



# The Bastions Route

A walk around Narva fortification buildings



# Narva

The favourable location of Narva (on the Russian border and at the crossing of trade routes) provided the town and its inhabitants with the possibilities for earning great wealth. However, at times of wars and conflicts, Narva often became an important target because of the location and wealth. Therefore, most of its rulers (and Narva has seen plenty of those over the time) have contributed to fortification of the town. This mostly meant enhancement and reconstruction of the existing structures, but often also included establishment of new fortification systems.

Throughout centuries, enormous re-



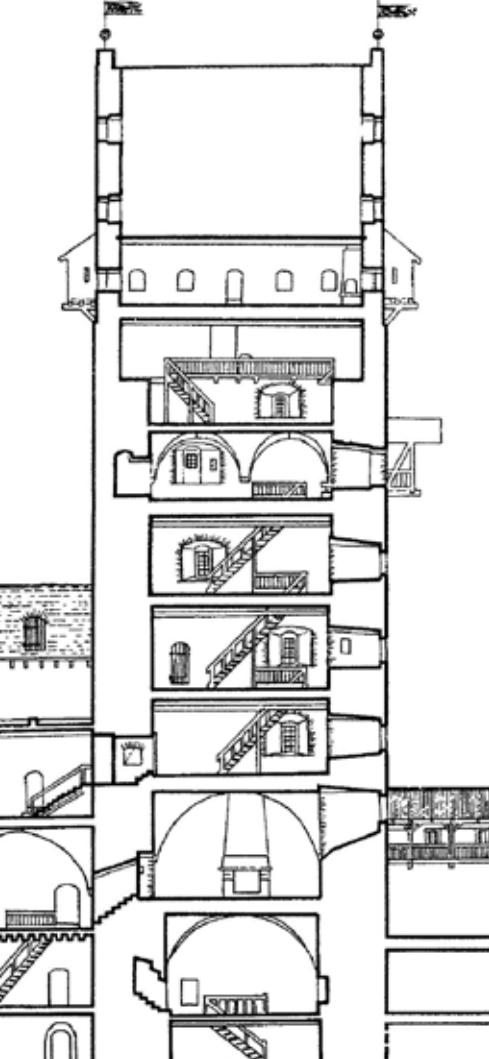
sources have been invested in the fortification of Narva. The investments, however, have failed to prevent a current reconquering of the town. An unconquerable town was actually an ideal of that time, and although this ideal was sometimes achieved, the development of offensive weaponry (provoked by the unconquerable reputation of the towns in question) soon prevailed over the defence. Narva never achieved this ideal; even worse, it could not keep the renewal of its defensive structures up to date. This was also the case in the Great Northern War at the beginning of the 18th century, when the extremely powerful bastion system established by the Swedes was conquered by the Russian Tsar Peter I shortly before its completion.

A common characteristic of the survived fortifications of Narva is multi-layeredness: the fortification types used in different eras due to different weaponry were mixed here. We can also see a rather pure-style fortification systems, for example, the bastions constructed by the Swedes. The fact that the Narva Herman Castle has retained its medieval look despite the numerous reconstructions and wars is a small miracle. Only owing to this 'miracle' can we now enjoy the extraordinary view of the Narva Herman Castle and Ivangorod Fortress, standing side by side and seemingly guarding each other. Nowhere else in the world can the contradiction and rivalry between the Western Roman and Eastern Roman civilisations be seen more clearly.



A bird's eye view of Narva and Ivangorod. Photo – Juri Škabara.





## Medieval fortifications

Although the exact age of the Narva Castle and the town still causes arguments between historians, they agree on the sequence of events. Firstly, in about the 13th century, the Danes, who had conquered Northern Estonia, built a wooden border stronghold at the crossing of the Narva River and the old road. Under the protection of the stronghold, the earlier settlement developed into the town of Narva, which obtained the Lübeck town rights in the first half of the 14th century.

Section of the Tower of Hermann.

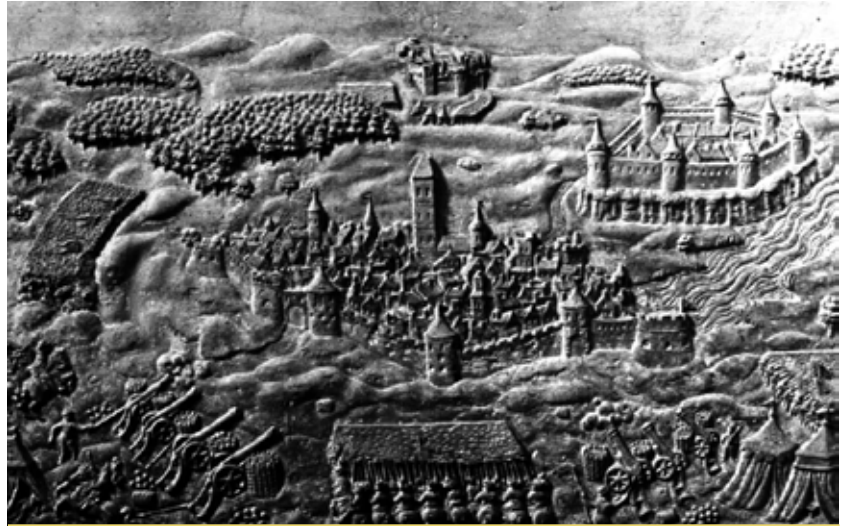
After several conflicts with the Rus-

sians, the Danes started building a stone stronghold at the beginning of the 14th century. It was a small castellum-like structure with 40-metre sides and a tower, a predecessor of today's Herman Tower, at the North-Western corner of the castle. At the beginning of the 14th century, a small forecourt was established at the North side of the stronghold and in the middle of the century a large forecourt was added to the West side; citizens were allowed to hide there during a war-time as the town of Narva was not surrounded by a wall during the Danish rule.

In 1347, the Danish King sold Northern Estonia, including Narva, to the Livonian Order; the latter rebuilt the structure into a convent building according to their needs. The stronghold's

ground plan with its massive wings and a courtyard in the middle was mostly retained. The Herman Tower was also completed at the time of the Order, rushed by the establishment of the Ivangorod Fortress by the Russians on the opposite side of the Narva River in 1492.

The Order surrounded the town with a wall, which, unfortunately, has not survived (in 1777, an order was issued to pull it down). On the basis of descriptions, we know that the wall had four gates: the Viru Gate in the West, the Herd (Karja) Gate in the North, the Old (Vana) Gate leading to the river port in the East and the Water (Vee) or Small (Väike) Gate in the South. The gates were covered with iron plates and preceded by drawbridges. The approx. 1 kilomet-



A scene from a battle in 1581, depicted on the tombstone of the Swedish army leader Pontus de la Gardie in Tallinn Dome Church, is known to be the first depiction of Narva and also the only one showing the medieval town wall.

re-long town wall was fortified with at least seven towers. The town wall was surrounded by a moat. Towards the end of the Order's period, the town wall was

enhanced, the gates were strengthened by adding foregates, and several medieval wall towers were adapted to use as special cannon towers.

## Initial bastions

In 1558, the Russians conquered the town of Narva, ruled by the Order, and in 1581 the Swedes conquered the town. A contemporary chronicle describes in detail how the Swedes with their stunningly „great and fat“ cannons kept making large holes in the town wall of Narva for two days. Although the introduction of firearms had occurred already during the Order period, Narva’s defences had remained almost modernised and hopelessly outdated by the gunpowder era.

Almost immediately after the conquest of Narva, a wooden model of the Narva Castle was prepared at the command of the Swedish King Johann III, and mo-



dernisation works were launched. The defence structures constructed followed the medieval location of the town wall, and the modernisation was more about strengthening of the existing defences than establishment of new ones. In the corners of the old town wall, earth-filled towers or basteis, four in total, were constructed instead of the existing medieval towers. The town wall was also fortified with earthwork at the beginning of the 17th century.

In the 20s of the 17th century, construc-

tion work at Narva defences commenced. The establishment of bastions, the latest

**Above:** A view of the medieval town wall of Narva, supplemented with bastions on the western side. You can see the King’s Wall (Kuningavall) in the left-hand corner of the Narva town wall, the Old Wall (Vanavall) in the centre and the Christians’ Wall (Kristervall) on the right (Matthäus Merian the elder, ca. 1638. Etching in Martin Zeiller’s *Topography*, Frankfurt 1652).

word in defence, was continued. Bastions were basically a development of basteis – unlike basteis, square-walled bastions (neo-Italian-type bastions according to later determination) allowed a better protection of their sides with gunfire. This time the work was also limited to the reconstruction of medieval defence structures, trying to maximize the use of the existing fortifications. The medieval town wall was used to serve as wall sequences between the bastions, and basteis were used for building the bastions. During the reconstruction ac-



tivities, the Viru Gate was closed and remained inside the Old Wall, built upon it. The Coastal Gate and the Water Gate remained in use. The Herd Gate opening to the North was renovated and fortified additionally with a strong tower and a rondel.

This was the end of the gun era or modern time fortifications construction period in Narva. Earthwork fortified with limestone walls (known as the Christians' Wall) has survived from these times.

A scheme, made on the basis of the map from the year 1634 (known to be the first map of Narva), shows that transition to bastions had already occurred by that time. I Narva Herman Castle, II Old town of Narva, III Ivangorod Fortress, 1) the Christians' Wall (Kristlasvall); 2) the Old Wall (Vanavall); 3) the King's Wall (Kuningavall); 4) the Sand Wall (Liivavall); 5) the Herd Gate (Karjavärv); 6) the Old Gate (Vanavärv, also the Old or Small Coastal Gate); 7) the Small Gate (Väikevärv, also the Water Gate); 8) the Castle Gate (Lossivärv, also the castle's Old Gate); 9) rondel; 10) south tower of the castle; 11) arsenal for gunsmiths and workshops; 12) the Great Stone Hall (Suur Kivisaal).



- Bastions at present days
- ..... Bastions at the end of the 17th century
- · - · - · Old town's fortifications

1. Fortuna (Fortune) Bastion, the end of the 17th Century.
2. Triumph Bastion, the end of the 17th Century. To the South of the bastion there was the Gate of Peter I, which also gave the name to the Peter's Square.
3. Fama (Reputation) Bastion, the end of the 17th Century. This is the only bastion designed by Dahlberg in Narva that has not survived.
4. Gloria (Glory) Bastion, the end of the 17th Century. A gunpowder storehouse on top of the bastion, constructed at the second half of the 18th Cen., nowadays is the Art Gallery.
5. Honor (Honour) Bastion, the end of the 17th Century. Following the destruction of the bastion's river-facing side in



the Great Northern War in August 1704 the Russian troops took the city from this side by storm under the command of Peter I.

6. Victoria (Victory) Bastion, the end of the 17th Century. The mightiest bastion in Narva: the height of its front wall is 16 m.

7. Pax (Peace) Bastion, the second half of the 1670s. It was first called Wrangel. Later it adopted the name "Pax" as the bastion designed to replace Wrangel in Dahlberg's project bore the same name, but due to the Great Northern War, it could not be reconstructed.

8. Defence structure Spes (Hope), the end of the 17th Century.

9. Bastion Christians' Wall, constructd

in 1583-85, reconstructed in the first third of the 17th Cen. as a so-called neo-Italian-type bastion. The only surviving older-stage bastion in Narva was restored in the 1970s.

10. Location of the Dark Gate. This was the place where the Narva Coastal Gate was situated in the Middle Ages. Reconstructed in 1676-80 and called the New Gate. Later adopted the name Dark Gate, after which the Dark Garden got its name. The gate was demolished in 1875.

11. Location of the King's Wall. The tower of the medieval town wall, reconstructed in 1583-85, became known as the King's Wall, was reconstructed into a neo-Italian-type bastion in the first third of the 17th Century. It remained in ruins at the end of the 17th Century.

12. Narva Herman Castle, constructed mainly by the Livonian Order in the 14th - 16th Century. The oldest preserved parts of the castle date from Danish rule in the turn of the 13th - 14th Century.

13. The 5th ravelin, built by the order of Peter I in the first quarter of the 18th Century. This is the only ravelin that has partly survived.

14. Location of the King's Gate, the end of the 17th Century. During the Russian rule this gate was called the Emperor's Gate.

15. Location of the Sand Wall. Built in the corner of the town wall in 1583-85. It was reconstructed into a so-called neo-Italian-type bastion in the first third of the 17th Century. It was demolished at the end of the 17th Century.



## New bastions

Despite the investments into Narva's defences during almost half of a century, the Swedish Kingdom had to admit in the mid-17th century that Narva's defences were unlikely to withstand the quickly developing offensive weaponry. Although leaders of the fortification service prepared in 1635 plans for surrounding the town with the new bastions, Narva actually only managed to deal with fixing the existing fortifications.

Under the leadership of Erik Dahlberg, a Swedish statesman, politician, engineer and military leader (1625-1703), modernisation of many Swedish towns, including the fortifications in Narva, was carried out in the last quarter of the 17th century.

Construction activity intensified in the years 1676-80, when the new Wrangel Bastion was constructed on the river-facing side, whereas the

Coastal Gate, opening to the East, was reconstructed as the New Gate, later called the Dark Gate, and the Herd Gate opening to the North was fortified with a separate ravelin-like stronghold. The fortifications were supplemented with batteries built for cannons, one of which was established in the Northeastern corner of the castle, where the Estonian flag is flying today.

As a task, given by the King of Sweden, Erik Dahlberg, the leader of the fortification service and an outstanding military engineer, inspected the fortifications of Narva. Dahlberg stated in his critical report, that Narva's fortifications were unsatisfactory, and that the existing modernisation plans were poor or too expensive. Dahlberg presented his proposals to the King, and the King appro-

ved one of these in 1683.

The proposal suggested a totally new fortification system: the existing defences, based on the medieval town wall remained inside the defence zone, planned by Dahlberg and actually lost their function. The works commenced rather modestly in 1682 and continued in an increasing pace year after year until the conquest of Narva by Russians in 1704. Although the construction was interrupted when the war broke out, Dahlberg's plan had been implemented largely before the war.

The establishment of the bastions required unprecedented resources from Narva: during the last years of the work, over 1,500 men worked on the construction, and over 40,000 state talers per year



This project, dated 1681, shows the proposals, made by Stael (A, chestnut brown), Rodenburg (B, yellow) and Dahlberg (C, violet) about the modernisation of the fortifications of Narva. Compared to the first two, Dahlberg's plan, which was eventually brought to life, is more modest in its volume, less expensive and more realistic.

were spent (as a comparison: Tallinn received less than 20,000 talers per year). Owing to such colossal expenses, Narva

obtained one of the most powerful defence systems in the Northern Europe of that time.

## Bastions from inside and outside

The Swedes managed to complete six bastions and also a bastion-like fortification Spes (Hope) located in front of the South wall of the castle. The Swedes did not have time to reconstruct the Wrangel Bastion into the Pax (Peace) Bastion - although the latter name was taken into use, it is still the original Wrangel Bastion with only the name changed. A half-bastion, called Justitia (Justice), planned to the Northeastern corner could not be completed. Out of five ravelins, designated for the protection of the bastions, only two were built. The West gate, planned between Triumph and Fortu-



The project, devised by Erik Dahlberg in 1685, which became the basis for the construction of the bastions in Narva.

na (Fortune) could not be constructed either, and it was completed only in 1822 under Russian rule. The gate was

located exactly where the traffic from Russia enters the town today (the gate was called the Gate of Peter I).



Narva's bastions have high and powerful front walls or faces, which are characteristic to the Dahlberg's system. In the walls of the bastions, there were vaulted tunnels or casemates for defenders of the town. The casemates in the Narva bastions (except for Gloria Bastion) have two floors, are 2 metres wide and 2-2.5 metres high. Light reaches the casemates through embrasures located at every 7 meters, with wider holes for cannons and narrower holes for guns. At every embrasure starts a ventilation shaft, intended for directing gun smoke out of the casemate. The outer walls of the casemates are about 2 metres thick, and they were also protected by earthwork, situated opposite to the moat, preventing cannon fire from being aimed directly against the bastion wall. The bastions had tunnels and casemates

with a total length of 1.5 kilometres.

The bastions established were surrounded by a moat. A new gate - the King's Gate - was built in the North direction, and it became the main gate to the town. In the 18th century, people began to call it the Emperor's Gate. The Water Gate and the New Gate (later the Dark Gate) were the other surviving gates.

Today, the riverside bastions Pax, Victoria and Honor are the best preserved bastions, and also well-preserved are the Gloria Bastion at the end of Vester-



A vaulted casemate in the Honor Bastion.

vall Street, the Fortuna Bastion in the South-Western corner of the castle and the south wall of the Triumph Bastion adjacent to the Peter's Square.

## ...up to the present day

Although the Swedes gained victory over the Russians in the first conflict of the Great Northern War near Narva in 1700, this was not enough to win the war. In 1704, Peter I returned to Narva and started bombarding town fortifications in order to prepare a breakthrough from the East coast of the river. After 10 days of cannon fire, the escarp wall or façade of Victoria and Honor bastions collapsed, and the Russians took the town by storm on 10 August. The great bastions

that still look so impressive failed to defend the town because of their location close to the river. Because of the river, earthwork could not be established in front of the bastions, and this made their high and powerful stonewalls defenceless against direct gunfire. Estonia was conquered by Russia, victor of the Great Northern War, and Narva lost its actual strategic importance, since it was no longer a



border town. Although Narva remained in the list of Russian fortifications for more than 150 years, this was not really necessary from the military viewpoint. However, the bastions that suffered damage in the Great Northern War were restored and ravelins left incomplete by the Swedes completed. Narva was finally removed from the list of fortifications in 1863. At first, the town found no use for the bastions assigned to it. Only establishment of a park on the

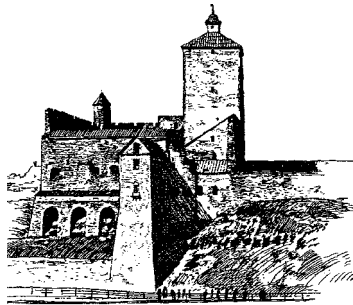
Victoria Bastion by the river was commenced; this park was later cal-

**Above:** a medal, dedicated to the Swedish victory in Narva battle, held on November 19- 20th, 1700.

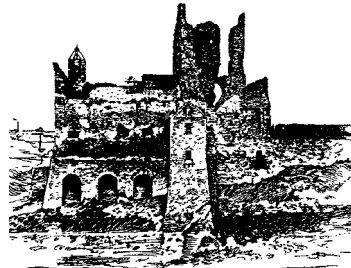
**Below:** a medal in commemoration of the conquest of Narva by the Russian troops on the 9th of August, 1704.

led the Dark Garden after the Dark Gate situated next to it. The Dark Gate was demolished after 1875. Establishment of a park on a defence structure was not an original idea, since the same was being done by many European towns (Würzburg, Vienna, Augsburg, Mainz).

The greatest damage in the history of Narva was caused to the fortifications



by warfare in the 20th century. Soviet aviation attacks in March 1944 destroyed Narva's Baroque old town and constant gunfire demolished Narva Castle's convent building, the Herman Tower and rondels in the western forecourt. By the end of World War II, Ivangorod Fortress was in a poor state as well: it had suffered severely from German cannon fire. Restoration of the Narva Castle



commenced in the 1950s, and work is still being carried out up to the present day. The bastions Victoria and Pax have also undergone reconstruction.

Today, Narva's former military objects are in the service of the town's inhabitants and visitors: the Castle now houses the Narva Museum and the park on top of the bastions is a popular walking and recreation area.



Narva Herman Castle. From the left to the right: a view from the East in 1939, in the 1960s and nowadays.

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Narva Tourist Info Center: Puškini 13, 20309 Narva,  
tel/fax +372 356 0184, [narva@visitestonia.com](mailto:narva@visitestonia.com) or visit  
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