

Welcome to Kronborg Castle

Kronborg became part of the UNESCO world heritage list in 2000. Denmark has three other sites on the list, namely the Jelling Rune stones, Roskilde Cathedral and Stevns Klint.

The reason for accepting Kronborg on the list is lengthy, but here is a summary:

“Located on a strategically important site commanding the Sund, the stretch of water between Denmark and Sweden, the Royal castle of Kronborg at Helsingør (Elsinore) is of immense symbolic value to the Danish people and played a key role in the history of northern Europe in the 16th-18th centuries. Work began on the construction of this outstanding Renaissance castle in 1574, and its defences were reinforced according to the canons of the period's military architecture in the late 17th century. It has remained intact to the present day. It is world-renowned as Elsinore, the setting of Shakespeare's Hamlet”.

The UNESCO World Heritage list includes some of the most spectacular sites in the world – to name a few, The pyramids, The Akropolis, Angkor Wat, Taj Mahal and numerous other places. The UNESCO world heritage list is made up by a committee of 21 countries, who take up the propositions for the areas all over the world where the sites are located. And then the countries oblige themselves to protect these areas or sites.

If a country has sites worth protecting, but is unable to afford these obligations, they can apply for funding in the UNESCO foundation.



Courtyard

Now, the courtyard, the tall walls, the decorations in limestone and plaster, the copper roof etc, basically all the splendour of this renaissance castle is rather far from what Kronborg Castle looked like to begin with.

The first records we have of a castle being built here in Elsinore, are from 1427, shortly after Erik of Pomerania started collecting the due at Øresund. Obviously he needed some way of enforcing his new golden egg. It was a late medieval castle, a square building, high walls around it for protection which actually still exist in the outer walls of the present castle.

In 1574 - 76 Frederik II. began extending the outer fortifications and at the same time he began changing the castle from the outdated medieval castle into what we see now. At first, it was a redbrick building with details in limestone, but as you all know, during the course of a construction work, there are usually added costs - and the king decided that he wanted to show off his wealth by covering the entire castle in limestone - the peak of architectural fashion in those days.

So what we see now, is basically the castle as it was conceived in the late 1500s. This goes for the outer fortifications as well.

The architectural style is “Dutch Renaissance”, and it distinguishes itself from the Italian Renaissance by being rather more elaborate, more detailed, extensive use of metals, e.g. copper for the roof and often for decorations as well. I guess it is ok to say that Dutch renaissance means more “icing on the cake”, so to speak. More was more – and the famous words by Mies Van der Rohe, “less is more”, is something that would have been absolutely out of the question in the 1570s.



Interior from the church – which gives us an idea of what the rest of the castle has looked like. So more is more – and even more is better still!!

First room

Erik of Pomerania's name is actually associated with a curse in Danish, we say, in the meaning of "Go to Hell" "Go to Pomerania". The reason for this was that Erik of Pomerania was not exactly a financially responsible king, he bankrupted the kingdom to a rather a large extent with wars in southern Jutland, and since then that curse has been clinging to his name. He wasn't popular. But he did do one thing that stands out. He invented the Øresunds Due, and in that respect secured the wealth of many, many Danish kings succeeding him.



Erik of Pomerania



The guns overlooking Øresund

The thing is that the Danish Kingdom was a very different story then, compared to now. We are actually standing in a location that is very close to the center of the country in the 1500s. Denmark extended far to the east, and encompassed most of what is now southern Sweden. So when all the merchant ships passed through Øresund, they passed through Danish territory. So in some sense you could say that a

due was in order. In return he offered the merchants the safe passage and protection from pirates. Hence the military facility. Light houses were built along the coast as well, so something was done to fulfill the promise.

It is contradictory that the "bankruptcy king" made this new invention, the Øresunds due, which turned out to be one of the most stable sources of income for the Danish State in the next four hundred years. It stopped as late as 1855, even though Denmark lost the southern part of Sweden in 1660. In spite of this, it was still possible to collect the fee, given the fact that the ships weren't actually passing through Danish waters.

This did little to alter the fact that the Øresunds due was detested by the merchants in the entire region of the Baltic sea, which extends to many, many countries, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Finland and Sweden. And in 1855, an American ship announced that they were not going to pay the due anymore. And that was the end of it.

The way the due was calculated would shift through time. To begin with it was a fixed rate, but later the due was set to 1 percent of the cargo value. Now, as you can imagine, this would easily lead to the captains lying about the value of their cargo. So Peder Oxe, a minister of the king, Frederik II., proposed that the king should demand the first right to buy the cargo. Now, if the value was set too low, he would get a ship's cargo for a bargain. So now the captains would actually often set the value a little higher, in order to be sure to avoid losing the cargo.

The Queens quarters

In the queen's quarters, the bedrooms are relatively small. There are fireplaces, so you could keep the bedrooms heated – but still, such small rooms for a queen? The explanation is the little ice age, which I believe is from around 1300 – 1800. Walls this thick, made of stone, would be impossible to heat up, no matter how much firewood you used. So the small rooms are a sign of the climatic challenges even kings and queens had to meet.

As a matter of fact, a servant would heat up the bed for the queen during winter... and supposedly leave before she went in... given the fact that the marriage between Queen Sofie and Frederik II. was a happy marriage, I assume the waiters knew their duties and kept to them.

The office of Frederik II.

The castle is one of many castles that the king possesses. Governing the kingdom meant travelling from one to the other, in order to keep the kingdom together. It was a display of power when the king entered the castle with the court, and the rest of the time, the castles would be half empty. It is fitting to make a small stop right here, because of the portrait of Frederik II, who turned the medieval castle into what we see today, basically.



Frederik II, King of Denmark

Frederik II. married quite late. He couldn't just go out and get himself a wife, it had to be a suitable party. And in those days royalty didn't marry for fun or love, marriages were part of political alliances. He finally married at 38, but preceding the marriage, there had been an ongoing search for a suitable bride. Actually, Elisabeth I. of England was one of the women he tried to convince to come to Denmark, but as you know, she had her hands full governing England, in one of the longest and most prosperous governing periods for Britain - and she was known as the virgin queen.

Marie of Pomerania was summoned to the castle, because here was someone, who could be suitable – and the kingdom needed an heir rather desperately – Frederik wasn't getting any younger. But then something strange happened. Frederik couldn't get his eyes off of one of the ladies accompanying Marie. This was Sofie of Mecklenburg, only 14 years old, (but people grew up faster back then). He fell in love. So the marriage between Frederik II. and Sofie is actually one of the rare instances where a royal wedding came about out of something as reckless and irresponsible as love.



Sofie of Mecklenburg

The table

Even the meals were a display of excess. 4 kilos of food were calculated for each person. Now, 4 kilos is an enormous amount of food for one person. But the solution for getting through this was a waiter with a goose's feather and a silver bowl. When you were full, you simply threw up and continued eating.

There are no forks or knives here. A knife was a personal possession, and forks were invented, but used to hold down the roast. So you cut a piece of meat and ate with your fingers. The tablecloth served as the napkin.

For a standard party in the Ballroom, 24 courses were made – so there would be plenty of use for the servants with the feathers.

I know that this seems like a completely unacceptable way of behaving in our time. But it seems fitting to say that these people were responding rationally to the demands that were made on them, just like we like to think that we do. Obviously it is a demonstration of extreme wealth to behave like this, and in that way out of the ordinary – these people were the filthy rich of their day. But think of the things we do on an ordinary day that are just as much demonstrations of our extreme wealth – picking up your cell phone, starting your car, having had the possibility to educate ourselves for years and now do research. These things are just as much a luxury for the few, when we consider the world as such.

If we consider the castle as architecture and as construction, it is clear that the many, many people working here were far from simple or irrational. With the tools they had and, compared to today, relatively few constructional and architectural means at their disposal, I think it is fair to say that they were extremely clever, being able to achieve the successful construction of a castle this size, which still stands almost 450 years later. How many of the skyscrapers of New York will be there in 500 years?

Sometimes I think that we haven't been getting anymore clever at all... we just know how to manipulate nature in more ingenious ways – and spend more energy than we have.

Another lovestory

Now that we are in the queen's quarters, I might add to the drama of royal love stories, by telling you a little about the love affair between another queen of Denmark, namely the English Princess Caroline Mathilde and the German doctor Struensee, who accompanied Christian VII. and apparently had a good influence on him – he was also nicknamed “The mad king” – and is believed to have suffered from skizophrenia.

Struensee rose very quickly to power, partly because of his influence on the king, and partly because of his relationship with the queen – How he managed to be the queens lover and at the same time keep the king happy, I have no idea. But in

1772 it all came to an abrupt end, as he was found guilty of the relationship and for compromising the power of the king. He was beheaded and dismembered, his body laid out for public display. The sentence was very harsh, even for those days and probably served as a warning for anyone else who would take the new ideas of the enlightenment too seriously in DK. He had tried to reform the administration in that way and was punished for it by the old societal elite, who probably wouldn't want to give up their privileges.

The very same ideas resulted in one of the most important events in political history, the French Revolution... perhaps the advent of the development towards our modern democracies in Europe.

A recent Danish Film, which I believe was a runner up for the Oscar for best foreign film was made in 2012: "A Royal Affair".



In these chambers, the queen Caroline Mathilde, saw the last of Denmark, waiting for the ship to take her away, as she was banished from the Kingdom, her kids taken away from her and she was sent to Germany, where she died a few years later. A rather terrible destiny.

The Queen's gallery.

This is another of Frederik II's additions to the old castle, namely the queen's gallery. It was important for the king to make sure his queen could have easy access to the dancehall. As we all know, displaying grandeur and power is of the utmost importance for the ruler. So the queen could make her entrance through this long hallway with plenty of space for the fashion of the times, great, big dresses. It took 11 months to finish the queens gallery and 11 years for the castle. What's the explanation for this?



The Queen's Gallery

Well, the new queen had to get from her quarters to the Ballroom in a way that was suitable for her. She certainly couldn't be expected to walk over the courtyard. It would have been full of people at work, servants, kitchenhands, blacksmiths, carpenters, there would be cow's and horse's manure and what not. Not at all a place for the queen to be. When she saw this, she wasn't happy, of course. So she went back to Copenhagen, despite all of the king's efforts with his new castle. And not only did she not want to stay here, she locked up the door to her bedroom out of sheer disappointment – at least that's the way the story goes. Never, never underestimate the power of a disappointed wife!

It also tells us something about the relationship between Sofie and Frederik. Womens lib was no way near being on the agenda, but she knew how to get what she wanted – remember, a young woman, a girl even, by our standards, not even 20 years of age, confronting the monarch of an empire. She has my respect!

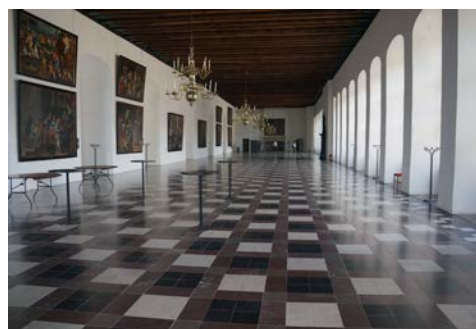
The pictures in here are painted by the dutch painter Gerrit van Honthorst, and depict scenes from the history in the preceding centuries of Danish supremacy in the Danish and Baltic area. You may know that our present queen is Queen Margrethe II., but here we see Margrethe I. She was the initiator of the Kalmar union, a political masterpiece which made Danish supremacy in the region possible for some 126 years from 1397 – 1523. It was a Union of the three Nordic countries, Sweden, Norway and Denmark – and the union meant that Erik of Pomerania was common king to the three lands, but, so the treaty says, obliged to govern them after their own laws. A form of provincial self rule. Margrethe I respected this, but when Erik came of age, he didn't. Rebellion in Sweden and dissatisfaction with his rule in Denmark was the result – perhaps even the beginning of the growing selfawareness of the Swedes, which ultimately resulted in the loss of southern Sweden in 1660 – and the beginning of the end of the Danish empire.



The paintings were commissioned by Christian IV. and were supposed to be hanging in the ceiling in the ballroom, which we shall enter in a few moments.

The Ballroom

Frederik II had the new gem in his architectural portfolio decorate to the highest standards of the time. The ballroom's ceiling was covered with a coffered and decorated ceiling until the fire in 1629. After that with paintings.



The ballroom walls were decorated with 40 tapestries depicting 101 Danish kings. You should imagine gatherings of kings, queens and the nobility in their finest robes, having parties beyond imagination, eating and drinking, dancing and what else goes on in a party. It is no wonder that Shakespeare heard of the castle and made it the setting of his perhaps most famous play, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

As we discussed on the tour, King James of England married the Danish princess, and it is quite likely that this choice of setting by Shakespeare was made in order to please King James – and perhaps to make sure to have instant hype around the play, since Kronborg was renowned in its own time.

The Ballroom was the first of its kind, and certainly famous for its parties. Frederik II. Loved parties and he wanted to make sure he was heard. So every time he raised his glass in a salute to his guests, a horn signal sounded and the guns on the

fortifications outside were fired. You can actually read this in Shakespeare's descriptions of the ballroom.

Hamlet went on stage for the first time in 1601. Shakespeare has taken the story of Amled, a figure from a Danish chronicle by Saxo, and rewritten the figure into his play, thus creating the most famous figure of theatre ever. Every summer, the play is set up here in august.

Tapestries room

What was the idea of depicting some 101 kings from the history of Denmark? Well, Sweden and Denmark had been in conflict about which kingdom was the oldest and thus justified as the most powerful nation in the area. We all know that history is written by the victors, so posing as one such historically justifiable ruler was important. Then it didn't matter that much that the illustrations were made from what we would now describe as fairy tale kings. The Chronicles delivering the raw material for the depictions were not exactly the result of historical research.

There is an oddity in the "textboxes", to use a modern phrase, in the lower part of every tapestry – because even though the tapestries were made to justify the rule of Danish Kings in the region, the texts are not exclusively positive. They were describing the legacy of the ruler, as a means of selfcriticism for the king. Like a memento mori – Even a king will have his final score made up of the people succeeding him.

The tapestries were made here in the town of Elsinore. If there is a crown and a B at the bottom of the tapestry, it means it was actually made here, in the castle of Kronborg. And they were made in the course of 6 years. When you consider the fact that a skilled weaver could finish approximately 1 square meter in a year, you get an idea of the work load and dedication the workers must have had.

The church



The organ in the Kronborg Castle church

We will take a quick look at the church, because it is one of the places that were not destroyed in the fire in 1629. And it gives us a good impression of what the decorations and colours have been like originally in the rest of the castle. If you can imagine this style and level of detail being on display all over the rooms we have visited, you get a good idea about what it used to look like. Again, the

Netherlandish renaissance style says lots of icing on the cake, lots of metal or at least golden paint to bring out the splendor. Another good example of this architectural style is Rosenborg Castle, right in the center of Copenhagen, where the Crown jewels are kept.

The church is actually still functioning as a church, so people get baptized and married here, just like in any other Danish church.

Casemates

We didn't go on tour in the casemates together. But those of you who went down there on your own will know that is an exceptionally dark and unpleasant place to stay. They served as soldier's quarters and were part of the defensive system of Kronborg, all the way into the eighteen hundreds. There were storagerooms for food, there was a prison and the caseemates made up the protective shelter for the soldiers defending Kronborg. The figure of Holger Danske, a huge viking like warrior is down there, and the story goes that when Denmark is posed with threats from an outside aggressor, he will rise from his sleep and come to the rescue. As such he, the sleeping warrior, is a common figure in many European cultures, so even though you could say that he ranks among the top ten Danish national symbols he is more of an EU citizen, really.



Holger Danske

As you are aware of by now, this text is a mix of historical knowledge and personal reflections. But perhaps most of all history in an attempt to make the historical people “come alive”, so to speak. I find history interesting, not out of an ambition to know, like an encyclopedia, what went on where, when and why. But because people have always responded to the circumstances surrounding them in the manner they thought best. Out of rationality, of good sense, of love, of hate, of vanity, of desire etc etc. If we can get some sense of why they did what they did, perhaps even what their sentiments were, we can use that as a reflection for ourselves. What would we do, could we rise to the occasion like they did, could we obtain the same level of skill, of dedication, of patience as they had?

It never ceases to amaze me how ordinary people have had to make dramatic decisions all the way through history, and they deserve our respect, just like all the ordinary people today, who are in difficult circumstances. Unfortunately there are too many examples in the world of today, so I will refrain from mentioning any. Like the kings, and basically everybody, we shall be judged by our successors. So for me, to make history come alive, is to try to get to know the individuals behind the monuments, the weavers working patiently, the masons and their exceptional skill, the carpenters making furniture, floors, doors and the elaborate benches in the church, the kitchenhands and maids at work and last and least, the elite governing them.

It is basically to do the exercise of seeing my own existence from a historical viewpoint. Could I or would I be able to do what they did? Quite often a humbling experience, if you ask me.

Thank you for your patience!