

“IN THE HOUSE OF THE FRIARS PREACHER”

THE SECULAR USE OF MENDICANT FRIARIES IN LATE MEDIEVAL DENMARK

The rise of the Mendicant Orders in the 13th century marked a new era of monastic life and in several European towns large and extravagant friaries arose. Seeking people rather than solitude, the Mendicant houses became not only a place of worship but also the scene of many different secular events.

By comparing the written sources of the late medieval period with the archaeological evidence, it is possible to decipher the character, organization and reasoning for this external use.

“1504. THIS YEAR, KING HANS ISSUED SEVERAL VERDICTS IN HIS COURTROOM WITHIN THE DOMINICAN FRIARY OF ODENSE”

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What?

The characteristics of secular use

The character of the relation between the Mendicant Orders and the secular world can be derived from written sources. An event that especially in the late Middle Ages often took place within the friary precinct was the royal juridical court.

Other diplomatic negotiations also took place within the friaries. A trade dispute between the Hansa and the English King was settled in an unknown Dominican friary but also a simple question of inheritance between commoners was resolved in the Franciscan Friary of Horsens. Quite unusual, the Franciscan Friary of Ribe was the scene of a wedding feast in 1504. Contrary to this, archaeological sources show that the inner cloister frequently was used as a public burial place.



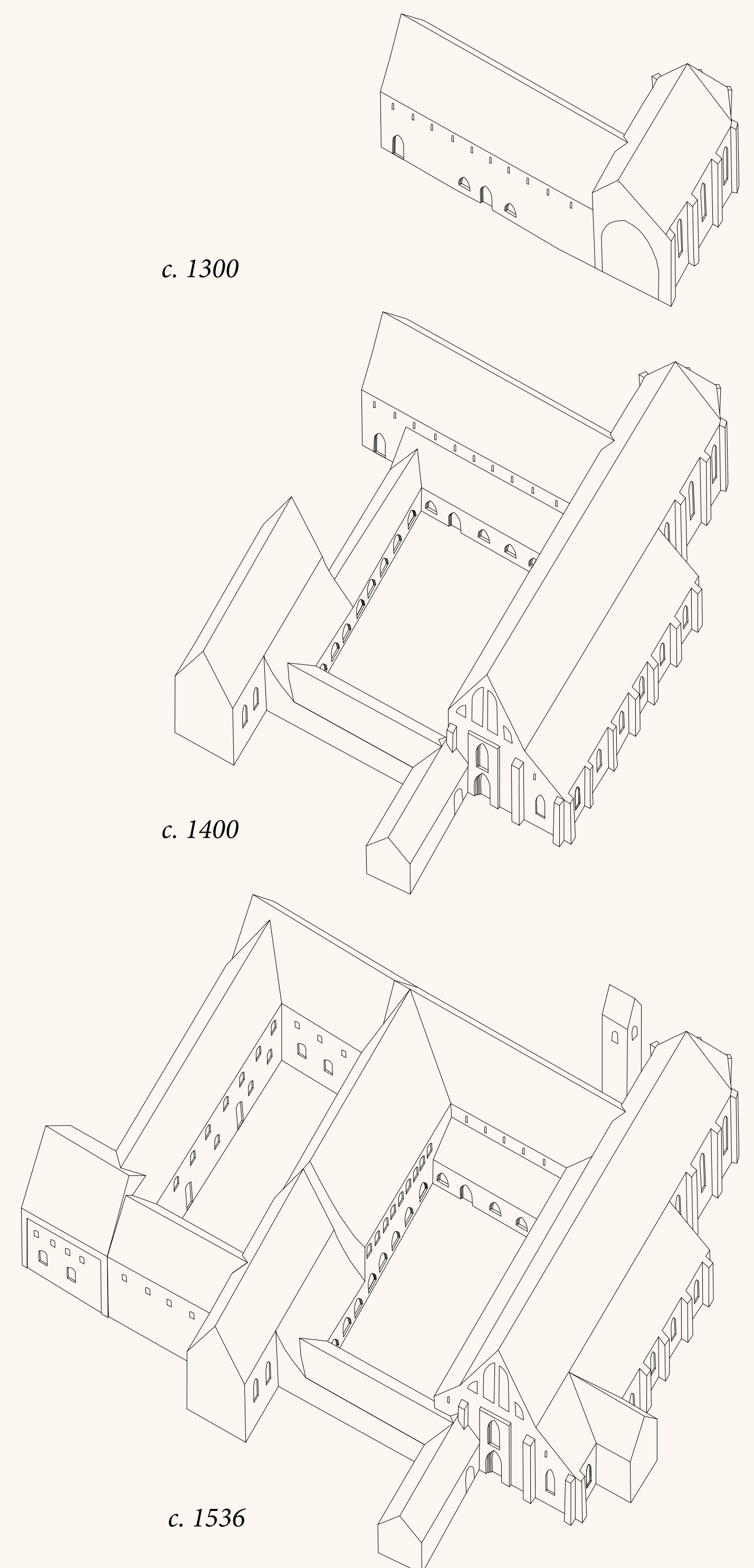
The preserved medieval hall in the west wing of the Dominican Friary of Aarhus. Due to the close location to the main entrance and the elaborate interior, it has been interpreted as suitable for the conduct of secular events. Photo: ML 2011.

Where?

The spatial organization of Danish Friaries

The archaeological sources give some answers to the question of where the secular events took place. From the date of foundation and until the Reformation the friaries underwent wide-ranging renovations and extensions and research has shown a distinct boom in construction works in especially the 15th and 16th centuries.

The buildings history of several friaries indicates that a plan arrangement characterized by dual-cloisters often appear in the late Middle Ages. The buildings around the inner cloister (except for the east wing) can be interpreted as semi-public, whereas the east wing of the inner and the entire outer cloister were covered by the monastic clausura. In friaries with just one cloister it appears to be the west wing that holds the external functions.



The buildings history of the Franciscan Friary of Odense shows a veritable boom in construction works in the late Middle Ages. The complex is accessed through the inner cloister – which is open to the public – while the outer cloister remains secluded. The same plan arrangement is evident from several Mendicant friaries in Denmark as well as other parts of North-West Europe. Drawing: ML 2011.

Why?

Reasons for the secular use

The friars were dependent on alms and by offering an option of public use of their houses, the base was made for a prosperous relation between friars and laymen. In return, the use of the friaries as scenes of political dispute and legal actions might have imbued contracts and treaties with a divine seal. Also, the need for meeting on neutral ground can be seen as a reasonable argument. This appears to be the case in the peace negotiations between the King and the Hansa in Horsens in 1432.

Conclusions

The late medieval sources show that the Mendicant houses were used for several secular events. The emergence of the plan arrangement with dual cloisters can be seen as a consequence of a more differentiated spatial organization where the Mendicant Houses are divided into different public and clausured zones.



Only few cloister walks are still preserved in Denmark, like the example from the Dominican Friary of Ribe. Through several excavations it has become evident that the (inner) cloister was intensively used as public burial place during the medieval period. Photo: ML 2010.

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