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Unknown remains of the main altar of the collegiate church in Vyšehrad from around 1600?

ANNOTATION

In 2021, the Prague City Museum acquired excellent monumental wood carvings of St. Peter and Paul of Prague origin from the turn of the 17th century. Their style has no direct comparison in Bohemia; the closest workshops capable of creating such work operated in southern Germany. In Prague at that time, there were not many institutions that could afford such a spectacular commission, nor discerning customers with the range of knowledge exceeding the local horizon. Therefore, it is possible to connect the sculptures with Vyšehrad, where at the time of the reconstruction of the collegiate church of St. Peter and Paul the initiative of the chapter's superiors met with the support of leading figures of the imperial court. The iconography of the sculptures corresponds to the high altar consecrated in 1599; they are also mentioned in the 19th century inventories from the period before the neo-Gothic "cleansing" of the church.

SUMMARY

The Prague City Museum has recently acquired a pair of excellent carvings, most probably counterparts of St. Peter and Paul. The original owner found one on the street in the Old Town and purchased the other in an antique shop in Prague. These are fragments of larger-than-life altar sculptures created at the turn of the 17th century, which have no direct parallels in the Czech lands. They were probably commissioned in southern Germany, where several established, artistically and organizationally advanced and successful workshops producing church furnishings in a similar style were operating at the time (e.g. Virgil Moll, Hans Degler or Hans Zürn). There are not many possible sites of original destination, but most indications point to the Vyšehrad Chapter church. Extensive repairs in the last third of the 16th century, financially well supported, included the construction of a new chancel and the main altar of Sts. Peter and Paul. Also personalities with the range of knowledge exceeding the local horizon were active in Vyšehrad around 1600, capable of recognising artistic quality and strongly committed to the renewal of Catholicism. One of the means of attracting the interest of the inhabitants, who overwhelmingly adhered to Utraquism (in Prague c. 92–95 %), was the restoration of the church. The extraordinarily monumental and artistically impressive statues of the apostolic princes Peter and Paul, well-understood symbols of the Roman Church and the papacy, can thus naturally be seen as part of the consolidation of the identity of a chapter recovering from decline and seeking a new self-confidence. The conservative style of the aforementioned South German workshops, reminiscent of the late Middle Ages, probably suited this purpose, as it could evoke the legitimacy and strength of the Church in the times before the spread of the German Reformation. The connection of the preserved carvings with Vyšehrad is also supported by written evidence from the 17th and 19th centuries, from before 1885, when they were probably removed during the neo-Gothic rebuilt of the church and handed over to the newly founded School of Arts and Crafts.

Fig. 1. Head of St. Peter. Carving, Prague City Museum, inv. no. H 293430 (photo © MMP, 2021).

Fig. 2. Bust of St. Paul. Carving, Prague City Museum, inv. no. H 293431 (photo © MMP, 2021).

Fig. 3. Philip van den Bossche / Johannes Wechter / Aegidius Sadeler, 1606: PRAGA. So called Sadeler's Large Prospect of Prague – section: Vyšehrad. Copper engraving, etching, part 9 (© Prague City Archives, Collection of Veduts, Sign. G 20).

Translation by Aleš Mudra