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Jerusalem and the Scandinavian Round Churches

Jes Wienberg

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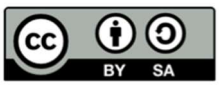

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Jes Wienberg (Lund University, Sweden)

Jerusalem

Jerusalem! The name of the Heavenly City could be seen and heard all over the Christian world in the Middle Ages. It was used as a watchword during the Crusades and depicted in churches. Thus, Jerusalem found its way as an inscription above a gateway at the golden altar of Lisberg, a Romanesque parish church in Jutland, Denmark.[1]

Figure 1: Round church of Hagby in Sweden. Credit: Jes Wienberg.

Jerusalem has long been at the heart of studies of the Middle Ages, including its culture, mentality, iconography and architecture. For example, a large Norwegian research project on the subject of Jerusalem in Scandinavia, titled "Tracing the Jerusalem Code", has recently published its first volume.[2] Jerusalem is also a recurrent concept in a recent study by the historian Michael Otto of Scandinavian urbanisation as storyworlds in the written sources.[3]

Jerusalem and the Round Churches

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem has been seen as the main model for the construction of round or polygonal churches across Europe. The classical article by art historian Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture'", is the central reference here. Krautheimer demonstrates how the Holy Sepulchre has been copied, albeit often only in part: the round plan, the number of

[1] JOHANNSEN – SMIDT 1981, pp. 101–102; AAVISTLAND 2021, p. 117; JOHANNSEN ET AL. 2025, vol. 2, pp. 29–52.
[2] AAVITSLAND – BONDE 2021.
[3] OTTO 2025.

columns, the size, or some other selected detail.[4]

Following this, and typically by referencing Krautheimer, it has been argued, or simply assumed, that the architecture of a medieval round church is inspired by the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, as well as other famous churches in the Holy Land or Rome.[5] Consequently, a round church is interpreted as a local symbol of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem and the Scandinavian Round Churches

In Scandinavia is has been assumed that the round churches were copies of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and symbols of the city, built by returned Crusaders, who had participated in the Crusades to the Holy Land in the Mediterranean or Baltic regions. The round churches here are relatively few, however much debated as architecture deviating from the normal.

This idea can be traced back to the historian Hugo F. Frölén, who wrote a magisterial two volume dissertation on the Nordic round churches. Some art historians and medieval archaeologists have emphasised the symbolic meaning of the church architecture. The art historian Kersti Markus has interpreted the architecture around the Baltic Sea as a visual culture reflecting the ambitions of the Crusader state of Denmark to create a Northern Jerusalem.[6]

The interpretation of the round churches as copies of the Holy Sepulchre has even been extended, in principle, to the 15–19 medieval round church towers of Scandinavia.[7]

[4] KRAUTHEIMER 1942.
[5] E.g. UNTERMANN 1989, pp. 52–85; MORRIS 2005.
[6] FRÖLÉN 1911; JOHANNSEN – SMIDT 1981, pp. 100–109; WIENBERG 2014, pp. 224–228; WIENBERG 2017, pp. 17–21; WIENBERG 2023, pp. 96–100; MARKUS 2020.
[7] WIENBERG 2009; WIENBERG 2010.

The general view was first proposed in Scandinavia by Frölén back in 1911:

Figure 2: Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.
Credit: Solveig Borgehammar.

"By erecting in his homeland a copy of Holy Sepulchre he might not only receive a confirmation of an already achieved indulgence, but, what was more important, he himself could rest and receive his death masses in a building which – however smaller and simpler – might be said to depict the Holy Sepulchre of Christ himself. However, other motifs might have played a part as well. By erecting such a memorial at home an abbot or knight could in the best way strengthen his personal reputation and consolidate the memory of his journey."[8]

Round Churches in Scandinavia

Round churches are widely interpreted as symbols of Jerusalem, but coming down to earth, the evidence from Scandinavia at least is weak. Thirty-four round churches are actually known in Scandinavia: 19 in medieval Denmark, 13 in medieval Sweden and two in medieval Norway (including the Orkney Islands). In no cases can these be directly connected to the Holy Sepulchre or Jerusalem.[9]

Where the church's dedication is known, it is never 'Holy Sepulchre', and where the name of a medieval church is known, the architectural design is either unknown, because the church no longer exist and have not been investigated (Ribe in Denmark), or normal with a square chancel and nave, however the inscription being the source is questioned as it might not be a dedication (Forshem in Västergötland).[10] Neither can any named Crusader who went to Jerusalem be connected to the erection of Scandinavian round churches

[8] FRÖLÉN 1010–11, vol. 1, p. 8.
[9] An outdated catalogue of Scandinavian round churches is presented in FRÖLÉN 1911 vol. 2, and an updated overview in WIENBERG 2014, pp. 209–213; WIENBERG 2017, pp. 6–8.
[10] Danmarks Kirker 19.2, 1984, pp. 845–846; BLENNOW 2009; WIENBERG 2014, p. 227; WIENBERG 2017, p. 21; WIENBERG 2023, p. 94. The inscription in Forshem may not be a dedication as previous assumed: ISTA (---) SIT IN HONORE D(OMI)NI N(OST)RI IE(S)V CH(RIST)I ET S(AN)C(T)I SEPVLCRI. The missing word after ISTA may not be 'ecclesia', but 'elemosina' meaning 'alm'.

even when its is often written as a matter of course with any degree of certainty. However, it is possible to identify a few Crusaders with experiences of the Baltic Sea who were involved in building round churches.[11] The direct architectural connection to Jerusalem remains a hypothesis yet to be proven.

Reflections

Krautheimers view on iconography was what I have termed "metonymic copying", whereby a detail might represent the whole – the plan, ambulatory, columns, cupola, gallery, absidoles, aedicule, and dimensions, as well as the liturgy and dedication, or the relics brought back.[12] The very openness of this metonymic copying makes it very difficult to determine with certainty whether a church is a concrete copy of the Holy Sepulchre or meant as symbol of Jerusalem.

Furthermore, the church may have been modelled on another church closer to the building site than Jerusalem, thus it may be a copy of a copy of a copy, and so on. Alternatively, the church architecture may incorporate influences from several places or models, a situation that I have termed "creative copying", whereby no two churches are identical.[13]

Finally, there is the concept of micro-architecture, whereby every round arch in Romanesque architecture, paintings, and fittings is supposed to refer to, and thus remind the viewer of, the Heavenly Jerusalem.[14] This recent interpretation, which seeks to add meaning to new areas, makes the concept of Jerusalem so fundamental and all-encompassing that we might have to reconsider medieval Europe as a mental space.

[11] WIENBERG 2014, pp. 218–221, 227; WIENBERG 2017, pp. 10–14, 20–21; WIENBERG 2023, pp. 88–89.
[12] WIENBERG 2014, pp. 228–229; WIENBERG 2017, pp. 21–22; WIENBERG 2023, p. 98.
[13] WIENBERG 2014, pp. 228–229; WIENBERG 2017, pp. 21–22; WIENBERG 2023, pp. 97–98.
[14] AAVISTLAND 2021; BONDE 2021.

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