Bohus Fortress – Kungahalla – Kungälv
An unprecedented Nordic heritage

The choice of site for Bohus Fortress was brilliant. The military history of the stronghold would be heroic. With the Norwegian enclave "Skärdal's skate" on the opposite bank of the river, it gradually grew in military and economic strength against neighbouring Sweden. More than most other strongholds, Bohus Fortress reflects Nordic history through the centuries. (Rune Ekre)

One of the towers, known as Mors Mössa (Mother's Hat), is currently (2013) being renovated as part of an extensive project to improve access to the fortress for visitors.

The medieval town of Kungahalla
At one time, Kungahalla was Norway's fourth largest town. It was Norway's outpost in the south and occasionally the residence of Norwegian kings. Kungahalla is mentioned early on in the Old Norse sagas where there are several accounts of its greatness and importance.

Sigurd Jorsalfar (c. 1090-1130) whose name means Crusader or "Jerusalem farer", was one of the kings who favoured and developed the town. Kungahalla had a mint to make coins, as did Lödöse in Sweden. Kastala church was erected in 1127.

The town stood at the site of the present-day Kastellegården, which later supplied food to the troops at Bohus Fortress. The dairy cows grazed on the area of land today known as Komarken ("cow pasture"). Non-milking cows were kept in Fontin, an old name for a dried-up cow.

A service was being held in Kastala church in August 1135 when the news came that the Wends were heading towards the town. The Wends were a Slavic people from northern Germany. Today, a group of these people and their language still exist in the Spreewald region, south-east of Berlin.

One section of the Wendish army arrived by river, above Kungahalla, which meant that the town was attacked from two directions. They also brought horses with them, led by Duke Ratibor.

The Icelandic chronicler, Snorri Sturluson, recounts how Kungahalla was looted and burned. The Norwegians became thralls in the country of the Wends. Snorri was told this by his foster father, Jon Loptsson, who had been brought up by Andreas, a priest in Kungahalla. Snorri went to Norway in 1218 and became King Håkon Håkonsson's close confidant. He spent some time in Västergötland where he stayed with Eskil, the brother of Birger Jarl.
Kungahälla was a trading centre for the county of Bohuslän and parts of the country east of the river Göta älv. In the 11th century, Lödöse became a strong rival for trade in the region. Lödöse was better located on the east side of the river Göta älv.

Kungahälla had at least two churches and two monasteries later on. In 1612, the town was destroyed by the Swedes. More or less the whole of the island of Hisingen was burned down. Locally, it was known as the *Burning Feud*.

Kungälv
The Danish King Christian IV then ordered that a new town, Kungälv, should be built on Fästningsholmen (the Fortress island).

The Swedes besieged Bohus in the 1640s and the new town was destroyed. During a Danish attack on Bohus in 1676, the defending Swedes set fire to the town, which had been rebuilt, to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Danes.

Thereafter, the town expanded at the foot of the Fontinberget hill, with streets on either side of the church.

Cammin casket

Erik Emune, the Danish king, ordered the making of a casket from elk antlers. It was presented as a gift to the Norwegian king Sigurd and was in Kungahälla when the Wends attacked the town. It is believed that the casket was kept in the town of Cammin, at the mouth of the Oder, for more than 800 years. Cammin was bombed during World War II and the casket disappeared. A replica of the casket is now on display in Kastala church.

The ruins of the stronghold on Ragnhildsholmen, opposite the site of the town of Kungahälla

In the 1250s, the Norwegian King Håkon Håkonsson ordered the construction of a stronghold on the island of Ragnhildsholmen in the river Nordre älv.

The island is now joined to the mainland of Hisingen. The stronghold did not remain unscathed for long and was last mentioned in 1311. In the background you can see the river Nordre älv and Kungälv about two miles away.

From Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. 
Olaf Tryggvason and Sigrid the Haughty met in Kungahälla to arrange their marriage. Everything seemed to be going well until King Olaf told Queen Sigrid that she must convert to Christianity.

Sigrid replied: *Never shall I depart from the faith that I have always held and which my forefathers have kept before me. But I have nothing against you believing in whichever god you see fit.*

King Olaf became angry and replied in wrath: *Why then should I care to wed you, you withered old heathen jade!* and he struck her across the face with his glove. They both rose to their feet. Sigrid said: *This insult will be your death.*

Sigrid married King Swen Forkbeard of Denmark. Swen urged his stepson, the King of Sweden Olof Skötkonung and the son of the exiled ruler of Norway to join him in attacking King Olaf on his journey to Wendland (at the mouth of the Oder) with his men.

They lay in wait off Svolder (possibly Rügen) and engaged in battle with King Olaf in 1000. It was a hard and uneven battle. It is said that when the conspirators boarded Olaf’s ship Ormen Lange (the Long Serpent), Olaf threw off his chainmail and jumped into the sea and escaped by swimming under water along the longships. He never returned to Norway.

**Bagahus**

In 1308, King Håkon Magnusson ordered a timber castle to be constructed on the rocks of the island of Bagaholmen. Earlier, the island was known as Elfabägi. The word *bägi* meant obstacle. The stronghold was called Bagahus, which over time was shortened to Bahus and then Bohus. It is this Bohus that has given its name to the province of Bohuslän and the county of Gothenburg and Bohus.

The timber stronghold was replaced with a stone and brick fortress. It had a defensive wall with square towers and became known as Norway's most inaccessible fortress. The surrounding countryside was governed from here.

In the late 1500s, the Danish King Christian IV began the huge task of transforming the medieval stronghold into a powerful military fortress. It withstood fourteen sieges over 350 years and is believed to have been the strongest fortress in the Nordic region.

Since about 1250, the land known as "Skårdal's skate" on the east bank of the river Göta älv had been an enclave belonging to Norway and Bohus. The remains of Skårdal's stronghold are visible in the hills high above the river.

In 1658, Bohus was handed over to Sweden with the signing of the Treaty of Roskilde. From 1680 to 1700, Bohus was the residence of the County Governor of Bohus. The fortress was maintained until 1756 but fell into disrepair thereafter.

In 1783, the garrison departed from Bohus. Parts of the fortress were blown up and in 1789 the citizens of Kungälv were given permission to collect stone from there.

King Karl XIV Johan intervened in 1839 and forbade any further destruction. However, without any maintenance work, the fortress continued to fall into ruin. Work eventually began on preserving this fantastic historical monument which witnessed much strife between the Nordic countries.

**Stronghold – fortress – castle**

The medieval stronghold is shown here on an outline of the 16th century fortress. The stronghold had a defensive wall with square towers. The main towers were:

- Father's Hat Tower top left
- Red Tower top right
- Mother's Hat (formerly the church tower) bottom left.
- Sven Hall's Tower (formerly Krabbe's tower) bottom right.

There was a gate tower with a drawbridge in the west wall. Buildings inside the walls housed everything from kitchens, smithies and banquet halls to a church with room for a standing congregation of 400.

Building work on the fortress in the 16th century included the construction of bastions around the stronghold. One of these was Skarpe Nord, up on the right. Inside the bastions, casemates were built to hold cannons. The upper part of the square towers was round.

The medieval stronghold was rebuilt to create a representative Renaissance castle.

Picture from "Strongholds in western Sweden in the Early and Middle Ages".
Queen Blanche at Bohus

Queen Blanche and her son Håkan, who became king of Norway. Painted by the Finnish artist, Albert Edelfelt, 1854-1905. This painting from 1877 gave him one of his first major breakthroughs as an artist.

Blanche became known and popular in the 19th century when Hans Henrik Hallbäck (1838-1885) wrote the song: Rida, rida Ranka.

Blanche (Blanka) came from Namur in Belgium and married Magnus Eriksson at Bohus Fortress in 1335. The queen's lady-in-waiting was Birgitta Birgersdotter, better known later on as Saint Bridget.

The Bohus explosion

In 1566, during the Nordic Seven Years War, the Swedes managed to capture the Red Tower and celebrated by hoisting the Swedish flag. One of the soldiers defending the fortress went down into the gunpowder storeroom and set it alight. A contemporary account says that thrown up into the air the Swedes were not looking larger than crows.

There is a relief on the sarcophagus of the Danish King, Frederick II, in Roskilde Cathedral depicting the Bohus Explosion.

The Swedish cousin and enemy Erik XIV had to surrender his crown to his brother Johan III.

Kungälv with Bohus Fortress

Section of a map of Kungälv by Gustaf Liunggren 1855.

1855 Fästningsholmen consisted of two islands.

The town that exists today was built when the fighting died down in the 17th century. Its two main streets, West Street and East Street, stretch from the square and the church in the centre.

East Street is lined by many well-preserved, picturesque houses. On the hill above stands the Nordic Folk High School with students from the Nordic countries - a symbol of unification, unlike the fortress!

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Västra Gatan (West St.) in Kungälv c. 1900

The street was Kungälv's only thoroughfare for many years. Photograph: Helfrid von Schéele.

Text and photo: Bo Björklund.