

## THE CHURCH OF ST. APOLLINARIS IN REMAGEN, GERMANY - - ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND RESTORATION

Paul-Georg Custodis \*

The neogothic Church of St. Apollinaris in Remagen on the Rhine is important for several reasons:

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, a church designed by Zwirner, the architect who completed the cathedral of Cologne, was built on the Apollinaris Mountain. The church was to be a place of pilgrimage.

·Today, this church is the most important religious building in neogothic style along this part of the Rhine. Its significance is derived from its close affinity to the Gothic cathedral of Cologne, and also from the paintings in the interior.

·Since 1985, the Church of St. Apollinaris has benefited from an extensive restoration program financed by the state and the church in a volume of more than 4 million Euro.

### The History

As it seems, St. Apollinaris was bishop of Ravenna in about 200 AD. We have little precise knowledge of his life and activities. Most of what we know must be considered legend. Two churches were built in Ravenna in his honor: St. Apollinare Nuovo and St. Apollinare in Classe, the latter erected over his grave. His relics are honored in Remagen (Germany), Gorkum (Netherlands), and in Reims and Dijon (France).

Pilgrimages to Remagen in honor of St. Apollinaris can be traced back as far as the middle of the twelfth century. At that time, Benedictine monks from the abbey of Siegburg built a small church with a crypt and a monastery on a site, where possibly in ancient times, people had worshipped pagan gods and spirits, and where a chapel dedicated to St. Martin had stood since the sixth century. In 1164, Reinhard von Dassel, the archbishop of Cologne, on his way back from Italy, brought the head-relic of St. Apollinaris to the newly erected church. As the legend goes, he chose Remagen, because the boat he was traveling on stopped by itself at this point of the Rhine River.

For the next six hundred years, the Apollinaris Mountain, as the site was called from this time on, was a destination for pious pilgrims living along the Rhine River and in the neighboring regions.

In 1793, the relics were brought to Siegburg on the eastern side of the Rhine to protect them from the invading troops of the French Revolution. The monastery itself was dissolved in 1802.

In 1807, the church and the monastery became the property

of the Boisserée brothers of Cologne. In 1838, the buildings then came into the possession of Count Franz Egon von Fuerstenberg Stammheim, a member of the Westphalian Fuerstenberg family, which had brought forth several Catholic bishops in the preceding centuries. He had a big fortune at his disposal and was very interested in art and architecture. By purchasing the old pilgrim chapel, he hoped to revive the veneration of the ancient relics. Besides, he intended to use the crypt of the chapel as a burial place for himself and his family. Prompted by the Count of Fuerstenberg-Stammheim, Franciscan monks came to the Apollinaris Mountain in 1857, after the completion of the church and the paintings. Their special assignments were preaching and the revival of the veneration of St. Apollinaris. Even today, pilgrimages take place to the Church St. Apollinaris in Remagen.

### The New Church

At first, Count Franz Egon von Fuerstenberg-Stammheim intended to have the interior of the still existing old church decorated with religious paintings, and called together a group of painters from Düsseldorf: Ernst Deger, the brothers Andreas and Karl Mueller and Franz Ittenbach. They were all members of the Düsseldorf Art Academy, drawing their inspiration from the early Italian Renaissance. The renovation of the old church came to an end very quickly, when severe static damages were discovered in the foundations. So, Fuerstenberg decided in 1838 to tear down the old church and to build a new and bigger one for the pilgrims. For this purpose, he arranged a competition between Ernst Friedrich Zwirner (1802-1861), the architect responsible for the restoration and the completion of the cathedral of Cologne, and Rudolf Wiegmann (1804-1865), who was an architect and professor in Düsseldorf at the Art Academy and little known at that time.

Ernst Friedrich Zwirner had come to Cologne only a few years before, in 1833. He had studied in Berlin and had been influenced by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, (1781-1841). As a basis for his work of completing the cathedral of Cologne in the tradition of the Middle Ages, he used medieval drawings of the west facade, which had been rediscovered in 1814 and 1816. Due to its importance as a national issue, the completion of the cathedral of Cologne emphasized and helped spread the neogothic style in Germany and the neighboring countries.

Wiegmann planned a small church in neoromanesque style, including details of both the older church and the

Romanesque churches along the Rhine River. Zwirner designed a larger structure with four towers and four equally long naves in the form of a Greek cross. His style was a mixture of early Italian Renaissance and details taken from the cathedral of Cologne. There is a striking resemblance to some of Schinkel's plans, especially of a chapel for the Czar at St. Petersburg, Russia, drawn in 1825 and the Friedrichwerder'sche Church in Berlin, completed in 1830. Count von Fuerstenberg-Stammheim preferred Zwirner's concept to that of Wiegmann and commissioned him to erect the new church.

Only recently, these first drafts, kept in the private archive of the Counts of Fuerstenberg-Stammheim, were made available for research and studies. Now, it is evident that in Ernst Friedrich Zwirner's plans, drawn in the short time between 1838 and 1839, the facades underwent major changes. The austere design of the cornices on the western roofs and the steeples was given up and changed to resemble that of the cathedral of Cologne. The gables of the three naves were changed to false fronts and decorated with crockets and crosses. In the fall of 1838, workers began tearing down the old chapel. It was taken down so completely that only a few Romanesque capitals in the lapidarium beneath the church bear witness of the old building.

One of the most decorative elements of the church are the filigree spires of the west towers. They were built as free copies of the spires of the cathedral of Cologne and help achieve the buoyant impression of the church when viewed from the Rhine River. These spires as well as the balustrades in front of the roofs and the communion rail in the interior of the church were made of cast iron. As the bills prove, they were produced by the Isselburg foundry near Rees on the lower Rhine River and not, as it can be found in literature until now, by the foundry in Sayn.

Zwirner had the Church of St. Apollinaris built with quarry stones of slate and an ashlar facing of volcanic tuff. The abundant decoration and tracery of the gables, and the spires of the east towers were hewn from yellow sandstone.

### **The Interior of the Church**

From the first, it was Count Fuerstenberg-Stammheim's declared intention to decorate the interior of St. Apollinaris with paintings. As already mentioned, he engaged Ernst Deger, Andreas and Carl Müller as well as Franz Ittenbach for this purpose. The church now under construction offered even larger surfaces than the old chapel would have done. All of the artists had prepared themselves for this work with detailed studies in Italy. The paintings, following a homogeneous plan, were made from 1843 to 1853. They show scenes from the life of Christ, Our Lady and St. Apollinaris. Karl Deger painted the large murals on the north side with scenes from the life of Christ, as well as the picture in the apse. Karl Müller painted the large surfaces on the opposite south side with scenes from the life of Mary. The remaining

small surfaces were divided up between Andreas Müller and Carl Ittenbach.

Zwirner was not only responsible for the architecture of the church, but also for its decoration and its furnishing. The altars, the organ and the pulpit were made according to his plans by artists, who also worked for the cathedral of Cologne. The most important member of this group was Christoph Stephan of Cologne. He carved the confessionals, the pulpit and the pews, and made the capitals of the big pillars and also the models for all the works in cast iron.

The beautiful ceramic tiles in the choir were produced by the English company Minton-Hollins in Stoke upon Trent. The founder of the company, Herbert Minton, working closely with the architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, had produced ceramic encaustic tiles since 1830. His company produced tiles for numerous churches and also for the House of Parliament in London.

In the middle of the north wall of the choir, a door opens into the private chapel of the Counts of Fuerstenberg-Stammheim. It has eight sides with a column in the center to support the star-covered vault. The furniture and decorations of the family chapel were among the last and the most expensive pieces of work made for the church. The Bembe' company from Mainz was responsible for both. There are very few pieces left, but we do have the original bills and thus good information about the things that used to be there. The furniture and decorations consisted of the wall lining of heavy silk velvet with golden edgings and tassels, and six carved ebony chairs with velvet upholstery; all of these things must have made a very splendid and elegant impression on visitors. The sacristy is in a similar position to the choir on the south side as the family chapel is on the north.

The Church of St. Apollinaris was consecrated on March 28, 1857. The relics of St. Apollinaris were brought back from Siegburg on July 23, 1857.

### **The Palace Project**

Count Franz Egon von Fuerstenberg-Stammheim intended to build a summer palace next to the church. It was to stand next to the north transept, and was to have its own entrance to the church.

Fuerstenberg commissioned Zwirner to make the plans. Until lately, no one had seen these plans.

Now, they can be studied in the private archives of the Fuerstenberg-Stammheim family: In the years 1853 and 1854, Zwirner came up with two plans for this elegant palace. With its towers and neogothic decorations, it was comparable to English palaces. However, it was never built. One reason was the high costs, the other the fact that the bishop of Trier feared that pilgrims would no longer have access to the Church of St. Apollinaris, as a multitude of pilgrims would severely disturb the privacy of a summer residence. The

bishop, responsible for the religious aims and consequences, threatened to withdraw the relics. Count Fuerstenberg-Stammheim, a pious man, gave in. He also gave up his plans for using the crypt beneath the church as a burial place for his family and had a private burial place erected nearby on his property.

### **The Restoration of the Exterior**

While the walls of the church are sturdy and solid even today, the neogothic decorations and sculptures have shown damages for a very long time. Ever since 1919, extensive repairs of the stones have taken place. The spires of the two west towers, and the pinnacles and crockets of the gables were replaced. This work took place until the late thirties and went to such an extent that a newspaper dated March 1939 speaks of a total restoration, while mentioning new damages on the facades and the spires at the same time. Since the end of World War II, serious new damages were visible. In particular, pilgrims were endangered by falling rocks. In 1954, the administration of the monastery had many decorative elements such as pinnacles and parts of the cornice taken down. The east spires and the slate roofs were repaired in 1963.

At the beginning of the eighties, damages caused by falling parts had reached such an extent that a systematic restoration had to be planned. The State Conservation Office of Rhineland-Palatinate proposed to commission architect Karl Josef Ernst of Zuelpich to draw up a catalog of measures for restoration. This catalog became the basis for the various repairs and restorations beginning in 1985 and slowly coming to an end in about 2003.

These are the measures taken:

- The entire roof-truss was repaired. All of the roofs of the naves and the choir were covered with new slate.
- All of the volcanic tuff stones were cleaned with steam and without chemicals. Many of the tuff stones on the facades and the spires were split. They were replaced by new stones. The open interstices were closed with lime mortar.
- The decorative elements made of sandstone was cleaned with steam and without using chemicals. The pinnacles, the tracery of the windows and the cornice were stabilized; missing parts were replaced by sculptors.
- The south spire of the west facade had vertical cracks. They were probably caused by the ringing of the bells.

Experts suggested securing this spire in seven planes with bands of stainless steel.

- The spires of the two west towers, constructed of cast iron, were seriously corroded. The rust was removed, and the structure was covered with acryl.

### **Restoration of the Interior**

Since its completion in 1857, the Church of St. Apollinaris had been admired by pilgrims and by visitors for both its religious moment and its high artistic quality. But even before 1914, first damages became visible, when loose paint began peeling off the walls. So, several restorations took place, one in 1929, another in 1955. In 1999, damages caused by leaks in the roofs called for new repairs. Again, efforts were made to save the plaster and the paintings in the choir and on the walls of the naves. This work was supervised by the State Preservation Office of Rhineland-Palatine. A project of the Federal Republic of Germany in cooperation with the School for Restoration in Cologne did research on the state of the paintings and earlier restorations, and documented them.

The carved wooden pulpit had lost several of its fine ornaments, such as the pinnacles on the top. It was restored in 2000; the missing parts were added.

Among the last tasks to be done is the restoration of the crypt. Beneath an ugly coat of modern paint, the original paintings of the time the building was erected were found: an intricate system of blue and red bands with a kind of bone-lace. A group of restorer started in 2001 to remove the old paint and to restore the murals. This work will take several years.

When in 2003 the south tower next to the choir will have been stabilized, missing or broken stones copied and replaced, the enormous, twenty years restoration program will have come to its end. The momentous Church of St. Apollinaris will have been saved for future generations.

#### **\* Dr.-Ing. Paul-Georg Custodis**

Born 1940,  
Member of the State Preservation Office of Rhineland-Palatine (Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz) since 1973.  
Several publications on the architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.  
From 1984-1987 General Secretary of the German Committee of ICOMOS.