

Our folk architecture — an important historical document

KARL BAUMGARTEN

Historical research is based on the analysis of different historical sources, above all archival and literary documents such as records, maps, pictures, or papers of all kinds. On the other hand — material objects are documents for historical scholars as well. So it has happened that during the last hundred years folk architecture has become more and more interesting for historians, too. However — during the first decades — they only tried to make use of it for ethnohistorical assertions. That means the then known types were mostly thought to be characteristic creations of a particular ethnic group. German scholars especially ascribed single forms to several Germanic tribes — names such as “Saxon house”, “Frankian house”, “Alemannic house” and so on prove this to the present day.¹ Hence it followed that folk architecture was mostly believed to be thousands of years old and — since these times — to have been nearly without any development. In a high degree this ethnohistorical view was obviously based on the fact that for dozens of years only a few ground-forms of popular buildings were known.

Later when regional research was intensified the number of the then fixed variants differentiated by the quantity, the size and the function of the rooms, by the character of their exteriors or by the material of their construction, grew quickly. At the same time new methods of studying — above all the so-called “Gefügeforschung”², a special analysis of timbering — were developed. The results of these efforts were surprising: it could be proved that forms which existed geographically side by side had really come into being one after the other, historically. By this means single strata of forms following each other could be already found within several countries — and that not only between the different variants of a certain area, but also by a detailed study of selected buildings — even within a single house. Unquestionably this last statement is a very interesting one.

Confronted with its historical background everyone of these strata becomes an important document for history now. For everyone of them soon proves to be decisively stamped in its essential features by certain

historical processes, whereby their different forms can be understood as an expression of the creative possibilities and limitations of the working people in erecting their houses. Both — possibilities and limitations — present themselves first of all as decided by the social and economic situation within a determined area during a fixed period. That means: greatly altered forms generally indicate substantial changes of the former property status; borrowings from the town architecture or from the so-called “high architecture” mostly show increased cultural or prestige claims based on improved conditions of life; evident pauperization and remarkable levelling commonly reflect an intensified administration “from above” or a ruthless suppression. On account of its historical stratification and its cultural intertwinement folk architecture has thus become a valuable source for the history of folk culture and folk life especially during the feudal period — it attests processes from the history of civilization and cultural connections which we can often no longer discover from other documents.

A few examples out of my own Mecklenburgian research area may illustrate these assertions. Mecklenburg is known as a domain of the Low-German hallhouse, formerly mostly called Saxon house. Here, the oldest buildings of this type date from about the 16th and the 17th centuries. Even to-day, many of them — above all those of the western part in the neighbourhood of the corn-ports of Hamburg and Lübeck — possess an interesting feature: a second, in later times almost regularly boarded up, door-way in their rear gables. That is to say, such houses originally had — like barns — two door-ways, one in the front gable and another in the rear gable (Fig. 1). By this means carts and wagons could formerly pass right through from one end to the other. Some decades ago this feature was mostly thought to be a very old one.³ But, that was an error — such passages can only be traced back to the end of the 16th century. That means second door-ways are never older than 400 years. In this connection still another feature of Mecklenburgian hallhouses of this time is to be called to mind: the evident enlargement of the barn-room under the roof by the extension of the whole building — excavated hallhouses being much narrower than those of the 16th century. Both features — the two door-ways and the enlarged barn-room — obviously point to the same fact, to a period of agricultural boom.⁴ And indeed, this 16th century was — as other documents likewise tell us — such a prosperous time for Mecklenburgian farmers, the more so as during the period of the early bourgeois revolution Mecklenburgian farmers were not much oppressed. Later the second door-ways became traditional for a long time, but about 1800 they were commonly closed up (Fig. 2). Only in the north-western part of Mecklenburg, in a specially fertile landscape, have a few passages been preserved to the present day.⁵

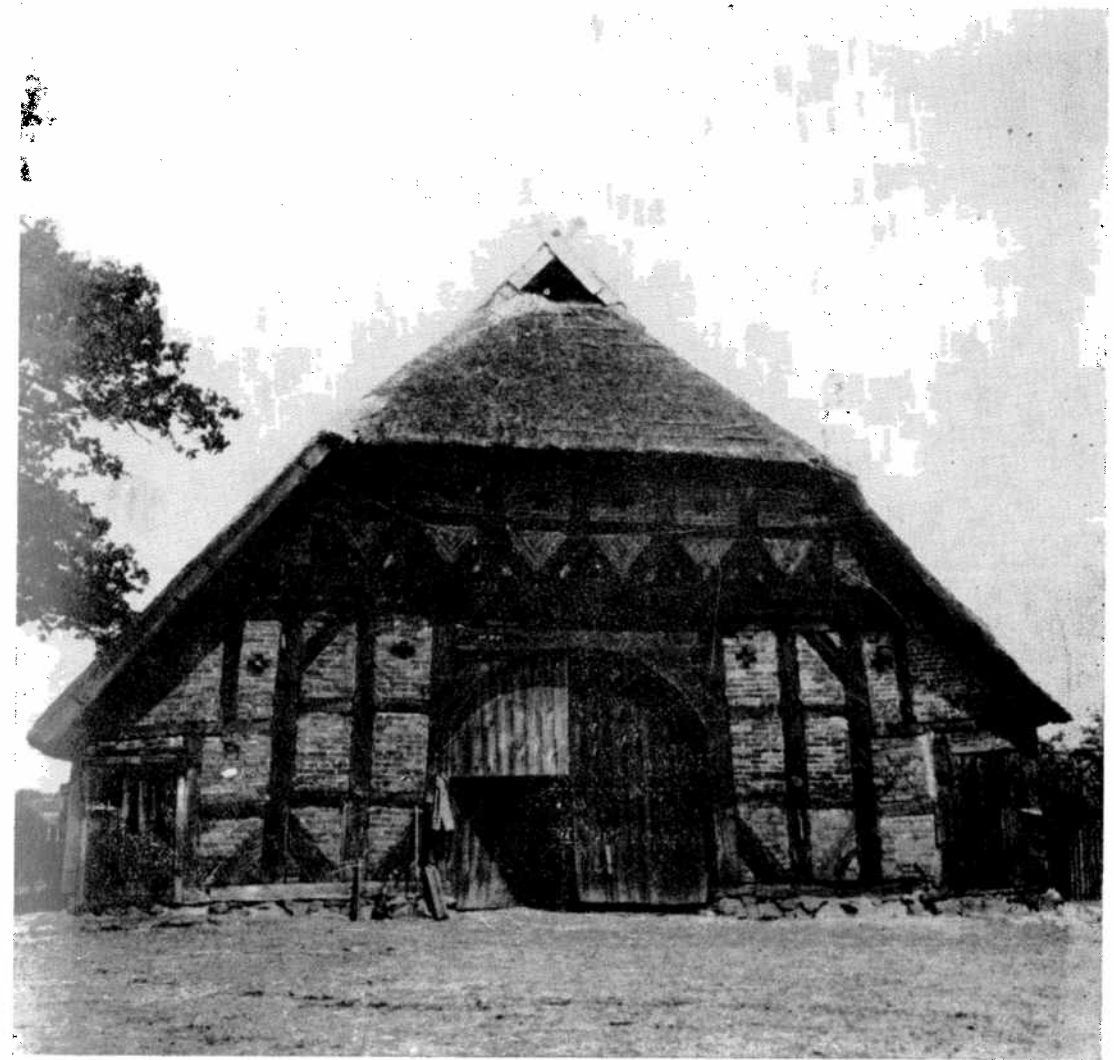
Another interesting feature of West-Mecklenburgian hallhouses are



1. Neschow, Kr. Grevesmühlen (NW-Mecklenburg) The rear gable with the second door-way.



2. Stuck, Kr. Ludwigslust (SW-Mecklenburg) The rear gable with the later closed up second doorway.



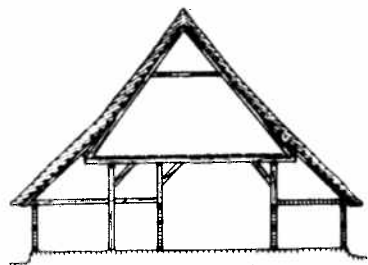
3. Strassen, Kr. Ludwigslust (SW-Mecklenburg) The most beautiful show-gable of Mecklenburg (1971).



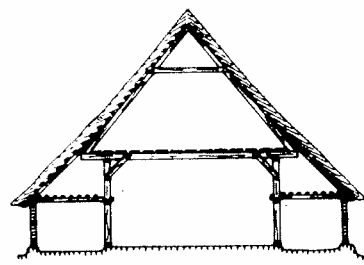
4. Thandorf, Kr. Grevesmühlen (NW-Mecklenburg) Decorative show-gable from about 1800.



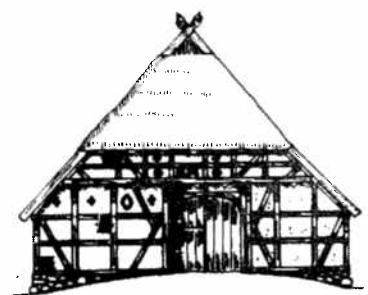
5. Petersberg, Kr. Grevesmühlen (NW-Mecklenburg) A modest show-gable from about 1800.



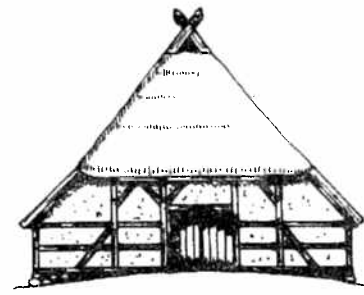
Schnitt a-b, Ende 16. Jht.



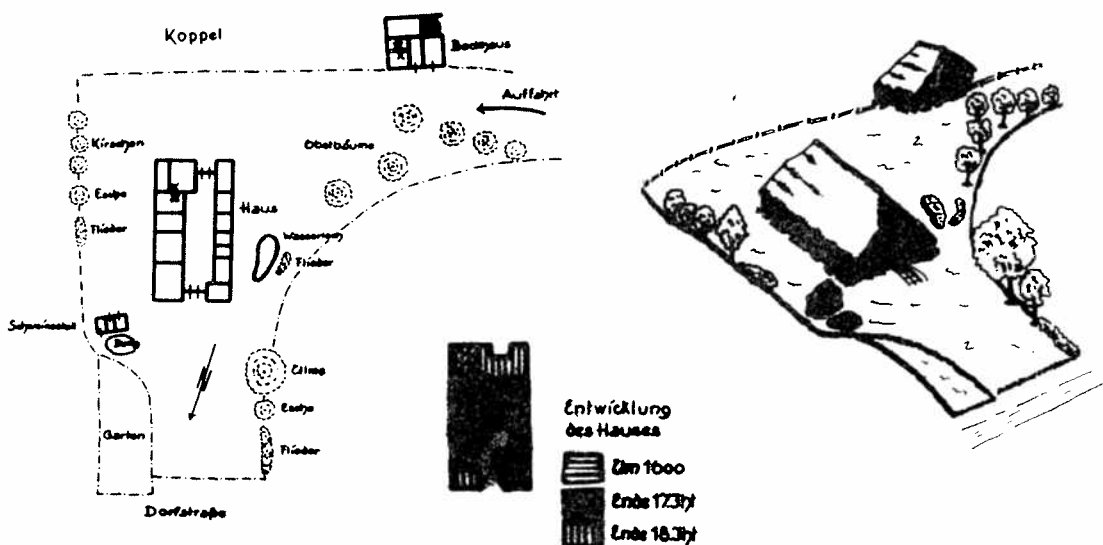
Querschnitt, um 1600



Vordergiebel, Ende 16. Jht.



Vordergiebel, Ende 17. Jht.



Entwicklung des Hauses
 Um 1600
 Ende 17. Jht.
 Ende 18. Jht.

their often beautiful show-gables. Above all we meet with them during the second half of the 17th century.⁶ This is really astonishing, because — just in the middle of this century — two demands of the Mecklenburgian squires had been legalized: serfdom and expropriation of all the rural population. Nevertheless just at that very time splendid gables were erected. But, to explain that we must remember the following fact: after the awful 30 Years' War very many Mecklenburgian villages were completely destroyed. Their rebuilding was only possible if the peasantry took an especially active part in it — naturally the feuda! lords also knew this for certain. So they did not yet press their subjects very hard — the decades till 1700 were still relatively happy ones for Mecklenburgian villagers — and now these beautiful show-gables grew up as interesting documents of the constructive work done by the farmers during this period (Fig. 3). After 1700 — when the rebuilding had almost been completed — the suppression became worse and worse and the erection of such fine show-gables now swiftly declined everywhere with the exception of the northwest of Mecklenburg, where villagers have never come to know the so-called second serfdom (Fig. 4).

Sometimes old houses still contain features of different ages and thus features of diverse historical strata — naturally such buildings are always of quite especial interest for historians. One of these interesting houses is an old cottage in a little village named Petersberg in the northwestern part of Mecklenburg (Fig. 5).⁷ According to the characteristics of its timbering it must have been erected about 1600. From this time only one yoke of two posts and two complete plates have been preserved — so we can reconstruct the original length with only five bays. About 70 years later the house was altered for the first time. Its economic part was wholly broken down and reerected with three rows of posts instead of the former two. So an additional ground-barn could be included within the house — an enlargement of the storeroom, which the cottager obviously needed, during the period of rebuilding after the 30 Years' War (Fig. 6). The next stratum dates from the end of the 18th century. Now three bays, one in front and two at the rear, were added. At the same time the front end got a modest show-gable. All these features point to another period of agricultural boom, but at this time a boom in which — in Mecklenburg — only the free farmers of the northwest could participate. Finally, in 1960 the last change of this house took place. Up to this time it had always possessed two door-ways. Now the one at the rear end was closed up — it was no longer wanted, since the owner of the yard had become a member of the local co-operative. In this way this one cottage documents several important stages in the historical development of the villages in the north-west of Mecklenburg during the last 400 years (Fig. 7) or so.

These few remarks about Mecklenburgian hallhouses may have shown that no historian can afford to ignore folk architecture as a document

6. Petersberg, Kr. Grevesmühlen (NW-Mecklenburg) Cross-sections and exterior views.
 7. Petersberg, Kr. Grevesmühlen (NW-Mecklenburg) The farm-yard and the strata of the house.

of historical processes. But on the other hand, we all know that these buildings are disappearing everywhere now. That is to say: in future scholars can no longer make use of these sources if we do not preserve them in some way. Above all that can be done by two means: 1. by a thorough documentation of a great number of the still existing objects, 2. by a concentration of the most valuable buildings within regional open air museums. Both undertakings should be swiftly set going — they are two of the urgent tasks which are awaiting the generation of our days.

REFERENCES

¹ Cp. R. Henning, *Das deutsche Haus in seiner historischen Entwicklung*. Strassburg 1882; A. Meitzen, *Das Deutsche Haus in seinen volkstümlichen Formen*. Strassburg 1882; W. Pessler, *Das altsächsische Bauernhaus in seiner geographischen Verbreitung*. Braunschweig 1906; O. Lauffer, *Das deutsche Haus in Dorf und Stadt*. Leipzig 1919.

² K. Baumgarten, *Wesen und Aufgaben der Gefügeforschung*. In: *Lëtopis Reihe C* Nr. 6/7, 1963/64 p. 256 sqq.

³ C. A. Endler / J. U. Folkers, *Das mecklenburgische Dorf*. Rostock 1930 p. 114.

⁴ K. Baumgarten, *Das mecklenburgische Bauernhaus um 1600*. In: *Die Bauerngesellschaft im Ostseeraum und im Norden um 1600*. Visby 1966 p. 231 sqq.

⁵ K. Baumgarten, *Hallenhäuser in Mocklemburg — eine historische Dokumentation*. Berlin 1971 p. 78 sqq.

⁶ K. Baumgarten, *op. cit.* p. 55 sqq.

⁷ K. Baumgarten, *op. cit.* p. 79.