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Øystein Ekroll: Med kleber og kalk. Norsk steinbygging i mellomalderen 1050-1550. (With Soapstone and Mortar. Norwegian Stone Building in the Middle Ages 1050-1550.) Det norske Samlaget. Oslo 1997. 329 pp. ISBN 82-521-4754-2.

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Stone buildings from medieval Norway have often been out-shown by the more famous stave churches. On the whole it has been difficult to get a survey of the number, architecture and preservation of the stone buildings, despite that, from an European perspective, they are relatively few in number. Scholars have been restricted to books and articles of varying quality or to do research in archives and in the field.

The churches are systematically described in “Norges Kirker” (1959ff), but so far only a few counties have been examined (Akershus, the city of Bergen, Buskerud, Oppland and Østfold). Selected churches are mentioned in art-history surveys and articles. All monasteries and royal castles have recently been presented. On the other hand, there has been a lack of literature regarding the many stone houses or stone cellars in the towns as well as in the countryside. A book, which deals with all stone building in medieval Norway is now available.

Øystein Ekroll, a medieval archaeologist employed at the restauration workshop at the cathedral of Nidaros in Trondheim, has published a textbook entitled “Med kleber og kalk. Norsk steinbygging i mellomalderen 1050-1550” (With Soapstone and Mortar. Norwegian Stone Building in the Middle Ages 1050-1550). The book contains a short introduction followed by three major sections, Part I “Fra Rom til Trondenes” (From Rome to Trondenes), Part II “Byggjemateriale og byggjeprocessen” (Building Material and Building Process), Part III “Systematisk oversyn over norske steinbygninger frå mellomalderen” (Systematic Survey over the Norwegian Stone Buildings from the Middle Ages). The book contains a bibliography, maps with all the stone churches marked and an index. The book is well illustrated with numerous black and white photographs and line drawings.

Part I follows the principal development of the stone building from Greece and Rome to medieval Norway, where the first known stone building according to Snorre should be a hall at the royal manor in Trondheim built on the initiative of King Magnus the Good (1035-47). The characteristic features of the stone building are then described, divided into the periods 1050-1150 (Early Romanesque), 1150-1250 (High Romanesque), 1250-1350 (High Gothic) and 1350-1537 (Late Gothic), where the period 1150-1350 both qualitatively and quantitatively has left most traces. Here the building of the age is treated transversely to categories as town and countryside, ecclesiastical and secular. Part 1 follows the tradition in art-history surveys (e. g. Lidén 1981) through the use of selected examples, accounts of stylistic influences, active kings and economic conditions.

Part II treats the choice of stone materials, everything from the quarry to the brick kiln, the process from laying the ground to building and rasing the spire. The promoters of the building, architects and craftsmen are discussed on the basis of information in sagas, inscriptions and mason marks. Then, the decoration of the buildings are dealt with. Part II, which probably has engaged the writer strongest, follows the tradition known from “Middelalderen bygger i stein” (The Middle Ages builds in stone) (Lidén 1976).

Part III is a catalogue of the c. 350 stone buildings from medieval Norway. The survey consists of an introduction, after that the buildings are treated, first the profane ones, then churches and monasteries in the towns and finally churches and monasteries in the countryside arranged according to counties. The buildings are shortly described regardless of their preservation. Part III constitutes an original and important contribution, as such a survey has been lacking.

“With Soapstone and Mortar” is an essential book. In my own experience from a survey of apsidal churches in Scandinavia, the reviewer can appreciate how difficult it has been to get a general view of the Norwegian stone buildings. We have to go all the way back to Harry Fett’s “Norges kirker i middelalderen” (Norwegian Churches in the Middle Ages) (1909) to find an equivalent synthesis.

“With Soapstone and Mortar” is a textbook, which is extremely rich in information. It assembles old and new knowledge, and a particular merit is that it deals not only with the outstanding monuments, but also the many more anonymous works. Who would guess that Norway might have had two churches with round towers, Lunner in Oppland and Tromøy in Aust-Agder, and plenty of profane stone houses or cellars both in the towns and the countryside, e. g. by Værnes in Trøndelag? The catalogue with its democratic comments on both small and great thus earns praise. At the same time there are some shortcomings, both of great and secondary importance.

First of all one or more leading motives in the form of a problem, a perspective, or a thesis, which can bind the book together is lacking. The three parts are virtually independent.

As a matter of principle it is problematic to deal with stone architecture almost isolated from wooden architecture, because stone buildings often are a part of settlements, where both materials were used, e.g. at the Archbishop’s Palace in Trondheim. The relationship between the number of wooden churches and stone churches is specified in some counties, but not all. The architectural effect on wooden buildings is not mentioned. The wooden constructions of the stone buildings are not given sufficient attention.

The textbook intends to unite archaeological, art-historical and architectural perspectives, but the result resembles earlier surveys and syntheses written by art historians, where monuments like the Cathedral of Trondheim get much space, where the impulses come from either west or south, and where the building is explained in reference to named kings, economy and needs of manifestation. The Late Gothic period (1350-1537), which has never been well reputed in Norway, receives only 2 pages. Could it not be, as is indicated by the surprising datings of Trondenes church in Sør-Troms (15th C), that the established concept of architectural “periods of flourishing”, which follows a national self-consciousness, has led to too early datings? Thus many wooden sculptures belong to the Late Gothic.

Building proprietors are often nominated stormænd (noblemen or magnates), but were they all men? In the chapter about building proprietors an example of a woman appears: Ragna Asolfsdotter, who had the church in Eidfjord in Hordaland built about 1300. Again, it is incorrect to use gender-specific concepts like “stormænd” and “byggheer” (building lords) to characterize the social context of the building, because both men and women were active (Wienberg 1997).

The survey of the Norwegian stone buildings constitutes more than half the book (pp. 129-302), but it is unclear, whether the intention is that we should read the survey from beginning to end or if the intention is that the catalogue should function for reference purposes.

On one hand the survey resembles the style of the other chapters. Indeed, between the descriptions interesting discussions are tucked away, e. g. on church types, tithe and parish formation (pp. 182ff). On the other hand the descriptions can be quite technical with a detailed account of all portals, windows and profiles accompanied with measurements.

The catalogue seems reliable. However, closer examination of the account of medieval Tønsberg (pp. 168ff), indicates some omissions and inaccuracies. I chose Tønsberg as a test, because I have first-hand experience with the churches. The vanished western part of St. Lawrence, which must have resembled the twin towers of St. Mary in Bergen, is not mentioned. The eastern apse of St. Michael is in the strictest sense of the word a hypothesis, and the structure is not discussed: Was it thus a church with two stories? The foundation of St. Peter is dealt with, but not the fact that large parts of the churchyard were archaeologically investigated in the 1980's. The choir of St. Mary was not only "made rectangular", but extended to the east. The round church of St. Olav is discussed, but the nearby ruins of the monastery, which were excavated in 1971 and 1987-88, is not mentioned.

The catalogue is limited to modern Norway, with Jämtland in Sweden as an exception. The principles of the catalogue are not adherent to the description of two churches in Jämtland, Frösö and Västerhus (pp. 293f). The inclusion of Jämtland is probably caused by its proximity to Trondheim and Trøndelag, which are allotted relatively much attention. But if Jämtland is included, then all the 34 stone churches and 2 towers ought to be described, and moreover also the stone building in Bohuslän (further away from Trondheim), and possibly also the stone buildings in the North Atlantic, which previously belonged to Norway, e. g. on the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

There are numerous illustrations in the book, sometimes two or three of the same monument, still this reviewer misses important illustrations which would have increased understanding, especially plans of the Archbishop's Palace in Trondheim. Grasping the contents would have been easier if there had been references to figures, so that text and illustrations that belong together could have been more easily found. An example: St. Mary's in Oslo is illustrated on p. 45, but the description starts on p. 171. The gravestone of Ragne Asolfsson is shown on p. 110, but the inscription is quoted on p. 106 and again on p. 258.

Most of all thematic maps, like a map of all stone churches (see Lidén 1981 p. 6), maps of profane stone buildings and selected phenomena like building materials, towers and vaults are missing. There are county maps with stone churches, but unfortunately they are made according to different scales and principles, which hampers a comparison. Østre Gausdal on the map (p. 308) is missing, the name Våle near Tønsberg on the Vestfold-map should be replaced with Sem (p. 312), further the uncertain Kvåle and Njøs are missing on the map of Sogn and Fjordane (p. 318), and the church of Værnes is missing on the map of Nord-Trøndelag (p. 321).

In my opinion several important titles are missing from the bibliography, e. g. the investigation of Mære in Trøndelag, surveys of the churches in Jämtland and Vestfold, and also literature on parish formation (Lidén 1969, Almqvist 1984, Skre 1988, Brendalsmo & Veia 1990).

In spite of all critical comments: "Med kleber og kalk. Norsk steinbygging i mellomalderen 1050-1550" fills a profound gap, because we need good surveys of medieval stone buildings in Norway. It is a usable and useful book, which can work as a point of departure in future research. The book will be studied frequently.

Revision of English text: Birgitta Håkansson.

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