

Cherished and Perished Monuments

Some 19th-Century Cases of Renovation in the Baltic *Heimat**

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SUMMARY

Ever since the early 19th century, the handling of medieval monuments, such as the St Olaf's church and the town wall in Tallinn (Reval), has revealed contradictory tendencies. The "long 19th century" can be called the era of discovering, but also of destroying historical monuments. The latter occurred due to poor awareness and the resulting decay, sometimes as a result of restoration itself, in the form of extreme attempts to "purify" what was considered the original, medieval appearance of a building. An interest in the historical appearance of a structure was not seen as inconsistent with replacing it with an imaginary reconstruction. Therefore, ironically, the first specialists to begin research on medieval buildings often were those who, through their practical work, ended up wiping out the last surviving layers of the original structure. Reconstruction has always been an essential tool for art historians, theoretically, i.e. remaining on paper, while in practice renovation as interference in the physical structure of a building has had very different consequences. Due to shortcomings in tsarist Russian legislation, the Baltic Germans endeavoured to work out their own approach, but rather than the institutionalisation of the field, my essay aims to address their motivation and resulting discussions. By the 1880s a new wave of conservation projects had begun across the Baltic provinces, and many cases of restoring medieval architecture were to be found. Focusing on texts published at the time, the latter part of the essay aims to look at this more professional phase in Baltic heritage preservation with an attempt to detect if this brought about a new approach to monuments.

Introduction

Heritage by nature involves a dialogue between history and the ways of remembering it. Therefore heritage, and especially heritage conservation, has the power of rewriting existing memory discourses.¹ Like literature,² heritage has the potential to reactivate layers and associations within memory: sometimes even those that never existed in reality. This is particularly relevant in the context of the 19th-century enthusiasm for reconstruction and the simultaneous wave of (national) identity construction. This essay mainly sets out to look at the representations of medieval architecture in the 19th-century practice of heritage conservation in Estonia and the Baltic provinces (Fig. 1), looking at some of the most polemical cases of "rejuvenation".

We can speak of "sharing heritage" between Eastern and Western Europe, between different German-speaking communities, along with tsarist Russia, and also of sharing heritage across time, over generations. Although "sharing heritage" is a topic that sparks fruitful discussions regarding the perspectives and agencies of different ethnic communities, of which there have been many over the course of Estonian history, this will not be my focus in this essay. It is almost impossible to address these developments without the framework of national traditions and cultural identity,³ which has been my primary interest for some time. Yet, here I aim to put these considerations aside and concentrate on particular cases of renovation as phenomena in themselves.

It should be specified, that 'Baltic' almost always signifies 'Baltic German' when looking at the 19th century. The whole project of writing art history and protecting its material remnants was the privilege of Baltic Germans until World War I and independent statehood, almost entirely without the involvement of the local inhabitants.⁴

I will first look at one case of *the* monument of Baltic architecture, or rather a monument of heritage conservation, St Olaf's church in Tallinn

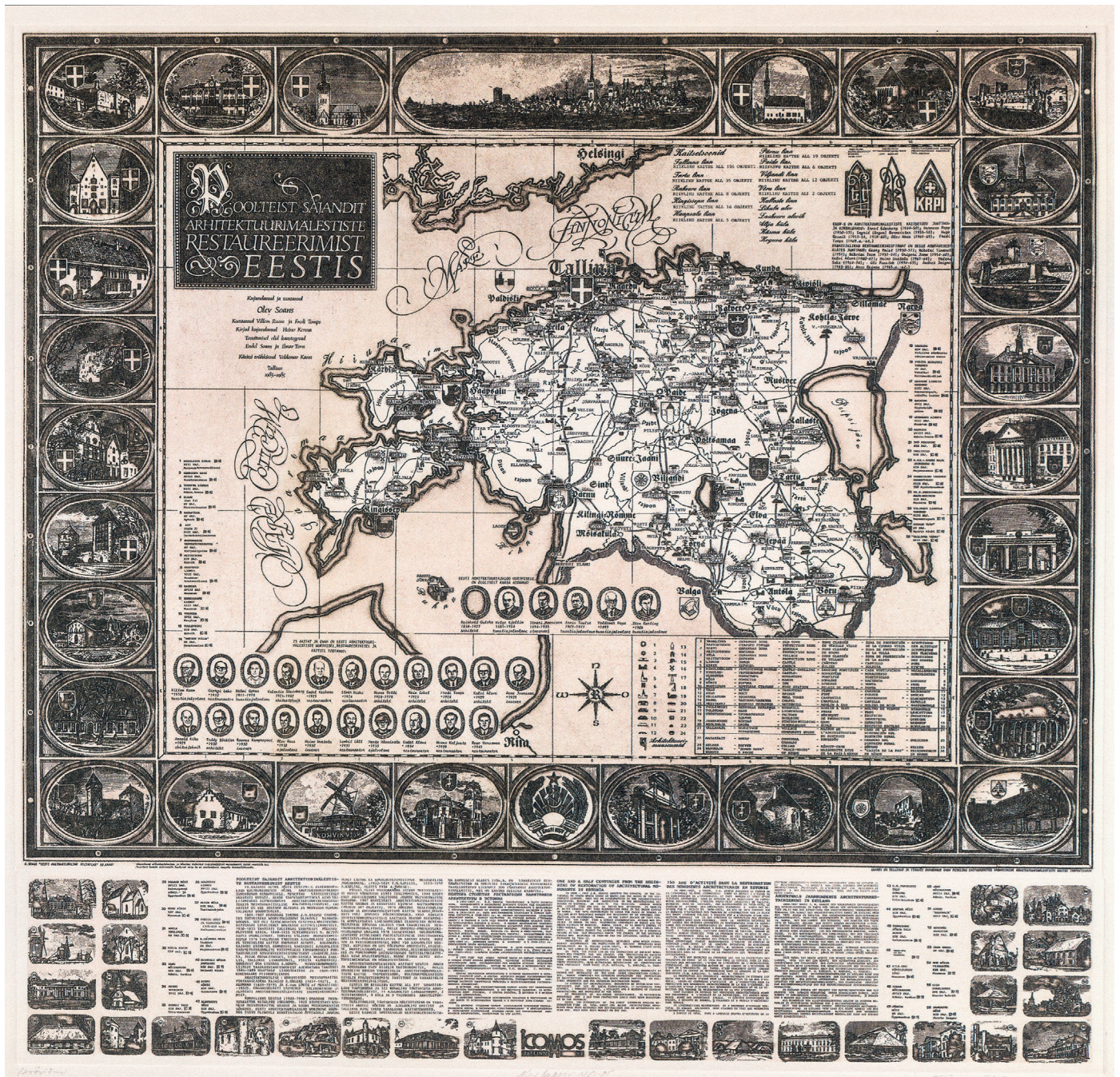


Fig. 1: Map by Olev Soans (visualisation in etching), Villem Raam and Fredi Tomps (content), “Poolteist sajandit arhitektuurimälestiste restaureerimist Eestis” (One and a half centuries since the beginning of restoration of architectural monuments in Estonia), 1983–1985.

(Reval): not to study the monument itself, but rather using it as an example of certain tendencies from which essential questions began to spring. It is the essence of heritage conservation to raise principal issues about whether and how to preserve, and especially the cases I am about to examine here bring to light an array of intriguing controversies.

The topic has been addressed by a number of authors already, most thoroughly by Ants Hein in Estonia, and Martinš Mintauris in Latvia. My point is not to repeat their work, but to single out some of the inherent contradictions, in order to briefly

analyse Wilhelm Neumann’s position at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries. He was the spokes of Baltic heritage preservation, and his rich publishing activities allow one to go in many directions, but here I shall limit myself to purifications and reconstruction.

A Gothic monument rising from the ashes, literally

From the first grand instances of restoration, controversies begin to appear. Although the medieval Tartu (Dorpat/Yuryev) cathedral ruins had gone

through a major reconstruction in 1804–1807 (architect Johann Wilhelm Krause), this example is hardly ever cited as a landmark in local conservation history. It is enough to say here that of the ambitious reconstruction designs, the large chancel of the former church was turned into the University of Tartu library in a manner combining Gothic Revival with Classicising motifs, leaving the rest of the church in majestic ruins.⁵

Concerning the state of affairs in the field at the time, a state policy regarding the preservation of historical monuments was lacking in the Russian Empire. The first heritage conservation acts were the imperial ukases of Nicholas I in 1826–1827, forbidding unwarranted demolition or extensive

reconstruction of old buildings, but making no attempts to specify what this meant (and this continued to be the case until the early 20th century, although steps were taken towards legislative clarity in the latter 19th century). As a result, some of the most essential monuments – almost exclusively medieval castles and their ruins, accompanied by some churches and monasteries – were surveyed and documented under the guidance of the governor-general of the Baltic Sea provinces, Marquis Philip Osipovich Paulucci.⁶

Perfectly demonstrating the manifold and often opposing tendencies characteristic of this pre-disciplinary phase, the same Paulucci was also responsible for an urban redevelopment campaign, which made the following of Neo-Classical model façade designs compulsory, to liberate the towns from their “backward” medieval appearance. Rather than indicating disrespect for heritage, this resulted from the narrow definition of what constitutes heritage: medieval structures were only beginning to be appreciated, and this certainly did not include residential buildings or the street milieu (also most of the medieval stoops were dismantled) at that time. If their preservation was considered at all, it was limited to grand monuments.⁷

In Estonian historiography, the renovation of another ecclesiastical structure, St Olaf’s church in Tallinn (1828–1840; Fig. 2), is usually treated as the first conscious attempt to restore the authentic style of a building. The church’s tragic fire in summer 1820, when it was struck by lightning, and the subsequent rise from the ashes sound almost like a romanticist fairy tale. Its reconstruction was largely a historical coincidence, which would have been impossible without the support of the tsars Alexander I and especially Nicholas I. Due to the well-known negative aura of the ‘dark’ Middle Ages, the ruins would in all likelihood have been left untouched, but those were the years when Tallinn, a provincial town, became the most fashionable resort of the Russian elite, to whom the discovery of the exoticism of local Gothic architecture can really be attributed.⁸

Romanticism in European heritage preservation, as well as in other fields of culture, is often associated with conformity to a pan-European revival style, which hardly allowed to emphasise longed-for national or regional particularities. Rather than through the immediate contacts and experience of the intellectuals, architects, craftsmen etc. in the leading French



Fig. 2: Model of St Olaf’s church in Tallinn (112 cm high), dating from ca. 1825.

and German projects,⁹ in the Baltic region, the influence was more indirect and mediated. Considering that the work at St Olaf's was largely carried out with Russian financing, although with the participation of many Baltic Germans of whom there were plenty in the imperial court, it is symbolic that rather than a German style, the "old Danish character" was emphasised in explanatory documents and reconstruction designs.¹⁰ Besides, we cannot speak of the Baltic German patriotic *Heimat* movement as a possible trigger as early as the 1820s.¹¹

The Russian emperor's motivation was clearly not to provide a monument to the Baltic German community under his rule. Rather, his considerations might have been more pragmatic in doing what civilised countries do with their grand monuments.¹² And here we witness the international connections sneaking in a different way. Namely, the familial relations of Nicholas I are important in this context: he was the son-in-law of King Frederick William III of Prussia, the great rebuilders of the Cologne cathedral, whose daughter Charlotte had been married to the future tsar to cement the alliance between the two countries shortly after the Napoleonic wars.¹³ Moreover, in terms of role models, other huge nationally charged and internationally significant restoration projects had occurred during the 1810s and 1820s – a paradigm shift – most essentially for the Baltic region the Teutonic Order castle in Marienburg (today's Malbork), the interpretation of whose details is documented in St Olaf's case.¹⁴

Could we call this undertaking historically and academically oriented? The renovation of St Olaf's under the supervision of the painter Friedrich Ludwig von Maydell – a curious choice, considering that he had no previous expertise in restoration – was indeed the first occasion in the Baltic lands where each step was documented. In the neighbouring province of Livonia, the first similar attempt at stylistic restoration only occurred in 1859: the *Brautkammer* and *Münstersaal* of the Riga Great Guild, renovated under the architect Heinrich Karl Scheel, likewise his first and only experience in the field.¹⁵ As elsewhere in Europe, the first professional steps in heritage conservation in the Estonian province were simultaneous with the emergence of romanticism and historicism. Yet the relationship between restoration and the contemporary revival styles was highly ambiguous: the interior design and stone carving was all done in the manner of

"high" Gothic Revival in St Olaf's. Although many new church towers in the Estonian countryside used its reconstructed tower as a role model,¹⁶ the reconstructed St Olaf's was considered too smooth and shiny already by contemporaries. But this did not result from the "rejuvenation" alone – the Lutheran church itself was currently reforming its architectonic and aesthetic principles.¹⁷

Interest in its historical appearance and the wish to replace it with an imaginary vision seem like contradictions, but this was highly typical of the era. Ironically, as is commonly known, the first people to appreciate and start research on medieval buildings often were the ones who destroyed the last surviving layers of history. As Hein has observed, instead of resembling an academic discipline, this approach to conservation should be seen as an artistic endeavour.¹⁸ No wonder, considering that the work was led by a visual artist. What Arnold Bartetzky has written about Marienburg also applies in this case (although in St Olaf's efforts to 'perfect' the monument were no longer undertaken in the 20th century): "In ihrer heutigen Bausubstanz ist sie sogar vornehmlich ein Denkmal der Denkmalpflege des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts und ihrer Visionen des Mittelalters."¹⁹

The exceptions proving the rule?

The Gothic Revival continued to bring about ambitious projects on medieval structures, whose authentic early-15th-century appearance would have presumably been given a more 'Gothic' character after a 19th-century purifying renovation, the most notable examples being the Tallinn town hall (which was again 'medievalised' in the post-war decades, under Soviet rule²⁰) and the Great Guild hall.²¹ Renovation was also carried out at the cathedral, St Nicholas' church and the former Dominican friary in Tallinn, the Narva castle, the Haapsalu (Hapsal) cathedral during the 1840s–1850s, etc.²²

In other words, although the first instances of stylistic restoration occurred, this was by no means an established practice. During the 1820s–1830s opposing tendencies were strongly present too, e.g. the interior of another grand medieval church, the red-brick St John's in Tartu, was reconstructed in the Neo-Classical manner (architect George Friedrich Wilhelm Geist), completely disregarding and partly destroying the grandeur of its rich terracotta decoration. The conservation of the medieval façade began in 1899 (architect Wilhelm Bockslaff); repli-

cas were made, where original figurines had gone missing. The Classicised interior was to stay in place, until the bombing of World War II revealed the magnitude of the terracotta gem.²³

Even though the Tallinn medieval town wall is still mostly intact today, several gate structures on the main streets (Viru/Lehmstr., Karja/Karrisstr., Nunne/Süsternstr., Harju/Schmiedestr.) were dismantled in the mid-19th-century.²⁴ In this case, rather than being due to aesthetic preferences, this was done in an attempt to modernise: to provide better hygiene, sanitation and fire safety conditions, and to allow access to new transportation vehicles; as we know, many European cities lost their medieval walls at that time.²⁵ Further urban readjustments were undertaken after the Crimean War of the 1850s made officials realise that medieval fortified towns could no longer serve a military function.²⁶

With these rapid changes, the linear passage of time, the irreversibility of each step when working with ancient monuments, and their historicity

and singularity as signs of the past became ever more relevant.²⁷ When the loss of important historical layers in the course of this modernising process was recognised, ideas of reconstructing these same walls became more popular. In Riga, too, active debates over restoring the urban fortifications took place since the 1860s.²⁸ The Tallinn municipal government began taking more decisive steps to forbid such destruction from the 1880s onwards. At the turn of the century, fragments of the town wall were “renovated”, sometimes with remarkable additions (architects Neumann and Friedrich Axel von Howen; Fig. 3).²⁹ By World War I and the 700th anniversary of the city, the Baltic Germans were planning a grand reconstruction of the wall’s former glory.³⁰

In the 1880s, the University of Tartu architect Reinhold Guleke provided another curious example of contradictory tendencies, envisioning the full reconstruction of the Riga cathedral in grand Gothic Revival style, quite far from its medieval form.³¹ In the heyday of national sentiment, gigantic monu-

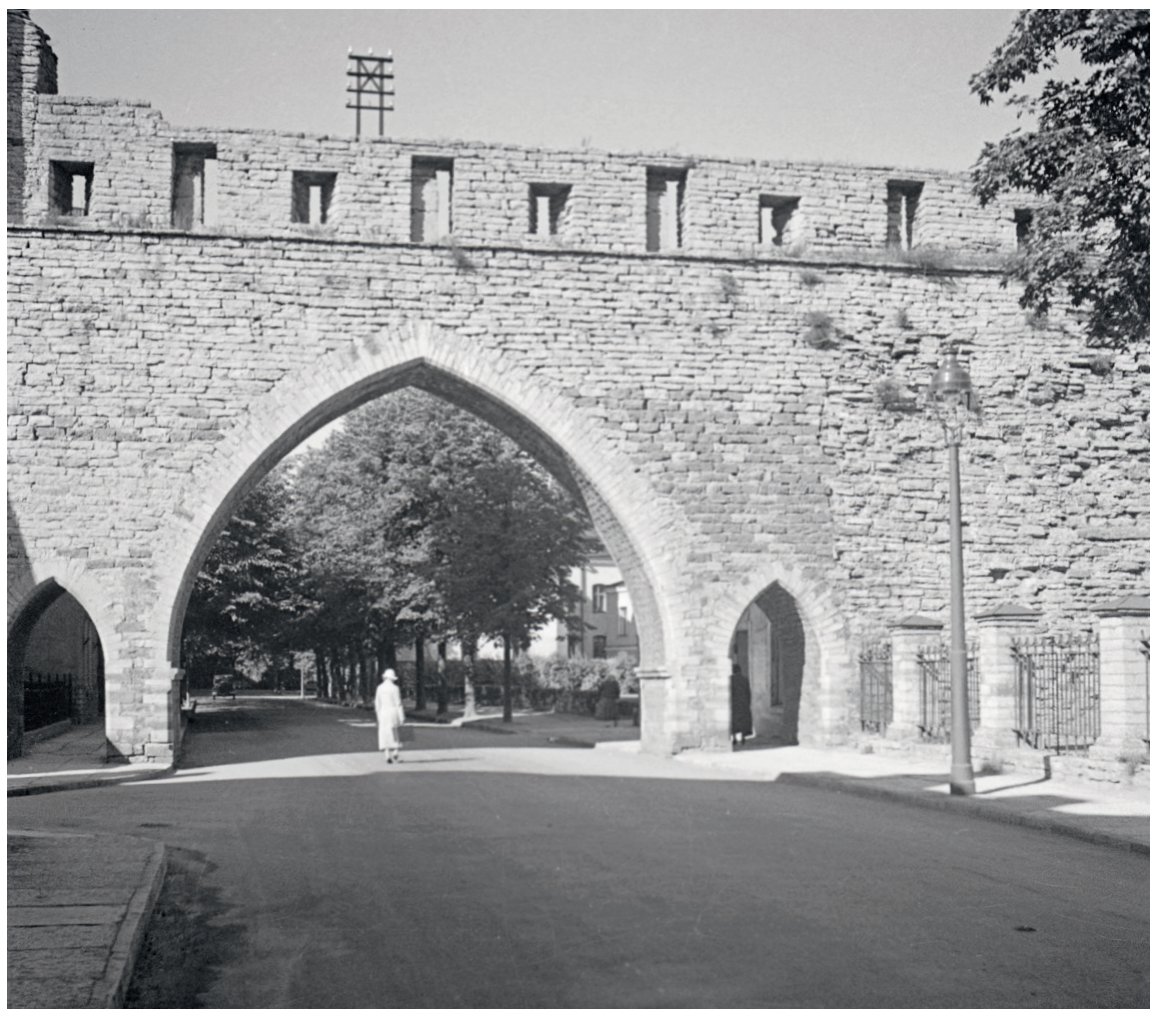


Fig. 3: New gate in the medieval town wall on Suur-Kloostri Street, Tallinn, designed by Wilhelm Neumann in 1890s.

ments in the manner of the reconstructed Cologne cathedral as a symbol of the German people's unity³² certainly appealed to the powerful rulers but, curiously (or perhaps not), also to scholars and architects. Guleke's grandiose design did not result from his lack of knowledge. On the contrary, almost simultaneously he published a thorough account of the history of the church, plus an album with detailed drawings.³³ With similar enthusiasm he made reconstruction drawings of the Tartu cathedral in 1890s (Fig. 4). Where to draw the line between reconstructing historical accuracy, and reconstructing a general (but no doubt grand) impression?

Professionalising discussions

In the second half of the 19th century, one can witness a more nuanced wave of interest in heritage preservation: detailed attention began to be paid to renovating historical monuments among the local learned societies;³⁴ specialist accounts of local art history became more frequent.³⁵ This was the beginning of a more self-reflective analysis of how to approach monuments. I now intend to look at what constitutes the scholarly component in the succeeding restorations, marking a step further from the previously described cases.

It was probably the massive project of the Riga cathedral (since 1884), but especially the preparation of his monograph on local art history (1887), that made Wilhelm Neumann first realise the damage dysfunctional attempts at renovation had done to works of art and architecture: „Unserer Zeit, die die Schöpfungen früherer Jahrhunderte besser zu schätzen weiss, ist es vorbehalten, die Schäden, welche durch Unwissenheit und Vandalismus hervorgerufen sind, wieder zu heilen, und dass sie es thut, und mit Erfolg thut, sehen wir an der Verjüngung und dem Auferstehen manches schon der Vernichtung anheim gegebenen gewesenen Werkes.“³⁶

In line with the Tallinn-born Georg Dehio's later famous slogan “conservation, not restoration”,³⁷ Neumann declared in his call (1888) to compile an inventory of local monuments: „Es kann dabei nicht unsere Hauptaufgabe sein, alle diese Denkmäler zu restauriren; diese Aufgabe folgt erst in letzter Linie, die erste ist: zu conserviren.“³⁸ By this he presumably meant delicate maintenance and above all protection, rather than conservation in the contemporary sense of the word. Neumann's goal was to maintain the monuments for the next generations: to create a complete overview, compile a hierarchy and ulti-

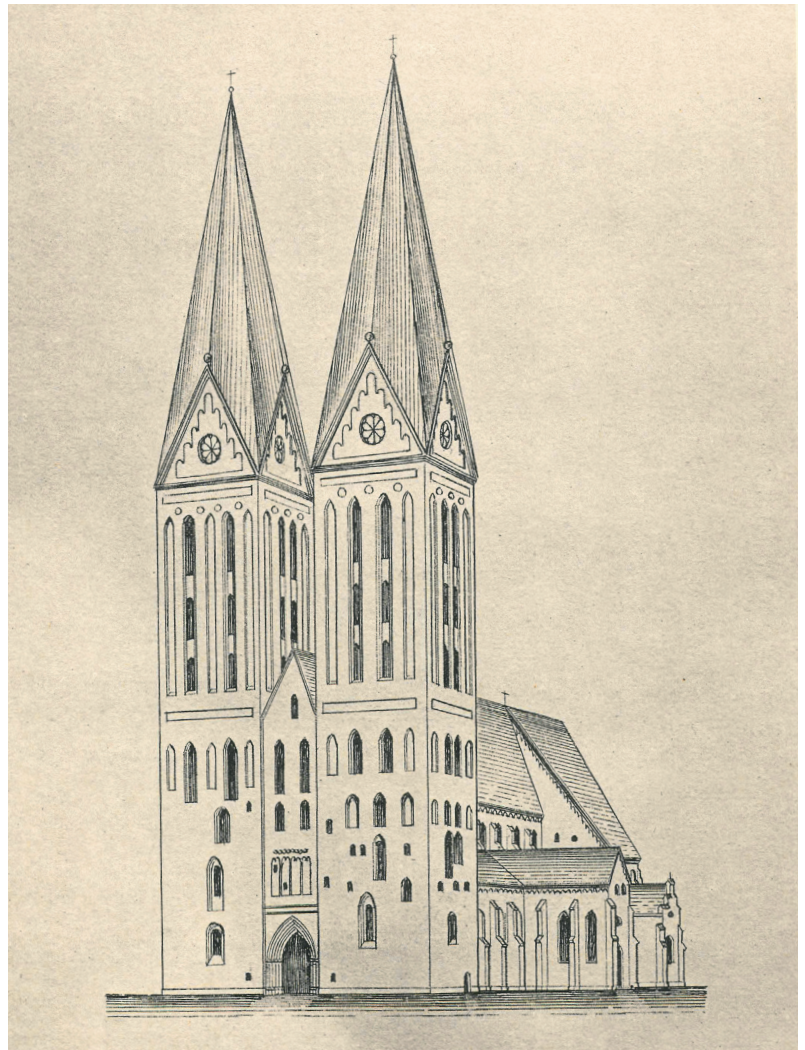


Fig. 4: Reinhold Guleke's reconstruction of the ruinous Tartu cathedral (1896).

imately an archive of monuments which would be valuable sources for art historical research, as well as future restorations. He defended the position that the marks left by different styles and historical events all deserved to be preserved: „Die Begeisterung, die sich der heutigen Zeit bemächtigt hat, die mit einem Schlage die an den meisten Kunstwerken begangenen Sünden ausmerzen und vertilgen möchte, sie ist nur zu leicht bereit, in übertriebenem Eifer bei dieser Reinigungsarbeit das Kind mit dem Bade auszuschütten. Sie geht oft ins Extrem und indem sie darauf hinarbeitet, irgend einem Kunstdenkmal seine ursprüngliche Form wieder zu verleihen, zerstört sie nicht selten Kunstwerke jüngerer Perioden, die mit gleicher Berechtigung neben denjenigen der älteren bestehen mochten. Das ist der sog. Kunstvandalismus, der aus dem Purificirungsverfahren hervorgeht.“³⁹

In 1888 Neumann was still enthusiastic about the idea that one fortunately did not need to complain about similar restoration sins in our *Heimat* as

one did in Italy or Germany.⁴⁰ His rich publishing activity was clearly motivated by the wish to prevent future abuses. He criticised neglect or insensitive restorations in many of his writings, e.g. in 1914: „In Hapsal wurde die alte Kirche der bischöflichen Burg wieder hergestellt, in übertriebenem Purifizierungseifer aber leider dabei recht rücksichtslos verfahren.“⁴¹ The findings in the Riga cathedral had led to a more systematic search for medieval murals, which were now discovered in the rural churches of Muhu (Mohn) and Karja (Karris) on the Estonian islands, among other places,⁴² and in this connection too he stated in 1911: „mehr haben religiöser Fanatismus und veränderte Kunstschauungen der Zerstörung überantwortet, das Meiste ist durch Unwissenheit und Unduldsamkeit – es muß gesagt werden – noch in der Zeit der „Aufklärung“ der Vernichtung anheimgefallen.“⁴³

Defending the value of different construction phases in words often meant getting rid of those phases in practice, as Neumann's own designs curiously demonstrate, however. In this context, the above quotes might be regarded as highly polemical. Can we then apply the same formula from the cases discussed to this most professional art historian of the era? Neumann's scholarly interests penetrated into his architectural practice, making him the first architect to show an interest in the local heritage in his designs for new buildings, and thereby he is claimed to have also innovated local contemporary architecture.⁴⁴ Not many of his buildings are located in what later became Estonia. The Scheel bank in the Tallinn Old Town, taking advantage of historical details, and the Taheva (Taiwola) manor in southern Estonia, then Livonia, are the most noteworthy among them. In 1890s he supervised the renovation of several ruinous structures: Piritä convent in Tallinn, the Teutonic Order castles of Paide (Weissenstein) and Rakvere (Wesenberg).⁴⁵ He also acted as a consultant, when the Kuressaare (Arensburg) episcopal castle was renovated (architect Hermann Seuberlich, 1904–1912).⁴⁶

In connection with finding the best solution for conserving the Tartu cathedral ruins (the same few central objects keep running through all the major discussions), where Neumann was again involved, it is interesting to see that the leading German conservation specialists, such as Dehio, the German architect and archaeologist Heinrich Jacobi and the Marienburg *Landbaumeister* Conrad Steinbrecht, were consulted.⁴⁷ The influence of international

scholarship for particular cases and the heritage legislation at large has to be addressed in detail elsewhere. Here, Steinbrecht's reaction during his 1889 research trip to the Baltic provinces, as described by Karl von Löwis of Menar, deserves to be quoted, however: Steinbrecht „war angenehm überrascht über den Reichtum des Forschungsmaterials, das in diesem alten Culturgebiete, trotz aller Kriegsstürme, die über das vielbegehrte Land dahingegangen sind und trotz aller bisherigen Vernachlässigung der Baudenkmäler, bis jetzt erhalten geblieben ist.“⁴⁸ Thus, full advantage was taken of the occasion to persuade the local readers to attribute more value to the Baltic *Heimat* and their own heritage.

Concluding remarks

Heritage is always shared, history is always entangled. I find the physical remains of medieval architecture to be a perfect example, as they were constantly constructed both literally – via conservation or reconstruction practices – and by means of art historical and popular writing,⁴⁹ which shaped the approaches and value systems in relation to this heritage. I have examined the Baltic Germans' perspective, but avoided going into their relationship with either the German 'motherland' or the Russian 'fatherland'; moreover, this relationship was constantly contested by the rising Estonian/Latvian ethnic nationalism. But most of East Central Europe is faced with a history and material heritage on which multi-ethnic power games, along with the ambitions of German supremacy and those of tsarist Russia, in Central Europe including Austria-Hungary, have left a strong mark.⁵⁰

Despite the historical difficulty, which does not make it possible to construct smooth linear narratives, there is, of course, nothing unique to the Baltic region about these 'polemic cases' of renovation. Highly questionable restoration projects exist today, as they did in the 19th century, across Europe and globally. On the one hand, we might agree with Winfried Speitkamp that, at times, the 19th-century heritage conservation gives reason to speak of an illusion of history, rather than its pious appreciation.⁵¹ The emerging conservation practice of the era is both an indicator of rising interest in history and ancient monuments, and an attempt to perfect these very monuments, often bringing to life the commissioner's or architect's wildest imagination.

On the other hand, the simultaneity of opposing measures, both 'pro- and anti-heritage', does

seem striking at first, but precisely damage and destruction have made clear the overall necessity for heritage protection. The contribution of restoration architects to the preservation of monuments, including the particular monuments mentioned, is obvious, even if in somewhat 'distorted' form.

Towards the end of the 19th century, this imaginative practice of restoration in the manner of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc led to (as a counterbalance) the strictly conservationist approach promoted by John Ruskin and others.⁵² Despite an interest in the Gothic Revival beginning in the late 18th century, the gap between these first interpretations and later principles of conservation was almost as sharp as the one between Neo-Classicism and Gothic Revival, as Hein has stated. And thus, both of historicism's two 'daughters' – imagination-driven restoration as its bastard-child, and heritage conservation as the lawful offspring, a slogan coined by Dehio⁵³ – should be regarded as legitimate.⁵⁴ With a slight shift, the Hungarian scholar Ernő Marosi has sim-

ilarly claimed that during the 19th century, "[t]he methodological distinction between conservation and restoration in the preservation of historical monuments made intellectual reconstruction [i.e. on paper] the legitimate operation and restoration a dangerous one."⁵⁵

This is not to say that anything in the historical state of things, in the light of the changing historical consciousness, should be regarded as 'illegitimate'. But, even if this could only be done very briefly, by placing art historiography, the history of heritage conservation and the history of architecture in the same narrative – a manoeuvre not undertaken very often in connection with the cases discussed – different aspects begin to come to light. It becomes evident that positions differing to the extreme might originate from the same author, leading either to the cherishing of the particular historical layers or sights, or to their perishing from the way of the new.

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Image sources

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Notes

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