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The chapel of Corpus Christi in prague's New Town in the pre-hussite period – two small studies

ANNOTATION

This article addresses two aspects of the history of the chapel of *Corpus Christi*, which until 1791 stood in the middle of the Charles Square in Prague's New Town. The chapel was founded between 1382 and 1393 from the initiative of the confraternity in the sign of the of Circle and Hammer and put under the patronage of Body and Blood of the Lord, Blessed Virgin Mary and Sts. Felix and Adautus. The author queries why the chapel was consecrated to Sts. Felix and Adautus, whose cult did not proliferate in Bohemia and in Central Europe until mid-14th century. The second analysis seeks to uncover the location, from which the relics were displayed during feasts of *ostenko reliquiarum*, which took place in Prague since the mid-1350s until 1420.

SUMMARY

This article addresses two aspects of the history of the chapel of *Corpus Christi*, which until 1791 stood in the middle of the Charles Square in Prague's New Town. The chapel was founded between 1382 and 1393 by the confraternity in the sign of the of Circle and Hammer and put under the patronage of Body and Blood of the Lord, Blessed Virgin Mary and Sts. Felix and Adautus. The author queries why the chapel was consecrated to Sts. Felix and Adautus, whose cult did not proliferate in Bohemia and in Central Europe until mid-14th century.

In the Empire, the relics of these Roman catacomb martyrs were venerated in the Benedictine nunnery monastery in Erstein in Alsace (starting in 850) and in the collegiate church of the Holy Apostles in Cologne (starting in 1024). We have only fragmentary information about the fate of the relics, but parts of both relics were probably acquired from Erstein in 1353 by the Roman and Czech king Charles IV and were documented at Karlštejn Castle 1515. In Bohemia, the impact of the cult can be traced through the patronage of chapels and altars, recorded in the episcopal registers of benefice foundations (*Libri erectionum*). In the Prague archbishopric, eleven new chapels and altars that contained a foundation for Sts. Felix and Adautus were founded between 1351–1407 (see the register of benefices in the article's appendix.)

Drawing on these registers as well as on literary and iconographic evidence about the cult of both saints, the author concludes that Sts. Felix and Adautus (in Old Czech Sts. Šťastný /Happy/ and Sbožný /Rich, Powerfull/) were venerated as the patron saints of happiness and wealth, especially by the burgher elite in Prague and in some royal towns (České Budějovice, Čáslav, Kutná Hora, Olomouc).

Is is, therefore, likely that the saints were selected for the foundation of the *Corpus Christi* chapel by several patricians from the Old Town, members of the confraternity of Circle and Hammer. Their preference for Sts. Felix and Adautus – as a complement to a *Corpus Christi* cult, which was at the time very popular in Bohemia – is a window into the religious world of the urban elite. This world could accommodate not only a special patronage ensuring worldly pleasures but also an adoration of Fortuna as an assurance of favorable life fortunes (wealth, power, happiness). Both the courtly milieu and the burghers from Prague's Old Town were no strangers to capricious fortune. It was no accident that the building in Old Town Square (No. 502) with the house sign featuring fortuna belonged to the family of Benešovský (since 1363), whence came also Hána Benešovský, the co-foudner of the chapel of *Corpus Christi*.

The second analysis seeks to uncover the location, from which the relics were displayed during feasts of *ostensio reliquiarum*, which took place in Prague since the mid-1350s until 1420.

The founders of critical art history, history and church historiography of the later 19th century, faithful to the wording of the papal document from 1397 (MUCP 1834, 342–345, Nr. 38) distinguished between the newly- built chapel of *Corpus Christi* and a new stand-alone tower, which was established instead of the original wooden construction (first mentioned in 1372) for the purpose of relic display. However, the prevailing opinion in the relevant literature in art history from 1970s was that the relics were displayed from the (balcony of the) tower, which was a part of the

chapel of *Corpus Christi*. Based on historiography from the end of the 19th century, the author concludes, having analyzed four sources from 1397, 1408, 1414, 1418, that the relics were displayed from a special structure (*turris reliquiarum*), a tower, first made from wood and later, after 1397, from stone, which was adjacent to the chapel of *Corpus Christi*. This structure disappeared without a trace at the beginning of the 16th century at the latest, after it lost the purpose for which it had originally been intended.

Fig. 1. Michael Petrele 1562: PRAGA BOHEMIAE METROPOLIS ACCVRATISSIME EXPRESSA. 1.5.6.2. – cut: view of the Charles Square and the surrounding area, the circle denotes *Corpus Christi* Chapel. Panoramic view of Prague by Michael Peterle (?) – so-called Wrocław's Prospectus. The original published by Jan Kozel and Michael Peterle, printed by Jan Kozel. (Color Photolithography/ published by the Prague commune and printed by Unie 1904; stored in Prague City Archives, Collection of Prints, sign. G 1.

Fig. 2. Herget's Plan of Prague, shortly before 1791 – cut: view of the Charles Square with location and groundplan of *Corpus Christi* Chapel. Franz Leonard Herget / Karl Lutz / Johannes Oppelt, Grundris der Kay. König. HauptStadt Prag im Königreich Böhmen unter ... Leopold des Ilten. (stored in Prague City Archives, Collection of Maps and Plans, sign. MAP P 1 B/1).

Fig. 3. J. D. Huber 1769: Ortographic plan of Prague in cavalier perspective – cut: view of the northern side of the Charles Square with the *Corpus Christi* Chapel. Josef Daniel Huber, Wahre Laage Der Königlichen Haupt und Residentz statt Prag, 1769, ink drawing (original: Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek; copy: Prague City Archives, Collection of Photographs, sign. X 18318).

Fig. 4. Peter Vischer (?), Nürnberg 1487: woodcut depicting a wooden balcony, used for annual displays of the Passion relics and imperial insignia in Nürnberg after 1424. The woodcut is a part of the so-called Heiltumsbüchlein (stored in Staatsarchiv Nürnberg). Adapted from Schramm 1935, Nr. 636, Tab. 92.

English by Marcela K. Perett