The Origin of the Hall in Southern Scandinavia

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The paper deals with the origin of the hall as a room for individuality in southern Scandinavia. It points out a number of houses and rooms which could be called halls in an embryonic rather than a feudal sense. The creation of the hall, probably in the 4th century, marks the introduction of a new phase in the tension between the individual and the collective, by introducing a social space to match an individuality which was bred within the family, while accepted as a public norm.

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In the late 1980s, the course followed by archaeology took a decisive, turn in as much as reconstructions of the past became uninteresting in themselves. Prehistory lost some of its artless charm when understanding the present instead of the past became the final aim of archaeology. Although around 1970 there were theoretical arguments to put an end to traditional archaeology (for example Johansen 1974), seminar papers and contributions to archaeological congresses on themes well within the traditional boundaries of the discipline stood out as instructive examples of why this archaeology was running short of justification as a research discipline.

No sooner was the feminist perspective developed (Bertelsen et al 1986) than it was made obvious that archaeological prehistory was a one-gender, male phenomenon and that archaeologists, male and female, had been taken in by believing the material propaganda of prehistory (some of which was once considered neutral; cf. Malmer 1963) to be a fair description of how it was, rather than an adequate mirror of how it is.

The same mocking attitude towards the so-called past could also be
Frands Herschend

inferred from studies of the history of archaeology. Such studies, at which Eggers (1951, p. 23 ff.) made an early attempt, showed that essential ingredients in the interpretation of prehistoric problems reflected the common opinions in the age of the interpretative archaeologist himself rather than problems of prehistory (cf. the articles in Kristiansen 1985; Herschend 1980, pp. 33 ff.). The reconstructions of prehistoric techniques, such as understanding how the Iron Age house was constructed, not to say built, immediately disclosed not only that the reconstructions themselves could not in any formal way be shown to be correct (Coles 1973), but also that the mere fact that they were produced in our days made them look ridiculous. There were several non-intuitive lessons to be learnt.

One such group of lessons was tied to the fact that all reconstructors are to some degree fooled by modern technology (Edgren and Herschend 1979, p. 20). Thus it turned out to be a fact that in house reconstructions in which an electric drill was part of the equipment, dowel solutions (with rather slender dowels matching the capacity of the drill) were much more common than in reconstructions in which only the auger was put into the tool-box. Although you may remedy one such mistake (or defend it as the ultimate truth), this endeavour turns out to be no solution. It simply opens your eyes to the next and, one hopes, slightly more intricate problem. Eventually you end up trying to reconstruct the malnutrition or childhood experience of some average prehistoric carpenter before you start to think of forests and timber qualities that have long been lost. Then, if not before, you realize that reconstructing is a matter of hunting down an understanding that for theoretical reasons can never be grasped when once defined as being somewhere ahead of you.

While proving the futility of any reconstruction, the way in which these attitudes to gender, the history of archaeology or house reconstructions produced knowledge seemed sound enough. With reference to the debate in philosophy and the theory of science after the second world war—why not start with the late 1950s (for example Anscombe 1957; Toulmin 1957; Winch 1963)?—it was relatively easy to argue that, although lacking in complexity and objective truth, reconstructions of the past are nonetheless a necessary analytical step if you want to understand the present. It would seem that during the last few decades understanding has become the research problem and archaeology a craft.

Instead of seeing all the shortcomings as blocking the archaeological research, we should consider them as part of the conditions for creating
knowledge out of the past and as an example of the fact that that is what archaeology is all about—bridging past and present, i.e. by creating a connection in which the conceptual chain can no longer be followed. Take a concept such as The view of rationality in food production in the Mälar Valley from 1000 B.C. onwards, and you will see that so much of past knowledge has been lost that there is no point in aiming at a fruitful reconstruction or rethinking of it. If this is a consequence of the theoretical development during recent years, then what concepts are left to be discussed in the final archaeological production of knowledge?

In my opinion, concepts that we can already understand as social tension should be favoured among the many possible answers to this question, since material patterns pertaining to such concepts are of present-day interest and, when recognized in a prehistoric context, they gain a possible prehistoric basis. If so, they may become intricate, in as much as they help us to recognize the social problems that are inherent to our culture.

For that reason, this article is about the tension between the individual and the collective. Such a concept can never be treated exhaustively, nor can it be adequately discussed, since the very discussion of it changes the concept.

To begin with, an individual could in the ideal case be a member of a collective in such a way that he or she was indispensable, while at the same time the individuality of the person was defined solely in relation to the collective. Figuratively speaking, we may refer to the unity of hand and fingers, arguing that the individual finger is defined by its being a part of the hand, while the hand in itself can be the ideal hand only with five fingers. Now and then, we like to think of the nuclear family in this balanced way.

If this delicate balance exists, then it can also be distorted. Today we know of a lot of more or less artificial collectives in which differently defined individuals take part as more or less anonymous elements, elements that can to a certain degree be dispersed without affecting our notion of the qualities of the collective. The labour force in industrial production or the use of the labour force in warfare are classical examples of this very individuated type of human being, but individuation is a much wider phenomenon (cf. Holter 1975; Beck 1987; Näsman 1992).

In contrast to the individual who has been reduced to a dispensable, almost set-theoretical element of a set, we can also imagine the individual who is in fact protecting the collective by belonging to it, by defend-
ing it and interpreting its ideals, often acting as judge, prosecutor and shepherd in one person. In western Europe, we seem to prefer this individual to be a man and a mixture of a healthy, stout brute and a slightly pathetic, official moralist. Hartwig Frisch (1928, p. 280) pointed out the type by comparing the appearance and character of such men as Charlemagne and Bismarck and, if we do not insist on the moustache, we may add Churchill. There is not always a point in exposing our heroes to ridicule. Having pointed out this, I feel free to find some suitable material patterns to prove my point, and that is where the hall enters the picture.

As a historical phenomenon, the hall is linked to the king and the feudal lord. It is the room or building in which he, as the head of his nuclear family, excercises his rights and performs his duties. He settles disputes and entertains his clients while organizing his economic and political system and space, keeping track of tenants and subjects. In southern Scandinavia, the area in focus, the hall itself is for archaeological reasons not a feudal invention, since, if you follow the main development of the Iron Age home, you will soon detect that the branch to which the hall belongs developed in the late Roman Iron Age.

It is fair to say that at the beginning of the Iron Age the house defines the social space of home and household for a self-sustaining nuclear family (Fig. 1). It is characterized by the distinct separation, by means of the entrance room, of dwelling and byre. These two parts are now of approximately the same size, and the buildings seem mainly to be homes. I take this as my rather arbitrary point of departure without bothering about how this came to be.

There is a close dependence between the mode of subsistence, the simple building technology and the general planning of the home. But the situation of the home seems to be stable only for a generation or two.

Fig. 1. The planning of the standard pre-Roman Iron Age farmhouse. From Becker: 1972.
Homes are seldom rebuilt on exactly the same spot but are often moved, the house torn down and the site tilled.

Time changed this pattern and the home—a farm, in some places part of a planned or spontaneous village—became a relatively stable, spatial phenomenon. A lot of more stable situations developed. Some may have had demographic and economic causes, such as the “moving”, but in reality rather stable, villages on Jutland (Lund 1988). Other causes may have been topographic, such as the farm mounds in northern Norway (cf. Johansen 1982), but some are examples of places that for no obvious general reason have been favoured for centuries, such as some farmsteads in the Mälar Valley (Göthberg & Söderberg 1987). Recalling the phases of the Hodde village (Hvass 1985), stability and social status seem to have been interdependent (Fig. 2).

The growing stability is accompanied by a new room that becomes more and more frequent in the home. This room, I believe, was first noted in a systematic way by Björn Myhre (1980) as the living-room without a hearth. Some Danish archaeologists talk of the extra pair of
Fig. 3. The standard post-setting in the dwelling part of the larger long houses in southern Scandinavia during the late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period. A and B from Stenberger 1940; C from Tesch 1992, fig. 18; D, E and F from Hansen et al. 1991, fig.
posts introduced in the dwelling part of the main farmhouse (Fig. 3). Eventually two new pairs of posts are introduced, creating first a room on each side of the original fireplace room and later two rooms at the short end of the main house (Hansen 1988; Hansen, Mikkelsen and Hvass 1991). The sequence is illustrated by Hedeager (1988, p. 139).

The two-room dwelling part became the standard mode when farms reached a size which made it impossible for the nuclear family alone to maintain them and spatially difficult to organize the dwelling solely around the hearth, when the number of people living on the farm increased (cf. Onsten 1992). In that situation, the need for more space is obvious, but the fact that the farms grew instead of just multiplying marks a social stratification, in as much as several, potentially self-sustaining, nuclear families never formed a home of their own.

Farms consisting of two houses or, in the case of big farms, one main house and some secondary ones became more abundant in the 2nd century A.D., and the second house or secondary houses seem mostly to have been reserved for storage and handicrafts (Mikkelsen 1990, pp. 146 f.; Fig. 4). Later, some of the functions of the secondary house were

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**Fig. 4.** A choice of farms from the early Roman Iron Age, with one main house and one or more secondary houses. Number 4 from Hvass 1985. The rest from Mikkelsen 1990.
probably added to the main building as a new room, for instance, on Jutland, and for a while the number of farms with two houses decreased.

In the 4th century, a third house was introduced on large farms. Such houses are not common but, taken together, they form a pattern characterized by one or more of the following archaeological characteristics:

1. They belong to big farms,
2. They consist of one room with a minimum of posts,
3. They are singled out by their position on the farm.
4. Their hearths are *neither* used for cooking, *nor* do they facilitate a handicraft,

![Diagram of the spatial organisation of a farm](image_url)

**Fig. 5.** A reconstruction of the spatial organisation of the dominating farm in Vallhagar on Gotland. From Stenberger 1955, map 1.
(5) The artefacts found in the houses are different from those found in the dwelling part of the main house on the farm.

The living-rooms without a hearth and the other rooms later enlarging the dwelling part of the main house were additions and to a certain extent a matter of growing farm-size only, but the third house is an addition to the farm and a division of the dwelling. From the positions of the entrances and their varying number, which seems to have been very much a matter of free choice, we may infer that its planning was not so strictly governed by spatial rules as that of the main house.

The state of preservation is obviously crucial if one wants to find instances of this type of house and one may therefore get the impression that it was always a very exclusive phenomenon and also a peripheral one, since in the central settlement areas all buildings are poorly preserved.

In the well-preserved periphery, the 5th-century example from Vallhagar in Gotland (Stenberger 1955) is probably the most instructive to begin with. Nearly all the houses in the settlement have been excavated, but, judging from early maps, some farms have disappeared in the south-east. Nonetheless the centre of the settlement is well preserved and making the original number of farms or households c. 12 is not unreasonable. Several farms have been divided, but the southernmost of the two central ones seems almost to have escaped this fate (Fig. 5).
It is probably significant that in Vallhagar the farm consisting of houses 16, 18 and 19 (Lundström 1955; Gejvall 1955; Möllerop 1955), which escaped division, contains a hall, house 16 (Fig. 6). The roof-supporting posts are markedly few and the middle aisle relatively narrow. Both traits are modern in comparison with the main house and they indicate a thatched roof with a higher pitch than that of the main house. Even the plank-lined benches are peculiar to the house, and so is the hearth. Although both houses, 16 (the hall) and 18 (the main house), were burnt down, only the hearth in the main house was surrounded by kitchenware. This indicates that the fire on the hearth in house 16 was meant to make the house light and warm, without being disturbed by those who did the cooking.

In the third house or the hall, luxury artefacts, such as fragments of glass vessels, bronze jewellery and ornamented ceramics, predominate, together with artefacts for handicrafts, for example, small knives, whetstones and polishing stones. A spindle-whorl blank and some bone or antler waste supports the handicraft picture. In the main house, the overwhelming artefact category is household ceramics, and luxury and handicrafts hardly exist. The artefact categories in house 16 could be found in other houses in Vallhagar as well, but the interesting thing is that on the big farm these categories are found only in the hall or third house. It is fair to conclude that the luxury part of the dwelling and activities that could easily have been housed in the main building were confined to a special house, heated in addition to the first.

House 16 is not a feudal hall in a political or economic sense, but it might well have been the embryo of such a hall, in as much as it shows the will of the owner of a large farm to separate a part of his social life from immediate contact with the main house collective, in which humans and animals make up the cardinal part of the subsistence economy. Obviously, the third house or the embryonic hall represents some of the possibilities that the surplus production organized from the main house could result in.

The mixture of situation, spaciousness, luxury and handicraft suggests that the house may have had representative as well as leisure-time functions for the family who owned the farm. It is an essential feature that the third house is not a room for representation only, but also a way of actually separating the family from the immediate self-subsistence, putting them in a room where they could most conveniently engage in
activities which were easily combined with listening and talking and drinking.

When Mårten Stenberger in the early 1930s selected excavation objects in Öland, he chose two big farms, two of a medium size and a small and insignificant one (Stenberger 1933 and 1935). In Rönnerum, he first mapped what was left of a large settlement area and saw that the big farm had at a late stage in its history been divided into two by a wall. Originally, the farm consisted of the same sort of houses as the Vallhagar farm discussed above (Fig. 7). In Rönnerum, Stenberger (1933, pp. 125 ff.) excavated only house VII finding the main house too big and knowing that house V was probably purely a farm building.

House VII (Fig. 8) is characterized by the stone-lined bench, the narrow middle aisle, the long space between the pairs of posts and the big hearth not used for cooking. The house was not burnt down and the excavation was a very rapid one; not many artefacts were recovered, but sherds from a glass vessel and a rivet from a shield boss were found on the floor, and the absence of household ceramics was conspicuous.

Övetorp, once a large farm (Stenberger 1933, pp. 131 ff.), is a parallel to the farm in Rönnerum, and house II (Fig. 9) is the equivalent of house VII. Although the excavation plan gives the impression that the farm has been totally excavated, this is not the case. Only parts of the upper floor, created after a thorough rebuilding of the farm, were cleared, and in House II the floor was not more than touched upon. What we see is thus the end phase of the farm, when it was divided into two households. This division even affected the hall building, where the construction of a partition wall called for a second bench, doorway and hearth. The very small scale of these hall-rooms underlines the symbolic value or status attached to this, the extra dwelling-house separated from the main building.

Turning to the Danish material, it is hard to point out a hall before they become apparent architectural monuments, such as the one in Lejre (Christensen 1987 and 1991). The difficulty is due to the state of preservation characterizing most Iron Age houses, but it seems reasonable to consider house V in Dankirke (Hansen 1990) a hall and not the main house of the farm, since in these parts of Jutland and northern Germany the main house is a long house with a distinct and different plan (Fig. 10). Compared with a contemporary long house from the area, the differences are striking—huge posts and side beams spanning seven metres
Fig. 7. A reconstruction of the spatial organisation of the dominating farm in Rönnerum on Öland. From Stenberger 1933, fig. 56.
The origin of the hall in southern Scandinavia

Fig. 8. The floor of the hall in Rönnerum on Öland, house VII. From Stenberger 1933, fig. 86.

Fig. 9. The floor of the hall in Övetorp on Öland, house II. From Stenberger 1933, fig. 87.

Fig. 10. A: A typical, 4th-century, main house on a large farm in southern Jutland. From Hansen 1988, fig. 6:1. B: The third phase of the Hall in Dankirke. Based on Hansen 1990, fig. 7, house Vb.
in a narrow middle aisle must have been awe-inspiring in this sparsely forested area. The imposing building is matched by the very rich artefact material found in connection with the house area.

In the excavated villages in southern Jutland there are no obvious halls to be seen, but on examining the main phases of, for example, Nørre Snede (Hansen 1988), it is seen that many farms lack a second and third house, although these houses can from time to time be seen, for example, in phase 3 on the dominating farm closing the village street in the east. No detailed plan has been published of the farm that signifies main phase 3, but the farm plan and the second and third houses on this farm (Fig. 11) belong to the dominating farm and the phase. Like sev-
The origin of the hall in southern Scandinavia
eral parallels in Vorbasse (Hansen et al. 1991), the house is situated in the middle of the yard and constructed with only one pair of internal posts. This means that the house walls are high and stout enough to conveniently support a cross-beam with queen posts that in their turn support the side beams. The wish to create a free floor is characteristic of the third house on big farms. In Vorbasse, where, on the whole, the farms are large, there are several examples, and in the very large, somewhat later and solitary farm of Mörup (Mikkelsen 1988), we meet with the same planographical characteristics of the farm with three houses (Fig. 12).

Although it must be considered a tentative hypothesis, there is much to suggest that the third house is indeed the hall of the very large farms in southern Jutland and thus the actual origin of the Anglo-Saxon hall (Fig. 13).

The hall is most often a house, but in some special cases, for example, at Borg on Västvågøy in Lofoten (Stamsö Munch et al. 1989), it is a room. In Borg, Tromsø Museum excavated parts of a large farm some years ago. The floor layers were to a certain extent preserved and it was possible to connect artefacts and rooms with each other. The example (Fig. 14) is late, Viking Age in fact, but the long house with an entrance room and the rooms in a row is an echo of the classical, southern Scandinavian, Iron Age house. The order of the rooms is somewhat different, since here at Borg the entrance room separates two living-rooms—the standard living-room and the hall respectively. In the hall room, at the summit of the hill where the long house is situated, the posts are relatively far apart. The middle aisle has been lowered to create benches in the side aisles and in the upper part of the room and, although there is a big fireplace, very few household ceramics and soapstone sherds were found in the room. On the contrary, the artefacts are dominated by an exclusive collection of glass vessels and imported ceramics. In comparison with the more kitchen-like dwelling, the mixture of luxury and handicraft once again stands out as characteristic of the hall in its embryonic or, in this case, peripheral form. The hall at Borg is

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The origin of the hall in southern Scandinavia
Fig. 14. The main house at the Borg farm. From Herschend & Mikkelsen 1992.
a curious echo of the rural, late Roman Iron Age hall in a period when in southern countries the phenomenon had developed into the central room of kings' houses—buildings filled with housecarls. The hall room at Borg would seem to indicate that the people were conscious of the roots of the hall.

In the examples given so far, the connection between economic strength and the embryonic hall has been obvious, but, turning to the last example, the ideological and military connections seem to take over.

For several reasons, Öland in the Baltic became the region where settlement planning took an experimental turn in the Migration Period. A growing population, the unrest in southern Scandinavia, the development of the metal economy and close contacts with the Roman army in the eastern part of the Empire in the 5th century lay behind the creation of ideal settlements in the form of fortified villages (Herschend 1991).

The Eketorp ring-fort is the only one excavated, and here the planning fulfilled several aims. The point of the defence works was to create a fortification for the civilians both inside and outside the fort. This was accomplished by the stout wall and the portcullis gate, which would have been open even during a siege, allowing peasants from the surroundings to reach the security of the fort. From the beginning, the defence system had several traits adopted from Roman fortifications, but they were abandoned and the system was changed to a Germanic and probably more suitable one, given the attacks that could be expected.

The planning of the settlement gives a very egalitarian impression, regulating the breadth of the facades along the streets and squares. Eketorp is a permanent settlement and a colony, but not a way to compress the surrounding population into a fortified village. On the contrary, people are given homes of their own in the new fort. They breed livestock and manage the byres, but their one-sided economy is dependent on that of the farms around the fort. As a social experiment, the ideal, the densely populated, ring-fort settlement, did not last long (Herschend 1985; 1991).

Some of the inhabitants must have belonged to the military organisation defending the fort and others to an organisation that was more egalitarian. Therefore it seems that two organisations were mixed in the fort, one managing the population surplus and the other the defence in the area.

A settlement study shows that among the seemingly similar houses
one, house 03, is nonetheless outstanding (Fig. 15). It occupies the best position in the south-western facade, facing the largest square in the fort, and it is a centre in the most regularly planned part of the settlement, equipped with a canopy entrance, occupying and blocking several of the few public spaces in the fort. Inside, there is a small entrance room, and behind that the hall room, through which the standard living-room is reached. This is the only house in the settlement with two living-rooms and in the outer one we find the only hearth that was not used
for cooking. There are no benches in the side aisles of this room, but the
contrast between the artefacts in the two rooms is striking when the dis-
tribution of household ceramics and weapons is mapped. Normally,
these groups cannot be set off to mark different aspects of everyday life,
but in a fortification this is possible. Therefore, it seems significant that
it is in the central house of the fortified settlement, separated from the
food-preparing women, in the room with the hearth that supplied the
light and the heat, that we find the weapons (Fig. 15).

This means that the central hall room was planned in the ideal settle-
ment in order to mirror a society that was in principle egalitarian, but
nonetheless in need of a primus inter pares, in this case, for protection.
Concentrating the military organisation to a room in one of the house-
holds is a way of pointing out the individual leader and connecting
leadership with the room.

Although the examples are few, they suffice to show that the hall was
already the room of leadership, in an economic as well as a military
sense, in the 5th century. The point is that a part of the social power pro-
cceeds from the home, i.e. from one of the socio-psychological platforms
later to be found in developed feudalism, namely the unity of home, 
nuclear family, responsibility, power and the individual acting for the
collective. The interesting thing is that, centuries before we can talk of
feudalism, the hall constitutes the room as a social space for the individ-
ual who in that room is the head of a nuclear family—a positive notion
common to rich and poor—and not just one of a team that runs an estate.
It is by the fusion between the military power, which could be temporar-
ily bestowed upon any strategically gifted murderer, and the economic
power, inherited by the sons from the best farms, that individuality be-
comes a public, social concept invested with a room, the embryonic hall.
Thus created, it could not be rooted out and came to be a natural coun-
terpoint of different collectives, such as the thing assembly, the village
assembly or later the tenants. Some time during the late Roman Iron
Age, it became possible within the nuclear family to breed an individu-
ality which acted for the collective and to make it a publicly accepted,
social norm.

When the upper levels of the hierarchy managed to create a space for
this individuality—a room separated from the subsistence economy—
they also created a place for an oral tradition in which the individual
from a certain stratum of society became the hero. What can be done in
the hall other than eat and drink and talk and entertain neighbouring
hall-owners, while developing an oral fiction? The hall gives a man the
opportunity of gossiping with selected members of a certain social stra-
tum, and that is quite a new political possibility in a society in which
otherwise everybody on the farm would be sitting around the hearth in
the main building listening to him.

One of the earliest sagas commenting upon southern Scandinavian
society, the first part of the Beowulf poem, is the final product of a long,
oral tradition, reflecting the cultural history of the middle and the later
part of the first millenium. Bearing in mind the archaeological record of
the third house on the large farms, it is not surprising that the saga is
about the hall and the individual, symbolizing the good and orderly so-
ciety, a society threatened by monsters whose sole purpose is that of
blocking the hall functions and thus the whole society and frustrating its
leading members.

In this poem, the tension between the individual and the collective is
shown in many ways and at least in one very instructive and gruesome
variation. Beowulf, who is morally and physically fit to kill the monster
Grendel, is temporarily allowed to take charge of the hall and use it as a
trap for the monster, whose pleasure it is to kill and eat all those who
sleep in there (Herschend 1992, p. 154). Instead of just waiting for the
monster inside the door, Beowulf puts one of his men next to the en-
trance as a sleeping decoy, having realized that Grendel, encouraged by
killing the man, will continue into the interior of the hall, where he will
be trapped in Beowulf’s grip (vv. 720 ff.). In a way, the plan does work,
since, as expected, the anonymous Geat inside the door is killed and
Grendel is probably death marked when he, rather unexpectedly, man-
ages to escape.

This is the extreme tension in a nutshell; either you are the good indi-
vidual in charge of the hall, indispensable to the collective and a mem-
ber of it, like Beowulf, or you are an element of it, in this case, one of
the 14 men chosen by Beowulf to represent the Geatish nation, and re-
duced to a decoy, necessary perhaps but no doubt dispensable, an an-
onymous element to be added or subtracted and valued as a decoy only.

It tells us a good deal about the unpredictable dynamics of the home
and the family that it must have been within the scope of this idea in the
early Iron Age that it appeared to be legitimate to create a relatively pri-
vate room to surround, bring up and sustain individuality as a public, social norm.

Today, there are many rooms for individuality, as there should be, but it is nevertheless comforting that, when individuality is nowadays put forward as a socio-political, public norm, it most often happens in rooms which are at least relatively public. In a period when decision makers on the political and economic level are presented to us as individuals and members of a nuclear family, there is no doubt a danger in the semi-private room, for example, a study turned into a television studio. Here, the owner of the room chooses either privately to built up his individuality and interpretations of society with his like-minded friends, or to address the public as their loyal hero. He uses the privacy of the room to make his individuality a public norm.

Although we may recognize the problem of individuality and collectiveness in its modern varieties, the point must surely be not to forget that the tension between the individual and the collective is a never-ending problem that is still present in the home.

Those who built the first embryonic halls as the third house on their farms did not foresee feudalism, but it so happened that they invented a new check in the play with the tension between the individual and the collective and that turned out to be no easy matter to handle, although handling it is absolutely necessary.

English revised by Neil Tomkinson

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