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Writing the Gothic: Defining the Character of Medieval Heritage in Estonia from the late 19th Century to the 1930s

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How were different art-historiographical cultures involved in shaping the understanding of Gothic art and architecture in Estonia, a country that in the late 19th and early 20th century was part of tsarist Russia and which then, in 1918, became an independent republic? In my presentation, I also ask what kind of life-world the various art-historical interpretations created in the imagination: how did they define the spatial and temporal cultural belonging of different nationalities within Estonia.

The first art-historical surveys of Estonian local heritage were written by Baltic-German art historians. Artistic and architectural production was systematised and ordered into periods on the basis of formal stylistics. The Gothic style found its place from the start, and it also coincided with the beginning of Danish-German colonisation and the Christianisation of the Old Livonian territories in the 13th century, thus forming the foundation for all of the subsequent artistic development, i.e. Estonian art history. At the same time however, the Gothic in Estonia has been viewed as a belated and less artistic peripheral version of the German spirit. In order to overcome this unhappy conclusion, a special rhetoric was elaborated.

The first modern art historian who had to face these issues was Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919), who was also active as an architect, and who in his later years was the Director of the Latvian Art Museum in Riga. In his book *Grundriss einer Geschichte der bildenden Künste und des Kunstgewerbes in Liv-, Est- und Kurland* (Reval 1887), Neumann wrote about the ‘slow becoming’ and ‘delayed arrival’ of the Gothic style because of the distance ‘from trend-setting centres and the conservative character of the inhabitants’. Therefore, he continued, ‘the forms never reached the clarity and richness of ideas and noble sublimity that is characteristic of the South [of Europe]’. In order to balance this aesthetic inequality, Neumann connected the development of Gothic forms to the use of local materials and thus made the architecture correspond to given special circumstances: ‘He (*das Land*) understood how to create new art forms that correspond to the nature of local materials...’ Hence, it is the Land and its people who give art-historical meaning to monuments. In the booklet he wrote for the local clergy, who were the keepers of medieval church buildings, Neumann crystallises this meaning: ‘Monuments of art and architecture are witnesses of the historical past of our homeland. The purpose of their maintenance is to preserve our consciousness of belonging to our cosy homeland, and to keep the memory of our ancestors alive’ (*Merkbüchlein für Denkmalpflege auf dem Lande*, Riga 1911). Accordingly, in Neumann’s view, all art-historical



The ruins of Toolse/Tolsburg, a castle of the German Order (1471)

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objects are important as material instruments of identity; they possess the ability to reflect history and affect feelings; they induce a sense of belonging. At the same time, the Gothic was determined to be the strongest signifier of 'German power' (*Kraft*) by the man who had greatly inspired Neumann, the German art historian Wilhelm Lübke.

What about the elites of Estonian origin? At the time when Wilhelm Neumann, Karl von Löwis of Menar, Reinhold Guleke and others were writing on the Gothic in Estonia and Livonia, the intellectuals of Estonian origin subordinated themselves to German/Western art-historical discourse, and they regretted that 'Estonians have not had any art of their own'. They had come to know art from the Germans 'and even adopted the word for it from their language. [...] If Estonian books and writings tell about artists, such as painters and others, those artists always belong to foreign nations...' (Anonymous, *Eesti Postimees*, 1885, 9.01).

Indeed, how is it possible to write about Gothic art and architecture in a way that they become 'Estonia's own heritage'? This question had to be answered when Estonians formed their own republic and reopened the University of Tartu (founded in 1632) as an Estonian university in 1919. In 1925 two laws were passed, the Law of Heritage Protection and the Law of the University, the latter urging the study of local history. In regard to art history, since there were no educated art historians of Estonian origin, the first professors were Swedes. Both Helge Kjellin and Sten Karling supported the idea of a Baltic-Nordic art region that was formulated by the Professor at the University of Stockholm, Johnny Roosval, in 1921 and published in 1927 in the German journal *Nordelbingen*. In Northern Europe, Roosval distinguished between two artistic areas: 1) '*Der baltische Norden*', '*baltiska Norden*': from the late 12th century to the beginning of the 16th century, the variformed yet overlapping 'art areas' around the Baltic Sea – Germany, Denmark, Sweden and the Baltic territories; and 2) '*Atlantic-Nordic*', '*Atlantiska Norden*'.

What Johnny Roosval aimed at was to demonstrate that the Baltic-Nordic region created its own independent art forms, an idea that was in contrast to the notion of the predominant influence of Hanseatic German art in this region. The concept of a Baltic-Nordic *artedominium*/*Geschmacksbiet* (taste region!) was very well suited to the needs of Estonians, who wished to free the nation's history from its 'German past' yet still remain 'European'.



Bernt Notke, *Dance of Death*, late 15th century, oil on canvas, 160cm x 750cm, from St Nicolas' Church, Tallinn, and now housed at the city's Art Museum of Estonia

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In 1932 the very first *History of Estonian Art. The Middle Ages* was published and its author, Alfred Vaga, wrote:

It is time to realise that 'Baltic art' – as far as it is connected with our country – cannot be separated and left out of the general history of Estonian art, that everything born throughout time in the field of art in our homeland belongs first of all to Estonian art history, regardless of who the creators were. [...] Thanks to older German-Baltic art historians, many are still convinced that the medieval art in Estonia and Livonia can be characterised as German colonial art. This opinion does not correspond to recent research results. These demonstrate, as J. Roosval has recently argued, the organic belonging of Estonian and Livonian art to the Baltic-Nordic art region, together with north and north-west Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the eastern Baltic countries, Estonia and Latvia.

Neither Vaga nor those who wrote about Estonian Gothic heritage in the 1920s–30s denied the 'German influences' completely, yet the emphasis was on the regional, rather independent development of forms.

Despite having different ideas of the *genealogy* and situatedness of the Gothic, the Swedes, the Estonians and the (Baltic) Germans shared a common view of the characteristics of the Gothic style: they all defined the local Gothic as simple, rigid, pure and cold, but strong in effect. Voldemar Vaga, the brother of Alfred Vaga, wrote in 1939 in his *History of Estonian Art*:

Baltic architecture's foremost character can be described as sober and simple. [...] This simplicity is, to a great extent, caused by the long and hard winters; the airy and dynamic Western European Gothic was not conceivable here. Yet, surely, the rigidity and simplicity of Baltic art was also caused by the mentality and spiritual mode of the colonisers. The tastes of these brave, strong-willed and harsh men can definitely be sensed in Old Livonian art. Even if Baltic architecture does not offer much in a purely aesthetic sense, its impressive grandeur still affects the viewer.

No doubt, Vaga's rhetoric reflects a similar line to that of earlier Baltic-German authors, such as Georg Dehio (himself of Baltic-German origin), who in his three-volume magnum opus *Geschichte der deutschen Kunst* (1919–27), wrote:

The Gothic [in neo-colonial Germany (neukoloniales Deutschland) i.e. the Baltic lands] architecture is self-confident without being vain, serious without being cold, brave in big and sparing in small undertakings. [...] One can see that this architecture is built by people who experienced a sharp wind in their noses, by people who were pushed into a world without any form.



St Catherine's Church in Muhu/Mohn in Saaremaa, late 13th century

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At the end of this strongly minimised historiography of the early days of writing on the Gothic in Estonia, the narratives that were constructed by different art-historical agents depended upon multiple elements. First, the authors shared the same art-historical discourse, based on Herderian-Hegelian thinking, which treated art as a reflection of a nationally/geographically determined spirit of the time. The differences emerged while defining the core of 'the spirit' and this, in turn, depended on the actual socio-cultural situation of a particular nation. Thus, changing political situations obviously had an impact on the meaning-making of the Gothic. Baltic-German authors were writing in the context of the emerging Russification politics of the tsarist regime and this coerced them into justifying the right to remain the leading cultural agent in the region. In this self-legitimising process, the Gothic was viewed as the signifier of the beginning of the history of the Baltic homeland and Baltic-Germans as legal heirs of the local medieval heritage. Estonian authors in the newly-founded Estonian Republic preferred to treat the Gothic, particularly its early phase, as a style of Baltic-Nordic communities that was developed in the Baltic Sea region by local craftsmen and artists. Because of its colonial past, the anti-German attitude was all-encompassing in Estonia in the 1920s and 1930s, while the search for a 'proper, civilised' cultural belonging was felt to be urgent. Finally, the general images of the Gothic constructed by Baltic-German, Swedish and Estonian art historians were again quite similar. The Gothic was 'Nordic', simple and severe in form, yet impressive and special.

Keywords: Estonian Gothic, art historiography, Wilhelm Neumann, Alfred Vaga, Baltic-German