



INSIDE NORWAY'S HAUNTED FORTRESS

A Castle Is Born

It all started with an attack—a big one. From one of Norway's own men.

In 1287, Norwegian nobleman-turned rebel Alv Erlingsson the Younger aggressively attacked the city of Oslo. His army left the city burned, looted—and in dire need of a better defense system.

King Håkon V Magnusson (1299–1319) was up to the challenge. He was a fan of fortresses, and had several built during his reign. Shortly after the attack, Håkon V set to work constructing Akershus to better protect the southern city.

The king had to be strategic in selecting the precise coordinates for the castle, and there's no doubt he chose wisely: He placed the castle on a protruding headland at the heart of the Oslofjord. Why there? The south and west sides boasted steep cliffs dropping sharply into the fjord, while marshland to the east made invasion nearly impossible. Any brave souls who did manage to slog through the marshes were met with formidable curtain walls—each three meters thick and eight meters (26 feet) high.

And if an enemy did make it over the wall, by incredible

Perched high on a headland overlooking the harbor, Oslo's Akershus Fortress has stood steadfast and strong for more than 700 years. The site of epic battles, brutal executions and raging fires, darkness clouds much of its long history.

Yet today the medieval castle shines bright as a national monument, housing museums and lively cultural events. Here's a look at the storied past of Akershus—and the spirits still rumored to haunt it today. BY RACHEL GUYAH

PHOTO BY PER MORK



Clockwise from top:
“Castle of Akershus”
by John-William Edy,
color aquatint on
paper, circa 1800–1815;
Akershus Fortress
surrounded by a
moat; Olav V Hall;
Seal (front) of King
Haakon V Magnusson
of Norway, based on
13 documents, dated
1305–18.



luck or perseverance? They would find themselves stuck in a dry moat (that is, a ditch), surrounded by defenders in the towers above.

While the exact dates are uncertain, construction of Akershus is believed to have begun in the 1290s. The medieval castle was originally developed into a royal residence for the king, with additional fortifications and defense elements added over time.

Some of the early features from around 1300 can still be seen today: Virgin’s Tower, which stands proudly on the southern end as the original entrance to the castle, has been

impressively well preserved. Knut Tower (originally called Kanniktårnet), to the northwest, is also still standing and has been partially reconstructed. It served as a crossfire tower during the Middle Ages.

Battles and Bloodshed

Not long after construction, Akershus was tested with its first attack: Duke Erik Magnusson of Sweden attempted to capture the castle in 1308 but was unsuccessful. Many attacks would follow—but all would fail. In fact, the fortress survived every single siege in its 700-year history.

Here are some of Akershus’ historic battles:

- **1449–1450:** Akershus was besieged during the throne sequel battle between Norway, Sweden and Denmark.
- **1501–1502:** Knut Alvsson captured Akershus as he led a rebellion against Danish rule. He was killed during peace negotiations aboard a ship outside the castle, and his body was thrown into Kanniktårnet Tower (now renamed after him)

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PHANTOM(S) of the Fortress

With so much darkness and death in its past, it's no surprise that Akershus has its fair share of spooky sightings. Meet the mysterious spirits that are said to haunt the castle!

Mantelgeisten, The Faceless Woman

If you're wandering the corridors and suddenly spot a lady in a long robe with no facial features (eek!), you might have just met Mantelgeisten. This faceless ghost is said to be wandering back to her bedchamber. Who she is, and how she died, remains a mystery.

Malcanisen, The Evil Dog

This furry phantom is said to be guarding the castle after being buried alive hundreds of years ago. The commander believed the ghost of the dog would provide protection for the men inside. If you catch sight of this canine, beware: Legend has it that anyone who sees Malcanisen will face a grisly death in the months to come.

Nightpyres, The (Tiny) Burning Women

Sporting a creepy laugh and ghastly grin, these baby-sized women are said to appear before any fire at the fortress. If you see these tiny terrors it's best to flee—and call the fire department!

The Eerie Inmates

Guards and other visitors have reported screams, scratches, whispers and chain rattles—as well as the unsettling sensation of being pushed. Some believe it's the prisoners, many of whom perished in the castle during its time as a penitentiary.

The Haunted Horse

Is that galloping you hear? You might have encountered the ghostly horse that haunts the castle. Legend has it that a drunken Swedish soldier was riding his horse just outside the fortress walls, shouting and threatening to conquer Norway, when Norwegian soldiers shot him and his horse.



Clockwise from top left: Cannons at Akershus; A man shows his medieval-style armor during the Oslo Medieval Festival; The surrender of Akershus in May 1945 when German garrison's commander Major Josef Nchterlein and his aide Captain Hamel hand the fortress over to the Norwegian resistance movement's Terje Rollem; A statue of war hero Max Manus; M48 Patton Tank on display outside the Armed Forces Museum.

as a warning to others. His body allegedly lay there for 12 years.

- **1527:** The castle met another foe: Mother Nature. Lightning struck the North Wing, igniting a raging fire that left many parts of the castle severely burnt.
- **1531–32:** The fortress resisted a siege by Christian II of Denmark.
- **1567:** Akershus was attacked during the Nordic Seven Years' War.
- **1716:** The fortress withstood its final attack: during the Great Nordic War (1711–20), Karl XII of Sweden swarmed the castle with thousands of men, but his efforts to invade ultimately failed.

Renaissance Remodel

Starting in the early 17th century, the castle and fortress were completely transformed with two major goals in mind: To adapt to the changing demands of modern warfare and weaponry, and to create a lavish royal residence for King Christian IV.

To meet the demands of modern warfare, most of the upper fortress was built in line with the Italian bastion system. These star-shaped forts featured angular structures called bastions, which projected outward from the curtain wall. Their low stature and polygon angles made them superior to medieval towers, which were vulnerable to modern artillery due to their low height, and had a rounded shape that created dead zones—blind spots that could shield attackers from defending fire.

Howitzers could be deployed on each side of the bastions to volley gunfire at attackers, while long-range guns could be fired from the structure's two

angular faces. Several of these bastions were created throughout the 17th century—most of which still stand today.

While fortifications transformed the exterior, King Christian IV cast his eyes inward: During the Danish-Norwegian ruler's nearly 60-year reign, he gradually converted the castle into a true Renaissance palace. Several towers were demolished or rebuilt during this time. The South Wing was converted into extravagant apartments for the royal family, and a lavish kitchen and viceroy living quarters were added to the Romerike Wing.

From Castle to Correctional Facility

Despite such extensive remodeling, the castle slowly fell into decay after Christian IV's death in 1648.

The castle's purpose gradually took a correctional turn, starting under Frederick III's rule. In 1652, he ordered that anyone convicted of petty larceny (minor theft) must be sent to Akershus for harsh labor. The convicts could also be rented out for public works and even private parties—which later made Akershus known as The Slavery.

A guardhouse, barracks and prison cells were added in the 18th century. A former powder magazine was converted into dormitories for convicts, with “punishment cells” added later—a place where prisoners who breached regulations were punished with half rations and forced to sleep on hard pallets.

Gradually, more and more prison facilities were created. By the 1840s, more than 500 prisoners lived there. In 1902, it was converted into Akershus National Penitentiary. The fortress would maintain its prison status for nearly another 50 years.

World War II

Everything changed in the spring

of 1940, when German troops invaded Norway and took charge of Akershus. Under Nazi occupation, the grounds served as a German military prison, court and barracks. The Germans controlled Akershus for five dark years—with a rather grim ending. Between February and March of 1945, German firing squads executed 42 patriots from the Norwegian Resistance movement. Just two months later, on May 11, 1945, Akershus was finally liberated: German occupying forces surrendered and returned the fortress to Norway in the war's final hours.

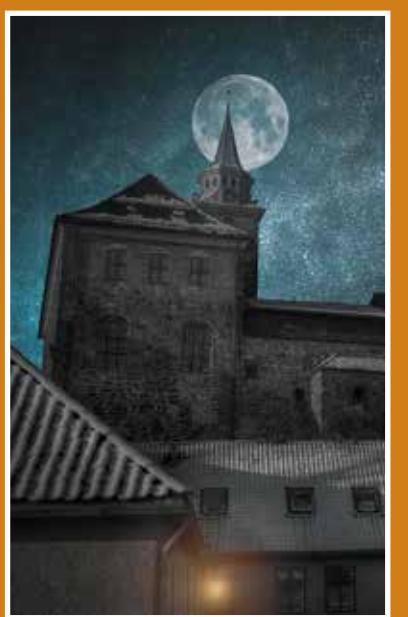
Fittingly, Akershus is now home to Norway's Resistance Museum.

After the war, the castle continued to serve as a prison until 1950. Over the next several decades the fortress underwent many restorations and renovations, revealing layers of rich architectural history. Several buildings were also repurposed to house government offices, educational institutions and museums.

Akershus Today

Today, Akershus still stands proudly over the harbor. After surviving centuries of battles and bloodshed, the fortress is now a calm and peaceful place that serves as an important cultural landmark. It is home to the Norwegian Resistance Museum, Norwegian Armed Forces Museum, and the Royal Mausoleum—where many modern monarchs are buried, including King Haakon VII (Norway's first king after regaining independence), Queen Maud, and their son, King Olav V.

It also serves as the main reception venue for government affairs and as a unique backdrop for lively concerts, theatre performances and other cultural events. ☀



Visiting the Castle

While the castle is temporarily closed, it's normally an Oslo must-see. Entrance to the main fortress area is free year-round, and there's a walking trail with a map so visitors can wander and learn about each building's history. Planning a future visit? You can purchase tickets to explore the castle itself, with its narrow hallways, majestic main halls and spooky prison cells. Guided tours are available. akershusfestning.no

Oslo Ghost Walk

Feeling brave? Try this two-hour walking tour hosted by Oslo City and Nature Walks. As you wander the streets of old Christiania (Oslo) and explore the historic fortress, you'll learn the spooky legends and back stories surrounding these areas. Keep your eyes and ears open for anything strange—past participants have reported mysterious sights and sounds! oslowalks.no