Robert Bork, Great Spires: Skyscrapers of the New Jerusalem.
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Of often staggering size and great formal virtuosity, and looming over the skylines of many European cities even today, the spire was by far the most conspicuous feature of the high and late Gothic church. Curiously, however, it has also remained one of the least researched. This splendid study represents the first book-length monograph on this important, but much-neglected subject. Bork's chief interest concerns what he calls ‚the great spire' - a descriptive category developed in analogy to Christopher Wilson's notion of ‚the great church' [1] - and here referring to spires of considerable formal, geometrical, and structural intricacy - essentially those of the cathedrals and great burgher churches in France, the Low Countries, the Rhineland, and the southern parts of the German-speaking lands. Spires lacking these distinguishing features - such as the imposing, but plain, timber spires in the area of Backsteingotik - are excluded from this investigation [2].

The book opens with an introductory chapter that considers Gothic spires in a variety of conceptual, historiographic, and semantic contexts. Accounting for the relative neglect of medieval spires in the scholarly discourse, Bork rightly notes that „architectural scholarship has emphasized interiors over exteriors. Because spires are essentially sculptural objects with little or no interior space, they could not be readily appreciated within the influential scholarly tradition that defined architecture in terms of the shaping of space" (p. 13); at the same time, Bork continues, the study of spires has also been hampered by a division of the scholarly community into distinct national (particularly French and German) camps - a division that often makes it difficult to discern and appreciate the patterns of international artistic exchange that gave great spire design its uniqueness and innovative momentum. Assessing the symbolic significance these colossal structures would have had for their medieval audiences, the author remarks that in their heavenward push and aesthetic complexity spires referenced and glorified both, the City of God, and worldly authority; spires therefore simultaneously visualized a theological concept, and the interests, needs and aspirations of those powerful institutions that had initiated their construction. To characterize this dual function, the author coins the catching phrase ‚skyscrapers of the New Jerusalem'.

In its assessment of the very relationship between built spire and ‚New' or ‚Heavenly' Jerusalem, Bork's opening chapter could arguably have been more extensive, particularly in view of recent scholarly tendencies that question the viability of St. John's vision as a hermeneutical tool for our reading and understanding of the Gothic church [3]. Evidence that could have been used to counter such revisionist views is, at least in part, of iconographical nature; examples are provided by the trumpet-playing angels on the corners of Freiburg Minster's spire octogon [4], or by the incorporation of Utrecht's cathedral spire into the background of the paradisiacal Adoration of the Lamb panel in the bottom register of Jan and Hubert van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece [5].

The main body of the book is divided into five parts. Part I explores the structural and ideological genesis of the great spire, opening with a prologue that traces the ‚architectural iconography' of the Gothic spire to two distinct architectural traditions originating in classical Antiquity, and continued and adapted throughout the early

Christian and medieval periods. These comprise firstly the free-standing Greco-Roman tomb canopy, and its early medieval spin-offs (such as lantern towers, gabled belfry- and crossing towers), and secondly, the Roman fortified gatehouse, as well as its Carolingian and Ottonian relatives, the great single- or double-towered westworks. In the subsequent chapter Bork exchanges his wide-angle for a zoom-lens, and focuses on the appearance of the first great spires in mid-twelfth century France - an appearance that coincided with the emergence of the Gothic style itself. Indeed, the author convincingly demonstrates that the same formal and aesthetic principles that govern the interior design of Suger's choir at St. Denis - in particular those identified by Paul Frankl as dynamism, diagonality, interconnectedness and partiality - also determine the make-up of the earliest Gothic spires. A case in point is furnished by the colossal south spire of Chartres Cathedral, where the diagonal lines of the octagonal spire cone, decorative gables, and flanking, steeply-roofed corner aediculae „create an impression of dynamic visual elision (...), just as the diagonal rib vaults do in the Gothic church interior" (p. 41).

In the following Part (II) the author examines the further development of the Gothic spire in later 12th- and 13th-century France and England, distinguishing between two divergent groups that emanated from the kind of design represented by the south spire of Chartres Cathedral. The first of these groups - called the ‚Anglo-Norman', and comprising, among other spires, those of St. Etienne in Caen, Coutances Cathedral, and the English cathedrals of Salisbury and Lichfield - is characterized by its incorporation of the tall, pyramidal spire cone, and, at the same time, by its rejection of the octagonal storey that mediates at Chartres between the four-sided tower block and the eight-sided spire pyramid. Buildings belonging to the second group - labelled by Bork the ‚eastern French', and including the cathedrals of Chartres, Reims, Amiens, and Notre-Dame in Paris - were to receive more complex spires, often also at the ends of their transepts or, as at Chartres, on either side of the chevet, but owing to factors such as urban fragmentation, economic constriction, and a royal policy that favored Cistercian and mendicant institutions, none of these projects was brought to a conclusion. Commenting on the truncation of eastern French spires in the mid-13th century, the author astutely remarks that „the cathedrals of Chartres and Reims (...) are so glorious in their present state that it is hard to think of them as incomplete fragments, even though they lack the dramatic multi-spired silhouette that their original designers intended" (p. 76).

Part III is concerned with what the author calls the ‚Golden Age' of spire construction, and, as regards sheer scope, analytical depth, and scholarly originality clearly represents the most impressive and compelling part of the study. It begins with a discussion of the facade and spire projects of the Rhenish cathedrals of Strasbourg and Cologne, and the Minster of Freiburg, all commenced in the decades around 1300. Focusing both on the extant monuments and on a series of surviving architectural drawings (so-called Visierungen) that document the genesis of the spire schemes for Strasbourg and Cologne (both of which were only completed in the 15th and late 19th centuries respectively), Bork concludes that it was here, in these Rhenish workshops, that up-to-date French Rayonnant ideas about the skeletization of form were for the first time brought to bear on spire design, to create the first spires with openwork pyramids [6]. In the two following chapters the author traces the subsequent history of the openwork spire type (and, to a lesser extent, also of competing designs) in the later 14th and 15th centuries, particularly in the south of the Holy Roman Empire, where prestigious spire schemes were initiated by princely, episcopal, as well as civic patrons. One of the earliest appropriations of a Freiburg-type openwork spire in this area can be found in the Charterhouse of Straßengel in Styria, constructed around the middle of the 14th century under the patronage of the Habs-

burg Archduke Rudolph IV. It was also Rudolph IV who in 1359 laid the cornerstone for the tower that would eventually be surmounted by the largest and most sophisticated openwork spire of the eastern Empire - that of St. Stephen‘s in Vienna. In contrast to the highly transparent spire cones of its Rhenish models, however, Vienna‘s south spire - completed in 1433 under Hans Prachatitz - is of „such narrow proportions that it registers as an opaque but finely textured spike“ (p. 170). Other spire projects explored in this part of the study include those of Prague Cathedral‘s abortive west facade (a project that may have involved a narrow, needle-like spire rather than an openwork spire, but that never went beyond the planning stage), of Vienna Cathedral‘s north tower (begun 1450, but not finished), and of the southeast tower of Meissen Cathedral, begun in ca. 1400 and representing „the first openwork spire to be completed as part of a true cathedral“ (p. 178). Bork‘s survey of openwork spire schemes in the south of the Empire ends with a detailed analysis of the work of Ulrich von Ensingen and his successors at Ulm Minster (where, from ca. 1390 onwards the most ambitious of all openwork spires was begun), Strasbourg Cathedral (completed in 1439 by Johannes Hültz, and at 142 meters the tallest masonry structure erected in the Middle Ages), the Frauenkirche in Esslingen (1398 ff.), and the north tower of Basel Cathedral (for which Ulrich submitted a plan in 1414). As is suggested by an extant facade drawing for Constance Cathedral, or by Hans von Schussenried‘s design for the upper termination of the tower of Our Lady at Bozen (Bolzano) in the South Tyrol, the openwork spire continued to represent an attractive solution to many spire projects well into the early 16th century, though, as Bork shows in the concluding chapter to this third part, late Gothic architects also successfully experimented with a series of alternative designs, the so-called buttressing pyramid and the domed termination being chief among them. Buttressing pyramids - tapering, towerlike structures consisting of a one or a series of buttressing shells - were first pioneered in microarchitecture, as in Peter Parler‘s sacrament house for St. Bartholomew‘s in Kolín (completed before 1378), but could, on occasion, also be applied to spire schemes, with the crossing tower of the Cistercian Abbey Church of Bebenhausen (1407-1409) furnishing a prominent example. If buttressing pyramids were especially attractive for their formal sophistication, domed terminations were primarily chosen for their highly symbolic potential, as their form could evoke both, the hallowed cupola churches of Jerusalem, Rome, and Byzantium, and - as in the case of Madern Gerthener‘s design for the west tower of St. Bartholomew‘s in Frankfurt - contemporary imperial or royal crowns (Frankfurt then being the site of the imperial elections).

In a subsequent Part (IV), Bork looks at the international reception to Germanic spire design from the 14th to the 16th centuries. In Spain, for instance, northern-style spire projects were initiated in the Castilian cathedrals of Burgos, Toledo, and Léon, the same three buildings that had been most affected by French Gothic in the 13th century. Two areas in particular distinguished themselves through their original, and often competitive, responses to the kinds of spires pioneered in the Rhineland and the south of the Empire - Brabant and France. In the Duchy of Brabant ambitious spire campaigns were commenced on both ecclesiastical and secular monuments (such as town halls and cloth halls), reflecting in part the civic pride of its flourishing mercantile classes. The colossal west tower of St. Rombout‘s in Mechelen (Malines), begun in 1452 by Walter Coolman, and continued in the Brabantine Florid style by members of the Keldermans dynasty of architects, certainly ranks as one of the most extravagant of these projects. Had it ever been completed to its full intended height of ca. 165 to 170 meters, the Mechelen tower would have eclipsed even the tallest spire scheme in the south of the Empire, at Ulm Minster (height as completed in the late 19th century: 161 meters). Bork‘s account of late Gothic spire building outside the German-speaking lands ends with a look at the situation in France, especially as it presented itself

after the end of the Hundred Years' War in 1453. While also analyzing a series of spires conceived for west facades - Jean Texier's 113-meter north tower for Chartres Cathedral providing the most notable example - the author particularly foregrounds the ways in which the spire concept was adapted to the northern French Dachreiter- and crossing tower traditions. Structures that testify to this fusion include the Flamboyant lantern towers of St. Ouen in Rouen, Évreux Cathedral, and the no longer surviving enormous timber crossing spires of the Cathedrals of Rouen and Beauvais, completed in 1544 and 1569 respectively, with heights of approximately 150 meters each.

Bork's narrative of Gothic spire design is complemented by a fifth and final part, which considers what he terms ‚the afterlife of great spires' in the Renaissance, Baroque, Gothic Revival and modernist periods, and which concludes with an epilogue on the iconicity of spire-like buildings - an iconicity that was thrown into drastic relief by the destruction of New York's World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. Of considerable scope, formidable depth and breadth in both original and synthetic scholarship, and engagingly written throughout, Great Spires represents a significant academic achievement, and a major contribution to the study of medieval architecture. It should be read by both students and scholars alike as exemplary of the best work that can be done in this field.

Notes:

[1] See The Gothic Cathedral: The Architecture of the Great Church, 1130-1530 (London, 1990).

[2] Readers interested in this subject should consult Olaf Asendorf, Mittelalterliche Türme im Deutschordensland Preußen (Frankfurt a. M., 1998).

[3] See especially Wilhelm Schlink, „The Gothic Cathedral as Heavenly Jerusalem: A Fiction in German Art History," in The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art: Studies in Honor of Bezalel Narkiss on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, ed. by Bianca Kühnel {Jerusalem, 1999}, pp. 275-285.

[4] For the presence of these angels on Italian and English spires, see Johannes Tripps, Das handelnde Bildwerk in der Gotik (Berlin, 1998), pp. 33ff. („Das Himmlische Jerusalem und seine Boten").

[5] On this motif, see especially Aart J. J. Mekking, „Pro Turri Trajectensi: De positieve symboliek van de Domtoren in de stad Utrecht en op de ‚Aanbidding van het Lam Gods' van de gebroeders Van Eyck," in Annus Quadriga Mundi: Opstellen over middeleeuwse kunst opgedragen aan Prof. Dr. Anna C. Esmeijer, ed. by Jan Baptist Bedaux (Utrecht, 1989), pp. 129-151. Mekking comments: „In 1425, the duke of Burgundy sent to strife-torn Utrecht a delegation which included the same Joos Vijd who commissioned ‚The Adoration of the Lamb of God' from the van Eyck brothers. To commemorate this, Vijd had the cathedral tower depicted on the central panel of this altarpiece, where it now stands as a symbol of the Church Triumphant. This was feasible because Ecclesia in Hermas' Pastor is represented by a tower, and because the upper, octagonal part of the cathedral tower is to be seen as a reference to the Heavenly Jerusalem." The incorporation of towers into representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem is also discussed by Stefanie Lieb, „Das Paradies als Architektur: Weltgerichtsdarstellungen in spätmittelalterlichen Wandmalereien niedersächsischer Dorfkirchen," in Festschrift für Günther Kokkelink, ed. by Stefan Amt (Hannover, 1998), 51-58. Cf. also „La dimora di Dio con gli uomini" (Ap 21,3): Immagini della Gerusalemme celeste dal III al XIV secolo, ed. by Maria Luisa Gatti Perrer (Milan, 1983), and the contributions by Marie-Thérèse Gousset and Agostino

Colli in Cahiers archéologiques, 30 (1982).

[6] On this subject, see also Robert Bork, „Into Thin Air: France, Germany, and the Invention of the Openwork Spire," Art Bulletin, 85 (2003), 25-53.

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