

Benedikt Ried's Vaults in Prague Castle and the Question of Formative Inventiveness

This paper is about aiming for an integral understanding of European architecture in early modern times. It seems to me that Gothic architecture in the decades around 1500 is not just an old fashioned stylistic model that remained untouched by the recurrence of interest in the antique world, but should rather be seen as a purposeful preference over an alternative Italianate manner. In other words: the Gothic of that time, seen through the eyes of its creators, should be regarded as a mode rather than a style.

The ambitions that motivated Italian architects to study antiquity with great precision were many and diverse, but predominant among them was the aim of positioning architecture in the context of a dynamic and expanding knowledge society. It was to shed the status of a mere *ars mechanica*, rising to become a rationally grounded science, like arithmetic and music, governed by strict rules that could be readily checked and verified. For the Italian artists, following the model of antiquity appeared to be the key to success.

However my thesis for this sketch is that the aim of rendering architecture scientifically had also been pursued in Central Europe long before the 16th century, and that this path was followed with the same intense ambition, but using other means, leading to a different result, and devoid of the Italian scholarly commentary on this development. While Brunelleschi and Alberti tried to anchor architecture in the safe harbor of the humanities, the middle Europeans remained loyal to a second culture of knowledge, one that did not count much on scholastic dispute and literary figures. When it came to architecture as an art of building, they relied on technical analysis and geometric design. In other words: The paradigm shifts marking early modern architecture came to pass in Italy external to Gothic design theory, whereas in Central Europe they unfolded under its specific aegis. For a long time the Northern architects chose to walk down their own path into modernity, and while the Italians recorded their architectonic studies in learned tomes, their Northern colleagues rather built their ideas as didactic texts crafted in stone.

Hallmarks of this set of “epistemic objects” are the intriguing curved rib vaults that cover the Wladislaw hall in Prague Castle – then the largest single-aisle hall in Europe’s residential architecture - and the surrounding rooms that allowed for comfortable dwelling, as well as for representative purposes. The creator of these vaults, Benedikt Ried, does his best to make them look like carelessly assembled rib constructions, but they must have been designed with even more incisive geometrical understanding than the canonical works. The seemingly arbitrary chaos is thoroughly calculated.