

Franciscan St. Michael's Monastery of Rakvere, Estonia

Notes on Building History

By Jaan Tamm

1. History

In late spring 1989 the leaders of what was then the Rakvere district commissioned Agu, an enterprise affiliated to the Estonian Heritage Society, to carry out archaeological investigation of an area to the east of the Rakvere house of culture on Theater Hill. The reason for the excavations was the district leadership's wish to build a new house of culture at the site.

Already the first excavations in summer 1989 revealed, and continued excavations in 1990 corroborated, the existence on the site of former settlement extending from the late Iron Age to the 19th century. Direct proof of it was a layer of midden 3.5 metres thick containing remains of an Iron Age settlement, foundations of the east and south wings of a medieval monastic complex and remains of later (17th-19th century) manorial buildings (Aus 1990, Nuut 1991, Toos 1991).

Thus, the present paper is the first attempt at a treatment of the building history of the Franciscan monastery at Rakvere, and at connecting it with the Franciscans' building policy and its reflection in Old Livonia's built heritage in particular (Tamm 1991).

By mid-16th century, the end of the Order period, Rakvere had grown into one of the wealthiest small towns in Estonia, with a number of residential houses, a Town Hall, a Guild Hall, a hospital and a chapel, a monastery and churches under the castle's

protection (Ungern-Sternberg 1837: 554, Richter 1913:225, Tarvel 1996:252). The Franciscan St. Michael's Monastery was one of the largest complexes of buildings in Rakvere. Its date of building defines it as the last but one medieval monastic ensemble to have been erected in present-day Estonia (Tamm 1988): only the still problematic Dominicans' monastic convent at Narva was started even later, in 1520 (Tamm 1993:200).

The original impulse for the foundation of the monastery at Rakvere is considered to be a victory the Livonian Order achieved over Russian forces at Lake Smolina on 13 September 1502 (Wittram 1956:36). It seems, however, that actual building did not start immediately, because as late as 1506 Master of the Livonian Order Wolter von Plettenberg applied to the Tallinn Town Hall for permission to build a monastery in Tallinn. The motivation was that in Tallinn the Franciscans' activity would be much more successful than in Rakvere (Lemmens 1912:158). But referring to the abundance of monasteries and churches in Tallinn, the request was turned down. Also another application in the same issue by Archbishop Michel of Riga received a negative response (Lemmens 1912:196). So, although the first major donation was made already in 1503 and it has been earlier been believed that building started immediately afterwards (Arbusow 1913:354),

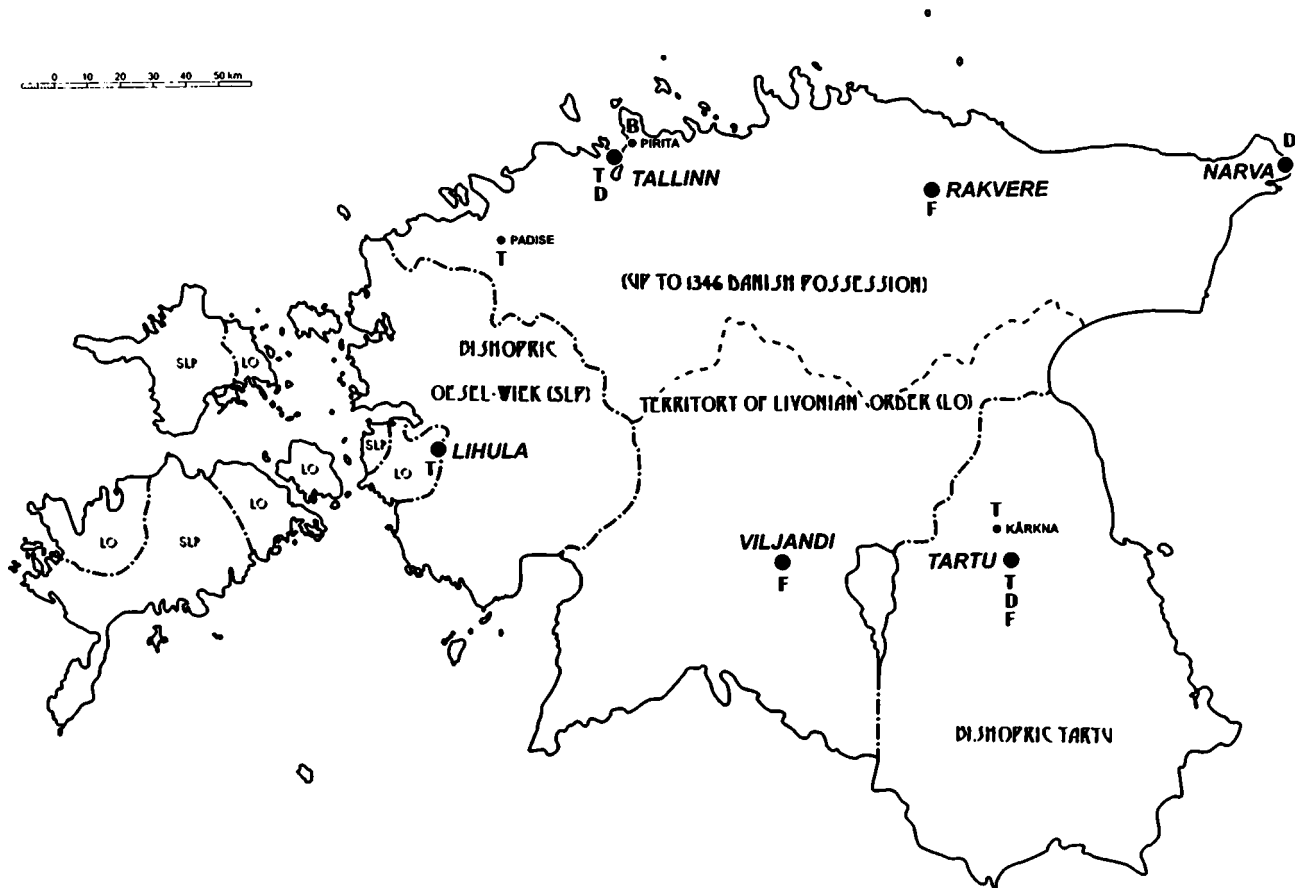


Fig. 1. Up to 1346 Danish possession. Bishopric Oesel-Wiek. Territory of Livonian Order. Bishopric Tartu.

it is likely that actual building work only started after the denials by the Tallinn Town Hall.

There is absolutely no information to tell us how long the building lasted and whether the complex was fully completed before the Reformation. Neither is there any important information concerning

events connected with the Reformation in Rakvere (Sild 1924:20ff), nor anything to connect a fire which occurred at the monastery in 1526 with the aftermath of the Reformation. Rather, it seems to have been an accident, and a donation of 50 Riga marks by B. Junghe to eliminate the damage caused

by the accident seems to confirm this (Lemmens 1912:32a). After that the monastery disappeared for more than thirty years from the scene of history and was only mentioned again in 1558, in connection with the tragic events of the Livonian War, when the town was overrun by Russian troops (Renner 1995:81).

In the course of demolition work which accompanied a building spree following the Russians' campaign of 1558 also the monastery was demolished, along with residential buildings, the Guild Hall and the church (Russow 1967:113). That date must be considered the end of the monastery as an institution.

What the actual rate of destruction and demolition in the monastery was during the Livonian War is difficult to establish. It is likely they were not quite as bad as can be deduced from the lines put down by chroniclers. However, the monastery is nowhere to be seen in a 1615 picture of Rakvere by Goeteeris (Johansen 1927, nr. 4) and in a 1683 town plan by Samuel Waxelberg (Virumaa 1924:58). It is also likely that Goeteeris, who had not personally been to Rakvere, only gave importance to the buildings actually used, such as the castle and a house on the site of the present No 17 Pikk Street, not the monastery which then may have stood in ruins.

2. Location and ground plan

As pointed out by earlier investigators, early Franciscan monasteries were erected outside town walls, and were often situated near gates. Although later monasteries were built within town walls, their usual position was right beside the wall, and as a result the monasteries of the order had a defense function. This idea is corroborated by all those monasteries of

Old Livonia whose location has been more or less precisely defined, such as Riga, Viljandi, St. Clare's of Tartu and Koknese (Altoa 1979:33).

Although it has been supposed in the case of Rakvere that the town may have been surrounded by an earthen rampart and a log fence (Eesti ajalugu 1937: 97), no traces of them have been found so far. The building of such a large monastic complex must have required a vacant area of considerable size. The remains of three or four stone buildings (stove and wall foundations and side walls) uncovered on the east side of the monastic complex probably go back to houses which had ceased to exist in the 15th century. It is not known whether that happened as a result of a fire or by the rise of a new settlement centre at the side of the castle in the centre of the present Pikk Street, round a new St. Michael's church. It is clear, however, that the monastery could only be erected on a site to which there were no other claims, i.e. a vacant area.

The statutes which established the main requirements for the Franciscans' buildings, the Statuta capituli generalis Narbonensis endorsed in 1260, only pertained to the church, giving builders rather a free hand in the rest of the complex (Braunfels 1976:307ff). The builder, of course, were accordingly influenced by the local circumstances and concrete needs. As there were no master builders among the friars, they often used the services of local urban craftsmen (1976:185). As a result, their architecture often adopted abundant features from the local building traditions.

Although not quite to the degree as was the case with other monasteries, the church was the dominating feature also in Franciscans' houses. Rakvere had two churches in the late Middle Ages – the above St.

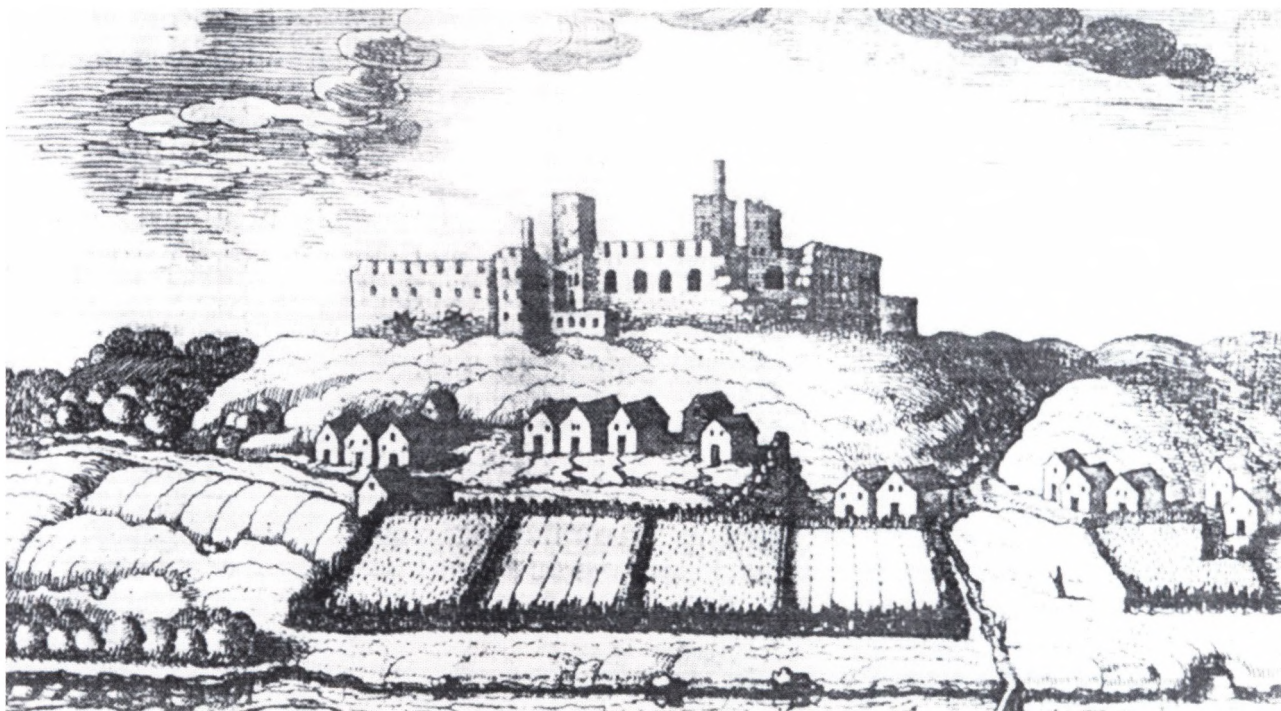


Fig. 2. Rakvere Castle, view facing east. After a 1615 drawing by Goeteeris.

Michael's, and the church of the Virgin Mary in the castle, which also fulfilled the role of cathedral, and accordingly there was no need at all to give the monastery church the additional function of a local parish church. Therefore the church was probably only used by members of the Order, performing the function which in many Franciscan monasteries was assigned to the choir. As there was no parish there was also no need for the otherwise obligatory pulpit, usually located in the middle of a longitudinal wall. The whole liturgical part of the services was limited to what took place at the altar(s).

3. Monastery Church

The church was placed in the southeast corner of the monastic complex (fig. 5) and had been shifted a little towards NE-SW from the traditional east-west orientation. Although the foundations of only three walls of the church, the north, the south and the east walls, could be opened during excavations, it has been possible to establish the outside length of the building at 18.85 m, and the outside width at 10.95 m. Considering the thickness of the walls (1.25-1.30 m), the interior was 16.25-16.35 m by 8.35-8.45 m or 138.2 square metres in area at the most. Inside, in

the middle of the east wall, was a foundation 207 cm by 67 cm built simultaneously with the foundations of the church and connected with them. The front of the altar mensa on it was 165 cm from the east wall, and behind there was a passage 55-60 cm wide. To the west of the northeast corner there was an opening in the church wall, by which the church was connected with a small room which very likely fulfilled the function of the vestry.

Further west of the opening was a projection on the inside wall, seconded by an analogous feature on the south wall. As the interior of the church was practically not studied at all, there was no later op-

portunity of connecting the two wall fragments, and accordingly, also of any more fundamental conclusions. On the basis of other, surviving Franciscan churches' ground plans (Scheerer 1910:19, RDK 1943:399, Altoa 1993:172), several possible functions can nevertheless be suggested. The projections could be either a) foundations of side altars, b) foundations of triumphal arches or c) foundations of a partition initially intended to separate the choir reserved for the monks from the rest of the church. Although no concrete information about the church floor was obtained during the excavations, it can be presumed that it was of regular limestone

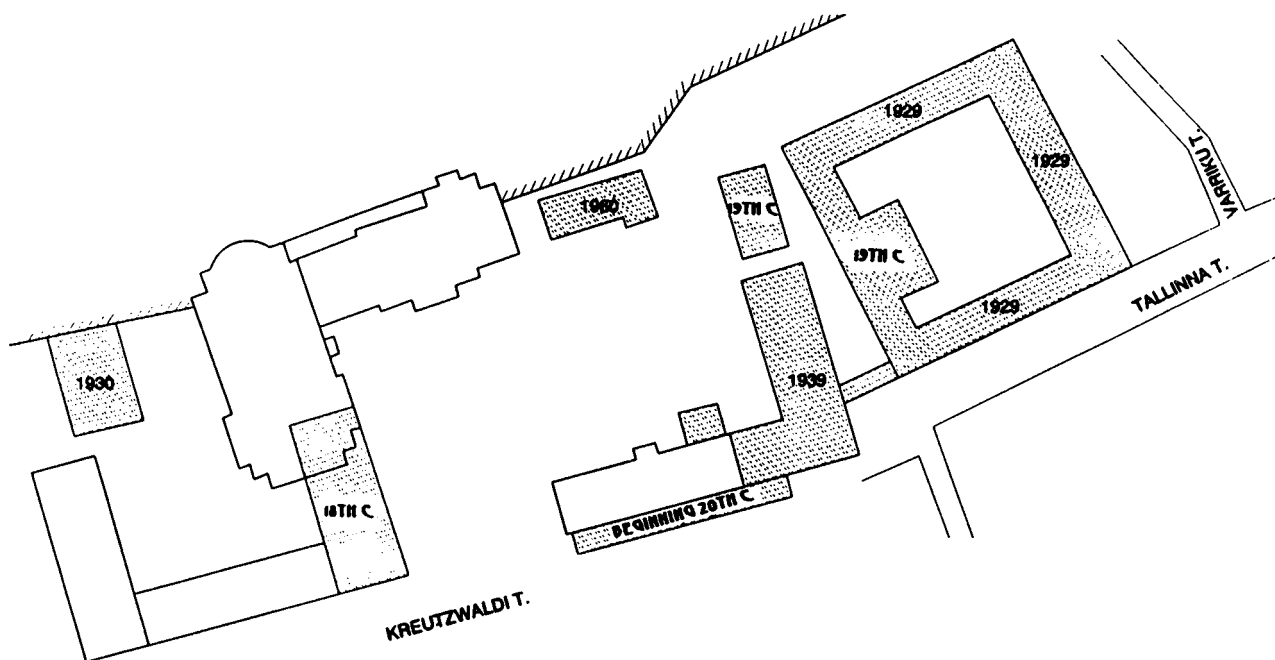


Fig. 3. Demolished buildings, 18th c. – 19th c. – beginning 20th c.

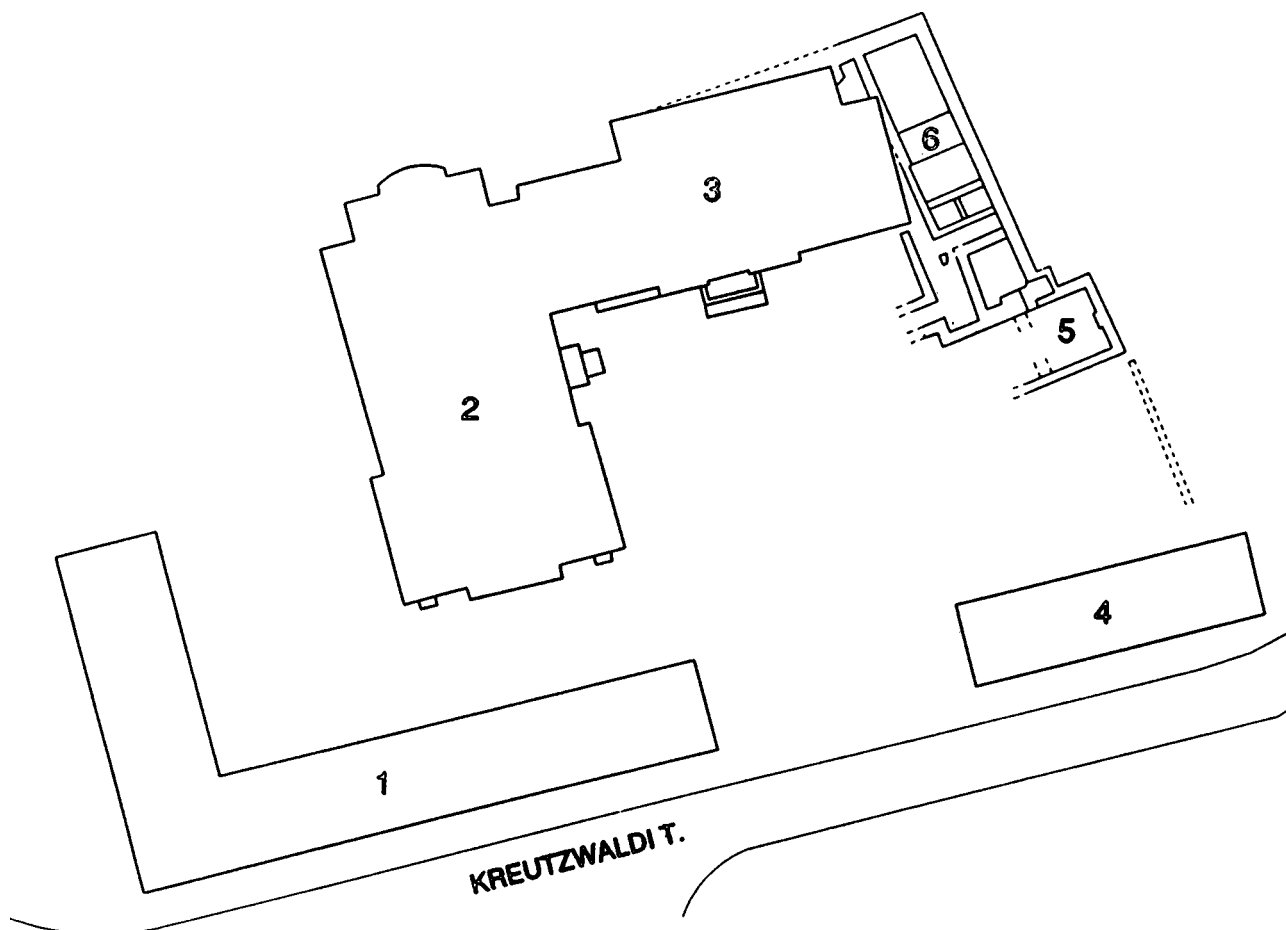


Fig. 4. 1. Manor storehouse – 2. Theatre – 3. Former manor hall (present community centre) – 4. Manor storehouse – 5. Monastery church – 6. East wing of monastery.

slabs, or of ceramic floor tiles like in Viljandi (Selirand 1981, Selirand 1982, Tamm 1991:205).

Deciding by broken stone surface on the interior sides of the north and the south walls, it was torn down in the course of later demolition work or the building of the manorial complex.

4. Vestry

As pointed out above, an opening penetrating the wall was situated in the northeastern section of the north wall. It connected the eastern part of the church with a two-bay room to the north of it. In fact, the western part of the latter served as a connection

between the church and a small interior yard and was in turn closed from the north. The floor of the room was made of regular limestone slabs of different sizes. Considering the way they had been laid, in a similar pattern from one end of the room to the other, as well as a certain roundness of the sides of the opening at the end closest the church, seemingly to facilitate movement, there may have been no door in the opening. But considering the functional connection of the room in question with a very secluded church which apparently was only used by the monastery's residents, there was no need for it either. The more valuable treasures and church vessels must have been kept in a closet built into in the eastern wall of the church, which had a ground plan of 0.75 by 0.85 metres and could be closed with a door.

5. Interior Yard

Between the church and the east wing rooms there was a slightly irregular (5.02 by 6.57 m) interior yard, closed on the east side by the monastery's east wall, and on the west by a room formed at the crossing of the east and the south ambulatories. Among other things, the function of the space as a yard is evident from its pavement in fine pebbles and a floor of pieces of limestone laid edgewise at an about 13° slant to the north – a gutter to take away rain and meltwater drained down from the roofs. Also a third door connecting the space with the basement rooms of the east wing opened on to the interior yard.

6. Basement of the East Wing

The length of the east wing uncovered in the course of the excavations was 26.65 m and can conditionally be said to have consisted of five rooms. The four

rooms lying farthest in the south were apparently also functionally connected. It is interesting to note that the basement was 3.66 m shorter on the inside than the east wing itself. This was caused by an abrupt drop in the relief, which means that the south wall of the east wing was built at the upper edge of the slope on a foundation that did not go very deep, while the basement itself was built under the slope, so as to cut back earthwork. Analogous attempts at economy are in evidence elsewhere in Estonian monasteries. So the east wing of the Pirita monastery, with a location on the slope of a river valley, is somewhat wider than the basement immediately underneath it.

Although the east wall of the east wing was of rather varying thickness (1.59 to 1.73 m) for its whole length, and not of very regular masonry, the general aspect of the wall (material, masonry technique etc.) leaves no doubt that it was laid simultaneously. The three southernmost rooms had beam ceilings and windows opening to the east. On the inside, these openings had upward slanting sills and correct carved frames on the outside.

Not all the basement rooms had similar ceilings. If the three southernmost rooms had beam ceilings, then the central one had a barrel vault, its longitudinal axis arranged rectangularly to the side walls of the east wing.

The northernmost, most monumental basement room of the east wing must have been where the building of the complex started. From there builders moved up the hill as far as the church on the highest level, with a difference of 3.07 m between the presumable floor of the church and that of the basement.

7. North Wing

Considering the joints in the side walls of the east wing and between the north wall there are grounds to believe that at least the foundations of the north wall, which also served as the north boundary of the monastery, had been completed when the east wing was built. The said north wall in its 14 m long open part was exceedingly thick as compared to other walls of the monastic complex, up to 3.32 m in the section extending to the east of the northeast corner of the complex. This can only be explained by the builders' inexperience or a correction made in the original ground plan. As the north wing continues under the present house of culture, the problems connected with it will be for future field investigators to solve. This also applies to the question whether we have to do with a basement in the case of the north wing, or, considering the difference in altitude, the ground floor.

8. East Ambulatory

Immediately after the basement rooms of the east and the north wings were completed, builders could move on to the ground floor rooms and ambulatories to connect the different rooms and wings of the monastic complex. Of these the ambulatory proceeding along the interior side of the east wall could only be opened in a 8.3 m long section. The southern part of its west wall was destroyed, and the northern section had been dismantled when the manor hall was built. On the basis of the uncovered section it was possible to define the width of the ambulatory (2 metres) and to establish that its west wall had, as a measure of economy, a post foundation connected by means of arches.

9. South Ambulatory

Only a section 3 metres long was uncovered of the south ambulatory which joined the east wing in a small room on the north side of the church. The ambulatory was paved with regular limestone slabs and was 2.15 meters wide.

10. Other Monastic Period Built Remains

As shown by field work in different parts of Theatre Hill (Toos 1990, Aus 1991), there are more remains connected with the monastic buildings still in the ground. So an east-west-oriented wall fragment at the northwest corner of the house of culture may belong to the north wing of the monastery. Wall fragments uncovered in the yard of the house of culture in connection with the laying of sewage and oil pipes in 1960 (Kirss 1989:2) and others opened near the same site in 1990 (Toos 1991) should belong to the west and the south wings. Definition of their role in the monastery's ground plan will be a job for future field investigators. The same applies to the building and settlement remains opened between the house of culture and Kreutzwaldi Street which may be part of the monastery's household yard. Finally, there is the problem of the burials excavated on the east side of the monastic complex and how they connect with a possible former monastic cemetery.

11. In Conclusion

As it appears from the above, the buildings of St. Michael's monastery in Rakvere were spread over an area measuring 47 metres from north to south and about 55 metres from east to west. Only the existence of the church, the east wing and the north wing can be asserted with any certainty. Of the west wing we only know a few isolated wall fragments which

have not been definitely connected with the ground plan. Of the south wing, we can only assert the existence of an ambulatory. There is also no doubt that there was an inner yard between the open ambulatories and the wings of the complex. As pointed out above, the monastery's church was situated at the southeast corner of the cloister and projected eastward from the rest of the east wing, as indeed from the rest of the buildings. Besides, it was not very precisely oriented. The only reason for this could have been the nature of the terrain. The unarticulated, one-nave building, which apparently had beam ceilings, was similar in size to respective buildings in Riga (Reinberg 1890:22).

Franciscan mendicant friars had no building organization comparable to that of the Cistercians. Therefore they had to make do with local builders. That these were not of particularly high standards either for their knowledge or skills is evident from the centuries-long building history of the Rakvere castle. As we know from the building history of the local church, master builders were brought from Tallinn (in 1400 and 1427) when there was some very demanding work to be carried out.

The above negative attitude of the Tallinn Town Hall may have been the reason why no experienced master builders were sent down from Tallinn, and the level of local builders left a lot to be desired, at least as far as laying out the ground plan and building the foundations was concerned. At the same time, changes in the ground plan seem to have been quite frequent in Old Livonia's monastic architecture in general.

On the other hand the use of a post foundation with connecting arches shows understanding which can only be acquired by experience.

The above was only a brief look at a part of a monastic complex built by the Franciscan mendicant friars in Estonia, to which only future field investigations can add any significant information.

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