

THE POSITION OF VANG CHURCH, ALIAS WANG TEMPLE (KARPACZ, POLAND), IN NORWEGIAN STAVE CHURCH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT. The author presents shortly the history of Vang stave church from Valdres, now situated in Karpacz (Poland), the only Norwegian stave church to be found outside the Norwegian borders. The aim of the paper has been to examine critically the place of Vang church in stave church literature over the last 150 years. The paper also includes a complete bibliography of the church.

In a short article on stave churches in the popular Norwegian almanac "Hvem Hva Hvor" for the year 1983, one can find the following statement:

"One (of them) was even sent to the king of Prussia, as no other way to preserve it was found, and it was reassembled in Germany where it can be seen today in a somewhat altered shape" (pp. 193-4).

The church in question is Vang stave church from the valley of Valdres, and although the statement bears witness to considerable factual, historical and political ignorance (there may have been another way to preserve it; it was reassembled in Silesia – then under Prussian rule, now in Poland – where it can be seen today in a largely altered shape), it does at least acknowledge the existence of a Norwegian stave church outside the Norwegian borders. This has not always been the case, and the aim of the present article is to investigate, chronologically, the place of Vang church in stave church literature over the last 150 years.

Poland owes its possession of a Norwegian stave church to somewhat unusual circumstances. The church from Vang in Valdres was erected some time before 1350. By the early 1800's the building had become too small for the local congregation, who had a new church built beside it. The medieval church was to be pulled down and its timber sold. The famous Norwegian painter J.C.Dahl (1788-1857), professor at Dresden Academy of Arts from 1824, saw it during his Norwegian

journeys and considered valuable enough to be preserved for posterity. Several proposed solutions failed to materialize: Bergen Museum was not interested, nor was the management of the Christiania Royal Palace on whose grounds Dahl thought the church could be re-erected; finally, Count Wadel Jarlsberg died when about to purchase it for his Bogstad estate. Dahl eventually bought it at an auction on behalf of the Crown Prince of Prussia, later King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. The young and gifted German architect Franz Wilhelm Schiertz was commissioned to make survey drawings and supervise all aspects of the dismantling. This took place in 1841, and the church was carted to Lærdalsøyri, shipped to Szczecin (then Stettin), and transported, reportedly via Berlin, to Brückenberg (now Karpacz) in the Riesengebirge (now Karkonosze) mountains, where it was reassembled and reconstructed according to the contemporary, romantic notions of Nordic medieval architecture. It appears that not more than 10–15% of the original material from Valdres was used. Brückenberg, a poor mountain parish, was situated near the estate belonging to one Countess von Reden, upon whom Friedrich Wilhelm had bestowed the church. Wang Temple (Świątynia Wang), as it is now known, has been in possession of an evangelical congregation ever since. On the whole, the building is in good condition, despite certain unfortunate alternations made due to the ignorance of the local priests as to the historical value of its ornaments.

It is only too natural that the artistic and historical value of Vang church should have been popularised by its “discoverer”, Dahl. Indeed, a drawing of one of its portals, made by Schiertz, appeared in printed form as early as 1837 in Dahl’s famous “Denkmale...”¹ However, no description of the church accompanied the drawing and when Dahl finally decided to write about the church² it had already been removed from its original site.

The first monograph of Vang church was published in Hirschberg (now Jelenia Góra) in Silesia in 1847, i.e. three years after the official opening of the reassembled church in Brückenberg. It was a 15-page pamphlet written most probably by the then minister of the parish, Werkenthin, containing the history of the church.³ It is a valuable source, as the author witnessed its re-erection.

The year 1868 brings an interpretation of the runic graffiti found on one of Wang’s portals. According to Professor S. Bugge⁴, the inscription reads: “Eindride cut Olaf’s son viciously on the little finger” – a reading quite different from that arrived at in Silesia: “Einar carved Olaf” – meaning, presumably that the church had originally been dedicated to St. Olaf.

German scholars did not take interest in Wang Temple until half a century after it had been re-erected: the first accounts of the church in specialist German literature were published in 1886 and 1891.⁵

To the non-specialist Norwegian reader the unusual story of the church from Valdres became known thanks to L. Dietrichson, an art history professor from Christiania University. Dietrichson, who had included Vang church in his survey of Norwegian church buildings of 1888⁶, in what was the first definitive work on stave churches⁷, devoted nine pages to the one from Vang. The scholar had seen the building in Silesia and examined the parish register. He starts his chapter on Wang with an account of the church’s earliest history, where the possibility of the church

having been originally erected at Berge farm is mentioned, then goes on to describe the events that led to the demolition and subsequent re-erection of the church where it stands today. The story of the church is set down in considerable detail. Finally, the architecture of the building is discussed, with all the alterations made by the local Silesian builders. Dietrichson is rather wary about dating the church: according to him, it is "younger than 1200" and "existed around 1319"; Dahl had dated it at 11th or 12th century. The chapter on Vang is illustrated with a plate of the building in its contemporary form, a ground plan and the portal drawing that originally appeared in Dahl's "Denkmale...". A year later, an abbreviated version of Dietrichson's book was published in Germany, incorporated in a larger work written in collaboration with the Christiania city architect H. Munthe.⁸ The chapter on Wang is considerably shorter and written in a more accessible style, but retains the original illustrations.

While supervising the dismantling of the church in 1841, Schiertz made a number of detailed drawings of both its interior and exterior at different stages of the process. These were thought to have been lost, at least by yet another Brückenberg parish priest with a flair for the scholarly – Erich Gebhardt, who published an extensive account of the church in 1904⁹, and presumably by Dietrichson, too. They surfaced, however, in the library of Bergen Museum and were published in the years 1915–1916 by Curator General, Dr Harry Fett. The first series, which appeared in 1915¹⁰, contained six photographs of watercolour sketches of the 14th century frescoes reportedly left behind in Berlin (before the fragments of the church were sent on to Silesia), and since lost. The paintings had already been described by Dahl in the aforementioned article of 1843. The second series, published 1916¹¹, contained drawings of both the interior and exterior of the church, at different stages of demolition. The article in which they appeared emphasized Dahl's role in the preservation of the church for posterity, described its architecture and paid tribute to the skills of Schiertz. One of his drawings shows the capitals of the inner columns, which Dietrichsen thought to be later additions. If indeed they were subsequent additions, they were not of Silesian craftsmanship.

Wang's unusual story was related again as early as 1920, in a book by A. Aubert devoted to J.C. Dahl.¹² As the aim of the book was to demonstrate Dahl's merits, the story of the purchase of the church is presented accordingly. The favourably biased presentation seems to echo the old argument about the painter's motives: Dahl had in fact been accused of purchasing the building for his own profit. Aubert illustrates his story with Dahl's sketch of Vang church in its original (?) surroundings as he saw it in his imagination, complete with dragon heads, gables and perambulatory.

Since Fett's publication of Schiertz's drawing, other scholars have used them as illustrations in articles on various aspects of medieval Norwegian art. The first to do it was A. Bugge in his article on Valdres churches published in 1923¹³, where three of Schiertz's sketches (of the exterior, the interior and of the choir vault) appeared as illustrations. According to A. Bugge, Vang church dates from 1170–90, as its ornaments resemble those of Stedje church, built around the year 1183. Vang's frescoes were used again as illustrations in 1926 in an article on medieval painting

in Norway, by R. Mowinckel.¹⁴ The paintings depicted the legend of St. Halvard – a unique subject in Norwegian ecclesiastical art of the Middle Ages.

Dahl's contribution to the preservation of Norwegian stave churches in general, and of Vang church in particular, became once again the topic of an article in 1929, in Bugge's review of church motifs in Norwegian painting.¹⁵

Some interesting light was shed on the circumstances of Dahl's endeavour by an amateur historian from Valdres, A.O. Øyo. While examining the old local council reports, Øyo discovered that there had been strong local opposition to Dahl's activities, and published the results of his research in the little known journal of the Valdres Historical Society.¹⁶ According to him, a local farmer, Knut Gudmundson Nordsvin, suggested in 1840 that the old Vang church remain in Valdres and be moved onto the opposite side of the Vangsmjøsa Lake, where it could continue to be used by the local community, which at the time was in need of a church. He offered a site for the church (and a new graveyard) on his own land, free of charge. His offer was opposed by the local parish priest, who was by then aware of Dahl's decision to purchase the church at all costs. Mercenary considerations prevailed in the local community, and consequently Vang church was lost for Norway. Unfortunately, Øyo's articles are not particularly well-documented and must therefore be treated with caution.

The first photograph of Vang church in its present surroundings appeared in Oslo during World War II, in a book on Norwegian stave churches by Herbert Reiher published by the "Haubtabteilung für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda beim Reichskommissar für die besetzten norwegischen Gebiete".¹⁷ The book had an appropriate subtitle "Masterpieces of Germanic Wooden Architecture", was written in German, and contained a short account of the church's history.

The post-war years bring a number of works on Norwegian stave architecture, with Vang church mentioned marginally, or not at all.

Thus, according to Fred. Tybring ("Den norske kirke og kunsten gjennom sekulene", Oslo 1953) Vang church was "bought by the German king Friedrich of Prussia and erected and shamefully altered in Brückenberg in Germany" – which is all he has to say on the subject.

To A. Bugge, in the first major post-war book on Norwegian stave churches¹⁸, the Vang relic is "known only from architect Schiertz's drawings done prior to moving the church to Brückenberg in the Riesengebirge". He devotes a page to it, discussing its architecture and decor, and illustrates it with one of Schiertz's sketches of the choir vault.

Gunnar Bugge and Christian Norberg-Schultz ("Stav og laft i Norge", Oslo 1969) publish only the well-known drawing of one of Wang's portals and its ground plan, but offer no comment on the illustration.

The local Valdres community did not forget about its old church. In 1969, an extensive, richly illustrated work on Vang stave church by Knut Hermundstad was published by the local parish council.¹⁹ The publication is amateurish, but the parts devoted to the 17th–19th century history of the church and its local background (with extensive quotations from source materials) may be of interest to the student of Vang church. It is rather puzzling that although the present location and sur-

roundings of the building are described in considerable detail, not a single Polish place name appears in the booklet.

The next decade brings a number of works which finally do justice to the half-forgotten (one is tempted to say "exiled") stave church from Valdres. First of all, Roar Hauglid in the most popular work on Norwegian stave churches to date (whose first version, published in 1969, was soon followed by new editions including those in English and German)²⁰ acknowledges the fact that the church is now in Poland. Discussing the stave churches that were removed from their original sites to be re-erected elsewhere (Gol, Garmo, Fortun, Haltdalen), he adds: "A fifth church preserved in this way was Vang church from Valdres, which the painter J.C.Dahl endeavoured to save on its original site in 1840, but which, when this proved unsuccessful, was sold to the king of Prussia. The latter in turn entrusted it to a poor mountain parish in the Riesengebirge in Silesia, where it stands to this day, though now on the Polish side of the border" (p. 9). Hauglid has little to offer by way of illustration; all we find in his work is a photo of some carved boards once removed from Vang church, now in the possession of the Universitetets Oldsakssamling in Oslo, and the well-known ground plan. In the following (1973) work on the decoration and furnishings of stave churches²¹, however, Hauglid makes up for the scarcity of illustrative material; he publishes three of Schiertz's drawings, two of his water-colour sketches of Wang's frescoes, and three photographs of various details of the portals. The ornaments of the portals are discussed; interestingly, Hauglid finds them rather untypical. He concludes: "If one did not know better, one might think that all those portals in Vang church were carved in the previous century" (p. 172). The church is dated at the end of the 13th century.

In the same year, an M.A. thesis on J.C.Dahl's contribution to the preservation of Norwegian historic monuments was submitted at the University of Bergen.²² Chapter VII of the thesis is entirely devoted to the preservation of Vang church. On the basis of extant epistolary material, the author - Einar Wexelsen - endeavoured to describe the circumstances of the purchase and demolition of the building. The chapter contains extensive excerpts from Dahl's letters and is therefore a valuable source for the study of Wang's history.

In spite of the growing awareness of the historical, artistic and sentimental value of Vang church, some authors continued to disregard it in their works: thus Peter Anker ("De norske stavkirker", Bergen 1979) devotes to it only one sentence in his 174-page long treatise.

It is to a curator from the National Folk Museum in Oslo, Arne Berg, that we owe the most complete, up to date, description of Wang. Berg followed in Dietrichson's footsteps and inspected the church on its present premises. His account of the building, published in the 1980 annual report of the Association for the Preservation of Norwegian Historic Monuments, of which J.C.Dahl was one of the founders, contains the history of the church and the story of its long journey, as well as a detailed description of its architecture. The article is profusely illustrated with both Schiertz's drawings and cross-section drawings of various parts of the structure. Berg's findings concerning the medieval alternations of the building may corroborate the hypothesis that the church had not been originally erected at

Grindheim in Vang. Berg's article was published in German and in Polish.²³ The Polish translation appeared in an obscure local museum publication and is the only serious work on Vang church available in Polish, as the pamphlet by yet another parish priest from Bierutowice (as that part of Karpacz used to be called), Rev. Ryszard Trenkler ("Świątynia Wang. Zabytek sztuki nordyckiej". Zwiastun. Warszawa 1963) is too popular and inaccurate to be of scholarly interest.

With the wealth of material collected by Arne Berg, one finds it surprising that Gunnar Berg, the author of the latest (1983) popular, concise but comprehensive work on stave churches²⁴, fails to treat Wang on an equal footing with the other 30 existing stave churches, thus making his work rather incomplete. G. Bugge does make the reservation that he is describing "all the surviving stave churches in Norway" (p. 18), but in view of such dubious specimens as Vågå (built "in the spirit of the stave church") being included in his survey, the exclusion of Karpacz church is hardly justifiable. After all, the portals of Wang – if nothing else – should be recognised as first-class relics of medieval sculpture tradition. Vang church is mentioned in Bugge's work only once, in connection with Øye church to which, according to him, it was a parallel. Arne Berg is marginally quoted, and one of Schiertz's drawings from the dismantling of the church is enclosed. No mention is made of the church's present whereabouts.

Another example of disregard for the existence of Karpacz church is Martin Blindheim's "Graffiti in Norwegian Stave Churches c.1150 – c.1350" (Oslo–Bergen–Stavanger–Tromsø 1985) – an otherwise comprehensive work, where among the various graffiti found in existing and no-longer-existing stave churches no mention is made of the controversial inscription from Vang church.

However, Hauglid's and Berg's efforts have borne fruit: in the latest work where Vang church is mentioned, a book published in connection with J.C.Dahl's 200th anniversary in Bergen in 1988²⁵, we find a quotation from Dahl's letter concerning the Vang affair (p. 86), and the following note: "...today the place is situated in Poland and is called Bierutowice in Śląsk (...) In its new shape it differs from what it used to be; on the outside the church is quite new, inside one can recognise the building from Schiertz's drawings" (p. 87). One of Schiertz's sketches is included – that of Vang church before demolition.

An interesting contribution to the study of Karpacz church was the publication, by Marie Lødrup Bang²⁶, of Dahl's four sketches of it in situ (nos. 964–7) – or rather, his idea of what it might have looked like in another, monumental work commemorating the painter's 200th anniversary. One finds that the Wang Temple in Karpacz as we know it today is not far from the vision of J.C. Dahl when he first saw the remains of Vang stave church.

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NOTES*

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* The above list is, to the best of the author's knowledge, the most complete bibliography of Vang church compiled so far.