Means, motives and opportunities: The architecture of monasteries during the reign of Louis the Pious (814-840)

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CONCLUSION

What stood out most in the course of this study is the diversity of early medieval monastic building projects. They ranged from churches that were completely planned ahead such as Steinbach to those of Reichenau and Herford which grew and evolved over time, as well as from magnificent and highly complex creations to simple yet functional buildings. The primary question posed in the introduction, ‘what do we really know about the architecture of monasteries built between 814 and 840?’, must therefore receive a multitude of answers rather than a single, univocal one. This is on the one hand due to the nature of the buildings that we have seen: they are too diverse to be characterised collectively. On the other hand, the approach that was adopted in this study was not geared towards the development of a theory that would encompass all monastic architecture of built during the reign of Louis the Pious. Instead, it strived to explore how looking at these buildings from a new perspective changes our perception of them.

By seeking the middle ground between the detailed study of a single building and the creation of a wide-ranging overview of many buildings from the period, I was able to take a step back from the usual reconstructions and return to the finds on which these reconstructions were based. Detailed analyses of these finds, as they were reflected in publications from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, made clear that ‘what we really know’ about the architecture of most early ninth-century monasteries is in the first place far less than we have been led to believe. Despite the fact that the finds do not, in most cases, allow us to reconstruct an entire monastic complex or even a complete abbey church, they nevertheless offer a lot of material for analysis. I have taking this material evidence as the starting point for my analysis. Moreover, this study has developed new perspectives to this material, amongst others through studying it in a wider context.

The monasteries under study have mostly been examined from a diachronic perspective. This meant that not only the building phases that came about during the reign of Louis the Pious (814-840) were studied, but also earlier and later phases. This has led us beyond the chronological limits of this study and into the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis’ successors. What surfaced were not similarities
between buildings in various places that were constructed more or less simultaneously, but connections between consecutive building phases on a single site. Although not necessarily alike in form, subsequent building phases shared characteristics such as the axis along which they were built, the centrality of certain places such as the position of the main altar or the burial of a founder, the dedication of altars and the types of materials and techniques that were used. At the same time, the context continuously changed: the communities and the resources available to them grew over time, local saints were increasingly venerated or ousted by imported ones, the liturgy evolved and new abbots took over. All of this was reflected in the size, complexity and sophistication of the abbatial buildings. The interconnectedness of consecutive building phases that this study has demonstrated, forces us to acknowledge the importance of the factor time more. Instead of looking at building phases as complete, self-contained designs, we must view them in terms of adjustment and change. This conclusion can be extended far beyond the realm of early medieval architecture: it may also apply to other types of building projects in other periods, as well as to other media, such as texts, whose authors also did not always work according to a predetermined plan but rather developed it as they went along.

Besides studying the buildings themselves, the context in which they arose was researched extensively through contemporary written, visual and material sources. Sources were selected on the basis of their connection with the building works, either directly, or through the people involved or their common time frame. The sources have been discussed relatively extensively to avoid approaching them simply as repositories of facts which can be picked from at will, as has sometimes happened in the past. A wide array of sources, such as hagiographic texts, chronicles, charters and a drawing, was investigated with respect to its value for architectural history. Each chapter pursued a number of themes in greater depth and the selection of sources was made with these themes in mind. A number of saints’ lives illustrated the specifics of monasteries as missionary posts in the final chapter, whereas the altar tituli of several churches belonging to the monastery of
Fulda illuminated the ways in which church building, the distribution of relics and
the dedication of altars were used by four successive abbots to convey meaning.
Whereas the abbots received centre stage in the third chapter, occupied with Fulda,
the monks themselves and their daily living environment in Reichenau and St. Gall
were the theme of the previous chapter. For this reason, sources such as the Plan
of St. Gall, monks’ lists and hagiography were used alongside material evidence of
the claustral buildings from Reichenau.

The example of the dedication of altars as a conveyor of meaning that was
just mentioned is significant since this study forces us to acknowledge that mean-
ning was more often expressed by dedications, texts and the presence of relics than
by architectural forms themselves, as the previous chapters have shown. Since the
designs of churches and claustral buildings have been shown to depend on a large
number of interrelated elements, we must also re-adjust the idea of a commis-
ioner and/or a person overseeing a building project as being free to deploy any
shape they deemed useful as well as meaningful. This has its repercussions for the
amount and type of meaning we associate with certain concepts and forms. This
study has benefited greatly from the so-called ‘iconographers of architecture’ dis-
cussed in the introduction, most of all Richard Krautheimer, because of their em-
phasis on the necessity of paying detailed attention to the context of buildings. The
specifics of their analyses, however, have to be reconsidered in many cases. This is
especially true of the alleged connection between certain architectural forms, most
of all the transept, and Roman churches such as St. Peter’s. We have moreover
encountered very few distinct architectural quotations, even though several of the
churches under investigation, including the abbey church of Fulda and the chapel
of St. Michael, but also Steinbach, have been interpreted as such in the past.

As a result of the combination of architectural, archaeological, visual
and textual material, a multifaceted image of the architecture of the period has
emerged. This research has made it abundantly clear that the designs and floor
plans of monastic churches were the outcome of a number of factors, which in-
cluded but were not limited to the wishes and circumstances of the abbot and/
or the community, previous buildings on the site, local traditions, the presence of relics, the building’s (liturgical) use and the time, resources and materials available. The cocktail made up of these ingredients produced a different outcome each time it was shaken. This makes it impossible to strain out general characteristics of monastic architecture during the reign of Louis the Pious, let alone determine the exact influence political decisions may have had on them. Where relevant, I have certainly taken politics, be they local, regional or empire-wide, into consideration, yet I have found no indications pointing towards a breaking point around the year 814 or the direct impact of the councils of 816/817 on monastic architecture, as has been argued in previous research. Whenever politics had demonstrable consequences for building work, these were mainly practical. This is showcased by the two patrons discussed in the first chapter. Hilduin’s building works in the abbeys of Saint-Medard in Soissons and Saint-Denis may for example have been delayed by his exile, caused by his support of the emperor’s rebellious son Lothar. Einhard on the other hand, despite his staunch allegiance to the emperor, had trouble accumulating the necessary building materials for his church in Seligenstadt during the crisis years, when Louis’ rule was contested and the empire was plagued by misfortunes. Interestingly, these issues did not directly impact the design of their churches. These observations force us to adjust the current image of the architecture of this period. Not only is there no attested connection between the ‘reform councils’ and contemporary and later architecture, we may also wonder how important politics really were for Carolingian architecture in general, or in fact for other creations such as artworks and texts. If patrons of architecture were influenced by local circumstances to such an extent as has been shown here, these conditions may also have had a bearing on the artworks they commissioned or the texts they wrote, more, perhaps, than empire-wide developments.

Despite the varied nature of the buildings that were studied, a few common characteristics do nevertheless emerge. For one, almost all monasteries went through a number of building phases in the eighth and ninth centuries. This matches their general development from modest beginnings to powerful (royal) ab-
beys. Generally speaking, the consecutive building phases demonstrate an increasing complexity: the churches went from simple structures with a nave and a choir to intricate arrangements displaying Westworks, eastern and western transepts, aisles, additional altars and chapels and complex crypts. Moreover, most communities were in one way or another impacted by the lively relic traffic of the 830s. It has long been known that many relics were bought, donated and translated during this period, and this study illustrates how this impacted among others the architecture of the receiving parties.

This study has expanded our image of Carolingian architecture by focusing on a part of the period that has received less attention than the decades around 800. By focusing solely on monastic architecture and where possible looking beyond the abbey church to the rest of the monastic complex, it has further deepened our understanding of monasticism in this period. All case-studies show that there was a discrepancy between the ideal situation described by rules and regulations and reality, which was more diverse and unexpected. The diverse ways in which the various communities responded to matters such as their increasing wealth, size and responsibilities, the reception of relics and the need for the multiplication of altars exemplify that there was much room for variation, and that local circumstances were often more important than centralising tendencies. This conclusion could only be reached by studying a number of case studies with relative profundity.

Future research into the time period and themes addressed in this study might take a number of courses. It would be interesting to widen the selection of case-studies both geographically and chronologically, since this study has shown that the boundaries we draw between periods and areas were not necessarily relevant to the architecture of these times and places. Additional studies might include e.g. West-Frankish or Italian monasteries, or pay more attention to nunneries, which might elucidate the role gender played in early medieval architecture. It might also be worthwhile to broaden the period under scrutiny and compare the development of a number of monasteries which reached the apex of their de-
velopment at different times during the Carolingian period. This could shed light on characteristics of the architecture of communities in the making that are not limited to a specific period. Alternatively, the monasteries studied here could benefit from a closer look. Within the scope of this study, a detailed treatment of all the available sources was not possible, yet I did discover a number of promising avenues for further investigation. I am convinced that in several cases there is still much to be gained from study of additional material such as photographs and original drawings made at the time of the various excavations, publications in relatively obscure local journals and scrutinising the sites in their present state; not to mention interviews with the people who were involved in the excavations, asking them about their observations and the ways in which they would interpret them. The monasteries of Reichenau, Herford and Soissons would moreover be ideal candidates for a more wide-ranging investigation of the context of the building works. As has been mentioned in passing, in most monasteries, the buildings constructed during last Carolingian building phase remained in use for a long time. After an initial period of growth and experiment, witnessed by a number of building phases in close succession, a form had been found that remained functional for the decades, centuries even, to come. As a final suggestion for further research, it would be interesting to look at when and for what reasons adjustments to these buildings were made, and also to investigate how the presence of these buildings impacted later architecture. In this sense, later Carolingian architecture has been at least as influential as the buildings that arose during the reign of Charlemagne, even though these are traditionally viewed as indicative of what Carolingian architecture is. The evolution of the built environment of the monasteries described here demonstrates that the development and reform of monastic architecture was a continuous process that lasted throughout the eighth and ninth centuries.