

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztnér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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What and Whom Should We Remember? The Case of the Teutonic Order's Church and Castle in Pöide, Livonia

ANNELI RANDLA*

With joy and gratitude I dedicate this paper to József Laszlovszky, the supervisor of my MA thesis at CEU and a good colleague ever since.

The Teutonic Order erected a church and castle in Pöide (Peude) on the island of Saaremaa (Ösel) in medieval Livonia (present-day Estonia) in the first half of the thirteenth century in order to dominate the landscape and represent their power. What one can see today, however, is quite different from their original intentions. This paper looks briefly at the transformations of these buildings and their setting over the centuries, and provides a brief account of the people who were portrayed in the church with the clear aim of preserving their memory.

Currently the church is situated in a flat pastoral landscape, surrounded by trees and, in spite of having lost its spire, it still stands out as a local landmark (Fig. 1). The castle, on the other hand, has disappeared altogether. The site is a relatively inland place: while the seashore is about five kilometres away as the crow flies, the closest harbors are relatively far.

Due to constant rising of the land, the landscape around the church has changed beyond recognition compared to the thirteenth century. At that time the area was an archipelago consisting of islands, islets, and marshy ground, and it was approachable by water. Two landing places and an Iron Age hill-fort were also close by.¹ In the course of the conquest and conversion of the island of Saaremaa during the northern crusades in the early thirteenth century, the Pöide church was erected on a small hilltop overlooking the hill-fort, thus juxtaposed to the earlier center of power. It was a clear statement, but even a stone church was not sufficient: a castle had to be built next to it.



► Fig.1. The church in Pöide from south (photo: Peeter Säre)

The construction history of the complex has been studied for over a century, but is still much debated.² In general, the building phases can be described as follows. The first church was a Romanesque edifice (ca. 1230), consisting of an aisleless nave and a narrower chancel. It had at least two round-arched portals and three windows on either side of the nave. Probably even before its completion, a new campaign was undertaken to convert it into a Gothic church; the walls of the nave were raised, the portals and windows rebuilt, and the vaults and an entire new chancel added (ca 1250). In a third phase, the tower was constructed and a castle was built north of the church (ca 1260–1290).³

By the end of the thirteenth century the church was a rectangular structure consisting of four vaulted bays of equal width and height. The easternmost of these served as the chancel. The tower was raised above the westernmost bay. Two Gothic foliage portals provided access from the north and south sides, and slender tracery windows provided light from the eastern and southern sides. The castle was an irregular structure surrounded by a curtain wall. Its main defensive feature was the massive church tower; the other buildings abutted the north wall of the church and the rest of the curtain wall.

* Department of Cultural Heritage and Conservation, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn

The complex first suffered damage as early as 1343, when the castle was destroyed during an uprising, and then abandoned. The Teutonic Order built a new castle approximately ten km northwards in Maasi (Soneburg). The castle ruins in Pöide were still used for storage and as a make-shift quarry in the seventeenth century, but by the nineteenth century all the remains above ground, save for the room converted into the sacristy, had disappeared (Fig. 2). The church also served as a parish church from the beginning and after the uprising of 1343 this remained its sole function.

In the twentieth century there were further losses: the spire burnt down in 1940 and the



► Fig. 2. The church from northeast in the 1920s (photo: Helge Kjellin, Historical Photo Collection, University of Tartu)



► Fig. 3. Interior of the church during conservation work (photo: Peeter Säre)

church fell out of use and was ransacked by the Soviet military after WWII. Conservation work did not start in earnest until the 1990s and is still ongoing (Fig. 3).⁴ On the positive side, there is more to be yet discovered about what was intended to be remembered.

Behind every building there are the people who planned, commissioned, built, and used it. The Pöide church is no exception; there are depictions of people in the church, rendered with the clear aim of preserving their memory. But can we find out who they were and what role they played in the events that shaped the physical and mental landscape of this region across the centuries?

The church is adorned with fine naturalistic foliage decoration as well as architectural murals. In addition, two full figures and a single head are depicted on corbels in the nave and a face was painted on the tower vault. The heads of the couple were damaged after WWII when they were



► Fig. 4. Figures on the northern corbel in the nave (photo: Peeter Säre)



► Fig. 5. Male head on the southern corbel in the nave (photo: Peeter Säre)

used for target practice, but their original state can be seen in earlier drawings and photographs (Fig. 4). The figures can be identified as local inhabitants based on their costume, brooches, head-gear, and a drinking horn. Their significance, however, can be debated. The image may depict donors who participated in the construction of the church or serve as a reminder for the locals that their elders converted to Christianity or serve as an image of pious Christians welcoming the peasant population to the church.⁵

The single male head on the opposite side of the church is more enigmatic, lacking clear attributes (Fig. 5). It might be connected, however, to the painted face recovered on the tower vault in 2016, which looks like a two-dimensional rendering of the sculpted head (Fig. 6). The vault under the tower has painted groins ending in fleur-de-lis motifs pointing at the center of the vault, where a schematic face of a smiling man with big eyes and ears and a small beard was painted on a rather small boss. The face lacks distinctive details, a name plate or any attributes, making it difficult to identify the person.



► Fig. 6. Male face on the tower vault (photo: Peeter Säre)

Nevertheless, its position and the surrounding decoration give some indication of its possible significance. The combination of a fleur-de-lis and a male face without a halo(?) may refer to the patron of the church: a bailiff of the Teutonic Order. Or it might be a master mason's or painter's "portrait." A saint cannot be ruled out either if the circular shape of the boss is interpreted as a halo. None of these hypotheses can be firmly proven and will remain open for further discussion.⁶

I will offer a few points instead of a conclusion. Firstly, a trivial aspect which cannot be repeated too often: although medieval buildings have been around for centuries, there is always something new to discover. Secondly, posing new questions about old material can dramatically change our perception of this heritage. And finally, studying medieval art and architecture can be great fun – something Jóska would definitely agree with.

Notes

- ¹ On the Iron Age maritime landscapes, settlement patterns and harbour sites in the region, see Marika Mägi, *At the Crossroads of Space and Time: Graves, Changing Society and Ideology on Saaremaa (Ösel), 9th–13th Centuries AD* (Tallinn: Ajaloo Instituut, 2002), 125–137; Marika Mägi, “‘...Ships are their Main Strength’: Harbour Sites, Arable Lands and Chieftains on Saaremaa,” *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* 8, no 2 (2004): 128–162; Marika Mägi, “Ösel and the Danish Kingdom: Re-visiting Henry’s Chronicle and the Archaeological Evidence,” in *Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier: A Companion to the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, ed. Marek Tamm, Linda Kaljundi, and Karsten Selch Jensen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 317–341; Krista Karro, “Lakeside and Maritime Landscapes: Cases of Kodavere Settlement District (Eastern Estonia) and Põide Settlement District (Saaremaa),” *Lietuvos archeologija* 38 (2012), 253–270.
- ² For discussion and earlier bibliography, see Jaak Mäll, “Verwaltungsgeschichte und Christianisierung der Insel Ösel im 13. bis 14. Jahrhundert,” in *Culture Clash or Compromise? The Europeanisation of the Baltic Sea Area 1100–1400 AD*, ed. Nils Blomkvist (Visby: Gotland Centre for Baltic Studies, 1998), 158–166; Kersti Markus, *Från Gotland till Estland: kyrkokonst och politik under 1200-talet* [From Gotland to Estonia: Church art and politics in the thirteenth century] (Tallinn: Mercur Consulting, 1999), 213–215; Kaur Alttoa, *Saaremaa kirikud / The Churches on the Island of Saaremaa* (Tallinn: Kunst, 2003), 70–75.
- ³ For the dating of and a discussion on the castle, see Kalle Lange and Kaur Alttoa, “Die Turmburg in Estland,” in *Castella Maris Baltici I*, ed. Knut Drake (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993), 119–120.
- ⁴ Juhan Kilumets and Anneli Randla, “Five Years in the Life of a Medieval Church: the Case of Põide,” in *Estonian Cultural Heritage: Preservation and Conservation 2013–2017*, ed. Anneli Randla (Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet, 2017), 53–55.
- ⁵ Armin Tuulse, “Die Kirche zu Karja und die Wehrkirchen Saaremaas,” in *ÕES Aastaraamat 1938* (Tartu: Õpetatud Eesti Selts, 1940), 170–174; Kaur Alttoa, *101 Eesti pühakoda* [101 Estonian houses of worship] (Tallinn: Varrak, 2015), 168.
- ⁶ For a discussion, see Hilka Hiiop, Juhan Kilumets, and Anneli Randla, “Kes vaatab vastu Põide võlvilt?” [Who is looking down from the vault in Põide?], in *Järelevastamine: Kaur Alttoale*, ed. Anneli Randla (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2017), 273–284.