

Marjan Buyle, Thomas Coomans, Jan Esther & Luc Francis Genicot: Gotische architectuur in België (*Architectuur in België*); Tiel: Uitgeverij Lannoo nv. 1997; 240 S., ca. 45 Abb. und Pläne, 276 Farbabb.; ISBN 90-209-3162-8; BF 2950,- (French edition: *Architecture Gothique en Belgique*; Bruxelles: Editions Racine)

'Gotische architectuur in België' is a beautiful book. Just by looking at the colour photographs made by Oswald Pauwels, one gets a very good idea of the variety of Gothic buildings to be seen and enjoyed in Belgium. The imposing, but unfinished tower of St. Rombouts in Mechelen (Malines); the monumental tithe barn in Ter Doest; the donjon at Crupet or the solitary Maagdentoren in Zichem; the refectory of the Byloke abbey in Bruges; the brick castle of Beersel; the spectacular (although rebuilt) cloth hall of Ypres; the town halls of Bruges and Leuven (Louvain); but also the various Gothic houses in the cities of Bruges and Gent are just some examples of the great diversity of Belgium's Gothic heritage, and they show that the Gothic monuments in this country are well worth taking notice of. The captions accompanying the photographs are informative, enabling the 'reader' to get some idea of what the book is about without the necessity of having to read the full text. For those wishing to know more, the text, written by experts from both the Flemish and French-speaking parts of the country, is to be recommended. Whereas most previous studies of Belgium's Gothic monuments have dealt almost exclusively with church architecture, this book discusses – and rightly so – the full range of building types; churches, chapels, monastic buildings, barns, town halls, hospitals, houses, palaces and castles, as well as city planning and the painted interior. The chapters dealing with church architecture have been written from a stylistic or formalistic point of view and are at times somewhat encyclopaedic. The chapters dealing with monastic architecture, keeps and castles, and the architecture in the cities follow a different line of approach. Not only are form and style discussed, but also how these buildings functioned, both in daily life and as expressions of the owner's status in society. It is a pity that no such attempt was made concerning the churches. Why discuss the interior of a Gothic house, but pay no attention to the interior divisions of a Gothic church?

After the obligatory introductory comments on the nature of Gothic, the book moves from the nineteenth-century restorations and grand-scale destruction in World War I to the availability of building stone in various regions in Belgium and to the Gothic building practice. Unfortunately, this chapter has been written very much from a Flemish perspective. Stone import into Flanders gets full attention, but it is not clear where other parts of the country got their building materials from, and what quarries were situated where. This is unfortunate, as the availability of a suitable building stone in a particular region was of course a great stimulus for the building trade and more often than not gave rise to local building traditions. In fact, the traditional division of church architecture in Belgium into several regional groups, which are all dealt with in the subsequent chapters, is mainly based on differences in the materials used. The grey stone from Tournai (Doornik) is the main

ingredient of the so-called 'Scheldegotiek' (Gothic architecture of the Escaut region), whereas brick is the material of the 'Kustgotiek' (Gothic architecture of the coastal region). 'Brabant Gothic' is characterized by the use of a pale honey-coloured limestone and 'Kempen Gothic' (Gothic in the Campine area) is for the greater part of brick, with interspersed limestone courses and details in limestone. 'Demer Gothic' is characterized by the use of a rusty brown sandstone. It is almost impossible to define these architectural regions geographically, as they show considerable overlap. In places like Gent there are buildings classed as 'Scheldegotiek' and buildings reckoned to be 'Kustgotiek'. Also, the discussion of the regional groups stops at the present-day borders, even though these did not exist in medieval times. Many 'Brabant Gothic' churches are to be found in the Netherlands. The same is true of the churches in the style of the 'Scheldegotiek', 'Kustgotiek' and 'Maaslandse Gotiek'. The Eifel group has more affinity with buildings in Germany than in present-day Belgium, and building in Hainault cannot really be discussed without taking northern France into account. That the book draws a line at the Belgian border is understandable, but regrettable, for in the end the reader is not given the complete picture of the development of a certain group of buildings, or of a certain style.

None of the so-called regional groups is very unified; no two churches within one group being the same. Clearly, it was not just local factors that determined what a church should look like, the patron probably had an even greater say in the matter. The patron's role has however been little studied so far. All this has led to certain tensions in the book. In dealing with the architecture in the Meuse Valley, Hainault and the Eifel region, Thomas Coomans and Luc Francis Genicot describe the most important buildings and make brief mention of the others. They then assess what these buildings have in common, and in which ways they differ. On the whole they seem hesitant to point out regional characteristics. The articles written by Jan Esther (Escaut region, Coastal region, Brabant, Kempen) never question the existence of regional schools. The 'genius loci' is all present here. Each article starts with a description of the preponderant characteristics of the regional style to be examined, and continues with brief comments on the accompanying buildings. In other words, Coomans and Genicot describe the architecture *in* a given region, whereas Esther describes the architecture said to be characteristic *of* a certain region, without clearly defining the region and without dealing with the problematic stylistic overlap.

In spite of these short-comings 'Gotische Architectuur in België' presents the reader with an up-to-date and superbly illustrated account of Belgian Gothic architecture in all its dimensions, and in doing so fills a gap, this study being the first to present the full-scale of Gothic building in Belgium. For anyone wanting to study the architecture in this part of the world, this book is an excellent starting point.

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