

Vincent Debonne

Architectural exchange between Hanseatic cities. Brick, Bruges and Lübeck

The remarkable wealth of medieval brick architecture in the regions bordering the North Sea coast has struck architectural historians ever since the 19th century. Commonly brought up as the explanation for this supra-regional architectural phenomenon is the Hanseatic league. This commercial maritime network is thought to have facilitated the spread of “brick Gothic” from Calais in the south up to the harbor cities of the Baltic sea in the north. However, extensive comparative research based on archaeological analysis of actual buildings largely remains to be done, thus leaving the concept of Hanseatic brick architecture unchecked. Nevertheless, in recent years several medieval brick buildings in the city of Bruges have been studied extensively, thus allowing a tentative comparison with contemporary brick architecture in the coastal cities of Northern Germany, most notably Lübeck.

Technical similarities (brick sizes, masonry bonds) are surprisingly few, which makes the existence of commuting building teams unlikely. Despite the use of the same building material, one must rather think of local building traditions. Inversely, several similarities, in some cases of a striking resemblance, occur in formal architectural features. These point towards master builders and patrons as agents of architectural exchange between Bruges and Lübeck.

For now, the direction of exchange, northwards or southwards, remains unclear. But this might be asking the wrong question: in the dynamic cultural space of the North Sea coast during the Middle Ages, architectural exchange may have been a case of two way traffic.

Dr. Vincent Debonne

Flanders Heritage Agency

vincent.debonne@vlaanderen.be