

Pirita Convent 600

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The western gable of the Pirita convent is one of the best known visual signs of medieval Estonia, and has become a standard element in general Estonian history writing, in textbooks, and in all sorts of reference texts, and has also found its way to stamps and film. At the conference on 16 June 2007 celebrating the 600th anniversary of the first mention of the Pirita convent, however, Father Vello Salo mentioned in his opening speech that, despite the convent's widespread fame, not much has actually been written about it, and what little there is mostly focuses on researching the stones. An art historian well versed in the research of the convent might protest that there has been published research. Still, taking a closer look at the publications, we see that our knowledge of the convent, which has operated for over 150 years in the bend of the Pirita River, is not that extensive.

The convent attracted wider scholarly attention before the threshold of the 500th anniversary of its consecration. Celebrations culminated on 15 August 1936 and in many ways were used, or even abused, to underline the great friendship between Estonia and Sweden. The celebration of 15 August 1936 resulted in two publications¹, which besides a lot of rhetoric also included sensible overviews of the Birgittine architecture, the style of the Pirita convent church and its connections with the architecture of the Teutonic Order. The authors were the prominent Swedish scholars Bertil Berthelson and Sten Karling, and the local Baltic German architect

and architecture historian Ernst Kühnert. Excavations and conservation work at Pirita had begun much earlier, in 1894, on the initiative of the Riga architect Wilhelm Neumann. The work continued under the supervision of the conservator Aleksander von Hoven in 1910, although the ruins became internationally known only in the 1930s when the newly appointed Tartu University professor Sten Karling took over. The young art historian Armin Tuulse² was responsible for publishing the results of the excavations.

In addition to art history articles, the Pirita jubilee album also contained an overview by the archivist Otto Liiv on the history of the Pirita convent. The facts presented in this article are those that would be repeated in all subsequent publications, as would data described by an unknown author about the building and consecration of the convent complex,³ which proved erroneous and caused a lot of confusion for the authors of the present publication.

1 Pirita klooster [Pirita Convent] / Birgittaklostret vid Tallinn 500, 1436–1936. Pirita Kaunistamise Seltsi väljaanne [Publication of the Pirita Improvement Society] 12. Pirita, 1936 (henceforth Pirita Convent I); Pirita klooster ja selle 500-aastase pühitsemispäeva juubel 15. ja 16. augustil 1936. a. ühes mõningate ajalooliste andmeteg [Pirita Convent and its 500th Anniversary Celebrations on 15 and 16 August 1936, together with some historical data] / Birgittaklostret vid Tallinn och firandet av dess 500-årsjubileum den 15 och 16 augusti 1936 jämte några historiska upplysningar, 1436–1936. Pirita Kaunistamise Seltsi väljaanne 15. Pirita, 1940 (henceforth Pirita Convent II).

2 A. Tuulse, Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen in der Klosterruine zu Pirita im Sommer 1934–1935. – Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi Aastaraamat [Yearbook of the Learned Estonian Society] 1934. Tartu: H. Laakmann, 1936, pp. 134–154; A. Tuulse, Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen in der Klosterruine zu Pirita im Sommer 1936. – Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi Aastaraamat 1936. Tartu: H. Laakmann, 1938, pp. 48–58.

3 O. Liiv, Pirita kloostri kroonika [Pirita convent's life and chronicle]. – Pirita convent II, pp. 11–26.

During the post-war decades, most research about Pirita was done by archaeologist Jaan Tamm and the late art historian Villem Raam. Pirita convent was the great love of Raam and a long-time object of research, but the majority of his ideas remained between the covers of field reports at the National Heritage Board. He managed to publish an analysis of the iconography of the ceramic moulds found in the convent,⁴ and another on the spatial form of the convent church and the development of its singular architectural details.⁵ Raam is credited with producing the primary vision of the late gothic sacral architecture in Tallinn. In his doctoral thesis, completed in 1988 and published in book format a few years ago, Jaan Tamm focused on the material culture of medieval Estonian monasteries. The material found at Pirita played a significant role in his work.⁶ On the occasion of the 95th anniversary of Villem Raam's birth, Tamm issued a book that presented the results of their previous research: *Pirita convent. The History of the construction and Research* (2005).⁷ New information about the settlement surrounding the convent was recently produced by archaeological excavations under the supervision of Villu Kadakas.⁸

Summarising what was said above, we can claim that the researchers of the Pirita convent have mostly dealt with ruins and archaeological finds. Paul Johansen's analysis of a calendar fragment that belonged to Pirita, found in the National Archives of Sweden, and Tore Nyberg's doctoral thesis on medieval Birgittine convents, relying on written sources only, are the exceptions that focus on the convent's spiritual life and people living there.⁹

On the 600th anniversary of the first mention of the convent, we were in a situation where we did not know why the convent was established in the lower reaches of the Pirita

River, who were actually behind the establishment, what role the Vadstena mother convent played, why the Pirita convent church is the most pretentious of all the Birgittine convent churches, and when exactly the convent complex was completed. Facts obtained from previous research without any critical thought proved unfounded and, according to Juhan Kreem's article in the present publication, 1936 was, in fact, perhaps not the right year to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the consecration of the convent.

It was therefore sensible to start from scratch, relying on one of the few reliable facts known about the Pirita convent: the convent built near Tallinn was first mentioned on 5 May 1407 in the Vadstena Diarium. On the initiative of Lagle Parek, a conference titled *Pirita Convent 600* was organised in the Pirita Social Centre in June. Lecturers included mem-

4 V. Raam, Kaks fragmentaarset vormiplaati Pirita kloostri [Two fragmentary moulds of Pirita convent]. – Töid kunstiteaduse ja -kriitika alalt. Artiklite kogumik [Studies of Art History and Criticism. Collection of Articles] 3. Tallinn: Kunst, pp. 65–77.

5 V. Raam, Pirita klooster [Pirita convent]. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1984; V. Raam, Das Birgitten-Kloster in Tallinn/Reval. Empore und Altäre. – Nordost-Archiv. Zeitschrift für Kulturgeschichte und Landeskunde 1984, H. 75, pp. 63–84.

6 J. Tamm, Eesti keskaegsed kloostriid / Medieval Monasteries of Estonia. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeedia-kirjastus, 2002.

7 V. Raam, J. Tamm, Pirita klooster. Ehitus- ja uurimislugu [Pirita Convent. The History of Construction and Research]. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeedia-kirjastus, 2005.

8 V. Kadakas, Uut informatsiooni Pirita ajaloolisest asustusest [New Information on the Historical Settlement of Pirita]. – Muinsuskaitse Aastaraamat [National Heritage Yearbook] 2004. Tallinn: Muinsuskaitseamet, 2005, pp. 73–74.

9 P. Johansen, Kalendrikatkend Pirita kloostriid [Calendar Fragment from the Pirita Convent]. – Vana Tallinn [Old Tallinn] III, Tallinn, 1938, pp. 24–27; T. Nyberg, Birgittinische klostergründungen des Mittelalters. Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis 15. Lund, 1965.

bers of the Centre for Medieval Studies at Tallinn University and Ruth Rajamaa from Stockholm. It is a rare occurrence at conferences that all lecturers are on the same wavelength, mutually inspiring and producing new ideas on the spot. This is, however, exactly how we can describe the sizzling atmosphere full of ideas in the vicinity of the new convent in the middle of an Estonian summer.¹⁰ The Birgittine nuns who carefully followed the papers and discussions made us feel that we were not dealing with past events only, but were trying to construct a bridge between the two convent complexes of Pirita – from the Middle Ages to the present day.

The result of the summer exchange of ideas was a special issue of *Studies on Art and Architecture*. As there are quite a few historians among the authors (e.g. Tiina Kala, Linda Kaljundi and Juhan Kreem) and an archaeologist (Marika Mägi), it might seem strange that the results of the research were published in this particular magazine. In a sense, this is in keeping with tradition. In the 1930s, the initiators of research on the Pirita convent were also art historians, including historians and archaeologists. On the other hand, art historians should perhaps be occasionally reminded that it is not possible to write about art without knowing the context: the earlier the period, the more it matters. In tackling the Middle Ages, interdisciplinary studies are really the only way forward and, with this in mind, the Centre for Medieval Studies at Tallinn University was founded in 2005. The current special issue is, in fact, the first joint publication of the Centre's members, who represent various fields of research.

Unlike many introductions, mine is not going to convey all the ideas expressed by the authors of this special issue; there are short summaries at the beginning of each article. I would rather focus on whether, in

the light of research results published here, it would be possible to determine why the Pirita convent church became such a powerful visual symbol.

When the Swedish state archivist Sigurd Curman was crossing the Gulf of Finland on a small steamer on an August day in 1929, the first thing he saw was the western gable of the Birgittine convent glittering in the sun. This seemed to him an enormously inviting sign, helping a strange vessel to find its way to the harbour. He realised only later that this was a church.¹¹ According to Marika Mägi, the choice of the location of the Pirita convent was not accidental; there was a harbour and an international trading site, and the riverside lands formed their background. The lands belonged to the Harju-Viru vassals, who were among the biggest donators to the convent. The key role in establishing the convent, however, was played by the Teutonic Order, on whose land the buildings were erected. The protests of the city of Tallinn against the location of the convent were based on their fear of a competing settlement nearby. This is partially proved by the size of the convent church – 1360 m². The area of the biggest sacral building in Tallinn – the Dominican church – is only 1219 m².¹² The sermons of the mendicant monks were meant for the townspeople, but it is not quite clear to whom the Birgittine brothers preached: local peasants, knights, inhabitants of the settlement, merchants? In any case, the church was designed for a large number of people.

¹⁰ The new convent was consecrated on 15 September 2001.

¹¹ S. Curman, Pirita klooster och det kulturella samarbetet mellan Estland och Sverige. – Pirita convent II, p. 15.

¹² V. Raam, Dominiiklaste Katariina klooster [Dominican St. Catharine convent]. – Eesti arhitektuur 1. Tallinn [Estonian Architecture 1. Tallinn]. Tallinn: Valgus, 1993, p. 269; V. Raam, Pirita klooster, p. 18.

It is probably not a coincidence that the gable architecture of the Pirita convent church was so imposing. It must have left a bigger impression on those who arrived by sea in the Middle Ages than it did in 1929, because during the completion of the convent, not all of Tallinn's sacral buildings had reached the dimensions of their heyday (e.g. St. Olaf's tower). The gable architecture of the Pirita convent church started to influence the facades of residential houses in Tallinn beginning in the mid-15th century, and thus this visual symbol must have had a strong meaning for the society of the time. The house owners who adopted this kind of architectural language should certainly be researched in the future; one of the best examples is at no 1 Kuninga Street, where the decorative round niches of the gable contain panel paintings of Christ and the evangelists, and there is a chapel at the back of the garden, which is very rare in Tallinn residential architecture.¹³ This indicates a wealthier person more closely connected with the church. Pirita primarily welcomed daughters from the best patrician families. In other respects, the relations between Tallinn and the convent remained aloof.

Despite the relatively diverse founders of the convent, it could still be said that the knighthood (the Teutonic Order and Harju-Viru vassals) were among the biggest supporters of the convent. A fact pointed out in Tiina Kala's article should be emphasised here, namely that this was the first new sacral building in the Tallinn bishopric after northern Estonia was sold to the Teutonic Order. As the Order lands were under the ban of the church until the late 14th century, the strong pull of the Teutonic Order towards the Birgittines is especially significant. St. Birgitta's idea of reforming the orders of knighthood, as well as the entire Catholic church

life, would have afforded the Teutonic Order an opportunity to show themselves in a better light. During the first decades of the 15th century, the Birgittine movement became quite topical, offering competition to all the older monastery orders. The building of a convent in Pirita should be understood in that context as well. In the Revelations of Saint Birgitta, Christ plants a new vineyard for himself, because the previous ones (i.e. religious orders and monasteries) no longer bear fruit. Birgitta and her brothers and sisters are going to look after the new vineyard themselves. The Birgittine monasteries are not refuges for social outcasts, but rather the centre of that society, a 'life-giving heart'.¹⁴ The convent constituted a miniature picture of society.

Considering the elitism of the supporters, the self-consciousness of the Birgittine Order, and its ambitious interference in social life and in the rearranging of religious life, it is not surprising that a place of worship, impossible for the townspeople to ignore, was built on the opposite shore of the Bay.

¹³ B. Dubovik, *Elamu Kuninga tn 1* [House at 1 Kuninga Street]. – *Eesti Arhitektuur* 1, p. 95.

¹⁴ A. Härdelin, *Birgittas samhällsvision och klosteridé*. – *Kult, Kultur och Kontemplation. Studier i medeltida svenskt kyrkoliv*. Skellefteå: Artos, 1998, p. 79.