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Middeleeuwse woontorens in Nederland: de bouwhistorische benadering van een kasteelvorm

Hermans, D.B.M.

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Author: Hermans, Dagobert Bernardus Maria
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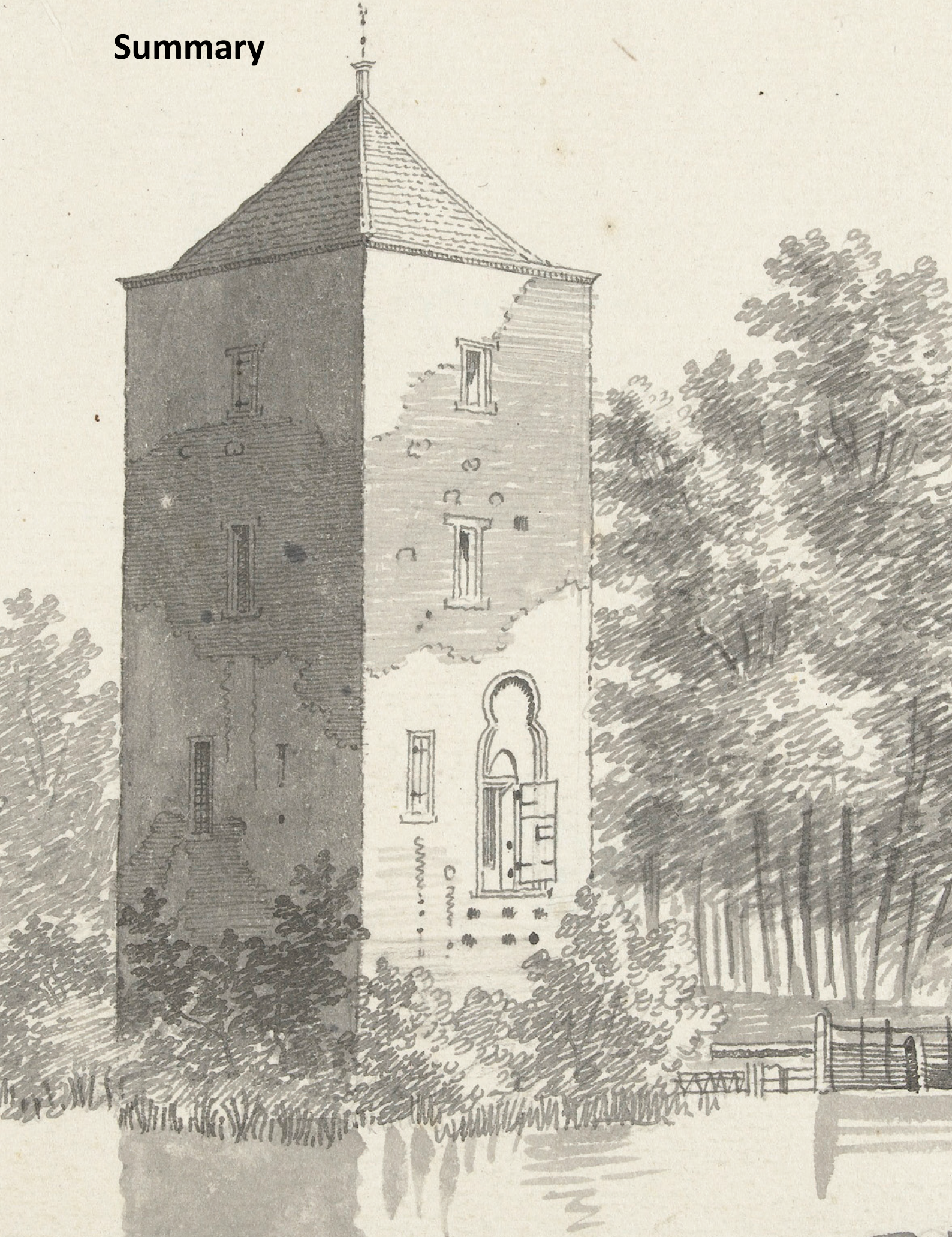
Summary



This study aims to provide a description and analysis of the smallest form of the castle in the Netherlands, the solitary tower, usually classified as a 'tower house'. An attempt has been made to answer such questions as: where do they differ from other castles and are these solitary towers comparable? 'Solitary' in this study is defined as existing without outbuildings or perimeter walls, whether emerging directly from a moat, or standing on a small island surrounded by a moat or hill. The research focuses on both extant and documented examples of solitary towers in the Netherlands, dating to approximately 1200-1500AD.

The research consisted of developing an inventory of extant and documented towers and, as far as possible, the extant towers were visited. A full survey was only possible in a few cases however. In total, 237 castles have been examined; of which 107 meet the criteria formulated for this research and a further 52 towers probably meet these criteria, but there is insufficient data to be certain. Of these 159 towers, 44 towers still exist.[1] These are divided into towers that are still more or less complete, towers that have been preserved as ruins and towers that are incorporated in a larger building and are often not identifiable as such. Of the remaining 78 towers, 20 cannot be classified as tower houses despite being recorded as such in the past and 58 were eliminated as they were not eligible for inclusion in the catalogues.

The study begins with a discussion of when the tower house was classified as a separate castle form in the Netherlands and what is meant by the term 'tower house'. This is followed by an examination of the extent to which the term tower house, as applied in the Netherlands, corresponds to its application in neighbouring countries. It has been found that the term tower house is used differently in different countries and The Netherlands, in particular, differs from its surrounding countries. Here the tower house is ultimately defined as a separate type of castle: a solitary tower which carries all the characteristics of a castle.

The Germans and the Belgians take the concept literally, as a tower which can be lived in. From this point of view, both the Germans and the Belgians view habitable towers built as part of a larger castle, or added to a castle, as 'tower houses'. Likewise, they identify habitable gate towers as 'tower houses'. They consider the tower house not as a type, but as a concept. They do highlight; however, that the tower has to be a self-contained (habitable) building unit. From the British and Irish literature it is not clear if the concept is taken literally, although it can be concluded that in those countries the tower house is seen as a castle type. This type is partly chronologically determined, in a similar fashion to the Netherlands. In contrast to the Netherlands, the tower house in Britain and Ireland is not necessarily a solitary building and archaeological research also shows that towers were not always solitary. Besides France, all countries recognise a distinction between early and late towers and in most cases the late towers are seen as tower houses as per the German definition of the term.

The applied research methods for this study each have their own advantages and disadvantages. In combination, however, they offer the possibility of a fairly reliable picture of the form, structure and layout of tower houses, not only of the existing examples, but also of the destroyed towers. This allowed the basis for the investigation to be widened. The problem with many, if not most towers, is dating. Dating methods do have their limitations. In most cases only a very general date is available, because methods to achieve a more precise dating have not yet been applied, or are not applicable. By a combination of methods, however, the general dating can come close to the actual construction date in most cases.

An attempt is made to connect the period of tower house construction with historical developments. It seems that this period corresponds to a period of prosperity in the Dutch agricultural sector and

[1] Solitary towers (34) and possible solitary towers (10).

the nobility of the time would have been largely dependent on this.

The tower as an independent building can also be found at early castles in the Netherlands. It is argued that there have been two periods in the Netherlands in which castles in the form of a tower were built. The towers from the first period, the early towers, cannot be counted among the tower houses, because they are in some respects architecturally different to the tower houses, particularly in size and shape. The most important difference is, however, that none of the early towers were likely to have been solitary buildings. In addition, they were not built by the gentry or the ministerialen, but by small dynasts, feudal rulers who were socially the equals of, for example, the counts of Guelders or Holland. In that respect too, they differ from the tower houses. It is assumed that the builders of the later tower houses took the early towers as an example.

The later tower houses are almost exclusively built by ministerialen or people from the same social group such as the gentry. The towers are built, to a large extent, in areas that became available by reclamation, or sale. This, at a time when there was a group in society who could afford the purchase of land and, after a prosperous economic development, also the construction of a modest castle. The land seems to have come into the possession of local ministerialen and farmers who were working their way up to become knights.

The research points out that a reasonably good picture can be obtained of the outside of the tower. Of the interior, however, only a very general picture view can be obtained with some of the elements therein. This not only applies to tower houses, but to castles in general. It is concluded that the tower in the 13th century was predominantly square with a size of 8 to 9 feet. In the course of the 13th century the new towers became slightly larger and the building of square towers decreased; a development that manifests itself more strongly in the 14th century. The wall thickness also decreased from over 2 metres at the beginning of the 13th century, to less than 1 metre at the end of the 14th century. The tower is generally built of brick and has mainly two storeys over a basement (4 levels). Most towers have an open parapet with merlons and sometimes, mainly in the 14th century, projecting cylindrical bartizans at the corners. When the interior is viewed by contemporary standards, it is concluded that in the absence of elements which we now consider essential, such as a well or to a lesser extent an oven (possibly replacing it with a fireplace), the towers are not habitable as standalone units. However, archaeological research points out that the towers were used as dwellings. The lack of a well in, or in the immediate vicinity of, the tower therefore provides no clue as to whether a tower was habitable, or uninhabitable. The question remains; however, whether towers without wells were fit to withstand a long siege in times of danger. In other words: were the towers in the Middle Ages not permanently inhabited and were they later?

Nothing can be said of the internal lay-out of the towers. An ideal lay-out, such as that identified by Doperé and Ubregts in Flemish towers, does not exist in the Netherlands. The reason is that, for example, no regularity can be found in the location of a private chamber, i.e. no regular place on, for example, the first or second floor. Therefore there was no fixed function for a specific floor in the Dutch tower houses, except that the entrance level is almost always situated high above ground level. Generally it can be concluded that for castles still relatively little research has been done both on their external and internal architectural elements. This makes it difficult to compare tower houses with other types of castles. It is hoped that these gaps in research can be filled in the near future.

Because of the limited and very variable amount of data available by province, on existing and destroyed tower houses, it is hardly possible to say anything about any regional differences in the construction of tower houses. One of the conclusions that can be drawn is that the tower houses in the southeast of Netherlands are larger than in the rest of the country.

In the introduction the question is posited as to whether there was a divorce between ‘toerne’ and

'huys' in the Middle Ages as a designation for a castle. It has been proved that, in any case, from the end of the 14th century the castle in the form of a tower (house) is defined as such in (loan) acts and other sources. It seems that the description in those sources only deals with square towers. Exceptions are the descriptions in the Guelderian loan acts, some of which relate to round towers. Some descriptions relate to solitary towers and in some cases a link could be established between the description 'tower' and the building itself. This allows us to see if it is indeed something which, in this study, is defined as a solitary tower. Due to the lack of older sources of the listed buildings, it is not possible to determine whether a shift occurs in the common name 'huys' to 'toern' around that time, or whether they were called 'toern' from the beginning. Except in Utrecht, and a single exception elsewhere, where it is detectable that the tower houses at the end of the 14th century are referred to as 'toern'; the solitary tower therefore seems not to be seen as a special building. Castles that are not solitary towers, but whose main construction work on the inner bailey is a tower, are also sometimes named as such. Where the name indicates a solitary tower, it doesn't seem so much a differentiation of a certain type of castle, but rather a possibility for a more precise indication of the castle in legal documents such as loan acts. It can be concluded that contemporaries in the Middle Ages, with very few exceptions, had no specific name for the solitary tower.

From the beginning of the 13th century, tower houses in the Netherlands were built by ministerialen or individuals from the same social group, such as the gentry. They were, or were shortly to be, in a position to afford a castle themselves, at a time when the knighthood was not yet closed. Therefore through building a tower they entered into the knighthood. It is obvious that a modest budget has played a role in the decision to build only a tower. What is important; however, is that there was a conscious choice to build a tower. The tower has three functions: defence, living and ostentation. It is argued that ostentation was the main function and that the tower form was the best way achieve that.

Within the urban environment in the Netherlands there are also towers that are similar in appearance to tower houses. It is argued that most towers, despite similarity in appearance, cannot be defined as tower houses according to the definition used in this study. They are in most cases not solitary and are not surrounded by a moat. The Gravensteen (the count's tower) at Leiden; however, can be counted among the tower houses. This tower, originally, was not situated inside the city, but was surrounded by a moat and had an outer bailey. Further investigation would show whether that also applies to count's towers in other cities. Two towers in 's-Hertogenbosch could, given their function and the fact that the towers were outside the city wall, be counted as tower houses, although they were not surrounded by a moat. However, only the ground plan of these towers is known. The towers in the Dutch urban environment cannot be compared with towers in Germany or Italy, for example, except that they are also built there by prominent citizens.

Castles in the sources are predominantly described with terms like 'huys' (house) or 'borgh' (stronghold). This also applies to the tower houses. There are also buildings that are marked with names like 'steenen camer' (brick room), 'steenhuys' (brick house) or 'spieker' (storehouse) which are sometimes very similar in appearance to tower houses. It is argued that the names are interchangeably used for the same kind, or type, of building and that contemporary and current names intertwine as well. It has become clear that some of the buildings which are named 'toern', for example in the area around the Langbroekerwetering, are named differently elsewhere. This refers to the stone houses and so called 'stinsen' in the north of the country. In their dimensions, structure, spatial layout, etc., these buildings show a particular relationship with tower houses elsewhere in Netherlands. It also appears that a number of buildings that are similar in appearance (i.e. merlons) or setting (i.e. double moats with drawbridges) with tower houses (or castles) cannot be included in this category. This is the case with the 'spiekers' around Arnhem, for example.

In conclusion, within the castles in the Netherlands the solitary tower, the tower house, takes a

separate place. The tower contains all the elements of a castle in itself, and is, almost without exception, solitary on an island with no additional direct space for expansion. This is the defining characteristic of the 'type'. Within this type, the tower houses show a high level of variation, for example, differences in size, shape and wall thickness. Due to the lack of knowledge about which facilities were required to be able to live in the Middle Ages, it is not clear whether the tower house was suitable as a permanent residence. The artefacts found during archaeological research may be an indication, but are inconclusive. The doubt is mainly motivated by the lack of a well, which in times of siege, seems essential to survive. The term 'tower house' therefore seems less appropriate and in my opinion should not be taken literally.

The Dutch tower house differs from that in other countries. The main difference is that the solitary tower stands on its own small, moated island. In the countries around us, the tower house isn't always solitary and certainly doesn't always stand on its own island. The tower house in the Netherlands is therefore in some way unique.

The name 'tower house' is, in my opinion, a translation of the German word Wohnturm. Renaud's article of 1955 still uses the term in the German sense of the word; as a tower as part of a castle, which is habitable as an independent element. In the course of time, however, 'tower house' has become synonymous with 'solitary'. This is presumably due to the fact that the Netherlands is one of the few countries that has many solitary towers. These solitary towers are ultimately defined as a separate castle type.
Based on the research the following definition of the tower house in the Netherlands can be given:

> *The tower house in the Netherlands is the smallest possible building that had all the characteristics of a castle. It is a solitary building on a, usually moated, small piece of land, which, limited by its size, allowed no other buildings. The storeys are stacked. Per storey there is one undivided chamber. The tower is generally between 8 and 10 metres in size, is square, and later more rectangular, and has a height of, an average, two storeys over a basement. The tower was generally constructed in the second half of the 13th and first half of the 14th century. The tower is almost exclusively built by ministerialen or individuals from the same social group such as the gentry. The function of the tower was, besides defence and housing, mainly for use as a status symbol and landmark.*

I am very grateful to dr Gillian Eadie for correcting the translation.