THE INTRODUCTION OF STONE ARCHITECTURE

HANS-EMIL LIDEN

THE ART OF BUILDING in stone and mortar was introduced to Norway by the Church, which was the bearer of so much tradition from classical culture and which held fast to the principle that churches should be built of stone. Only under exceptional circumstances, especially economic ones, was this rule broken. In this way the art of building in stone moved northwards in the wake of the Church, as the process of Christianisation advanced through Europe. Wherever heathendom was definitively conquered and the Church organised, great stone buildings were erected to God after the initial “missionary” period with its wooden churches. First came the churches and monasteries built by royal command, later came the smaller churches and the houses and castles for the king and the noblemen, and finally came stone-built houses in the towns as these developed.

The process of Christianisation reached the Nordic countries in the eleventh century. The first churches to be built were erected in wood; churches built or begun in stone during this period were exceptions. In Denmark the first wooden churches were totally replaced by stone buildings during the twelfth century, but this was never achieved in Norway and Sweden. Faced with a combination of thinly populated areas and good access to excellent building timber, the Church was obliged to drop its principles. Only in the towns and the most central and prosperous communities were churches built in stone, but even in these places the stone church did not reign supreme. In the bishopric of Oslo only about 20 of the 62 churches were stone-built and in the other bishoprics the proportion of wooden churches was even higher. In all, only about 200 of the c. 1,200 churches in Norway in the Middle Ages were of stone.

INTRODUCTION DE L’ARCHITECTURE EN PIERRE

L’ART DE LA CONSTRUCTION en maçonnerie fut introduit en Norvège par l’Église, qui était dépositaire de tant de traditions émanant de la culture classique, et qui tenait à ce que les églises soient bâties en pierre. C’est seulement dans des circonstances exceptionnelles – essentiellement d’ordre économique – que cette règle fut enfreinte. Ainsi l’art de la construction en pierre s’est-il déplacé vers le nord dans le sillage de l’Église au fur et à mesure que le processus de christianisation progressa à travers l’Europe. Partout où le paganisme était définitivement vaincu et l’Église organisée, de grands édifices en pierre furent érigés à la gloire de Dieu, après la première période « missionnaire », avec ses églises en bois. Il y eut d’abord des églises et des abbayes construites sur ordonnance royale, puis vinrent des églises plus petites, et les maisons et châteaux pour le roi et la noblesse, et enfin les maisons bâties en pierre dans les villes, au fur et à mesure que celles-ci se développaient.

Le processus de christianisation atteignit les pays norvégiens au XIIe siècle. Les premières églises que l’on y construisit furent en bois. Les églises bâties ou commencées en pierre pendant cette période étaient des exceptions. Au Danemark, les premières églises en bois ont été remplacées en totalité par des édifices en pierre au cours du XIIe siècle, mais cette substitution n’a jamais été achevée en Norvège et en Suède. Confrontée à une combinaison de territoires maigrement peuplés et d’accès facile à un excellent bois de construction, l’Église fut obligée de renoncer à ses principes. C’est seulement dans les villes et dans les communautés les plus centrales et les plus prospères que les églises furent bâties en pierre ; mais même dans ces endroits leur nombre est minoritaire. Dans l’évêché d’Oslo, il n’y avait que 20 églises sur 62 bâties en pierre, et dans les autres évêchés, la proportion des édifices en bois était encore plus forte. En tout, seulement 200 sur les quelque 1200 églises de Norvège au Moyen Âge étaient en pierre.

That it was the Church which introduced the art of building in stone does not mean that stone was totally unknown as a building material in pre-Christian Norway. Several of the buildings from the Migration and Viking periods which have been excavated by archaeologists must have had low walls consisting of several courses of boulders. Many of Norway’s so-called hillforts from pre-Christian times were also strengthened with stone walling at vulnerable points, but the building technique is so primitive that we cannot really
describe it as masonry. Real masonry using lime mortar as a binding agent is not known until Christian times.

The first masonry buildings in Norway were churches which according to the Sagas were built in the eleventh century. Snorri Sturlason wrote that King Harold Hardråde (1047–66) had St Mary’s church built in stone within the royal precinct at Trondheim, at the same time as he had King Magnus Olavsson’s stone hall in Trondheim rebuilt as a church dedicated to St Gregory. King Olaf the Gentle (Olav Kyrre) (1066–93) began the building of the first bishop’s churches in Trondheim and Bergen. None of these churches exists today, but remains of Olav Kyrre’s church lie preserved beneath the chancel of the present cathedral in Trondheim. In Oslo there is an interesting group of early stone churches which all now lie in ruins: St Clement’s, the first St Mary’s, and the earliest church on the island of Hovedøya, the site of the later Cistercian abbey. These churches must have been built, or at least begun, in the time around 1100.

The oldest stone buildings which still survive are churches which must have been built during the beginning of the twelfth century. Värnes church in Trondheim and the eastern part of the nave of Stavanger cathedral belong to the earliest churches we have, but the great majority of our medieval stone churches are in fact not much later, most of them having apparently been built in the hundred year period 1150–1250. Churches were of course built later, but there was clearly no longer such a great need. On the other hand many of the early churches were enlarged, with the chancels in particular being extended.

As well as churches, monastic buildings were
urban buildings, with the basement built in stone and the upper storey in wood. Some of the monastic buildings were also probably built in this way. A fine example of an important rural house built in a combination of stone and wood is the Lagmannstove (Judge’s House) at Aga in Hardanger, probably built at the end of the thirteenth century. The stone-built rectory (Steinhuset) at Gran in Hadeland is an example of a rural stone building with several storeys, possibly built by the local priest during the reign of King Håkon Håkonsson (1217-63). It must have been something quite out of the ordinary.

The most splendid example of the art of stone building in medieval Norway must be the cathedral in Trondheim. The earliest parts of the present building are from around the middle of the twelfth century and construction work appears to have been more or less continuous right up to the beginning of the fourteenth century, when it burned down only a few years after its completion. The erection of this cathedral must have had a great influence on the instruction and training of the craftsmen who were responsible for the various stone churches in Trondelag, indeed for church building throughout the whole land.

probably been constructed in this manner. An

bon exemple de grande maison rurale construite
en combinant la pierre et le bois est la Lagmân-

stove (la Maison du juge) à Aga dans la région
de Hardanger, vraisemblablement construite à la
fin du XIIIe siècle. Le presbytère bâti en pierre à
Gran dans l’Hadeland est un exemple d’édifice rural en
pierre à plusieurs étages, sans doute construit par
le prêtre local au temps du règne du roi Håkon
Håkonsson (1217-1263). Ces bâtiments devaient
à l’époque sortir de l’ordinaire.

Le plus magnifique exemple de l’art de la
construction en pierre en Norvège médiévale est
sans aucun doute la cathédrale de Trondheim. Les
parties les plus anciennes du monument actuel
datent environ du milieu du XIIIe siècle et l’œuvre
de construction semble avoir plus ou moins duré
jusqu’au début du XIVe siècle, date à laquelle
l’église a brûlé – quelques mois à peine après son
achèvement. L’érection de cette cathédrale doit
avoir exercé une influence considérable sur le
savoir et l’expérience des artisans chargés de la
construction des différentes églises en pierre du
Trondelag, et qui plus est, dans le pays tout
entier.

most often built in stone, and in the thirteenth
century both royal palaces and bishop’s palaces
also began to be built in this solid and imperish-
able material. As early as the reign of King Sverrir
(1177-1202) the first fortifications were built in
stone: the king’s strongholds overlooking Trond-
heim and Bergen (both known as Sverresborg)
and on Slottsjetlet overlooking Tønsberg.

Somewhat later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth
centuries, it seems that it became usual to build
cellars in stone in the town, almost certainly
because of the fire risk. Stone and wood were
often combined as building materials in these

furent construites les premières fortifications en
pierre – les forteresses royales dominant Trond-
heim et Bergen (connues toutes deux sous le nom
de Sverresborg) et à Slottsjetlet dominant Tøns-
berg.

Un peu plus tard, aux XIVe et XVe siècles, il
semble que l’on ait pris l’habitude de construire en
pierre les caves des villes, très probablement à
cause du risque d’incendie. La pierre et le bois ont
été souvent combinés comme matériaux de con-
struction dans ces édifices urbains, avec un
soubassement bâti en pierre et l’étage supérieur en
bois. Plusieurs bâtiments conventuels ont aussi