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The Pilgrimage Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port and its Late Medieval Furnishings

by Andreas Förderer

Introduction

In his recent study on south German parish churches, Klaus Jan Philipp emphasized that there is no function-specific typology in the religious architecture of the Middle Ages: “Observing the structure only, it is simply impossible for us to tell, without further information, if it is an episcopal church, collegiate church, monastery church, parish church or a chapel […]”\(^1\) This observation is confirmed by the comparison of numerous ground plans in the seminal study *Die kirchliche Baukunst des Abendlandes* [The Religious Architecture of the Western World] by Georg Dehio and Gustav Bezold,\(^2\) where plans of cathedrals were compared with churches serving completely different functions. To emphasize the point, these plans were presented without any indications of furnishings in order to avoid distracting the reader from the focus of the plan. Although construction and renovation projects of churches were certainly the result of needs and specific ideas, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain an obvious relationship between form and function.

Nevertheless numerous recent studies on such relationships between form and function at medieval churches have shown promise, because they approach the architecture as a complex answer to very specific standards and conditions, rather than a mindless following of general rules.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) *Artistic integration in Gothic Buildings; Rev. Papers presented at the conference [...] held at York University, Toronto, on Apr. 7-9, 1989* (Toronto/Buffalo/London 1995)
Figure 1  Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: Author.
On this basis the following paper will explore the conception of religious architecture at the end of the fifteenth century, using the pilgrimage church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle) (fig. 1) as a case study. This church is an excellent example of how the form of the church reflected its use as a pilgrimage center. Its earlier church building was completely replaced between 1475 and 1520 and its use was not overlaid with other functions such as was often the case with cathedrals.

The Location, the Pilgrimage and the Construction of the Church

The beginnings of the pilgrimage in Saint-Nicolas-de-Port are unclear. The dedication of a church with St. Nicholas as patron was recorded in 1101. This event was probably related to the arrival of St. Nicholas’ finger relic, following the arrival of the saint’s relics in Bari in 1087. Unfortunately there is no further information regarding the cult’s earlier constructions here. However, several documents reflect how attractive the site was to pilgrims in the later Middle Ages. A biographer of the later sanctified French king Louis IX (1214-70) reported that the king and his wife were rescued on their return from the crusade after someone called out to Nicholas of Lorraine in distress during a sea storm, promising the saint a silver ship in return for their safety. Furthermore several pilgrimage badges of the 13th century from Saint-Nicolas-de-Port testify to the popularity of the pilgrimage in northern Europe. Finally, in 1471 King René d’Anjou and his wife donated a golden arm reliquary adorned with precious stones.

Plans to build a new church in Saint-Nicolas-de-Port began to take shape around 1470. This design included three aisles in the form of basilica with a two-tower façade to the west. The eastern parts consisted of a Benedictine choir with three apses and a transept, which do not widen than the structure beyond the aisles (fig. 2). Unfortunately, only vague information on possible commissioners and financial resources of the construction survives. In the 15th century, Saint-Nicolas-de-Port was larger than Nancy, the neighboring residence of the Duke of Lorraine. The city enjoyed remarkable growth during this period as houses were built around two symbiotically interdependent centers -- the pilgrimage church and the

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market.

Figure 2  Plan of the Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: Author.
Only this combination of pilgrimage and trade could have facilitated the construction of the church in its ultimate, fully expanded, dimensions.

Questions regarding the reasons behind the design of the church, require an analysis of how the builders attempted to make optimal use of the available site. Two main streets along the city’s slope (which had been built in the context of rapid urban development) led to a noticeable bend in the longitudinal axis of the church building. (fig. 3) Two portals were placed at the transept responding to the arterial route of the city, passing through the choir of the church, to offer a short-cut entrance. (fig. 4) The transept, which is only visible in the elevation, was a further compromise between the limitations of tradition and the specific topographic situation. (fig. 5) The complete demolition of the pre-existing structure indicates that expansion of the space was probably the central motivation for constructing a completely new building.

Yet, the church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port does not reflect its function as a pilgrimage church by its large dimensions. Nor does it have an ambulatory, which is characteristic for numerous pilgrimage churches. Instead the church, in its general demeanor, actually passes itself off as a cathedral, (fig. 6) but at the end of the 15th century Saint-Nicolas was only an emergent priory of the Benedictine abbey Gorze. Therefore the architectural promotion of the pilgrimage, spurred by a competition with the major religious centers of Lorraine (Metz, Toul and Verdun), was certainly desirable and intended outcome.

Reconstruction of the Furnishings Contemporary with the Period of Building

Reconstructing the remnants of the original furnishings enables us to clarify the relationship between the form and the use of the building. Vincenzo Scamozzi made a stop in Saint-Nicolas-de-Port in 1600 on his way from Paris to Venice and sketched the ground plan of the church in his diary. (fig. 7) The situation depicted by Scamozzi in 1600 probably corresponds to that of the period of the completion of the church between 1510 and 1520. The drawing shows the altar with the relic of Saint Nicolas as the center of the pilgrimage church at the crossing of transept and nave. Instead of the present situation of an

Figure 3  Plan of immediate vicinity of the Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Archives Départementales de Meurthe et Moselle, Nancy: 2M/I art. 454, B 12, f° 83 v°-84 v°.

Photo: Public domain image.
Figure 4  Portal of a transept at the Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: Author.

Figure 5  Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port, from the south (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: Author.

Figure 6  Interior, nave looking towards the east, Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: Author.
Figure 7 Sketch of Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port by Vincenzo Scamozzi, 1600 (west façade, plan, and elevation. Photo: After Franco Barbieri (ed.), Vincenzo Scamozzi: Taccuino di viaggio da Parigi a Venezia (Venezia/Roma 1959).
central nave from the main portal in the west to the baroque altar in the central apse we must envision it as a multi-divided room. The central nave was separated from the transept by the reliquary altar. (Components of this original altar are preserved in a chapel in the church.) (fig. 9) Furthermore, during the main construction period, a treasure chamber was integrated along the outer wall of the transept in close proximity to the central nave. (fig. 8)

The use of the church can be outlined on this basis: the medieval pilgrim entered the church mainly through the transept portals. After entering the church, the pilgrim would have found himself at the western end of the nave, between the central choir in the east which was reserved for the clerics and the backside of the reliquary altar. Then the pilgrim would have walked through the side aisles into the nave, which was entirely aligned with the reliquary altar. As this area was independent from those reserved for the religious services and times of prayer of the clerics, the pilgrim could have entered the nave at any time. The reliquary altar consisted of a mensa and a gate, which was placed between the pillars of the central nave. This screen had two openings and was decorated in the middle with a still-preserved, stone turret, inside of which the arm reliquary with the relic of St. Nicholas could have been placed. (fig. 10) In this upper part the relic, while still protected, remained visible.

The reliquary was brought into the adjacent treasure chamber during the night. This two-story construction remains intact in the western bay of the northern end of the transept. (fig. 11) At the ground level, two cabinets were built into the wall to store the church’s treasure. The door to this room was secured with the aid of an iron rod, which was inserted and locked into the ground in front of the door. The iron rod could only be removed and brought into the room above the treasure chamber. A narrow staircase led to this room, which, because of its alcove, probably served as the guard’s room or watching chamber. There are two windows in it: one offering a view to the street and another into the church.

**An Interpretation**

The large dimensions of the later Saint-Nicolas-de-Port church, defined by the topographical situation, harmonized with its use. A distinction between both main functions “pilgrimage” and “choir reserved for the clerics” was reached by the ground plan and the well thought-out positioning of the furnishings. This made it possible to perform a liturgy according to the demands of the pilgrims, such as that seen later in baroque pilgrimage.
Figure 8 Treasure Chamber of the Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle).
Photo: Author.

Figure 9 Secondary Components of the Original Reliquary Altar, Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle).
Photo: Author.
Figure 10  Stone Turret of the Original Reliquary Altar, Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: Author.

Figure 11  Plan and Elevation of the Two-Story Treasure Chamber in the Church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (France, Dep. Meurthe-et-Moselle). Photo: After Odile Kammer-Schweyer, *La Lorraine des marchands à Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (du 14e au 16e siècle)* (tome 26 du recueil de documents sur l’histoire de Lorraine), Saint-Nicolas-de-Port 1985.
churches like Vierzehnheiligen (Bavaria). It should be pointed out that the placement of the choir of the pre-existing church had most likely been in the area of the later reliquary altar.

One reason for the afore-mentioned division of the new structure could have been the wish to maintain a site strongly connected with the relic because the effects of the relic in this location were of great importance. Whether this arrangement was determined by these conditions, clearly intended or not, the isolation of the reliquary altar accentuated the position of the reliquary in the center of the church and facilitated a liturgy focused around the relic and its significance for pilgrims.

A written source survives, which is very likely connected to the completion of the newer church, or to the beginning of its use. Duke Antoine of Lorraine founded a Mass for the church in 1511: “...pour la singuliere et fervante devotion que nous avons au glorieux corps saint confesseur et amy de Dieu, monsieur sainct Nicolas, notre bon advocat et patron ayons presentement fonde et institue une messe cothidiane estre dite et celebree perpetuellement a l’autel de ly maistre mons. Saint Nicolas […] laquelle messe nous voulons et entendons estre dite et celebré vers les onze et douze heures du matin quelle soit achevee et finie environ le midi et non plus longue affin que les pellerins qui arriveront tard aud. St Nicolas ou autres gens qui navroient este du matin a l’eglise puissent ouyr lad messe et pour a icelle convocquer et appeller le peuple y soit sonne de la plus grande cloche de ladite eglise [seize?] coups affin atraict et distinct l’un apres l’autre non pas a branlle mais d’un coste de ladite cloche seulement ...”6. The duke sponsored this daily Mass at the reliquary altar, to be said between 11 and 12 a.m. enabling late-arriving pilgrims to attend the service. The Mass was announced by separate bell chimes.

The creation of architectural and liturgical premises for permanent pilgrimages independent from those associated with holidays reflects, in my view, that in St.-Nicolas-de-Port the specific standards of pilgrimage were strongly connected with trade. Yet one might also suspect a change in religious needs or desires. Alain Erlande-Brandenburg recently pointed out that phenomena such as rood screens, which allowed a full view of the choir beyond, like that in Saint-Madeleine in Troyes, should be interpreted as examples of the desire of the laypeople for immediate participation in the liturgy.7 An inaccessible relic,

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6 Archives Départementales de Meurthe et Moselle, Nancy: 2MI art. 454, B 12, f° 83 v° 84 v°.

7 Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, “Les édifices religieux et le décor architectural à l’époque
which is only visible on certain days of the year such as that of the Cuthbert shrine in Durham Cathedral, would have been certainly detrimental for both the pilgrimage and the local trade.

Conclusion

The interpretation of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port and its furnishings shows the current paucity of in-depth investigations regarding the customs and development of this particular medieval pilgrimage. What kind of pilgrimages were there? How many of the pilgrims regarded the pilgrimage shrine as the ultimate destination? How many travelers regarded the pilgrimage site only as a welcome stop on a major route? Which local and liturgical conditions guaranteed the “success” of a pilgrimage, when we take into consideration that the miracle remained the exception at any rate? Regarding the immense size of the church and its pronounced “user-friendly” furnishings, we may draw a comparison to our contemporary “event culture,” revealing a new interpretation. The new church was not only an adjustment of the architectural space to the changed needs of the pilgrimage, but was an object of economic speculation; with hopes of increasing the number of visitors to the new attraction, and thereby secure the flow and productivity of trade. On this basis, donations given by the citizens for the construction of the church were religious as well as business investments, as they hoped the pilgrims would increase their future profits.

The choice of a cathedral plan as the ideal type of structure for Saint-Nicolas-de-Port does not reflect functional considerations in my view. The style instead communicated the legitimizing power of tradition to the visitors, while appearing to guarantee the overall acceptance of the new building. Sadly, as Odile Kammerer-Schweyer noted, these hopes were never borne out. A decline in the Saint-Nicolas-de-Port’s economy began within a few decades after the completion of the church, just before 1635, when the Thirty Years’ War finally devastated the area. After all, mass phenomena, at the beginning of the 16th century flamboyante” in: *Art et société en France au XVe siècle*, dir. Christiane Prigent (Paris 1999), p. 160..


9 Odile Kammerer-Schweyer, *La Lorraine des marchands à Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (du 14e au 16e siècle)*; tome 26 du recueil de documents sur l’histoire de Lorraine (Saint-Nicolas-de-Port, 1985).
as in our days, are only partially controlled.

_Bibliography_


