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Architecture and the Genres of History Writing in Ecclesiastical Historiography

Maarten Delbeke

- 1 In 1588, the year he was made archbishop of Monreale like his uncle Ludovico primo before him, Cardinal Ludovico secondo de Torres published the *Descrittione del real tempio, et monasterio di Santa Maria Nuova di Monreale* under the name of his secretary Giovanni Luigi Lello.¹ De Torres was an important clergyman who stood in close contact with Cesare Baronio and Filippo Neri but also, for instance, with the poet Torquato Tasso. He produced an important oeuvre on church history, liturgy, and institutional history.²
- 2 The thirty-three-page-long description of the *Descrittione* very briefly introduces the construction of the cathedral of Monreale, just south of Palermo, before leading the reader through the nave to the crossing, and from there to altar area, choir, the tribune, transept, and transept chapels. After a short description of the floor, the attention turns to the famous mosaics in the nave. In a fifteen-page enumeration, these mosaics are listed by their inscriptions. The description then deals with the “paradise” or portico, the gates, adjacent squares and streets, and the church exterior. Then follows a three-page enumeration of the church’s measures, arranged from large to small. The text returns to the interior to describe the altars, baptismal font, and the tombs in the church. After a remark on the light in the church, follows a description of the monastery. The text concludes by indicating the road to Palermo.
- 3 As an architectural description, the *Descrittione* is quite exceptional for its level of detail. Yet it belongs to a historiographical practice, church history, that has yielded many comparable texts. By briefly examining the *Descrittione*, this essay hopes to point out the potential interest of these texts for architectural history, and to gauge whether this production allows to address different or complementary questions than the current historiography of early modern architecture.

- 4 Torres's description of Monreale conforms quite well to the typology of architectural descriptions that Arwed Arnulf has proposed for medieval chronicles of abbeys and dioceses, and collections of *Lives* of abbots or bishops, *gesta episcoporum*: much attention is paid to measures and measurable entities (such as the number of columns); the church is represented as both the historical record and scene of deeds or *gesta*, laid down in works of art and architecture, inscriptions and tombs; important interventions are represented as part of the history of their patrons.³
- 5 As a result, the *Descrittione* paints a visually and stylistically homogeneous picture of the church. The text and, subsequently, the church do not acquire historical depth by pointing out artistic differences or developments, but by attaching artifacts to patrons who belong to different eras.
- 6 The dedication of the volume to de Torres even more explicitly associates the church building with human action, by stating that the author (that is, de Torres himself) could not send the cardinal "a more precious gift than this portrait of his new spouse, at least that is, until he will be able to come live with her." Since de Torres was in Rome at the time of the *Descrittione*'s publication, the dedication seems written to accommodate the obligation of bishops to reside in their diocese, reinvigorated after the Council of Trent. To do so, the dedication conflates two metaphors: the description is like the true portrait of a distant lover carried in the heart, and it concerns the church building as a representation of the spiritual church, the spouse of Christ. Following the metaphor, then, the accuracy of the description contributes to the ecclesiological meaning of the building. This spiritual interpretation of the detailed description recalls the church dedication rite, where the act of measuring the space transforms the building into a real church, the embodiment of a spiritual community; this rite in turn evokes the Old Testament descriptions of the Temple, and more specifically the vision of Ezekiel. But at the most basic of levels, the metaphor of the spouse's portrait humanizes the church of Monreale, presenting it as a person whose life and actions are soon to be united with those of de Torres himself.
- 7 The *Descrittione* was published again in 1596, now as part of the *Historia della chiesa di Monreale*.⁴ If the edition of 1588 had de Torres take stock of his new companion, the edition of 1596 describes his married life. The book consists of three parts: the description of the building, the *Lives* or *gesta* of the archbishops of Monreale up to de Torres, and a treatise on the privileges accorded to the church and diocese of Monreale.
- 8 The description is based on the text of 1588 but has been expanded to include de Torres' numerous interventions in the church. Two of these interventions mirror the second part of the *Historia*, the *Vite de gli Arcivescovi* or *gesta episcoporum*: in the apse, Torres installed an inscription listing all the arch-bishops of Monreale since the inception of the diocese,⁵ and de Torres decorated his most important intervention in the church, the construction of a chapel dedicated to San Castrense, de Torres with a portrait cycle of his predecessors.⁶
- 9 Why he did so can be gathered from a short page treatise inserted into the *Historia*, which recalls that "the continuous succession of bishops is considered an important argument for the truth of the Catholic Church against the fables of heretics," and that it was therefore common to install books or tablets recording the names of deceased bishops, and to have their effigies painted in the church. The point is underscored with citations from the Church Fathers and scripture, and a short bibliography of other modern compendia of *Gesta episcoporum*.⁷ Torres's attention to the motivation behind

his collection of bishops' lives betrays his indebtedness to Cesare Baronio, whose *Annales Ecclesiastici*, published in Rome between 1587 and 1607, aimed to prove the legitimacy of the Catholic Church by demonstrating that it is possible to write its history and that, therefore, its continuous and unchanged existence since the days of Saint Peter can be guaranteed.⁸

- 10 Quite probably, the *Historia di Monreale*, containing both the first description of the chapel of San Castrense and the *gesta episcoporum*, was published to celebrate the dedication or at least the construction of the chapel. The book thus simultaneously provided the accurate information concerning de Torres's intervention, and its precise meaning: the chapel is much less an early Baroque addition to a medieval church than the result of an act entirely similar to the interventions that gave the church its present shape. The *gesta episcoporum* of the 1596 edition offers a historical framework that unveils the true meaning of the church's art and architecture. The church exists because it was formed by a long and continuous succession of capable men who acted as fathers and husbands of the church and her diocese. In their footsteps de Torres follows when he assumes the care and embellishment of the building. As a consequence, the description of Monreale is as much a history of the building and the diocese as a transparent account of what the church looked like in the year 1588 or 1596. In a way quite similar to the genre of biography, the description serves to point out the relation between historical contingencies and the unchanging virtue that shaped the building, or spouse, of de Torres.
- 11 The case of de Torres' involvement with Monreale, acting simultaneously as its patron and its historiographer, is only exceptional because both aspects are fully developed and indeed "authored" by the same person. In fact, it is safe to assume that a very similar involvement was at play when in 1607 de Torres took possession of the dilapidated church of San Pancrazio in Rome as its titular cardinal. De Torres, probably with Carlo Maderno as his architect, reinstated the original three-aisled ground plan of the early Christian church, installed wooden ceilings, and restored the *confessio*, covering it with a new ciborium and decorating the apse.⁹
- 12 These interventions not only closely mirror the design of the chapel of San Castrense and de Torres's other interventions in Monreale in their insistence on early Christian typologies. Like Monreale, the restoration of San Pancrazio is paralleled by a literary project, the publication of a new heroic *Vita* of its titular saint, written by the Antwerp Latinist Hendrik van Kieffelt.¹⁰ The text is, of course, dedicated to Torres, and inserts references to his heraldry and to Mary, the patron of Monreale, into San Pancrazio's biography. The parallel between the restoration and the biography clearly suggests that de Torres simultaneously "reconstructs" the saint and his church. Torres mediation, his presence and interventions reunite the building with its founder, and reinstate their place in history.
- 13 Probably Torres planned to publish a *Life* of San Castrense as well.¹¹ When the first modern biography of San Pancrazio appeared, in 1718, it concluded with two chapters that describe the chapel the cardinal built around 1596.¹² These chapters are clearly indebted to the third and final edition of the *Descrittione* of Monreale, published by Michele Del Giudice in 1702.¹³ This book is similar in composition to the edition of 1596, but greatly expanded. Architectural interventions after 1596 are no longer recorded in the description, but in the series of *gesta episcoporum*; the description of the church, identical to the text of 1596, has received an elaborate and sumptuously illustrated

appendix, essentially a church archeological treatise on the significance of the artifacts and above all the mosaics contained in the church. A long introduction to this appendix sketches how, with the construction and decoration of the Duomo of Monreale, the reemergence of Christianity in Sicily parallels Vasari's history of the arts.

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- 14 With these operations, the agenda of de Torres (to transform architecture into living history via biography) is expanded into a historiographic project that bears witness of recent developments in ecclesiastical and liturgical history, and the emergence of artistic biography and guidebooks as an acceptable and reliable historical frame of reference. As a result, the 1702 edition becomes a full-fledged history of the church and diocese of Monreale, incorporating a detailed and well-documented account of its artistic and architectural development. This account, however, is still just one of the several arguments supporting the true history of the church, that is, the chronology and continuity of the archbishop's office. This continuity, in turn, guarantees the church's organic unity displayed in the homogeneous description of the church.
- 15 Within this framework, texts like the *Descrittione* only allow for a notion of historical development in the arts as far as this development supports extra-artistic chronologies, such as the *gesta episcoporum*. It values continuity more than change or reform, while acknowledging that the contingencies of history do produce new artistic and architectural practices. Because it sees the development of new artistic practices or forms as the byproduct of historical change, church history attaches much less importance to authorship or style than for instance modern architectural history. Most importantly, the church-historical view of history has no room for notions like primitivism or renaissance. If earlier eras, like early Christianity, serve as *exempla*, it is as historical points of anchorage, almost regardless of style or form.
- 16 The genre of church history continued to be practiced in very similar fashion until well into the twentieth century. The importance of this historiography thus at least partly resides in its sheer size and continuity. More essentially, the agenda and methods informing this genre remained remarkably constant. For instance, a mid-eighteenth-century treatise on Christian archaeology only spells out de Torres's or de Giudice's barely veiled intentions.¹⁵ As a consequence, when in the late nineteenth century modern Christian archaeology sought to assert its disciplinary identity, it reached back to the kind of seventeenth-century church histories I have discussed because these texts offered models for incorporating an ever more sustained examination of artifacts into the writing and teaching of the history of religion.¹⁶ Christian archaeology paid much attention to buildings, its relation to history, and questions of use and meaning; architecture, in conjunction with liturgical, hagiographic, and other texts, was seen as an important historical document.
- 17 Christian archaeology proposed an architectural historical model that was substantially different from the approach informing the budding art historical discipline of the late nineteenth-century, even if to Julius von Schlosser, too, these books represented an important form of proto-architectural history. A quite substantial but largely forgotten debate ensued.¹⁷ Probably because Christian archaeology was subtended by an apologetic agenda not very dissimilar to the early modern motivations to write church history in the first place, this form of architectural historiography became discarded.¹⁸ But as the example of Monreale has shown, I hope, this particular historiography is of

interest to the architectural historians precisely for the very reasons it became forgotten.

NOTES DE FIN

1. The essay presented here is still very much a work in progress, and closely follows the text of my conference paper. Annotation is kept to a minimum. Research for this paper was undertaken at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. I am very grateful to the CCA staff and research assistant Caroline Dionne for their help. Giovanni Luigi LELLO, *Descrittione del real tempio, et monasterio di Santa Maria Nuova di Monreale*, Rome, Francesco Zanetti, 1588.
2. *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 39, pp. 480–483; Paolo Collura, *Il Card. Ludovico de Torres arcivescovo di Monreale (1551-1609) : profilo storico*, Palermo, 1955.
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4. Giovanni Luigi LELLO, *Historia della chiesa di Monreale*, Rome, Luigi Zannetti, 1596. This edition is republished as a photographic reprint by Forni editore in Bologna, 1967.
5. LELLO, *Historia*, p. 5.
6. Michele DEL GIUDICE, *Descrizione del real tempio, e monasterio di Santa Maria Nuova, di Morreale*, Palermo, 1702, “Vite de gli Arcivescovi abbati, et signori di Monreale Per Annali,” p. 95. On this edition, see below.
7. “Vite de gli Arcivescovi abbati, et signori di Monreale Per Annali,” pp. 1–8.
8. See Simon DITCHFIELD, *Liturgy, Sanctity and History in Tridentine Italy: Pietro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular*, Cambridge, 1995.
9. See Margherita Cecchelli, *S. Pancrazio (Le chiese di Roma illustrate)*, Rome, 1972, p. 12, 28, 91.
10. Henricus Chifellius [Hendrik van KIEFFELT], *Vitae S. Laurentii Martyris Libri Duo*, Rome, Stephanus Paulinus, 1607. See also Del Giudice, *Descrizione*, “Vite,” p. 91. On van Kieffelt, see Jozef IJSEWIJN, “Supplementum Phoenissis seu Thebaidi Senecanae adiectum ab Henrico Chifellio Antverpiensi,” in F. DECREUS and C. DEROUX, eds., *Hommages à Jozef Veremans*, Brussels, 1986, pp. 161–174.
11. COLLURA, *Card. Ludovico de Torres*, p. 15.
12. Domenico Stanislao Alberti, *La vita dell'inclito vescovo, e confessore di Cristo S. Castrense primo, e principal protettore della città di Monreale*, Palermo, Francesco Amato, 1718, pp. 64–81.
13. See note 6.
14. Del Giudice, *Descrizione*, “Osservazioni Sopra la descrizione della Chiesa, e Monasterio di S. Maria la Nova di Morreale di Gio : Luigi Lelli,” pp. 45–48.
15. Pier Paolo Scudellini, *Dei vantaggi che può trarre un teologo dallo studio delle cristiane antichità*, Verona, 1776.
16. See H. LECLERCQ, *Manuel d'archéologie chrétienne*, Paris, 1907, pp. 34–59.

17. See, for instance Guillaume de JERPHANION, “La voix des monuments. Archéologie et Histoire de l’art,” in *La Voix des Monuments. Notes et études d’archéologie chrétienne*, Paris / Brussels, 1930, pp. 7–29.

18. See, however, Christian Jobst, “Die christliche Basilika. Zur Diskussion eines Sakralbaues in italienischen Quellen der posttridentischen Zeit,” *Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit* 1, 3–4 (1997), pp. 698–749.

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Index géographique : Italie, Monreale, San Pancrazio

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