

Preface

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Access

The reader senses immediately that there is a story behind each of the countless photographs in this book. The reason lies in the rigorous isolation of its subject: corbelled dome structures. These are buildings topped with stone domes constructed with a technique based not on a keystone but rather on corbelling, in which each successively higher layer is offset to produce inward vaulting. This technique is widespread in all parts of Europe where stones are abundant as well as in the Middle East.

The author Renate Löbbecke points out that this technique depends on an abundance of stones in soil intended to be used for agriculture. Correspondingly, the impulse came less from a desire for buildings than for a place to put the stones. In order to clear the earth of stones for agriculture to produce sufficient farmland, it was necessary to place the stones in as compact a space as possible. The lack of wood and the surplus of stones acted together, so that the accumulated stone depots were hollowed out, as it were, to offer protective spaces. Corbelled dome structures are not so much responses to a lack as products of excess.

This accounts for the specific way these buildings relate spatially to their surroundings. As they are built, they create an empty space around them that can be used for agriculture; their isolation is an essential feature of their function. Because many of the sometimes impassable terrains used

for agriculture have since been deserted, corbelled dome buildings are, as a rule, not only isolated but also abandoned, and this makes access to them as difficult as it is attractive. From the first line of the book, the author enables the reader to participate in an adventure in these rough regions in provincial Spain, Sicily, or Syria to seek out the evidence of a rural style of architecture. In general, she had to travel to uninviting areas, in order to stumble upon the buildings documented only after long exploration and then photograph them. Anyone who has undertaken similar searches in the secluded regions of Spain will scarcely be able to forget the solitude and calm they convey to the wandering researcher. The question arises whether the buildings presumed the travels or the travels presumed the buildings. In any case, the book offers a wonderful impression not only of the subject of the architecture brought together here but also of its ambience. In this dual play, the reader is given to understand, lies the inspiration for writing it.

Dating and Determination

The technique of corbelled dome buildings dates back to the fifth millennium BC. It would be tempting to define it as the absolute ur-form of architecture, because it is constructed without mortar, without supporting frame, and without any other aids. Renate Löbbecke refused to take such an anthropological approach to her subject matter—demonstrating the clarity of her architectural research. She limits herself strictly to the more recent history of this architectural form, which can be sporadically dated by documents and inscriptions since the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century, so that the complete corpus can be categorized, at least in outline. It was presumably the shortage of trees that began in the eighteenth century that led to stone being used rather than wood to construct simple buildings to offer farmworkers and shepherds housing or even simple shelter outside of the cities.

The author points out that the technique of corbelled dome structures is by no means a lower architectural form; rather, the finesse of layering stones testifies to considerable experience working with this material. Moreover, the various architectural types are marked by a conscious *Kunstwollen* that extends across an astonishingly broad geographical and cultural horizon. There are by no means primitive buildings; rather, they are complex buildings produced by anonymous workers, whose intuition is all the more impressive given that they were constructed without technological aids.

Style

When addressing the starting point of the eighteenth century, we are addressing an era that extends from the Baroque by way of the Rococo to classicism and the elementary architectural forms of the architecture of the French Revolutionary period. It would be rewarding to compare the various architectural types from an extended period and broad geographic horizon that Renate Löbbecke has found and analyzed to stylistic forms. Stereometric forms, austere in their isolation, bring to mind above all the architecture of the Revolution, whose tone was set by Claude Nicholas Ledoux's *Maison des Gardes Agricoles*: a spherical structure that was to be placed in the middle of the landscape. The question also arises whether Giovanni Battista Piranesi, for example, had such stone domes in mind when reconstructing Etruscan buildings. It is conceivable that his fetishism with stone—demonstrated, say, by his reconstruction of the Etruscan city of Cora—resulted from experience with an abundance of stone, which he might have encountered in the form of corbelled dome buildings in agricultural fields when he was exploring ancient ruins in Latium.

But these things must remain speculation. The author is refreshingly restrained when it comes to speculative interpretation of the rich materials from her decades of explorations. She sticks to the period of the eighteenth and especially nineteenth century and refrains from any psychological interpretations of the sort offered by, say, Guido Kaschnitz von Weinberg, who confronted the phallic column with the womblike dome as basic psychological components of Mediterranean architecture in his *Die mittelmeerischen Grundlagen der antiken Kunst* (The Mediterranean foundations of ancient art) (1944). This restraint accounts for the wealth of this work. It reconstructs a complex technique that resulted from a shortage of wood and a wealth of stone, producing highly differentiated forms that were deliberately employed in systematic placement in their environment. This book is an impressive demonstration of how a researcher not associated with an academic department at a university can make a vocation out of her passion for a subject. This is a work capable of brilliantly revealing a basic motif of building.

This book covers an anonymous construction method in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that can be compared to today's favelas in the megalomaniacal cities of Central and South America. The latter too are elementary building elements erected without offering precise instructions to architects. What is true of corbelled dome buildings applies to them as well:

buildings based on experience, not the teachings of academies and technical colleges, but not without technical skill that have formed their own style. The municipal government in Rio de Janeiro has currently stopped demolishing these “unauthorized” housing colonies and is instead reinforcing them and slowly leading them toward sustainability. This is spontaneous architecture, produced without regard to any regulations but nevertheless with considerable concision. The author has explored a similar field in the rural areas of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries.

From Gottfried Semper's *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* (translated as *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*) (1860–62) by way of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* (1964), Hans Soeder's *Urformen der abendländischen Baukunst in Italien und dem Alpenraum* (Ur-forms of Western architecture in Italy and the Alpine region) (1964), and Heinrich Klotz's *Von der Urhütte zum Wolkenkratzer* (From the primitive hut to the skyscraper) (1991), to the terminologically decisive article “Kragwölbung und Kragkuppel” (Corbelled vault and corbelled dome) by Franz Josef Hamm—*Bonner Jahrbücher* 174 (1974): 299–335—there have been sporadic attempts to explore this architectural genre or at least to mention it in passing, to say nothing of remarkable examples of regional research. But the present book offers a summa that cannot be compared to anything previously—and we can only congratulate Renate Löbbecke for the work of a lifetime.