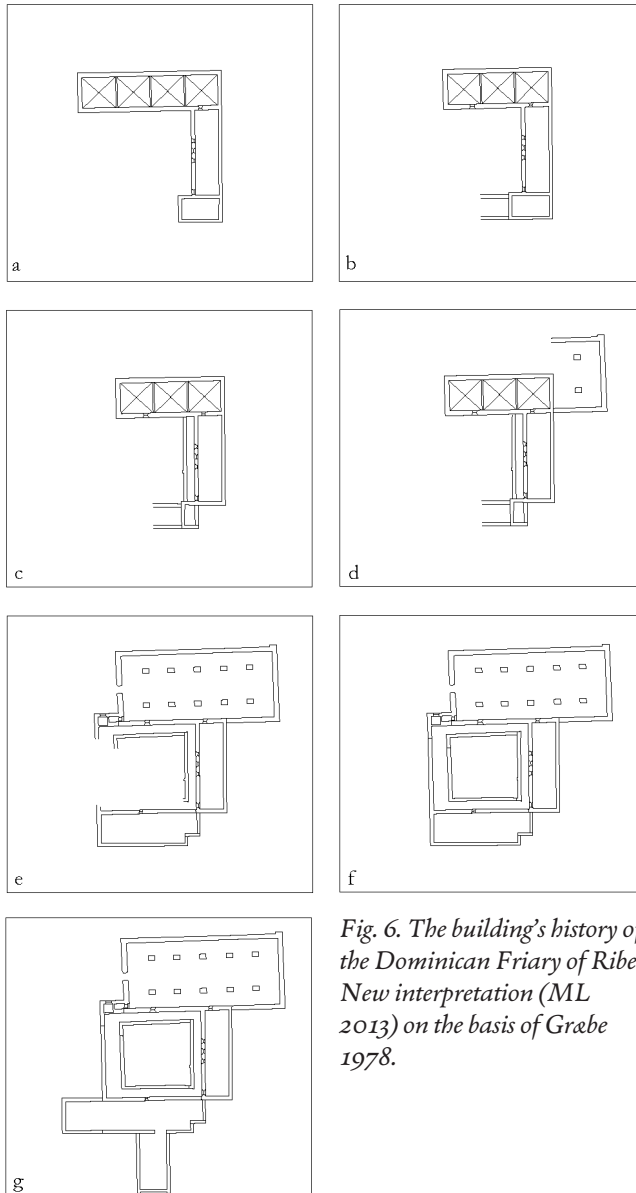
The Dominican friary of Ribe was founded in 1228 on the bank of the Ribe River. Despite the poor conditions for raising stone building in the marshy lands surrounding Ribe,<sup>7</sup> the friary is today one of the best preserved in Denmark; the east wing and an adjoining wing south of the main complex were torn down in the post-medieval period. After the Reformation, the friary served as a hospital (fig. 5).



*Fig. 5. Section of the cloisterwalk at the Dominican friary of Ribe. The majority of the complex can be dated to the late medieval period. Photo: ML 2008.*

Already in 1978, Henrik Græbe from the Danish National Museum published a study on the building's history of the Dominican friary of Ribe (Græbe 1978). It summarizes the knowledge gathered on the site, and despite later critique and new interpretations (fig. 6; DK Ribe Amt 2; *Søvsø* 2014: 721–724), it provided a fairly consistent understanding of the development of the complex.

<sup>7</sup> During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was considered repeatedly to tear down the church, due to the unstable foundations (DK Ribe Amt 1981: 720).



*Fig. 6. The building's history of the Dominican Friary of Ribe. New interpretation (ML 2013) on the basis of Gråbe 1978.*

The early phases of development are consistent with the establishment of the basic needs: A church, and an adjoining eastern wing with dormitory and chapter house, and perhaps also a small southern wing with the refectory (fig. 6a). Due to the architectural traits (which to a large degree resembles that of the church in Viborg, cf. above), the oldest church and the east wing should probably be dated to the first half of the thirteenth century.

In the two centuries following, it appears that there hardly were any construction works on the friary precinct (fig. 6b–c) – except for the demolition of parts of the church, the construction of an eastern cloister walk, and some smaller changes to the south wing. Especially the demolition of the western part of the church indicates that the friars probably had immense problems with the poor conditions in the marshy areas for construction works.

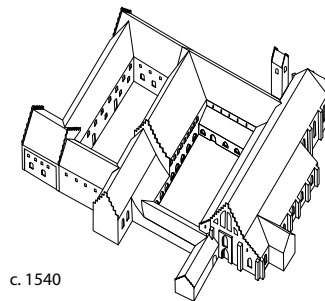
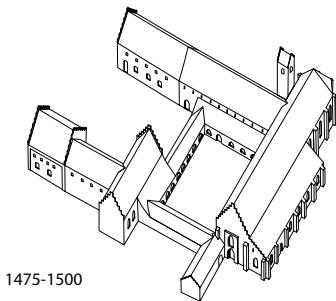
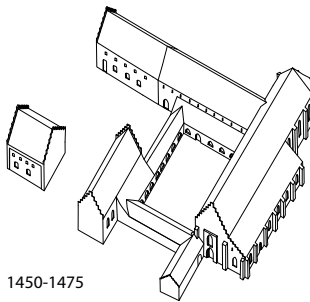
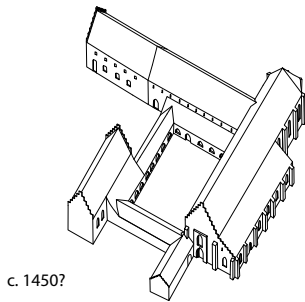
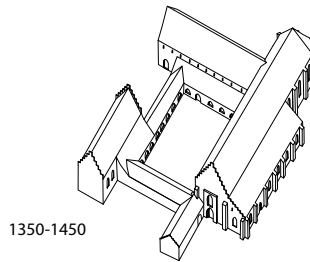
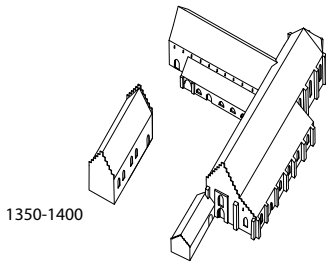
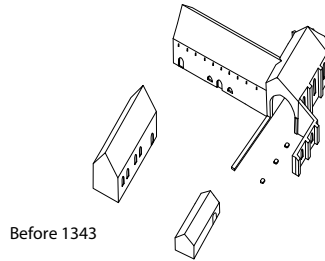
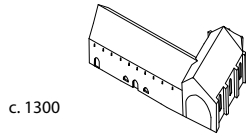
During the latter part of the fifteenth century, measures were taken to expand the derelict friary church and by the end of the fifteenth century a large three-aisled church was completed. The actual complex also expanded with the construction of additional wings to the south as well as the remaining part of the cloister walks (fig. 6d–g).

In sum: During the thirteenth century the basic parts of the friary were constructed, however the majority of the preserved remains stem from the decades immediately prior to the Reformation.

### **The Franciscan Friary of Odense**

In comparison with the majority of mendicant convents, the friary in Odense was established rather late. A royal donation secured the friary's existence from 1279 (DD II,2: no. 394), and by the end of the Middle Ages, it was amongst the largest Franciscan friaries in Scandinavia with two separate cloisters. The preserved parts of the complex consist of the northern cloister, the eastern wing and a small part of the cloister walk from the southern part of the complex. The church and parts of the southern cloister were demolished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Larsen 2013: 9–11).

Despite the fact that a large part of the friary is demolished, it is possible on the basis of both archaeological and written sources to get a fairly detailed image of the friary's development (fig. 7). In the initial phase around 1300, parts of the church were constructed and probably also the east wing. Sketches of the church drawn prior to the demolition gives the clear impression of a monument influenced by the same architectural trends as the nearby Cathedral Church in Odense, where the oldest parts of the brick-built church stems from the decades around 1300 (DK Odense Amt 1



*Facing page: Fig. 7. Axonometric reconstructions of the Franciscan friary of Odense seen from the south. Drawing: ML 2012.*

1990: 223). With regards to the Franciscan church, written sources state that it was finished and consecrated in 1343 (ScrMin II 1922: 299), by which time a couple of buildings around the inner cloister were erected.

During the following century the complex slowly evolved with the construction of a cloister walk, and perhaps also an addition to the east wing. From the 1450s onwards, building initiatives seem to gradually increase culminating in the first decades of the sixteenth century. At this time the outer cloister was constructed, and measures were taken to refurbish the church (Larsen 2013: 87–92). Most of the construction works during the decades around 1500 were probably on the initiative of the royal family. The spouse of King Hans, Queen Christine, had a fond relationship with the Franciscan order, and erected a memorial complex for her family in the choir of the Franciscan church (Bøggild Johannsen 2014). The Franciscan friars in Odense benefitted well from their good relationship with the royal family.

Despite a slight decline in building activity in the decades around 1400, the Franciscan friary in Odense saw building activity in more or less all its years of existence with a veritable boom in the years immediately preceding the Reformation.

### **The Carmelite Friary of Sæby**

As a final example, a late medieval establishment should be presented. The Carmelite friary of Sæby in Northern Jutland came into existence by the hand of Jep Friis, bishop of Børglum, who donated the parish church in the newly established town to the brethren. The establishment took place during the 1460s – the exact date is unknown, but the friary existed in 1472 (ActaPont no. 2662).

The brethren took over a small, single-celled church constructed in the mid-fifteenth century, and quickly began to expand it. A larger chancel was erected to the east and the walls of the original church were raised. New vaults were constructed, carrying several murals dated to the decades after 1500 (Rübner Jørgensen 2007: 112). At a later point – during the first three decades of the sixteenth century – a larger chapel on the south side of the church was erected alongside a tower at the west gable (fig. 8).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Stylistically, the chapel on the south side of the church resembles a common east-Danish motif from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, inspired by the architecture of St. Mary's Church in Stralsund (Licht 1976: 38–39).



*Fig. 8. The Carmelite church in Sæby seen from the east. The original parish church was heavily expanded by the Carmelite brethren during the years prior to the Reformation, the alterations shaping the church space until today. Photo: ML 2016.*

In addition to the church, friary buildings were erected on the north side of the church. Despite our knowledge of the claustral buildings are based on a very fragmented archaeological material, evidence for an eastern range with an adjoining cloister walk is sound as well as the ascertainment of an additional wing outside the inner cloister. Detailed studies of the excavation material as well as an analysis of the church also suggest that the southern cloister walk along the church was constructed, as well as a north and west range (Bentsen 2017). During a period of approximately 60 years, the Carmelites in Sæby constructed a friary complex which in terms of size was equal the fairly older friaries of the Franciscan and Dominican Order.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The same tendency is characteristic for other Carmelite establishments, including that of Elsinore and Aarhus (Lorenzen 1924; Krongaard Kristensen 2008).

## **Periods of fluctuation**

The four examples given above are more or less consistent with the general tendencies in the dynamic development of the Danish mendicant friaries during the course of the middle ages. In sum, three different phases of development can be distinguished on the basis of the intensity in construction work.

### **Establishments (Thirteenth Century)**

The establishment of a monastic institution always necessitates the erection of some sort of building complex to house the convent's inhabitant. And despite their noble ideals also the mendicants had need for facilities to accommodate their activities.

As can be noted from the examples above, the initial building phase often comprised a rather large complex. First and foremost a friary church and in addition to this an eastern wing with dormitory, chapter house, and different other quarters, and in several cases also a wing or building with space for the refectory. In total, a fairly large complex, wielding space to accommodate the basic functions of monastic life.

What differs between the friaries is typically the scale of construction work, and to some degree also how fast the buildings were erected, which mainly was related to how large donations were given the different convents in the early phase of existence. From written sources we know that the founders of the Franciscan friary of Nysted in 1286 provided the convent with the financial means to erect a church and an eastern wing (ScrMin II 1922: 300). From the Franciscan friary in Odense, sources suggest that the King – who also founded the convent – combined and donated several plots in the town area and probably provided the means necessary to build at least the church. His daughters were buried here in the 1280s, he donated the altar-piece, and some of the limestone capitals carrying the vaults in the chancel were decorated with the royal coat of arms (fig. 9).

In some cases, however, the initial donations might not have proven large enough to substantiate a mendicant convent. In Vordingborg, a Dominican friary was founded in 1253. A written source refers to the friary in 1261 (DD II,1: no. 332), but after this point the friary is never again mentioned in written sources, nor is there any knowledge of its existence from archaeological sources. It has been suggested that the convent did not flourish in the town and consequently was either dissolved or transferred to the nearby town of Næstved, where a Dominican friary was founded in the 1270s (Gallén 1947: 28, 66).

The town of Næstved also presents some cases, where political issues gave problems for the mendicant's establishment. The town's most prominent land owner in the thirteenth century was the Benedictine monastery of Skovkloster, situated just





*Fig. 9. Limestone capital from the Franciscan church in Odense carrying the royal coat of arms. The convent benefitted greatly from the royal family during the entire medieval period. After Danmarks Kirker. Odense Amt 2001.*

north of the town. When the Franciscans arrived in 1240, they were harshly treated by Skovkloster, despite them having the financial support of their founder, Ingerd of Regenstien, who belonged to one of the most powerful noble houses, Hviderne (Helms 1940: 415–417). The conflict ended thirty years later in 1270, when the Franciscans were finally allowed to stay in town – on strict terms (DD II,2: no. 153).

Despite these specific cases, the mendicant orders flourished during the latter part of the thirteenth century, with several construction works initiated or completed. In a way it is peculiar, since the period in general is characterized by the political and social unrest in the years following the death of Valdemar the Victorious in 1241, where his sons fought each other above the crown, the conflict of Investiture between king and archbishop, the financial decline and continuous pawning of the Realm.<sup>10</sup> Despite

<sup>10</sup> The larger landowning monasteries like the Benedictines or the Cistercians were probably more influenced by the political conflicts of the thirteenth century. The Cronicle from the Cistercian abbey of Øm mentions several incidents of harassment in the years



these tumultuous years, the mendicant orders continued to flourish; concluding several of their initiated building programs in the following century.

### **The Black Death and Beyond (Fourteenth Century)**

Traditionally, this period is associated with a notion of a general societal decline, partly due to the agrarian crisis of the first half of the fourteenth century, and the Black Death and subsequent plague epidemics (Ulsig 1991: 21–25; Nyborg 2009). And indeed, this period is marked by financially harsh times as well as a massive decline in population, as can be asserted from written sources as well as archaeological (Engberg 1999: 10–12).

With regard to construction works associated with ecclesiastical institutions, there appear to have been less activity than in the period before. However, the reason for the lacking intensity should mainly be seen in context with other factors than solely the 14th century crisis. The main construction works of the thirteenth century concerned the erection of parish churches which by the mid-thirteenth century appears to have been completed (Mackeprang 1944: 19; Johannsen & Smidt 1981: 91). Also, as mentioned above, the basic construction works by the mendicant orders were more or less completed during the thirteenth century. The erection of churches and monastic buildings in the fourteenth century is thus limited to mainly churches in urban centers or independent institutions such as monasteries.

The Franciscan church in Horsens (fig. 10) is an often-used example on the effect of the Black Death. During the period 1325–1350 the existing church underwent a large rebuilding process, in which the chancel was expanded, and the nave built taller. The chancel was finished, but the rebuilding of the nave was halted at some point – supposedly due to the Black Death (DK Århus Amt 10 2005:5720; Nyborg 2009: 50). The dating of the phase of rebuilding is based on stylistic traits, thus there is no sound evidence for the halted building plans being contemporary with the years of plague. Recent studies of the building's history in Horsens have also suggested that the rebuilding process took several years, and probably were not concluded until the second half of the fourteenth century – after the Black Death (Krongaard Kristensen 2016: 71).

There is a tendency in some publications to use the Black Death as a means of dating building phases, rather than taking the actual building into account. With reference to the Black Death, the high-gothic rebuilding of the Franciscan church in Svendborg is proposed concluded before 1350 (DK Svendborg Amt 1 2013: 557), de-

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following king Valdermar's death (Olrík 1932: 41–45). Their agrarian based economy was far more sensitive to general political and financial conflicts than the mendicants.



*Fig. 10. The Franciscan church in Horsens. East gable. The church was heavily restored in the 19th century, however the overall phases of the buildings history are still decipherable. The east gable along with the choir was rebuilt in high gothic style during the 14th century  
Photo: ML 2015.*

spite a written source mentioning that the church was consecrated in 1361! (ScrMin II 1922: 293–294)

Among other examples of building projects in the mendicant friaries during the latter part of the fourteenth century, examples should be mentioned from Aarhus and Roskilde. Probably in the 1360s, the vaulting of nave of the Dominican church in Aarhus was completed; dated by a mural inscription attributing the vaulting to the generous donation of the nobleman Stig Andersen Hvide (d. 1369) (Søvsø 2011: 10–11). Moreover, in the Franciscan friary of Roskilde, it is known from written sources that Queen Margrete (1387–1412) donated the funds to build a new refectory building (with a vaulted cellar) (ScrMin II 1922: 294).

The above-mentioned examples are only a few, and for many mendicant friaries it should be remembered that there are only few indications for construction works in the second half of the fourteenth century. However, apart from focusing solely on crisis and plague as a reason for the decline in building intensity, one might ask *why* should the mendicants continue expanding their friaries? The early fourteenth century saw the completion of several large-scale building works initiated during the phase of establishment.<sup>11</sup> At the Franciscan friary of Odense, the church was completed by 1343, and alongside that, the friary consisted of an eastern wing with dormitory and chapterhouse, and a refectory building. Keeping the original ascetic life views of the friars in mind, and remembering the mendicants own notion of living in *houses* and not *monasteries*, one might consider if not the complexes to some degree might have been perceived as *finished* at this point in time?

When comparing the Mendicant examples with other monastic institutions there appear to be a slight discrepancy. Other monastic institutions – as the Benedictines and Cistercians – who were relying on an economy based on agriculture and production, were probably harder hit by the agrarian crisis, Black Death and de-population, than the Mendicant orders. Sites like the Benedictine monastery of Glenstrup and the Benedictine nunnery of Randers were dissolved in the early fifteenth century (Lorenzen 1933: 60, 92), which might have been a long-term result of the fourteenth century crisis. Also, the abandonment of several parish churches during the high and late medieval period should probably be attributed to the crisis (Engberg 1999: 10–12).

Looking beyond the borders of the Danish Realm it is worth noting that the crisis and plague had very different impact. Norway was probably harder hit than both Denmark and Sweden (Sandnes 1981: 110–112; Myrdal 2003: 243–245), whereas the coastal region south of the Baltic seems to more or less flourish in the

<sup>11</sup> E.g. the chancel in the Franciscan church of Ystad and the Dominican church of Holbæk.

aftermath of the Black Death. Dendrochronological datings from a several churches in the region of Mecklenburg indicate a decline in the years preceding the Black Death, whereas the building intensity increases greatly in the second half of the fourteenth century before a new decline (Schöfbeck 2014: 190–193). The crisis thus had a much-differentiated impact in different regions and on different societal levels.

Despite large parts of society were dramatically hit by the crisis of the fourteenth century; it appears that the Danish mendicant friaries in many ways benefitted from it. The Black Death and later epidemics gave way to a more extrovert spiritual and religious way of life that probably had great impact on the order's relationship to society. While the orders symbolized an ascetic life in pursuit of the Lord, the friaries laid space to preaching, burials and commemorative masses that probably applied to society's growing need for spiritual guidance, thus attracting an overall interest and financial support from the laity.<sup>12</sup> The increasing interest from the laity combined with a more complex spiritual practice probably had great importance for the building activities of the mendicant orders in the centuries to come.

### **The Late Medieval Period (Fifteenth–Sixteenth Centuries)**

During primarily the second part of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century, the ecclesiastical building boom reached a climax, and for the mendicant orders this meant several major construction works that expanded their building mass significantly.

It was not only the mendicants that experienced this rapid expansion. Parish churches were subject to major changes, other monastic orders flourished, castles and fortification were expanded and the construction of brick-built houses in urban centers increased as well. It appears that in general the Danish Realm during the course of the fifteenth century could provide a fertile economic and social climate for this type of large-scale investments. And construction works continued to the very end – in 1521, the Franciscan nunnery of Odense was established (ActaPont nos. 4681, 4683) – despite it has been argued that the late medieval building boom reached its climax already around 1500 (Wienberg 1993: 119–121).

Since the 1980s, the economical factor has often been seen as the main explanatory model for the mendicant's expansion in the late medieval period. The general economic growth should also be acknowledged as the underlying facilitator for the building boom, yet for the mendicant orders other factors can easily have proven more central.

<sup>12</sup> Studies in the amount of donations to the Church shows that plague epidemics had an increasing effect on society's contributions, and the mendicant orders might have benefitted greatly from it (Bisgaard 2008; Bisgaard 2009: 97–98; Gøgsig Jakobsen 2014: 63).

The late medieval wave of Reform known as the Observants, have also been seen as one of the main economic factors behind the material growth of the mendicant friaries. The Observants held a strong discipline, dictating that the individual friaries were not allowed to be landowners – which during the high medieval period had been a more or less common feature among several Danish friaries. The explanatory model suggests that the financial means acquired by the selling of estates was used on expanding the friary complex. However, the notion does not coincide chronologically – the building intensity is increasing rapidly already from the third quarter of the fifteenth century, whereas most Franciscan friaries did not reform until the years around 1500 (fig. 11). Also, a study of the Dominican convents of Denmark shows that despite the friaries were reformed in the late 15th century, properties and estates were to a large degree not sold (Gøgsig Jakobsen 2008: 243–245).

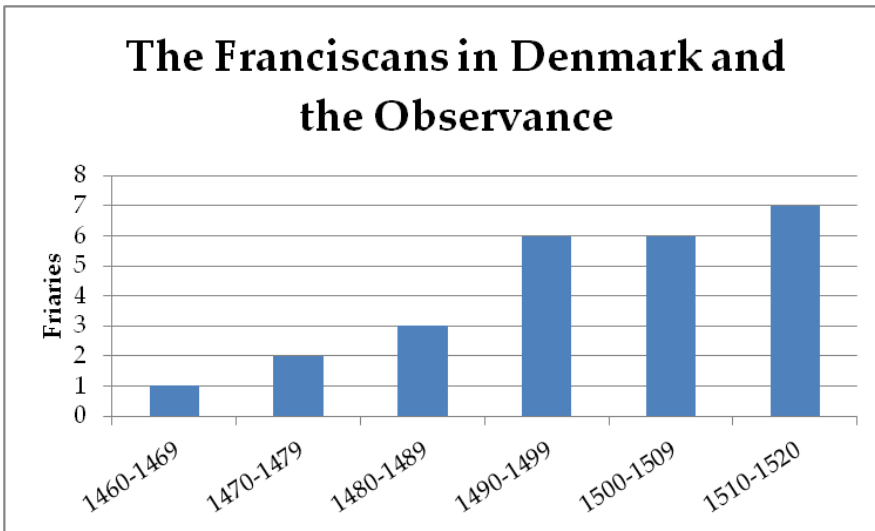


Fig. 11. The Franciscan friary's conversion to the Observance sorted by decade. Most friaries converted in first decades of the 16th century, succeeding the initial phase of the late medieval building boom.

In an assessment of the material growth of the friaries during the late medieval period, it is also important to notice that the individual convents had very different economical backgrounds. Some convents had powerful benefactors (perhaps with specific

agendas), which greatly influenced the expansion of the friary complex. The Franciscan friary of Odense greatly benefitted from the strong relationship to Queen Christine in the years around 1500, which is also the period when the building intensity reached its peak. The pious queen donated several larger and smaller gifts to the brethren – several of which have been recorded in her court accounts.

The court accounts of Queen Christine present a phenomenal source to the economy and material culture of a large-scale household in the late medieval period. It is however also a unique source, which should be used carefully.<sup>13</sup> It should be taken into account that many smaller gifts and donations from the nobility or bourgeoisie not necessarily have left any written evidence, and that the household accounts are both heavily informative as well as biased.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of giving donations to the church was widely popular during the late medieval period, and was probably linked to the increasingly intense religious life of the period. With the introduction of the *devotio moderna*, the aftermath of the plague epidemics of the fourteenth century and the rise of a more spiritualistic belief, the interactions between church and layman increased. Commemorative masses, the instigation of altars or chapels and the generally outward activities of the mendicants facilitated a close connection between the friary and the surrounding community. The enhanced and expanded spiritual and religious practice should probably be regarded as one of the primary reasons for the immense building activity during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup>

In relation to the explanation presented above, a functional interpretation might also be put forth. The building expansion of the friaries shows some trends in the late medieval period. Despite many additions and alterations seem to be individually assigned to the different convents; the result by the time of the Reformation gives a far more homogenous picture of the material culture than displayed in the earliest phase of settlement. And especially one characteristic is prominent – a structuration of the complex around two separated cloisters (fig. 12).

The best preserved example of this is the above mentioned Franciscan friary of Odense, but archaeological evidence suggests that this plan arrangement during the

<sup>13</sup> In a study of the donations to the Franciscan Order in the medieval period, the sixteenth century is in particular seen as a peak – however, the bias created by Christine's household accounts are not taken into consideration (Nybo Rasmussen 2002: 321–324).

<sup>14</sup> In a study of medieval wills, it has been argued that only donations including land and estate have left written evidence (Ingesman 1987: 205).

<sup>15</sup> Many of the friaries cloister walks were either completed or newly erected during the late medieval period, perhaps due to a spatial need for facilitating processions (Krongaard Kristensen 2000: 53).



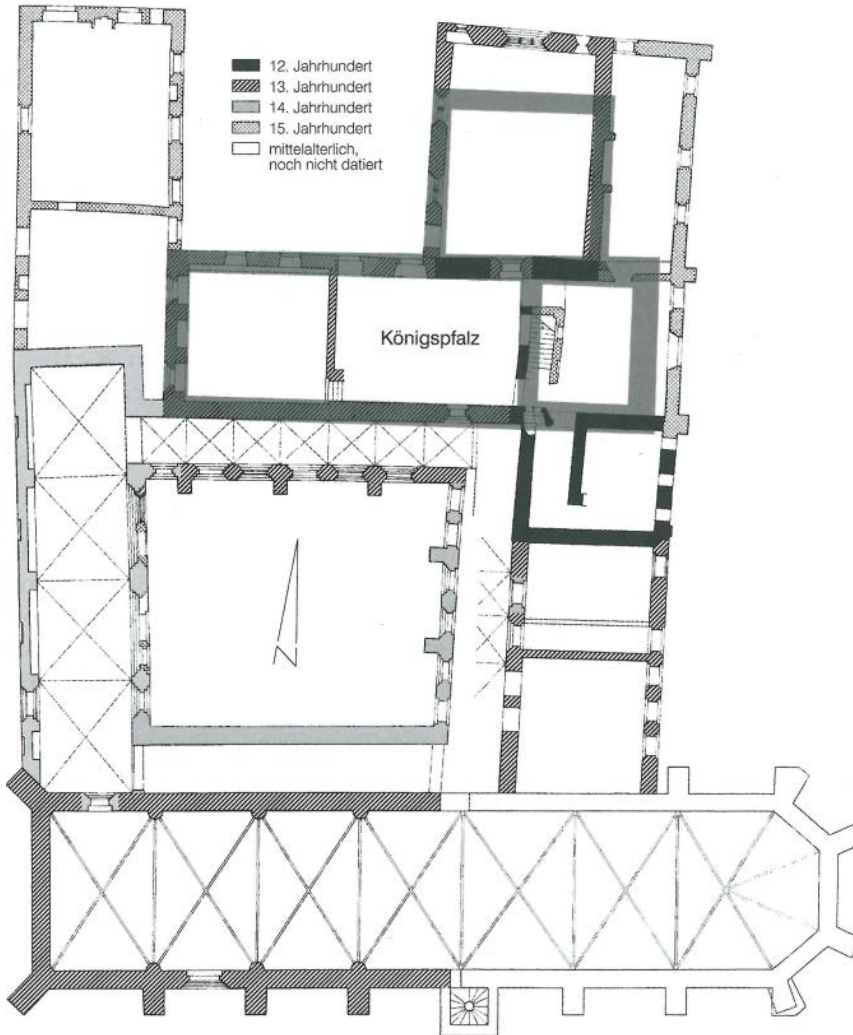


Fig. 12. The Franciscan friary of Schleswig is characterized by several phases, however at the end of the medieval period, the complex was structured around two cloisters (the northern was probably closed with a wall to the north) as it is known from several cases in North Europe. After Müller 2014.

fifteenth century became prominent in several Danish friaries, e.g. the Franciscans in Viborg, Ribe, Schleswig, Flensburg and Halmstad. In many cases (like the Dominican friaries of Viborg and Odense) the plan arrangement is probable; however the archaeological evidence is still too fragmentary to present a secure interpretation. On the southern coast of the Baltic, e.g. in the Hanseatic communities of Lübeck, Wismar, Rostock and Stralsund, the arrangement with two separate cloisters is very common among mendicant complexes (Untermann 2009: 199–201).

It has been suggested that the emergence of the dual-cloister plan should be seen as a consequence of the outward activities of the friars as well as the surrounding community's interest in conducting different secular activities within the friary precinct, thus dictating an arrangement with a secluded cloister for the brethren and a cloister with a semi-public appearance (Cante 2010: 69–70; Larsen 2012: 16; Larsen 2018: 215–220). The need for space, both functional and spiritual, increased during the latter part of the medieval period, and should to a large degree be seen as the primary source for the mendicant boom in construction works.

### **Concluding remarks**

The mendicant friaries changed continuously in the course of the medieval period. Being dependent on an economy primarily based on alms and donations, the gradual expansion of the friaries was for a great deal characterized by ad hoc solutions. Nonetheless, these several small additions over the course of centuries transformed the small and ascetic mendicant houses into large and impressive complexes.

The gradual expansion of the mendicant friaries can be divided into three main periods. The first period, from the earliest establishments and until c. 1300, was characterized by the establishment of the majority of Franciscan and Dominican houses, and saw the construction of the oldest parts of the friary complexes – e.g. the church and often the eastern range. The establishing phase more or less ceased in the early fourteenth century.

The second period, the fourteenth century, was to a less degree characterized by expansion, and in many cases the building activity at the mendicant friaries was significantly scaled down in comparison with the preceding period. Despite the fourteenth century – and particularly the latter part – has been seen as an era of general decline, it is evident that some parts of society flourished in the aftermath of the Black Death. Some mendicant friaries clearly continued expanding, yet for others the phase of expansion had ended several years prior to the Black Death.



The third period, from c. 1400 and until the Reformation, was clearly marked by an impressive intensity in building activity. Many friaries were expanded, and large brick-built houses were erected, cloister walks were constructed, churches renewed, restored and refurbished.

To a large degree these fluctuating periods were a product of general economical, political and above all religious developments that influenced society as a whole – or at least, they shaped the basic frame in which each friary could develop and expand. In many cases, it is clear that the many different ad hoc building projects should be seen in context with contextually significant factors for each friary.

As with the example of the Franciscan friary of Odense that during the course of its existence evolved into the largest Franciscan friary in the Nordic countries. The friary was established on the behest of the royal family, which remained a strong and faithful benefactor during the entire medieval period. Most of the building activity in the establishing phase should probably be attributed donations from the royal family, and in the late medieval period it was obviously Queen Christine, who was benefactor and protector of the convents.

Also, in the case of the Carmelite friary in Sæby, the rapid growth of the friary in the latter part of the fifteenth century was due to excessive donations from the founder Jep Friis, the bishop of Børglum. The establishment of the friary was part of a political strategy by the bishops in Børglum, in their attempt to establish and maintain a town or trading community on the east coast of Jutland.

Political strategy wielded a great significance as to whether friaries flourished or declined, and in the above-mentioned example of the Mendicant houses in Næstved, it is clear that the powerful Benedictine monastery of Skovkloster, located in the outskirts of the medieval town, were not fond of the mendicant brethren. For several decades in the thirteenth century, the establishments of the mendicant houses were halted, and the political climate between the monastic institutions was tense during the following centuries.

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