Introduction to Late Medieval Pilgrimage Architecture

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In recent years studies on the functional and liturgical aspects of late medieval churches have evolved as a central topic of historical and art-historical scholarship. The furnishings of a church, such as panels, sculptures, tapestries, and precious books are no longer understood as separate artistic expressions, but are placed into a context of contemporaneous piety and theology. One recent focal point for such scholarship was female monasticism, but the scattered scrutiny of pilgrimage architecture has not yet been subject to this kind of synthesis.

This introduction seeks to outline the reasons for this significant absence of research and to develop some possible questions for further studies in this field. An art historical approach to late medieval pilgrimage architecture requires attention to several "hurdles": The majority of pilgrimage churches combine other functions as well, such as cathedrals (Cologne), collegiate monasteries (Aachen) or abbeys (Weingarten). In some cases the pilgrimages started later and may have influenced the form of a new building or reconstruction project, as in the case of Frederick Barbarossa’s translatio of the relics of the Three Kings to Cologne.

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1 Research on the different forms of female piety and monasticism has been the most fundamental contribution of feminist approaches to history and art history so far. Pioneering in this context is the work of Caroline Walker Bynum. It is not possible to give a thorough selection of Bynum’s studies in a footnote. See e. g. her seminal study: Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982). Her contributions had an important impact on numerous US art historians such as Jeffrey Hamburger (Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Nuns as artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997). For a summary of recent research see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Formen weiblicher Frömmigkeit im späteren Mittelalter," in Krone und Schleier: Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern (München: Hirmer, 2005).

logne Cathedral in 1164. In other cases a miracle or the acquisition of relics launched the construction of a new church complex, as with the cult of St. Elizabeth of Thuringia in Marburg immediately after her death in 1231.

Another factor complicates a comprehensive survey. Whereas famous attractions such as Santiago and Rome were dominant in the early and high Middle Ages, the types of changes in devotion which start the 12th century led to many new forms of pilgrimage in the later Middle Ages, for example, those inspired by bleeding Hosts. Running parallel to this diversification of the objects and goals of pilgrimage, numerous regional & local centers now competed with the traditional pilgrimage sites, particularly beginning in the 14th century.

The regionally-diverse states of preservation further complicate the situation. Among the numerous medieval churches, most have largely lost their original character. In Catholic territories, most churches were either rebuilt and redecorated in the Baroque period or were destroyed and replaced by new buildings, such as the pilgrimage church for the Holy-Blood-Relic in the Benedictine Abbey Church of Weingarten. The starting point for research is more favorable in the Lutheran territories of northern Germany and Scandinavia. These regions did not participate in the iconoclasm of the peasant's war, the "Bauernkrieg," and thus tolerated the old furnishings. But there the liturgical tradition ended, so few written sources survive.

The Münster of Aachen, center of one of the most popular central European pilgrimages in the later Middle Ages, may serve as an introductory example to outline the problems and questions of present scholarship. The Heiltsuftsfahrten to Aachen blossomed particularly since the 14th century, when Emperor Charles IV, who was an admirer of Charlemagne, promoted the veneration of his shrine and the relic treasury of the Münster. Since then every

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seven years a multitude of people have come to Aachen. (ill. 1) The Heiltumsweisung itself took place outside the church from a balcony, where the treasury was shown to the public.
Ill. 1 Print showing the Heiltumsfahrten at Aachen
The pilgrimage was certainly not a phenomenon limited to the exterior of the church every seven years. But how did the architecture respond to the specific functional needs of the pilgrimage? A first look at the ground-plan of Aachen shows that the structure with the Carolingian Palatinate Chapel and the 14th century choir can be hardly characterized as pilgrimage architecture, providing an appropriate frame for the masses of pilgrims. Furthermore the late medieval Münster was not only the place of a collegiate monastery but – as we have already seen - the coronation church of the German kings.

Nonetheless in a charter of May 14th, 1355 the building of the new Gothic choir of Aachen Münster was justified with an account of a big crowd of pilgrims. But to what extent was the new architecture made for the pilgrims, since it does not correspond to our image of a pilgrimage church? Regarding the immense popularity of the Heiltumsfahrt and the specific function as coronation church we would expect a quick building process. However, the erection of the choir dragged on until 1414, the year of its dedication. Later on the Marienkapelle at the site of the old main apse was (completed in 1455). (ill. 2) In Mary’s chapel there was the famous shrine, covered by painted wooden panels. Its situation on an elevated tribune facilitated the custom of the pilgrims walking through under the shrine. Furthermore this chapel, which was demolished in 1786, preserved the venerated image “Unserer Lieben Frau von Aachen.”

The other major shrine, the Karlsschrein with the relics of Charlemagne, was placed east of the main altar. Similarly to the Marienschrein, it was also elevated and covered by painted wooden panels. There was some kind of an ambulatory behind the altar, which was slightly deeper than the rest of the choir, again enabling the visitor to pass under the reliquary shrine. Crowning the high altar, the shrine was easily visible from the other end of the choir. This complex arrangement makes clear that the access to both shrines must have been regulated in different ways. For the ordinary pilgrim it was certainly possible to come relatively close to the Marienschrein and to see at least its covering from the gratings. The entrance to the chapel itself was undoubtedly limited to certain groups of pilgrims. The shrine of Charlemagne at the eastern end was integrated into the pilgrim experience, at least visually. Nonetheless, the rudimentary ambulatory makes clear that even there, only certain groups of pilgrims, such as nobles, had access to the choir at specific times. In this context the text of the source of 1355 may be interpreted in a different way: Indeed the crowds of pilgrims stimulated the building project. However, the new building apparently was not intended to provide more space for the pilgrims, but for the clerics and their services in a clearly-separated part of the church.

Thus we can see that the relationship between liturgy and pilgrimage at Aachen needs further study. But this more-detailed research faces several obstacles: Although numerous medieval furnishings and the famous shrines survive, the context of their presentation has changed, making it difficult to reconstruct the original disposition. The interior topography of the church was especially altered in the second half of the 18th century. Furthermore, other important parts of the decoration, such as the stained glass, are completely lost. But medieval written sources have not been thoroughly analyzed yet, consequently, a comprehensive archi-


Architectural history of Aachen Münster in the context of its liturgy and function is still a task for future research.
III. 2 Marienkapelle at Aachen, 1455
This is a characteristic situation for many other churches, such as the famous Elisabethkirche in Marburg. There we have at first glance, an extraordinarily well-preserved interior with the choir screen, the grave of Saint Elisabeth, and the 13th century high altar still at their original places. The church, as well as the cult of Elisabeth, has attracted much scholarly attention. While art historians assumed for a long time that a popular saint in the later Middle Ages automatically resulted an equally-popular pilgrimage, this view has been contested in recent years. In the years following Elisabeth’s death and subsequent canonization of her burial place, the church attracted numerous pilgrims, causing Alberich of Troisfonatines (†1252) to compare Marburg with Santiago de Compostela. Yet, since the middle of the 13th century the pilgrimage to Elisabeth and its role for the church and convent apparently declined. Karl E. Demandt has collected the documents regarding the income of the convent, which show that during the 15th century, pilgrimage accounted for only a small portion of the proceeds. We have to take into account in this context that sudden popular mass pilgrimages, such as Wilsnack, are a later phenomenon, and did not start before the early fourteenth century. Instead, after c. 1250, the tradition of the German Order and St. Mary became the main patrons of the Marburg church, replacing St. Elisabeth. Furthermore, Elisabeth, wife of Landgraf Ludwig IV of Thuringia, became the patron saint of the whole state of Hessen, giving Marburg a more aristocratic character as pilgrimage attraction. Recent research has emphasized that the German Order, as keeper of the shrine, had interests which differed from the ideals of Elisabeth and that its political ambitions presumably moved away from the attention and care for the shrine to other areas such as the Christianization of the later Deutschordensland on the Baltic Sea. But still it is not clear whether the changes around c. 1250 were a strategic decision of the wealthy convent or that of an ordinary example of pilgrimage in the 13th century with clerics reacting to a declining attractiveness for pilgrims which had begun after the elevation of the body in 1235.


10 Werner, "Die Heilige Elisabeth und die Anfänge des Deutschen Ordens in Marburg," 160 with note 257.


At this point it is necessary to look at the church with its architecture and furnishings more closely. For a church erected shortly after the death of Elisabeth we would expect the architecture to be perfectly adjusted to the necessities of a pilgrimage. Andreas Köstler noted in his 1995 dissertation on the Elisabethkirche that the triconch choir (ill. 3) was not optimally suited to handling of pilgrims, especially with the additional restrictions imposed by the liturgical choir which blocked access to the crossing with its choir screens.15

A look at the pilgrimage church of Wilsnack, one of the most popular pilgrimages of the later 15th century, reveals ground-plans and architecture that convey a confusing image of the pilgrimage church.16 After a host miracle in 1383, the erection of the large church probably began during the late 14th century. In 1401, when Bishop Wöpelitz of Havelberg died, choir and transept were probably finished. One point is of particular interest here. The form of the nave was changed during this construction, which was completed not much later than 1430.17 Its length was reduced to join the nave with the stump of the tower of the older church. One motivation could have been to place the new building in the tradition of its predecessor. What is more significant for our argument is the fact that the builders took into account the reduced length of the nave, i.e. that one bay more or less was apparently not a concern for them. This could mean that the essential parts of the mass pilgrimage took place outside or around the shrine and it was not notably restricted by the shorter nave. Furthermore, we have seen in Aachen that ground-plans and regulations do not determine the success or failure of a pilgrimage.

For Marburg, Köstler notes the increasingly-strict regulations that blocked access to the church and to the relics of the saint. The shrine of Elisabeth was originally elevated behind the high altar to be seen at least from the nave. (ill. 4) But this arrangement was changed probably before the completion the new high altar retable in the late 13th century.18 A substructure for the shrine, comparable to those of Aachen and St. Ursula of Cologne,19 was abandoned and the reliquary was moved to the sacristy at the north side of the choir behind an iron grating where it still resides today. (ill. 5)

This new placement was completed at a time when the pilgrimage already had lost its attractiveness to the broader public. Köstler characterizes this gradual retreat of the shrine as a process of *Hermetisierung* [hermeticization] based on a lack of interest by the German Order

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Ill. 3  Groundplan of *Elisabethkirche*, Marburg

Ill. 5 Interior, north side of the choir, Marburg Cathedral.
Picture Source: Gerhard Lutz.
in promoting the pilgrimage.  

As we have seen, it is not clear yet in the context of 13th-century pilgrimage whether the decline of the pilgrimage and the changes in the presentation of the shrine were based on a specific strategy of the German Order. In the course of the increasing importance of Elisabeth for the German nobility and the Landgrafen of Hessen as patron of their state, the presentation in a separate treasury room may have been a reaction to an ongoing change of the target audience. The original plans for the presentation of the shrine behind the late 13th-century high altarpiece show that the clerics initially wanted to present the relics in a manner similar to that of other contemporary pilgrimage sites. The different arrangement in the sacristy then gave the access to the shrine a more intimate character which would have been an ideal form to attract aristocratic pilgrims. All these conclusions remain speculative because we do not have any contemporary written sources about the liturgical practice in the Elisabethkirche before the early 15th century. Our understanding of the pilgrimage site will remain fragmentary without a more detailed image of the position of the main reliquary shrine within the liturgy of the church and unless we know to what extent this shrine was moved and presented in processions and presentations to the public.

The main problem is that we have no broader context of research at the moment; no system of regulations for seeing and accessing the shrine that was characteristic for late medieval pilgrimages. Most of the surviving sites do not fulfill our image of an ideal pilgrimage church. One of the few exceptions is the building of Cologne Cathedral after 1248, where the shrine of the Three Wise Men was destined to be placed prominently in the crossing. But after a slowdown of the building process, the shrine was placed in the axial chapel of the ambulatory on the occasion of the dedication of the choir in 1322 – acting as an interim or even long-term solution.

The studies presented in this volume of Peregrinations introduces further examples of research in this field with surprising results which complement the observations on Aachen and Marburg. But further case studies are necessary in order to come to more general conclusions and to give a new perspective for studies on late medieval pilgrimage architecture.

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20 He even describes Elisabeth’s hospital and the pilgrimage as “unwelcome remains” (unerwünschte Reste) in the eyes of the German Order. Köstler, Die Ausstattung der Marburger Elisabethkirche: Zur Ästhetisierung des Kultraums im Mittelalter, 61. Hermetisierung and Ästhetisierung of the church interior are central terms of Köstler’s study. He draws numerous interesting conclusions that should be discussed in a more detailed way. However, some of his assumptions are problematic as he transfers the conclusions by Demandt and Werner too strictly into an art-historical study, dominating his interpretation of the changes of the interior structure of the church as an overall strategy of the clerics and their order. E.g. he interprets the triconch choir and the placing of the tomb of Elisabeth in the northern apse as a process of pushing away (Abdrängung) of the shrine within the church interior. See Köstler, Die Ausstattung der Marburger Elisabethkirche: Zur Ästhetisierung des Kultraums im Mittelalter, 61.


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