

Berthold Köster: Das frühgotische Bergportal an St. Servatius in Maastricht

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„In den Gebieten, die nördlich an das französische Kronland angrenzten, vor allem im Maastal, lagen im 12. Jahrhundert die wichtigsten Werkstätten der europäischen Goldschmiedekunst. Von Reiner von Huy, der zu Beginn des Jahrhunderts arbeitete, bis zu Nikolaus von Verdun um 1180 zeigten sie eine sehr ausgeprägte Eigenart der Figurenbildung. Während die romanische Skulptur Südwestfrankreichs und Burgunds bei der freien Entfaltung der Figur mit den übergeordneten Gegebenheiten des Bauzusammenhangs rechnen mußte, überraschen die getriebenen und vor allem die gegossenen Arbeiten der mosanen Goldschmiede durch die Gelöstheit, Räumlichkeit der Bewegungen. Vom Lütticher Taufbecken des Reiner von Huy bis zum Kreuzfuß von saint-Omer ist hier mit der frei bewegten, nicht an eine Wandung oder einen Dienst gebundenen Figur experimentiert worden. Auf die gotische Bildhauerkunst, die sich seit 1135 im französischen Kronland entfaltete, sind diese Versuche nicht ohne Einfluß geblieben.“

The above quotation is to be found in Willibald Sauerländer's monumental monograph on French Gothic sculpture¹ and is interesting for two reasons. First of all, Sauerländer acknowledges that Meuse valley metalwork held a leading position in the arts during most of the twelfth century and even that it played a significant role in the development of French Gothic sculpture. Secondly, such a pioneering role is denied by the sculpture in the same region, which is not mentioned at all. This point of view is hardly surprising, as on the whole, Meuse valley sculpture is considered archaic and provincial.

A case in point is the sculpture of the so-called 'Bergportal' on the south-west side of the nave of the former collegiate church of St. Servatius in Maastricht. It comprises an elaborate Gothic portal preceded by a decorated porch. The portal consists of a tympanum and lintel showing the death and ascension of the Virgin Mary, and it is framed by alternately four figurative archivolts that are supported by columns made of 'Kalksinter' or 'Wasserstein', a stone deposit from the ancient Roman aqueducts leading from the Eifel region to Cologne, and four foliate archivolts that are supported by eight large statues.

The Bergportal is probably one of the earliest and most important ensembles of Gothic sculpture in the Netherlands. It is not just a portal devoted to the Virgin Mary. The inner figure archivolt is devoted to the genealogy of St. Servatius, who was said to be a distant cousin of Christ himself. St. Servatius is also represented among the column statues. These are not the only features that render this portal unique. Neither in Belgium, nor in Germany, is such a portal to be found. It is the only thing of its kind in the very wide surroundings. Unfortunately, the portal suffered extensive restorations in 1596 and again in 1884-87. Missing parts were replaced and the sculpture disappeared under a thick and coarse coating of paint and plaster. As a

consequence the portal was regarded as an „œuvre lourde, .. œuvre ‘paysanne’, sans élan, sans inspiration“². The portal was again restored in the period 1990-1992 and this restoration yielded significant new facts as to the former appearance of the portal and its quality³.

It is to this portal that Berthold Köster devoted his 1996 Cologne dissertation. One of his main objectives is to deal with the Bergportal in relation to other German figure portals. „Eine Würdigung der Maastrichter Vorhalle in der deutschen Kunstlandschaft sollte daher unter dem Gesichtspunkt geschehen, ob das Bergportal die charakteristischen Merkmale deutscher Figurenportale aus der ersten Hälfte des 13. Jahrhunderts aufweist oder eine Sonderstellung einnimmt.“ (S. 8)

The book is divided in thirteen chapters, of which the first deals with the ‘status questionis’. After an extensive description of the portal and its porch and a brief treatment of the different building phases, the author deals with the function of the portal and then continues with possible prototypes and stylistic issues. First of all, he devotes a long chapter to the work of the Samsonmeister, who is named after the figure of Samson still preserved in the abbey of Maria Laach near Andernach, and who, according to Köster, was trained in Sens and was active as a sculptor in the Rhineland from circa 1200 onwards. According to Köster, the sculpture of the double capitals of the southern entrances into the porch belongs to the earliest phase of the Bergportal and is related to the earliest work of the Samsonmeister and his atelier. He dates these capitals to circa 1200 and considers them to have been reused from the predecessor of the Bergportal. The Bergportal was, according to Köster, rebuilt shortly after 1224. Following his discussion of the Samsonmeister, Köster deals extensively with the relationship between the Bergportal and similar portals in the Ile-de-France, i.e. Senlis (1170-1190), Mantes (circa 1180), Laon (west, central portal circa 1185-1205), Braine (1205-1216), Chartres Nord (central portal, 1205-1210) and Sens. Although the author finds a great many similarities between the Bergportal and the portal at Mantes, he prefers to ignore these. In his view the Bergportal was a direct derivation from Chartres Nord. Stylistically, the portal was a ‘Sackgasse’. Köster’s comparisons however are superficial and hardly convincing. One of the few examples that he chooses to illustrate (nrs. 29-32), suffices to show this, namely that between the heads of Christ and the Virgin on the tympanum of the Bergportal and the heads of Christ and the Virgin on the tympanum of Chartres Nord. The photographs of the Maastricht heads have been taken from close-by, while the Chartres heads seem to have been taken from underneath. This rather distorts the proportions. In real fact, the elongated facial types at Chartres have very little to do with the more compact heads of the Maastricht figures. The difference between Maastricht and Chartres becomes even more clear when one compares the entire figures and the draperies. In no way do the somewhat stocky Maastricht figures compare with their Chartres counterparts. Köster relates the style of Chartres Nord to the portals of Laon cathedral and St-Yved in Braine and characterizes this style as follows: „Die charakteristischen Eigenschaften, die die Skulpturen des antikisierenden Stils verbinden, sind der wirklichkeitsnahe Faltenwurf mit einem natürlichen Fall der Gewandfalten,

ausgeprägte Haarnadelfalten und die Figurendarstellung im Kontrapost“ (S. 264). It is precisely these aspects that are lacking in the Maastricht tympanum figures, as well as in the figures of the two inner archivolt, that form a stylistic unity with the tympanum and are of the same very high quality. Influence from Chartres may well be manifest in the figures of the two outer archivolt, as these – without a doubt – belong to the thirteenth century. These figures are rather stereotype.

Köster is aware of differences between the inner and the outer two archivolt, but minimizes these differences. Although he considers the figures of the inner archivolt to be rather like those at Laon, and the ones of the outer archivolt like Chartres Nord (S. 182), he sees no stylistic break. In his view, the inner archivolt and the tympanum were made by a „Bildhauergruppe, die vermutlich aus älteren Bildhauern bestand, da hier ältere Formen aus Braine und Laon noch verarbeitet sind, die aber auch in Chartres noch vereinzelt vorkommen.“ (S. 232)

Having dealt with the stylistic issues the author proceeds with the original colour scheme of the Bergportaal, traces of which were discovered during the 1990-1992 restorations. He then moves on to the iconography and further discusses Maastricht in the period between 1218 and 1236, also dealing with the available written sources that might enable a more secure dating of the portal.

One of the main weaknesses of Köster's study of the Bergportal is his refusal to deal with the Meuse valley itself and with metalwork. Köster repeatedly mentions the Rhine-and-Meuse valleys, but when he does so, he really means only the Rhine valley, as all his examples are derived from here. The literature he quotes concerning the Meuse valley is for the greater part outdated and the list seems very incomplete. In his entire study, not one comparison is made with an object or sculpture deriving from either the Meuse valley or Maastricht itself. This brings us back to the quote from W. Sauerländer at the beginning of this review, since the style that developed at the Gothic portals of Senlis, Mantes, Laon, Braine and Chartres is said to have been influenced by metalwork from the Meuse valley. Even Köster recognizes this. „Die Stilbildung zwischen den einzelnen Gattungen ist zwar nicht zeitgleich – die Steinbildhauer sind in der stilistischen Ausführung ihrer Figuren fast zehn Jahre später einzuordnen als die Goldschmiede – aber die entwickelten Formen finden sich in allen Bereichen, in der Buchmalerei, bei den Goldschmiedearbeiten und an der Steinskulptur ähnlich wieder“ (S. 189). In spite of this, he gives the metalwork short shrift. Without even attempting to make any comparisons to prove this, Köster writes, „Vergleiche mit der Goldschmiedekunst und der Buchmalerei belegen nur das verwendete Formenrepertoire, sind aber für einen stilistischen Vergleich von sekundärem Interesse. Am Bergportal konnte sowohl durch die Analyse der Ornamentik und der Feststellung, daß einige Details aus der Werkstatt des sogenannten Samsonmeisters stammen, als auch bei der Bearbeitung der Skulptur die Herkunft der Formen als eindeutig aus Steinmetz- und Bildhauerwerkstätten festgestellt werden“ (S. 190). Moreover, in the literature not only French sculpture is said to have been influenced by the metalwork products of the Meuse valley, the same applies to the Samsonmeister, who, according

to Brigitte Kaelble⁴, received his earlier training here and was much influenced by the metalwork in this region.

Considering all this, it seems no more than obvious that one investigate the state of the arts in the Meuse valley in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries before moving on to works that were influenced by Meuse-valley art, and to first see whether any comparisons can be made with works in the immediate surroundings that might shed some light on the stylistic origins of the Bergportal, rather than moving to the Rhineland and France straight-away. Such an investigation is of course somewhat hampered by the very severe losses that have occurred in the region. The cathedral of Liège has completely disappeared, as have many of the collegiate churches. Most abbeys have gone, often leaving no more than a few traces. However, some of the sculpture fragments from the area show that already at a very early stage there was an interest in what we would call 'Gothic' sculpture. A frieze and several capitals from the abbey of St. Truiden (between 1169 and 1172) and the friezes from St. Jacques in Liège (between 1155 and 1174) show that this sculpture was in no way inferior to contemporary sculpture in France. That such an investigation of works of art in the immediate environs of Maastricht should prove fruitful, can be shown with reference to the eastern capital of the southern entrance porch of the Bergportal. Köster attributed this capital to the Samsonmeister workshop, on account of a comparison between the naked figures on the Maastricht capital and a naked figure riding a dragon with a human head in the Maria Laach 'Paradies'. According to him there is a „wörtliche Übereinstimmung“ and this shows that there was a „detailgetreue Formenübernahme“ (S. 132 and 233). However, when one compares the photographs (nrs. 21 and 27), the only similarity seems to consist of the fact that the figures are naked. Otherwise the proportions are quite different. The Maastricht figure is extremely awkward, with tiny thin arms, emaciated short thin legs and an enormous corpulent body; the figure at Maria Laach on the other hand is more or less anatomically correct. Also, the foliage in which the figures are entangled could hardly be more different. A better parallel for the Maastricht figures was recently found on the site of the cathedral of St Lambert⁵. It consists of a huge capital that may well have come from the cathedral nave. The capital is decorated differently on all sides and probably had a naked mannikin on each of the angles. Unfortunately, one angle has disappeared. One of the mannikins is kneeling on one knee; with his head looking sideways; the other two are crouching and are looking straight out at the spectator. Compared to their bodies their legs are far too short and the figures look rather awkward. The sides show two dragons, two birds and a huge damaged creature resembling a lion respectively. The fourth side shows a naked mannikin with short, thin arms, crouching and being entangled in foliage, the branches of which curl over to form spirals. His sex is covered by a palmette. The capital forms a link between the mid-twelfth century capital sculpture in the westwork of St. Servatius and the choir ambulatory of the church of Our Lady on the one hand, and the sculpture of the south portal of the Bergportal on the other. It has been dated circa 1160-1170. Not only does this capital lend support to B. Kaelble's idea that the Samsonmeister was

trained in the Meuse valley as well as to the idea that Meuse valley sculpture should not be underestimated, it also underlines the fragmentary nature of our knowledge of sculpture cycles in the Meuse valley and northern France. The existing portals are not all there was; it is therefore impossible to determine the exact nature of the influence to and from and it is thus very dangerous to interpret vague parallels in terms of direct lines of influence deriving from Chartres or the Rhineland to elsewhere.

Köster concludes his study with a discussion of the Bergportal as a „Deutsches Portal“, even though there is really no such thing, as he himself has to admit. „Jedes der beschriebenen Portale ist einzigartig, obwohl sich die Vorbilder auf wenige französische Portale beziehen...“ (S. 246) and: „Eine Verallgemeinerung in formimmanente Kriterien ist ... in Deutschland nicht möglich“ (S. 251). In Köster's view the main characteristic of thirteenth-century German figure portals must be the fact that each of them is unique. The Bergportal seems to fit in because it is unlike any of the other portals.

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- 1 Willibald Sauerländer: *Gotische Skulptur in Frankreich 1140-1270*; München 1972, S. 47.
- 2 M. Devigne: *La sculpture mosane du XIIe au XVIe siècle*; Paris-Brussels 1932.
- 3 E. Tjebbes et al.: *Technisch Onderzoek van het Bergportaal in de Sint Servaaskerk te Maastricht*, Maastricht 1991 (unfortunately unpublished).
- 4 Brigitte Kaelble: *Untersuchungen zur grossfigurigen Plastik des Samsonmeisters (Beiträge zu den Bau- und Kunstdenkmälern im Rheinland, Band 27)*; Düsseldorf 1981, p. 118 ff.
- 5 M. Otte, J-M. Léotard & H. Fock: 'Phases anciennes de la cathédrale Saint-Lambert à Liège', in: *Le Vieux Liège* 266, 1994, 141 and plate 9.

Rathäuser im Spätmittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit [VI. *Symposion des Weserrenaissance-Museums Schloß Brake in Zusammenarbeit mit der Stadt Höxter vom 17. bis 20. November 1994 in Höxter*] (*Materialien zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte in Nord- und Westdeutschland, Bd. 21*); Marburg; Jonas Verlag 1997; 160 S., zahlr. SW-Abb.; ISBN 3-89445-207-2; DM 38,-

Der Tagungsband versammelt verschiedene Beiträge mit sehr unterschiedlich ausgerichteten Erkenntnisinteressen zur Erforschung von Rathausarchitekturen im Gebiet zwischen Rhein und Weichsel. Monographische Bauuntersuchungen und Beschreibungen bzw. Interpretationen von Bildprogrammen stehen neben summarischen Aufsätzen, die Rathäuser in größere Zusammenhänge einzuordnen suchen. Die Themenauswahl scheint ein wenig davon abhängig gewesen zu sein, wo jüngst denkmalpflegerische Maßnahmen abgeschlossen worden sind. Um so nützlicher wäre ein einleitender Beitrag gewesen, der die vorgetragenen Forschungsergebnisse im Zusammenhang mit dem allgemeinen Forschungsstand systematisiert hätte. Der Anspruch, „auch“ eine „vielseitige Erkenntnisquelle für interessierte Bürger“ zu bie-