

# Jana Maříková-Kubková – Iva Herichová

## Revising the later building phases of the Church of the Virgin Mary at Prague Castle/Hradčany

### ANNOTATION

The Church of the Virgin Mary at Prague Castle has repeatedly attracted deserved attention and its understanding is a key to the study of a fundamental break in the history of the Prague basin and of the whole of Bohemia. This break is represented by the adoption of Christianity and the formation of a centre of both ecclesiastical and political power at Prague Castle. Research has therefore mostly concentrated on the first building phase of the church, while the younger early Romanesque adaptation was ignored, although it bears a no less important message. We can connect these building activities with the erection of the Romanesque Basilica and the stabilization of Church institutions, and it perhaps even illustrates the contemporary perception of an older tradition. The detailed revision of the context of the find re-examines the older building, which from the 9th to the 11th century served as a burial chapel with a tomb, into which in the 10th century a grave was inserted.

### SUMMARY

For a long time, the later building phase of the Church of the Virgin Mary was neglected; attention concentrated mainly on the first building, which was dominated by a large above-ground tomb in its interior. In response to the new discussion, the present study returns to the shape of the first building phase; main subject, however, is the second Romanesque adaptation. Again, by means of a re-excavation, we were able to confirm that the first chapel was a single-nave building with rectangular apse erected inside a cemetery. Under the north-eastern corner, at least one burial in anatomical position was discovered. The interior contained a tomb, a large above-ground construction about 1 m in height. The alleys between the tomb and the enclosing walls were only 0.6–1 m wide. Despite difficulties, this building can be dated into the second half or to the end of the 9th century. By all means, it was a memorial with a funeral function, which could not have served primarily liturgical purposes and therefore cannot be identified as the Church of the Virgin Mary known from written accounts.

In the first half of the 10th century, a grave was inserted into the tomb, into which two individuals were successively buried. The later buried was a woman with jewels that represent the only datable finds and point just to the first half of the 10th century. We have no information on the development of the building in the course of the following century, but burials at the cemetery continued intensively.

Sometime in the second half of the 11th century, the original building was, as reverently as possible, replaced by a new building with ashlar walls, an oblong nave and a semi-circular apse of similar dimensions as the original chapel. Ivan Borkovský's excavation proved that this construction respected the older graves in and outside the original church and that the interior burials were protected during construction, probably by the original tomb slab. This slab was removed only when the new pavement was laid. The mortal remains and jewels were covered with clean material and the floor level was raised in view not to disturb the older graves. This reconstruction can most probably be attributed to the Chapter of Prague, which started a large construction project at Prague Castle in 1060 or 1068.

**Obr. 1.** Prague Castle, St Mary's Church; the location of the church within Prague Castle – the cut out. The overall situation in MAŘÍKOVÁ-KUBKOVÁ/HERICHOVÁ 2015, 63, obr. 1.).

**Fig. 2.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; view from the east, finding at the spot of section V–V (fig. 4) in the course of the excavation of the later grave in 1950, after uncovering parts of the skeleton (Archive of the Institute of Archaeology, negative No. 6460).

**Fig. 3.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; section III–III (1950–1952) – simplified longitudinal section of the church, from west to east (BORKOVSKÝ 1953, 163, fig. 19). Description (after BORKOVSKÝ 1953): **1** – masonry of the later altar; **2** – masonry of the earlier altar; **3** – wall of the apse of the later building phase; **4, 6, 9, 12** – black deposits (humus), on which the church rests and into which the graves were dug; **5** – eastern tomb wall; **7** – east wall of the later graves; **8** – west wall of the later grave; **10** – western tomb wall; **11** – plaster on the tomb wall and on the

surface of the stones between the tomb wall and the later grave; this feature of the construction seems to be connected with the tomb slab; **13** – pieces of mortar, plaster, limestone and earth from the collapsed western tomb wall; **14** – yellow clay bedding and surface of the first daub floor after the destruction of the graves; **15** – limestone grit on the surface of the daub floor serves as bedding for the later pavement; **16** – yellow clay on the surface of the limestone grit, on which the younger limestone slabs lay; **17** – limestone slabs of the latest pavement in the church interior; **18** – west wall of the youngest church; **19** – layers of mortar on the bottom of the later grave; **20** – apse and the wall of the older church; **21** – wooden board serving as padding for a wooden lid and for the grave slab of the later grave; **22** – flat limestones as padding beneath the cranes in the later grave; **23** – sandstone step in front of the older altar; **24** – yellow clay deposited in the time of the first daub floor; **25** – foundations of the west wall of the older church; **26** – intact soil.

**Fig. 4.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; section V–V (1950–1952); cross section of the church from north to south (BORKOVSKÝ 1953, 165, fig. 20; for a translation of the 1953 description see MAŘIKOVÁ-KUBKOVÁ/HERICHOVÁ 2015, 75, Fig. 4). Based on the revision, we have to change some interpretations in the description from the 1950s: **1–5** – layers of one floor phase; **6, 9, 10** – part of one backfill of the later grave; **16** – layers 120 and 118, separated in 1995, are actually one layer; **19** – two distinct plaster layers with different dating; **24, 31** – in 1995, the inner wall structure could not be studied; the wall could contain remains of the older building phase; **31** – foundations of the later church.

**Fig. 5.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; ground plan showing sections, preserved masonry and trench B1, contexts: **900** – foundation walls of the younger building phase (church); **901** – masonry of the Theresian modifications; **904** – tomb walls; **905** – masonry of the later grave; **906** – foundation wall of the North-East corner of the nave of the older building phase (chapel); **907A** – above-ground masonry of the older building phase of the apse (presbytery of the chapel).

**Fig. 6.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; area of section V–V through the church interior from north to south (cf. fig. L); **1** – tomb; **2** – mortar floor in the tomb; **3** – secondary grave; **4** – stratigraphy of the backfill of the tomb and grave; **5** – composition of the church floor; view from the east (photographed by A. Paul, 1950; stored in the Archive of the Presidential Office at Prague Castle, No. D6517).

**Fig. 7.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; view of the inner face of the northern tomb wall (photographed by A. Paul, 1950; stored in the Archive of the Presidential Office at Prague Castle, No. D6532).

**Fig. 8.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; sections A, C, D, E from 1995; contexts: **100, 105** – paving of the church interior (100 and 105 could also be part of another paving, not verifiable); **116, 130, 142** – dusty loamy layer enforced with lime stones, bedding layer of the tomb bottom; **118, 120** – layers containing redeposited original soil; **121** – mortar on the bottom and walls of the tomb; **143** – subsoil, diluvial sediments; **501** – foundation pit of the church; **900** – foundation walls of the younger building phase (church); **901** – masonry of the Theresian modifications; **903** – above-ground masonry of the younger building phase (church); **904** – tomb walls; **905** – masonry of the later grave (after the records from 1995 drawn by F. Adánek in 2017; Baltic Height System).

**Fig. 9.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; section H from 1995; contexts: **120, 118** – cultural layers with redeposited original soil; **143** – bedrock, diluvial sediments; **900** foundation walls and **903** above-ground masonry of the younger church; **501** – foundation pit of the church; **503** – tomb wall on the border of the cemetery horizon (after the records from 1995 drawn by F. Adánek, 2017; Baltic Height System).

**Fig. 10.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary, trench B1, sections 1, 2, 3 and 4; for the ground plan see figs. 5 and 12; contexts: **118, 120** – layers with redeposited original soil; **143** – bedrock, diluvial sediments; **154 a 155** – dusty and loamy earth similar to layer 120, containing mortar fragments; **166** – backfill of grave 1/2017; **501** – foundation pit of the church; **503** – outline of the homogenous cemetery horizon (trench B1 with graves A, B and C); **504** – outline of the foundation pit for wall No. 906, filled with contexts **168, 167** and some stones; **505** – outline of the foundation pit for the older apse; **506** – outline of grave 1/2017, upper edges (in the spot of the question mark) unclear; filled context **166**; **901** – masonry of the Theresian modifications; **903** – above-ground masonry of the later building phase (church); **906** – foundation wall of the North-East corner of the nave of the older building phase (chapel); **907** – foundation wall of the apse/presbytery of the (funeral) chapel; **907A** – two lines of above-ground masonry of the older building phase of the apse (presbytery of the chapel), nave walls and nave corner; contrary to earlier excavation records, we have proof of a larger depth; level of the foundation joint determined with measuring needle (after the records of the 1995 excavation drawn by F. Adánek, added and adjusted after the 2017 re-excavation).

**Fig. 11.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; outside view of the church, joint between apse and nave; foundations of the older building phase and preserved two lines of above-ground masonry (**907A**) below the regular wall of the later apse (**903**) with ashlar and burn marks on the outside; the north-eastern nave corner (foreground

to the right) was removed in course of the erection of a modern wall; view from the north (2017).

**Fig. 12.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary, trench B1; ground plan of the finding after the excavation in 2017; contexts: **901** – modern Theresian modification; **903** – above-ground masonry of the later phase of the chapel; **907A** – above-ground masonry of the older building phase of the chapel (identical in the apse and the nave corner); **906** – foundation of the nave; **907** – foundation of the apse; **503** – southern edge of the cemetery layer containing graves A/95–C/95); **504** – outline of the foundation pit for foundation wall 906, filled with contexts No. **168**, **167** and some stones; **506** – course of the preserved part of the southern wall of grave 1/2017 on bottom level, filled with context **166** (after the measurements of Geo-cz, drawn by I. Herichová).

**Fig. 13.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary, trench B1; during the 2017 excavation: view of the joint (**on the right**) between apse wall/presbytery and nave (**far right, 906**) of the older building phase (chapel); foundation of the apse (masonry **907**) with inclined stones (lower part of the foundation was not unearthed) and two lines of above-ground masonry (**907A**); the semi-circular apse with different ground plan of the younger phase (church 903) stands on the coping of this masonry (photographed by M. Frouz, 2017).

**Fig. 14.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; finding of the 2017 re-excavation, state after the end of the excavation; trench B1 and a part of trench B2, sandstone slabs of the North-East corner of the nave, upper left: masonry of the chapel's apse; view from the north (photographed by J. Gloc, 2017).

**Fig. 15.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; trench B1 in the course of the 1950 excavation; view of the composition of removed layers in the church interior that were in contact with the masonry of the older and younger apse; in the 1950s, the layers were removed up to the level of the border between foundation walls and above-ground walls of the older apse (**dashed**).

**Fig. 16.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary; western part of the church interior during the excavation in 1950, mortar floor of the tomb in the centre; section A in the **foreground**; **above** – ground masonry of the tomb **on the right**; later grave after being opened **on the left**; **upper right** – construction of the church floor.

**Fig. 17.** Prague Castle, Church of the Virgin Mary: **A** – model of the first building phase (**funeral chapel**), state in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, tomb with indicated position of later grave; **B** – later building phase (**church**); view from the south, section III–III, protected structure of the funeral monuments clearly visible beneath the floor (3D modelling by Vojtěch Dvořák).

*Translation by Tomáš Mařík*