## Review Article: Estonian Churches

by

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In this article the author reviews and assesses the value of a recent publication from a source and on a subject that will be totally unfamiliar to most readers. He discusses possible new areas for study and some of the intriguing questions these present. The publication details are as follows: Kersti Markus, Tiina-Mall Kreem and Anu Mänd, Kaarma Kirik (= Eesti Kirikud I), Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet [National Heritage Board] (2003), 240 pp., 206 pl., 28 cm., ISBN 9985-9371-3-9, ISSN 1736-0196; € 35 (from National Heritage Board).

Nascent and newly independent nation-states commonly assert their cultural traditions by proclaiming the distinctive elements that have survived long periods of foreign domination and by showing how imported influences have been modified. Churches, the most public of ancient monuments, are particularly interesting at what Pierre Francastel called 'the frontiers of Gothic', where forms of plan and structure and ornament derived ultimately from the heartlands changed to a greater or lesser degree. As the expression both of centuries of religious belief and of the history of communities they tend to receive attention early, as in Finland where Finlands Kyrkor was begun in 1912. If Estonia produced anything during its brief independence between two world wars it cannot have compared with the volume under review which, indeed, is unmatched for quality of production in either of the two excellent Scandinavian series, Danmarks Kirker and Sveriges Kyrkor, whose academic example it follows in a general way. It does so, too, in providing information in English - a summary (pp. 222-37) and captions to all the illustrations<sup>2</sup> – which, since relatively few art historians read Estonian, should help to give this first volume from the National Heritage Board the attention it deserves.

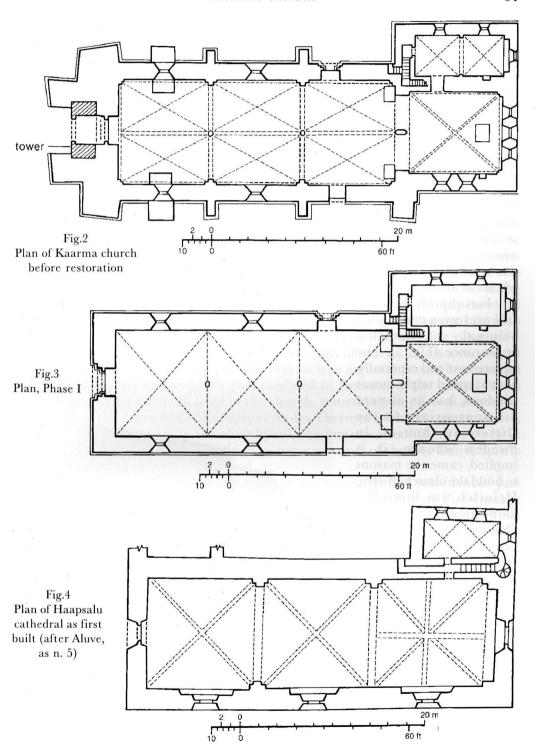
The church chosen to initiate the new series, Kaarma, is near one of four Iron-Age centres on the largest of the Estonian offshore islands, Saarema (Ösel in German), and served an inland settlement on the River Põduste which reaches the

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sea at modern Kuressaare, formerly Arensburg (Fig.1). Its medieval importance stemmed from the conquest of the southern part of the island in 1227 by the Livonian Brothers of the Sword – one of several crusading military Orders in the north – when Kaarma, which escaped destruction and lay in the middle of the episcopal estates of the diocese of Ösel-Wiek established in 1228, probably became, under its German name Karmele, the principal ecclesiastical centre of Saarema.



Fig.1 Map of Estonia



Kaarma church (Fig.2), built during the time of bishop Heinrich (1234-62). has a history of structural problems arising from the nature of the subsoil, which comprises layers of sand, clay and peat whose potential for subsidence the original builders recognised from the outset. In so unsuitable a location they must have had a strong reason to persist, perhaps something to do with an earlier timber building whose fragmentary remains were excavated beneath the east end of its Christian successor. The new church, of three square bays, groin-vaulted and with a slightly narrower square chancel (Fig. 3), is said to 'adhere more or less' (p. 222) to the plan of Heinrich's short-lived cathedral at Pärnu on the mainland, which was completed to a rectangular plan in 1251 and burnt down in 1263.3 It is interesting that at this stage in the christianisation of the country there was so little difference in plan or size between a locally important church such as Kaarma<sup>4</sup> and the cathedral at Pärnu or its successor at Haapsalu, which is actually slightly smaller<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 4). This situation is reminiscent of another frontier of Gothic, Ireland, where, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the parish church of Ardmore was briefly transformed by a small but significant enlargement into a tiny cathedral when the see first acquired a fixed location.6

Fortunately Kaarma still preserves much of its original external appearance (Fig. 5). The square east end especially, with stepped triple lancet windows, has an austere air appropriate to the Cistercian houses in Sweden whence, it is implied, came the masons to build the church. Bishop Heinrich was himself a 'the Dominican: Dominicans did not have lav brothers who specialised in building and thus the nearest abbot was probably addressed to help professional provide masons'. So the argument runs (p. 223) and it may well be broadly correct, although the quite small



Fig.5 Kaarma church, exterior from north

foundation of Vreta, near Linköping, one of the two Swedish abbeys cited, has apsidal ends to the choir and transeptal chapels which make it a somewhat uncertain source. The other one, Alvastra, also near Linköping, has a square-ended choir

and chapels but having been consecrated in 1185 was quite old as a model.<sup>7</sup> Apart from its general external appearance it is not easy to see much that is Cistercian about Kaarma church and the groin vaults throughout are likely to have been a necessary mark of status rather than a reflection of Dominican practice. All that the masons brought with them were their craft skills and an idea of what an up-to-date church should look like.

South-west of the church and just outside the churchyard, the present parsonage incorporates the remains of a greatly altered stone building that has been reduced to the height of the undercroft, one end of which was vaulted and the other had axial (samson) posts supporting a timber floor. With a length of 21.7m, and walls 1.4m. thick – the latter indicating a 'many-storeyed' defensive stone building (caption, Pl. 17) - it was probably the residence of a noble family and is approximately coeval with the church. During the middle ages accommodation for the priest was on the north side of the chancel, in a single large room above the vestry and reached from it by a staircase in the thickness of the wall. It is a merit of the English summary to provide a précis of arguments about the purpose of this room, as indeed about many other disputed points. Interpretation turns on the presence of a fireplace which has a joggled lintel resting on two simply-moulded corbels of rather Romanesque appearance. It is interesting that an art historian has made the claim (p. 226) that the room provided lodgings for pilgrims improbable, one might think, in view of the difficulty of access, unless a very small number of pilgrims is envisaged. The fact that such an argument could be advanced at all illustrates the unfamiliarity (not confined to Estonia) of the notion that a priest often, perhaps usually, lived in the church, something implicit at much the same time at the other end of Europe, at Ax-les-Thermes in the Pyrenees, where, after ghostly disturbances in the churchyard, the priest was unwilling to sleep in the church; and borne out for England by some research of the late Denys Spittle which, regrettably, he never published.

Churches in Estonia suffered much from two perils, fire and subsidence. Just when these two catastrophes struck Kaarma is a matter of argument. Fire damage occurred following a battle in 1261, not long after, we are told, the groin vaults collapsed as a result of the sinking and collapse of the west end. In 1298, when the Teutonic Order turned its crusading energies against the Christian population of Saaremaa, its troops massacred the people who had sought refuge in the church. These events form the background to the rebuilding in phase II (Fig. 6), which the authors date on stylistic grounds - principally the west doorway - as being earlier than the similar west doorway at Ridala church, which is itself ascribed stylistically to 1265-70. A new north doorway of three orders was built, the innermost having an unmoulded trefoil head which is unique in Saaremaaa. Vaults were intended for the new church when rebuilding begun in the late 1260s but after heightening of the nave, the addition of buttresses and the construction of a wall-rib the idea was abandoned in favour of a wooden ceiling, above which, in both nave and chancel, were roof trusses of a kind familiar in Germany and England. This is one of the points where the wider interest of this Estonian church becomes apparent.

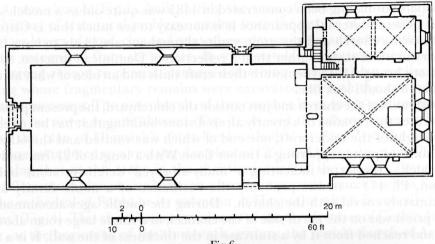
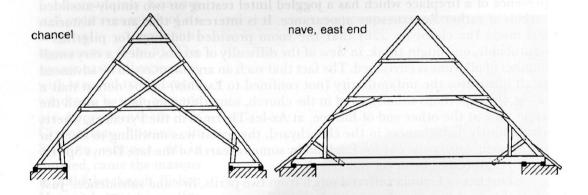


Fig.6 Plan, Phase II



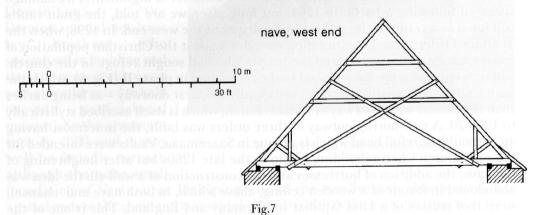
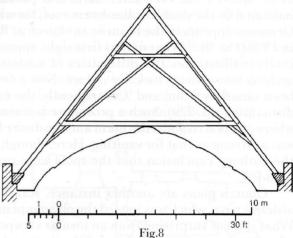


Fig.7
Roofs

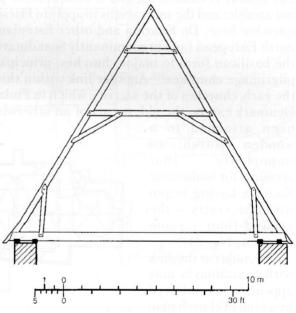
The roofs in question comprise two variants of the scissors-braced type, one in the chancel, one in the nave, also a slightly different type in the nave, with two collar-braced to the rafters (Fig. 7). The chancel roof is open, that in the nave

being closed above a wooden ceiling affixed to the tie-beams. As the caption correctly states, 'These roof were mostly used in the 13th and 14th centuries'. Most regrettably, all were destroyed in the cause of restoration (!) as late as 1990 without benefit of dendrochronological sampling, and, since it is inconceivable that advanced derivatives of the coupled-rafter roof could have been developed within Estonia, dates for them can only be arrived at by combining the scanty documentation with comparisons from elsewhere. The only obvious external source is Germany and it may be that this particular innovation introduced together with what is, in northern Europe, the distinctively German type the Hallenkirche or hall-church, of which more below.

So when did this type appear? Ambla, 'built during the third quarter of the century was the first church in central Estonia and the model for others in the region'. 10 If it has an original roof like those of Kaarma, a date in the late 1260s and 1270s is possible. vet some uncertainty remains because it is not certain when scissors-bracing began to appear in German hall-church roofs. They were not used, for example, in one of the most famous examples of the type, Marburg-St Elizabeth, of 1248d.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, surviving north German scissors-braced



Lübeck, Hospital of the Holy Ghost, roof truss (after Binding, as n. 12)



approximate scale

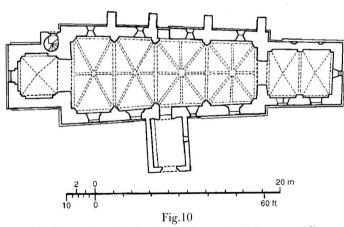
Fig. 9 Rothenburg o.d.Tauber, choir roof (after Binding, as n. 13)

roofs are of considerably later date, perhaps the earliest being the middle span of the three-aisled hospital of the Holy Ghost at Lübeck, of 1285d (Fig. 8), 12 so that in fact the date of the Kaarma roofs is uncertain; they could as easily be post-1298 as of 1260-79. An even later date, and presumably a break in construction, is indicated by the double collar-beam roof, for which the earliest definite parallel in Germany appears in the Franciscan church at Rothenburg o.d. Tauber, consecrated in 1309 (Fig. 9). 13 What may at first sight appear to be a matter of purely technical interest illustrates the difficulties of understanding how and when Estonian architecture came to look like it does. Now a caveat has to be added: the roofs have been raised by 3.5m. and 'Consequently, the earlier wooden roof must have been dismantled' (p. 229). Such a procedure is inconceivable in a country like England where an open roof was the norm and the desire for it to be up-to-date in appearance was as strong as that for vaulting. Here, though, no such consideration applied and the authors' conclusion that the roofs were reassembled unaltered appears well-founded.

Church plans are another instance. Kaarma comprised simply a chancel and aisleless nave, which was indeed the obvious plan for a first church almost anywhere. What is more surprising from an insular viewpoint is that such a plan often proved adequate for centuries. Perusal of the many volumes of Danmarks Kirker and Sveriges Kyrkor reveals that the vast majority of churches were not only built without aisles but usually remained so, and if enlargement proved necessary a bay was added, not an aisle; and the same seems to apply to Friesian churches. There is an historical question here. Do Kaarma and other Estonian aisleless churches form part of a north European (and predominantly Scandinavian) religious culture that confined the basilican form to major churches, principally cathedrals and abbeys but also pilgrimage churches? Another link within this large region is the importance in the early churches of the sacristy, which in Finland and occasionally in Sweden and Denmark can be the oldest part of an otherwise later building, having originally

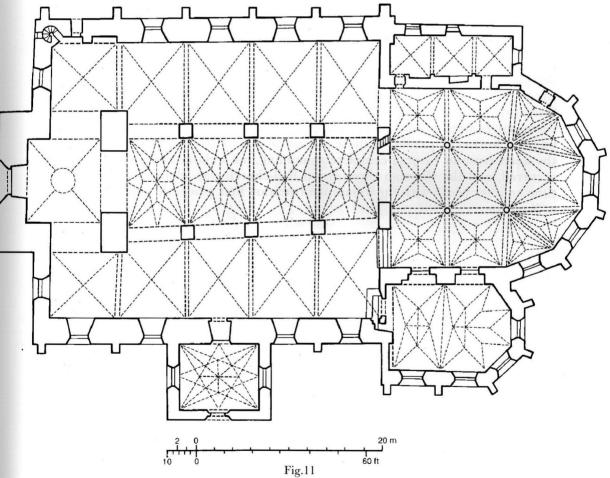
been attached to a wooden church; an importance that accounts for building at Kaarma having begun with the vestry – the ground-floor room (caption, Fig. 34).

Tenuous as this link with Scandinavia may appear, it is reinforced by a kind of church plan that is virtually confined to that region, in which a monospan nave tapers slightly



Guldager church, plan (after Danmarks Kirker, as n. 16)

from west to east. Two variants occur. In one the tapering of both north and south walls is symmetrical relative to the axis of the nave; in the other, one wall, usually the north, is parallel to the alignment of the chancel and the south wall diverges from it. Guldager church in Denmark<sup>16</sup> is one such (Fig. 10), but examples are not hard to find in both the Swedish and Danish corpuses and in sufficient numbers to make it certain that the second form of this plan, which might otherwise be regarded as the result of poor setting-out, is deliberate. The relevance of this form of planning to Estonia is that it is found in the nave of St Olaf's church at Tallinn (Fig. 11) – appropriate, in view of the meaning of the town's name, 'the Danish fortification'.<sup>17</sup> In 1230, in the shadow of the defences, Swedish merchants from Visby in Gotland established a trading post where, sometime before 1267, the church was founded. It is rather surprising that when rebuilding as a three-aisled



Tallinn, church of St Olaf, plan (after Kunstdenkmäler Baltische Staaten: Estland, Lettland, Litauen, Leipzig 1992, 314)

hall church began in the fourteenth century the opportunity to start afresh was not taken; instead, it looks as if, after the choir was rebuilt, the nave may have been left roofed while the new square piers were inserted into the old walls, which were only demolished as each bay of the arcades was completed – a conjecture supported by the irregular lengths of the bays. It is a process that can be matched elsewhere, at Sherborne abbey (Dorset), where the irregular bay lengths arose in a similar fashion, and at the former abbey of Écouché in Normandy where early-sixteenth-century piers of complex profile can still be seen driven through a thirteenth-century arcade. What is important for the history of Estonian churches is that however exiguous the traces of Scandinavian influence are, some can still be discerned beneath the overwhelmingly German models adopted later: the kind of situation Francastel described in another frontier of Gothic, Poland, where French and Mosan influence in the high middle ages was later submerged by German culture and lost sight of by art historians. <sup>19</sup>

Evidently many aisleless churches in Scandinavia proved large enough to meet the growth of population during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Then came the devastating effects of Black Death, during which, it is said, almost half the population of Denmark died, with comparable proportions elsewhere. Were the parish churches of Frisia, for example, many of which are large by English standards, built at a time sufficiently near the peak of the demographic cycle for them not to need enlargement; and did numbers recover too slowly to require building works comparable to those observable in English parish churches? When the need arose in Estonia complete rebuilding, not enlargement, seems to have occurred, and the German three-aisled hall-church was adopted. At the same time another break with the monospan tradition took place, the one exemplified at Kaarma.

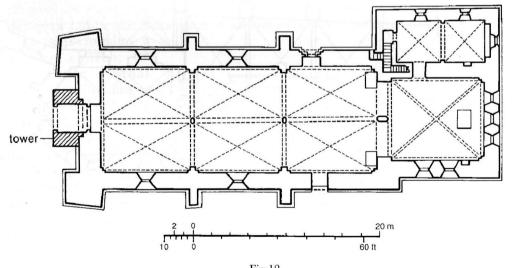


Fig.12 Kaarma church, plan Phase III

Phase III saw the creation of an axially divided nave (Fig. 12), here called the double-aisled solution, <sup>20</sup> which was adopted in order to replace the wooden ceiling of the nave by stone vaulting with less risk to the stability of an insecurely founded structure. Three octagonal columns were built, one of them in the middle of the

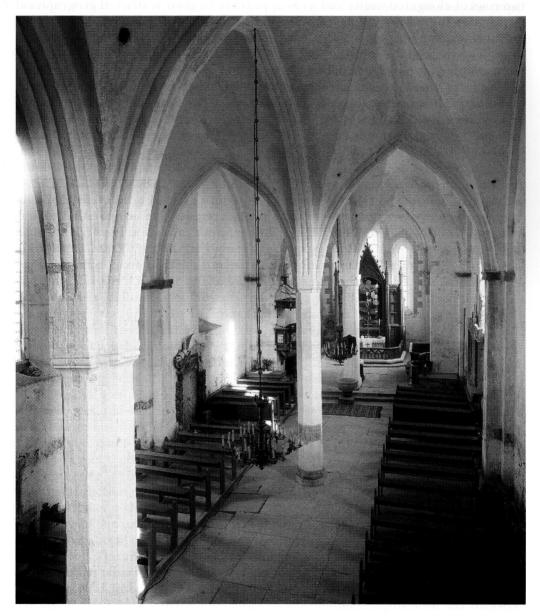


Fig.13 Interior of Kaarma Church

chancel arch, to support six elongated quadripartite vaults (Fig. 13), so the result was unlike those two-aisled churches which have a nave and chancel end-on and one aisle and thus in English terminology are properly called single-aisled churches. Massive buttresses were added at several points. The fewness of churches with two rows of elongated vaults and what appears to be their restricted geographical distribution suggests diffusion, not independent invention. Kaarma can be paralleled at Knutby in Sweden<sup>21</sup> where, also, the two-aisled plan with rib-vaults was adopted to replace the original vaulting, in this case a barrel-vault (Fig. 14). It was not often adopted for new construction although it is found at Gammelgarn church in Gotland, for which an exact Estonian parallel exists at Harju-Risti.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Scandinavian and specifically Swedish influence persisted through trading and other links with Gotland.

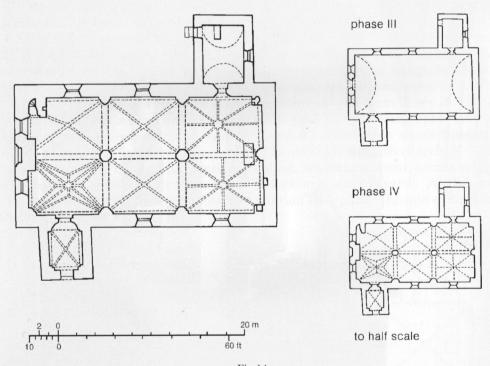


Fig.14
Knutby church, plan as existing
(after Sveriges Kyrkor, as n. 21) Phases III, IV

It is curious, in view of the origins of the type in German secular architecture, to learn that the double-aisled town hall at Tallinn, completed in 1404, probably provided the local inspiration and the masons for Kaarma, where the vaults are convincingly linked by above-ground archaeological detail to the west tower which bears the date 1407. Discussion of this point is the more valuable for restating the

arguments in favour of the older opinion that the tower antedates the vault, thereby assuring those who do not read Estonian of the balance and fairness of the English summary. But what, to a modern eye, is the clumsiness of the solution at Kaarma, where a pillar is directly in front of the chancel arch, prompts the question why the alternative, one more strongly indicative of German influence and the one most commonly found in Estonia, was not adopted: this was more extensive rebuilding as a three-aisled hall-church. Perhaps the visual effect is wrongly perceived, since what now looks like an intrusive pillar may have been masked by a screen and rood of which no traces seem to have been found in the masonry. One obvious explanation is lack of resources, yet money was found for a tower. A slight weakness of the English summary is that it is not perfectly clear who was responsible for building works at Kaarma in the middle ages. Since it is described as an episcopal church the bishop must have been responsible for the chancel at least, where nothing was done. The piers for the new vaults were paid for by the Gilsen family whose members, it is interesting to read, had no local connections but were important in the Teutonic Order. By the beginning of the fifteenth century Kaarma seems to have had the status of a parish church, so presumably the Gilsens found it desirable to assert their own importance and no doubt also the power of the Order by contributing to its rebuilding despite not being lords of the manor or the Estonian equivalent. They provided the money that the parishioners would have provided for the rebuilding of an English parish church nave. The question is complicated by the inclusion of a tower in the building campaign, a matter which introduces considerations unfamiliar to English readers.

Towers were unknown in Saaremaa before 1407. For centuries both the Teutonic Order as well as the Bishop had avoided building towers to churches...it is believed this was related to power struggle. The west tower was regarded as the symbol of secular power and by not permitting the construction of the tower the Bishop asserted his authority over the Order' which governed the island (p. 228). But how does this relate to the Gilsen family's implicit assertion of the Order's power by rebuilding the nave? Here, as at several other points, the reader unacquainted with the political history of the Baltic lands is at a disadvantage, but the authors' remarks are borne out by Koeru church in central Estonia, which 'Since [it] was founded by the Livonian Order, the original church was provided with a tower';23 and while it may be true that this was done 'keeping in mind its defensive function', the distant reminiscence of Carolingian westworks is clear. The prestige of a throne or high seat at the west end is apparent some hundred years later in the intention of the Danish King Valdemar IV, in rebuilding Tallinn cathedral as a royal church, to incorporate 'a sovereign's balcony...at the west end'.24 Nevertheless, the approach of the Teutonic Order towards the building of towers is not altogether clear: did it provide a tower to churches it founded, like the example of Koeru, or did it seek to add a tower to churches built by other landowners, which is what the bishop's assertion of his authority seems to imply? These are matters of interest to one whose country has a wealth of medieval towers, some undoubtedly built to express secular power or ecclesiastical status, many others simply as a

demonstration of communal pride and wealth.

Carved ornament, for which, hitherto, opportunity had been lacking, was now applied to the vaults and their supporting pillars. The simply moulded vault ribs present a peculiarity insofar as the diagonal rib does not spring from the same level as the transverse and wall-rib but from an attached column standing on the same grouped capitals, many of which are carved with what looks like a debased form of stiff-leaf foliage. Ornament finds its most elaborate and unusual expression on the bases of the pillars, which are carved with the kind of figures and scenes more commonly associated, in an English context, with misericords or the spandrels of late fifteenth century openings and fireplaces – a lion and dragon fighting and dogs chasing a unicorn, or some with alleged religious symbolism, such as two birds holding between their beaks a heart that 'denotes the redeemed human soul' (Fig. 15: Fig. 10 Guldager church, plan (after *Danmarks Kirker*, as n. 22)). Nor are the arms of those who paid for the rebuilding omitted, though at Kaarma they appear, not on vault bosses as they would in England, but carved in low relief on the faces of the pillars.



Fig.15 Kaarma church, base of pier

Thereafter the church at Kaarma was twice subject to change of status. Following the division of the diocese of Ösel-Wiek in 1449 it became the cathedral of West Estonia, a brief interlude that brought about only one minor change, the acquisition of a large wooden sculpture of St Simon of Cyrene, before it ended in 1457. More drastic in its effects was the ending of episcopal control at the

Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century and with it a change to Lutheranism and transfer of ownership – to the lord of the manor (for the chancel) and presumably, although this is not stated, to the parishioners for the nave. Then begins a story of piecemeal repair and redecoration familiar in an insular context, yet, despite the problems of inadequate funds and the ever-present danger of subsidence, sufficient was done to stave off collapse of the vaults. Only in the 1920s was serious consideration given to repair and only in the late 1980s was a programme of thorough repair and restoration begun that will finish in 2005 after conservation of the wall paintings.

Some eighty pages are devoted to the furniture and fittings, about which far less is said in the English summary and on which the present reviewer is hardly qualified to comment. Students of such matters will find much of interest in the many excellent colour photographs, particularly those of painted medieval decoration – they convey a strong sense of how bright a medieval church was – and of late fifteenth and sixteenth century statues of saints. They are of wood and derive for the most part from Lübeck workshops. Among the later sculptures, all of wood, are some striking wall monuments to local notables and a most remarkable doorway described as 'the symbolic door of the tomb of Carl Johann Ekesparre', 1683-1761, that is topped by what looks at first sight like a broken segmental pediment but lacking the usual bed; and the oddity of it is increased by the jambs. which comprise an attached shaft flanked by two rows of baroque foliage. Above the pediment on each side is a reclining angel with (apparently) one wing and one outstretched brawny arm pointing vertically to heaven. A traditional Estonian kind of memorial is a heraldic tablet accompanied by a text enclosed within a separate cartouche, the two being attached originally to a vertical pole.

To a reader who lacks Estonian the volume is beyond serious criticism. It is, though, unfortunate that the plan and the long- and cross-sections are reproduced at not quite the same scale and they would have been better on the same page. More diagrams would have made some points easier to grasp for native and nonnative readers alike: cross-sections of the nave c.1260, after rebuilding in the 1270s and post-1407 would have been useful, and axonometric development diagrams too. These, though, are trivial points compared with the wealth of high-quality illustration and the large amount of information an English reader can extract from the book. Although few such, and regrettably few English libraries, will buy it, many people interested in the history of architecture and art would find pleasure as well as food for thought in perusing it and to them it can be commended unreservedly. The National Heritage Board has made a notable contribution to the study of Estonian and European culture.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Dr Anneli Radla, Director-General of the National Heritage Board, for providing plans and illustrations; Allan Adams for redrawing all roofs and plans to uniform scales; and the Leverhulme Trust for supporting the research from which the information about Scandinavian churches is derived.

## NOTES

- 1. Francastel, P., Frontières du Gothique (Paris 1945, repr. 1970).
- 2. At least three counties, Præsto, Sorø and Tisted, in the series *Danmarks Kirker* have received English summaries in separate publications. *Sveriges Kyrkor* contains abstracts of each church in English or German.
- 3. I am indebted to Dr Anneli Randla for information about Pärnu.
- · 4. Perhaps the equivalent of a minster, although this is not stated. If so, the near-equality of size is less significant.
- 5. Plan, Aluve, K., Haappsalu piiskopilinnus (Tallinn 1998), kindly supplied by Dr Anneli Randla.
- Smith, J. T., 'Ardmore Cathedral', Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 102 (1972-4), 1-13.
- 7. Dimier, M.-A., Recueil de Plans d'Églises Cisterciennes (Paris 1949).
- 8. Ladurie, L., Montaillou (1978), 253; also 165, 309, 331.
- 9. Helme, M., Eestimaa Kirikute Teejuht / Guide to Churches in Estonia (2002), n.p., with Estonian and English text, gives many examples. Although this book contains at least one error, about a trefoil window at Kaarma, p.55 actually the north doorway, Kaarma Kirik, Fig. 48 it is the only source of information in English about Estonian churches generally.
- 10. Helme as n.9, 76.
- 11. Passing-braces and axial bracing with king-struts were used; 700 Jahre Elisabethkirche in Marburg 1283-1983 (Marburg 1983), 163-76. 1248d denotes a dendro date.
- 12. Binding, G., Das Dachwerk auf Kirchen im deutschen Sprachraum vom Mittelalter bis zum 18. Jahrhundert (Munich 1991), Abb.76.
- 13. Binding, as n. 12, Abb. 62.
- 14. Haiduck, H., 'Mittelalterlicher Kirchenbau in Friesland', in Sander-Berke, A., Fromme Friesen (Oldenburg 1997), 51-82.
- 15. Holmstrup is a Danish instance of an aisleless parish church rebuilt c.1490-1525 as a pilgrimage church; *Holbaek Amt*, 3 (1998-9).
- 16. Danmarks Kirker, Ribe Amt, 3 (1988-91), plan at 2058.
- 17. Tallinn-St Olaf, Helme as n.9, plan p.133; also Alttoa, K., and others, Kunstdenkmäler Baltische Staaten: Lettland, Litauen (Leipzig 1992). For the name, Estonian taani linn = Dänenburg, Lexicon des Mittelalters, article, 'Reval'.
- 18. Sherborne, RCHME, Dorset I, West (1952), xlvii-l; Écouché, Congrès Archéologique, CXI, Orne (1953), 113-42.
- Francastel, as n.1. The polemical stance of this book, arising from the political situation in pre-1939 Europe, does not diminish its scholarship and ideas.
- 20. No existing English term describes this kind of construction satisfactorily. Joan Evans uses 'two-naved' for the Dominican church at Toulouse (*Art in Medieval France* (1948), 145) and the alternatives two- or double-aisled are no better for what is really a special form of nave-and-chancel plan.
- 21. Lexicon des Mitelalters, article 'Hallenkirche'; Knutby, Sveriges Kyrkor 3, iii, 277-344.
- 22. Gammelgarn, Sveriges Kyrkor, Gotland IV/2, 707; Harju-Risti, Helme as n. 8. 25, plan, 133. Other monospan Estonian churches rebuilt with two aisles and vaulting are Keila and Luganuse, Helme, 23, 98 respectively.
- 23. Helme, 80.
- 24. Helme, 10.