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Revisited after 65 Years: The First Building Phase of the Church of the Virgin Mary at Prague Castle, Hradčany

ANNOTATION

The Church of the Virgin Mary, the latest discovery among the churches at Prague Castle known from written sources, was investigated at the very beginning of the 1950s. Attempts at finding its location date back to the interwar period, and it was around 1930 that Ivan Borkovský found the first indication of a building he was later to identify as St Mary's Church. Since the first publication of his investigation in 1950, it has been clear that the location and building do not conform to the idea conveyed by the written sources. This contribution seeks to define the place the church was erected at, to suggest a new reconstruction of its first building phase, including the architectural context, and to open a debate on the questions that have arisen from this new reconstruction.

SUMMARY

The reconstruction of the original physical relief in the area of the Church of the Virgin Mary was made possible only by the evaluation of the – only partially published – documentation from the timespan between the 1920s and 1930s and the last revision in 1995. The study of the foundation of the first construction, beginning with the bedrock of Aeolian-deluvial sediments and sediments that scholarly literature has named 'culturalized soils'. The finding situation does not allow to unambiguously identifying an intact soil type or any remains of the original soil horizons. The original surface in the immediate neighbourhood of the building appears to have been almost horizontal. In the broader context, it is situated on the northern edge of the slightly inclined Hradčany ridge.

The re-excavation of 1995–96 listed the following elements as belonging to the first building phase: a part of the foundation walls and a part of the aboveground walls of the apse on the north side, the north-eastern nave corner and the 'tomb', which, however, has falsely been described as a subsoil construction. The summary of the finding situation shows that the first building phase was founded on an already existing cultural layer; at least one grave is located beneath it and its interior displays an aboveground sarcophagus, into which the grave ascribed to Prince Spytihněv I and his spouse was later inserted, i.e. in 915, marking the end of the first phase. These facts shed light on the overall architectural development; most probably the sequence of buildings was as follows: a church, a surrounding cemetery, in which a mausoleum with walled sarcophagus was erected; this mausoleum was independent or attached to the main church.

The first interpretation connected the first building phase, in accordance with the later medieval accounts, with the figure of Duke Bořivoj (who founded the church in the 880s, and died in 889/890). Its end was marked by the additional burial, whose dating to the 910s is based not only on its identification with Spytihněv I but also on the jewellery it contained. The chronology of the constructions and burials has been delimited by a timespan of 20–25 years, and seems too short. If the jewellery and the identification of the buried persons of the later grave do not allow a dating later in the 10th century, we have to look out for an earlier foundation. An earlier historical event, to which the foundation can be related, is the baptism of Bohemian dukes in Regensburg in the mid-9th century.

Not only does the reconstruction of individual building phases of the Church of the Virgin Mary but also the specification of its location on the Hradčany ridge clearly show that we have to revalue our view of the oldest settlement of this area and of the whole of Prague Castle; we also have to revisit the original ideas of Ivan Borkovský. We will have to carefully investigate the surroundings of St Mary's Church including the Hradčanské Square, especially its northern half up to Kanovnická Street. We are convinced that it will be possible to connect this settlement with additional features found in the eastern part of the Prague Castle spur.

Fig. 1. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; ground plan and the location of the church within Prague Castle (A – inserted into the cadastral map by Ivana Herichová; B – into the orthographical map by M. Ďurica, 2015).

Fig. 2. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; Ivan Borkovský and Jaroslav Böhm are discussing the older and younger building phase of the apse (beginning of the 1950s, Archive of the Institute of Archaeology, Prague, Department Prague Castle)

Fig. 3. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; interior from the west (beginning of the 1950s, Archive of the Institute of Archaeology, Prague, negative No. 6449)

Fig. 4. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; V–V' cross section, transversal section of the church (north–south); The original terrain section displaying the history of the church appeared after dismantling the foundations of the Theresian corridor wall, which had disturbed the church (after Borkovský 1953, p. 165, fig. 20). **1** – the youngest floor of marlite slabs; **2** – yellow soil, in which the marlite slabs were tiled; **3** – underlay of marlite debris to inforce the yellow soil; **4** – reddened soil as underlay for the clay floor; **5** – flat stones of marlite laid obliquely to inforce the underlay of the clay floor; **6** – water-laid yellow layer; **7** – mortar layer; **8** – backfill of compact yellow soil; **9** – water-laid dark layer; **10** – water-laid yellow soil; **11** – fragments of mortar, plaster and marlite interspersed with soil from the demolished tomb; **12** – water-laid black soil with pieces of mortar, interspersed with a thin layer of yellow soil; **13** – mortar layer, the original pavement of the tomb; **14** – yellow soil; **15** – pavement of the tomb damaged by the construction of the south wall of the grave; **16** – black humus, in which the church and the graves were founded; **17** – walls of the later grave; **18** – backfill interspersed with mortar and small marlite fragments, following the construction of the tomb; **19** – plaster on the wall of the older tomb; contemporary with the younger grave; **20** – north wall of the tomb; **21** – black soil and marlite; **22** – black humus on the skeletons in the grave; **23** – evened mortar bottom of the younger grave; **24** – north wall of the younger church; **25** – clayish backfill from the time after the dismantling of the church; **26** – marlite debris; **27** – backfill with slate; **28** – burnt marlite and charcoals from the fire of the church; **29** – natural ground; **30** – shoulder bones in the section of the younger grave; **31** – foundations of the older church.

Fig. 5. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; view of the east part of the church; The walls of tomb as well as of the later burial are clearly visible; debris of the altar on the right (photo by J. Frolík, 1995; Archive of the Institute of Archaeology, Prague, negative No. 90182)

Fig. 6. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; model of the uncovered structures connected with the first building phase of St Mary's Church within the younger church and the apse; **dark grey** – older building phase of the apse and the north-east nave corner; **light blue** – tomb (reconstruction); **dark blue** – younger grave; **ochre** – floor level of the tomb and the joint between the overground and foundation walls of the older building phase of the apse (model based on the results in Frolík et al. 2000 and on the author's idea, processed by Geo-cz, 2015)

Fig. 7. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; ground plan of the preserved remains of the walls in the area of the church, measurements from 1995; floor in the sections C (fig. 8), B1 (fig. 10) and the transversal section through the church (V–V', fig. 4) reconstructed by Ivan Borkovský in the 1950s. **Dark grey** – older building phase; **light grey** – younger building phase (church); **blue** – tomb. (Based on the measurements by Geo-cz processed by Ivana Herichová, 2015.)

Fig. 8. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; Cross section C, context 105 – floor of the younger church; 120 – Aeolian-deluvial sediments (brown); 900 – walls of the younger church (grey); 904 – tomb walls (dark blue); 905 – walls of the younger grave (light blue). (After Frolík et al. 2000, p. 36, fig. 2/15 adjusted by M. Housková, 2015.)

Fig. 9. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; transversal section through the church (north–south), north part, identical to the situation in fig. 8, the debris of the tomb walls is well visible (photo by J. Frolík, 1995; Archive of the Institute of Archaeology, Prague, negative No. 90167).

Fig. 10. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; Section B1, context **120** – Aeolian-deluvial sediments; **143** – deluvial sediments; **504, 505** – outline of the foundation pit of the older church (foundation joint); **903** – walls of the younger church; **906, 907** – walls of the older church; the joint between foundation walls and overground walls marked with an arrow; **M** – mortar; **OK** – marlite; **P** – sandstone (after Frolík et al. 2000, p. 38, fig. 2/20, adjusted by M. Housková, 2015).

Fig. 11. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; first building phase on the reconstructed physical relief of the Hradčany ridge; **1** – St George's Square; **2** – Third Courtyard; **3** – mausoleum/St Mary's Church; **4** – hypothetical location of the church (Geo-cz based on the author's idea, 2015).

Fig. 12. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; detail of the north-east nave corner, human bone visible below the corner (photo by J. Frolík, 1995; Archive of the Institute of Archaeology, Prague, negative No. 90141).

Fig. 13. Prague Castle. The first building phase with the current buildings on the background. Description: (1–4 see fig. 11); **1** – St George's Square; **2** – Third Courtyard; **3** – mausoleum/St Mary's Church; **4** – hypothetical location of the church; **5** – The ravine has been supposed, but never attested archaeologically or geologically (inserted into the orthographical map by M. Ďurica, 2015).

Fig. 14. Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; model of the mausoleum (burial chapel) with walled sarcophagus in the interior (Geo-cz based on the author's idea, 2015).

Translated by Tomáš Mařík