

The founding of the Central Cathedral Construction Society at Cologne 1840/42

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“Here, where the foundation stone lies, there, together with these spires, the most beautiful gates in all the world shall arise”¹ It was with this hope that the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795-1861), together with the Archbishop’s co-adjunct Johannes von Geissel (1796-1864), laid the foundation stone for the re-commenced construction of the Cologne Cathedral on September 4th 1842.

However, the financing of this ambitious project, styled a national task, far exceeded the means of the Prussian state and its dome-enthusiast King. Although it was already recorded in the concordat for the re-establishment of the Cologne Diocese in 1821 that the Prussian state would bear the building costs incurred for the dome, this merely referred to the maintenance of the then current construction activities. From 1823 onwards an annual sum of 10.000 Taler (from 1826-1829, even 12.000 Taler) was made available.² Part of this money was raised by means of the cathedral-tax introduced in 1826. An appropriate amount had to be paid at baptisms, marriages, and funerals, but the hoped for revenue clearly fell short of expectations.

Under these conditions, although there was no lack of calls for the completion of the dome, this could hardly be considered. Already in 1814 there appeared in the *Rheinischer Merkur* a passionate appeal for completion by the Coblenz private-scholar Joseph von Görres (1776–1848), who conceived of the completion of the gothic Cathedral at Cologne as the creation of a German national monument for the liberation from French rule. „ In it having been abandoned [the work on the dome] was an image of Teutschland in linguistic confusion and disordered thought; similarly it will become the symbol of the new empire we wish to build!”³

Yet also Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) - who had been converted to admiration of the cathedral through his personal contact with the art collector Sulpiz Boisserée (1783–1854), son of a Cologne merchant, and who had in due time been commissioned for a report on the art treasures on the Rhine - was of the conviction that it was only the continued construction of the dome

¹ Address given by the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV at the celebrations of the laying of the foundation stone of the continued construction of the Cathedral on September 4th 1842, as cited in: *Kölner Domblatt*, Nr. 11 (Dienstag, 6. September 1842).

² Wolff, “150 Jahre Zentral-Dombau-Verein”, 12. By order of the cabinet of October 22nd 1825, the Prussian King even granted a subsidy of 15.000 Taler annually for the years 1826–1829, as cited in Ennen, *Der Dom zu Köln von seinem Beginne bis zu seiner Vollendung*, 120.

³ *Rheinischer Merkur*, Nr. 151 (Sonntag, 20. November 1814), as cited in: Wacker, “Der Traum vom Nationaldenkmal”, 99-100.

which could guarantee its permanent preservation. In his journal *Über Kunst und Altertum* [On Art and Antiquity] published together with Johann Heinrich Meyer (1760-1832) in 1816, Goethe finally raised anew “the daring question” “whether the right point in time had not arrived to contemplate the continued construction of such a work”⁴

Yet this endeavor, apart from the idealism that certainly did exist for it, required one thing above all else: large sums of money. Shortly after coming into office the cathedral’s master builder [Dombaumeister] Ernst Friedrich Zwirner (1802-1861)⁵ projected that a sum of 100.000 Taler would be required every year (which amounted to a total expense of 2 million Taler, or, if certain expenses were cut, 1.2 million) if the work was to be finished in a more or less foreseeable timeframe. Even under these conditions the Prussian government in Berlin signaled its willingness to contribute half of this sum. It now became imperative to find donors for the remaining 50.000 Taler a year, and thus the idea for a society for the advancement of the completion of the cathedral slowly began to take shape among the citizenry of Cologne.

Even though the question concerning the spiritual authorship of a society for the construction of the dome can no longer unequivocally be resolved⁶, such a proposal seems to have been formulated for the first time in 1837, by the governmental and consistory councilor Johann Vincenz Josef Bracht († 1840). More concrete were the efforts made by Government assessor Eberhard von Groote (1789–1864) of Cologne, and his “Thursday Winter-association” [“Donnerstägige Wintergesellschaft”], which in the fall of the year 1833, petitioned Friedrich Wilhelm III to be granted permission for a society for the completion of the cathedral. However, due to his general skepticism towards all bourgeois associations, this request to the Prussian King fell on deaf ears.

Finally it was the lawyer August Reichensperger (1808–1895)⁷ from Coblenz, who, by means of an anonymous pamphlet published on June 7th 1840, with the title “Some words on the construction of the cathedral of Cologne, addressed by a Rhinelander to his countrymen” [*Einige Worte über den Dombau zu Köln, von einem Rheinländer an seine Landsleute gerichtet*] attempted to reach a larger public with his idea for a central society in Cologne with country-wide branch-associations.

With the inauguration of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who as crown prince had already shown great interest in the projected renovation of the cathedral, the right point in time seemed to have arrived to translate the idea of a Cologne – based society for the construction of the Dome into action.

⁴ As cited in Stemmel, “Der deutsche Dom und die deutschen Dichter”, 172. cf. also Schmitz van Vorst, “Goethe, der Kölner Dom und seine Vollendung”.

⁵ Cf. Weyres, “Ernst Friedrich Zwirner”; Pilger und Steiner, “Ernst Friedrich Zwirner - Sein Leben, sein Werk, seine Zeit”.

⁶ The Rheindorf priest Heinrich Wilhelm Prisac already pursued this line of inquiry in his article in the *Domblatt* of 1857: „Wer ist, oder wer sind die Gründer des Kölner Dombau-Vereins?“

⁷ On August Reichensperger cf. also Udo Liessem’s contribution to this volume. On Reichensperger’s relationship to the dome of Cologne, cf. Rolf Lauer, “...der Traum meiner Jugend”. August Reichensperger und der Kölner Dom”.

A first initiative taken by the appeal court judge Bernhard von Gerolt, who, by means of a few copies of his handwritten “Pamphlet on the renewed Dome-construction” [*Denkschrift zum Fortbau des Domes*], succeeded in gathering around him a small, elite circle of Cologne Citizens for the purpose of founding a Cathedral-building-association, was, due to internal strife, ultimately doomed to failure. The dictum von Gerolt used as an epigraph for his writ, however, “Concordia et perserverantia res parvae crescent” (Concord and perseverance make small things grow) left its mark at least on the motto of the Central dome-construction Society “Concord and perseverance” [*Eintracht und Ausdauer*].⁸

It was only by means of the right of appeal of the so called “*Immediat-Eingabe*” [direct submission], - a type of petition that made it possible to appeal directly to the King – that 202 respected citizens of Cologne, who had gathered at Cologne City Hall on the 3rd of September 1840 under the leadership of the influential Cologne entrepreneur Heinrich von Wittgenstein (1797–1869)⁹, succeeded in requesting permission directly from the king for the foundation of an association for the continued construction of the dome. Its success did not have long to wait, for only two and a half months later, on the 23rd of November of the same year, the path was clear. Friedrich Wilhelm IV not only granted the eagerly anticipated permission; he also presaged further financial support. After further meetings of the now finally successful friends of the cathedral’s construction, the election of a “preparatory committee” for the foundation proper of the society, and the drawing up of a statute by a commission of five, a general assembly of all of those who had so far been involved could finally be called on April 13th 1841. Barring some minor alterations the statutes were ratified and immediately passed on to the King. In Coblenz, on June 16th 1841, already before the official foundation of the society, August Reichensperger founded one of the cathedral Construction Aid Societies that were to be so numerous later on.

Finally, in a decree from the 28th of December 1841, Friedrich Wilhelm IV let it be known that “I have not discovered any objections to the statutes of the Society for the construction of the dome at Cologne submitted with your report on the 28th of May of this year - which is hereby returned – and herewith grant it my approval by, at the same time and in accordance with the request expressed in §2 of the statutes, accepting the protectorate for the society” – and thereby, as it were, he gave instruction for the official foundation of the society.¹⁰ The cathedral’s master builder Zwirner also interpreted this “Highest directive of the cabinet” [*Allrhöchst Cabinets-Ordre*] as a most welcome invitation to continue the construction of the cathedral.

⁸ The words “Eintracht”[Concord] and “Ausdauer” [Perseverance] were embroidered in gothic lettering on the almost 4 meter long processional flag of the Central Dome Construction Society, cf. Schäfer, “Die Fahne des Zentral-Dombau-Vereins”.

⁹ For a biography, cf. von Wedel, *Heinrich von Wittgenstein 1797-1869. Unternehmer und Politiker in Köln*.

¹⁰ As cited in : *Vorbericht zum Kölner Domblatt*, Beilage C, Nr. 26.

Institutionalization

In Cologne the intensive recruitment of members started immediately. The statutes of the society were published in the newspaper, and an edition of 10.000 copies was distributed to all Cologne homes. Lists in which future members of the societies could register were made available at various places in the city, including Cologne city hall and the municipal museum. The goal of the society was succinctly and unmistakably stated in the first paragraph of the statutes: “Under the name ‘Cathedral Construction Society’ is formed in Cologne a society which has as its purpose to participate actively in the continued construction of the catholic dome cathedral church in Cologne according to its original plans, by means of the contribution of monetary support and in every other appropriate fashion”¹¹ In particular with regard to simplifications, for example leaving out buttressing, or adding any modernizations, the society was almost always able to assert itself by reference to the statutes signed by the king concerning the extension of the dome according to its original plans.¹²

The first general assembly of the Cologne Cathedral Construction Society took place February 14th 1842 in Cologne Gürzenich. 3.327 registered members took part in the election of the executive committee; yet on the same day the number of members rose to almost 5000.

The executive committee consisting of 40 people elected Heinrich von Wittgenstein to be the first president of the society. August Reichesperger became acting secretary. He also called into existence the *Kölner Domblatt* which, appearing at first weekly, and then once a month from 1845 onward, quickly developed into one of the most important art journals of its time.¹³ As a supplement to the *Kölnischen Zeitung* the *Domblatt* enjoyed a wide circulation in German speaking domains, making the dome construction society increasingly well known in all of Germany, and causing more and more country-wide aid and support societies to come into existence. The Bavarian Cologne Cathedral Construction Society made an exceptionally large financial contribution, its statutes having already been granted King Ludwig I’s approval on January 20th 1842.

If on September 4th 1842, the day of the laying of the foundation stone, the number of aid societies had already risen to 70, this number was to even more than double during the course of the year. Nor did the founding of such societies remain restricted to Germany, as funds for the continued construction of Cologne Cathedral were collected in many other European metropolises, such as Paris and Rome. For the most part such initiatives had to be ascribed to

¹¹ Taken from the “Statut des Dombau-Vereins zu Köln”, as cited in: *Kölner Domblatt*, Nr. 1 (Sonntag, 3. Juli 1842)

¹² The steel roof truss from 1859/60 was to be the only exception.

¹³ The last edition of the *Kölner Domblattes* as the “official communiqué of the Central Cathedral Construction Society” appeared in 1892. In 1948 the *Domblatt* was re-founded as the *Jahrbuch des Zentral-Dombau-Vereins*.

Germans living abroad. The designation “Zentral-Dombau-Verein” [Central Cathedral Construction Society] which enjoys common currency today, but which had not been foreseen in the statutes of the society, is apparently a neologism coined by Count Egon von Fürstenberg-Stammheim (1797-1859),¹⁴ who, in April 1842, registered all 500 orphans of Cologne for full membership and, by use of the term in a letter to that extent, sought to distinguish the Cologne society from the manifold aid-societies that had arisen in the meantime. The membership fee of one Taler (ca. 140 €) per year was not exactly small¹⁵, which is why in the city of Cologne many ‘Joint Cathedral Construction Societies’ [*gesellige Dombau Vereine*] came to be created, whose members shared one membership for the Central Cathedral Construction Society.¹⁶ On the other hand, single individuals, such as for example Duke Prosper-Ludwig von Arenberg, for decades submitted greater annual fees of up to a 1000 Taler. According to the Statutes, so-called “*Vereins-Gedenkzeichen*” [commemorative society insignia] – mostly etches of views of the dome in its various phases of construction, from 1872 onwards also in the form of photographs – were foreseen as a recognition of membership fees paid on time, and were distributed to all members every three years. In 1845 the number of members had almost reached the magical limit of 10.000, and so the general assembly on the 28th of May 1845 had to be held under the open sky, to the east of the dome’s choir on the Frankenplatz.

In the year 1846 the society could provide in excess of 86.000 Taler to the continued construction of the cathedral, due to its high membership and large single donations. Yet already 1849 witnessed a dramatic collapse in incoming funds. In the years that followed, the continued existence of the society was mainly vouchsafed by representatives of Cologne industry; in particular the Insurance company Colonia and the Cologne-Mindener Railway. From 1864 onwards an additional average of 150.000 Taler flowed into the societies’ coffers from the proceeds of the Cathedral Construction Lottery, initially labeled “collected premiums”.¹⁷

Although over the years the percentage share of costs, carried respectively by the Prussian state and the Central Cathedral Construction Society, regularly shifted from one side to the other, away from the original 50% of the total cost, ultimately only a small third of the total building cost of 6.628.000 Taler was covered by the Prussian state, whereas in excess of two thirds of the costs were supported by the proceeds of the Central Cathedral Construction Society.

¹⁴ Conrad, “Franz Egon von Fürstenberg- Stammheim (1797-1859)”.

¹⁵ On this point also cf., Pilger, *Zentral-Dombau-Verein 1840/42*, 78, note 215.

¹⁶ On the numerous “Joint Cathedral Construction Societies” that were set up in various districts of Cologne, cf. Herres, “Dombaubewegung, Vereinsgedanke und Katholizismus im Vormärz”, 70ff.

¹⁷ On the Cologne Cathedral Construction lottery also cf. Wolff, *Dombau in Köln. Photographien dokumentieren die Vollendung einer Kathedrale*; Wolff, “150 Jahre Zentral-Dombau-Verein”, 24–6.

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