

The reflection of the political situation of the towns of Prague in the visual arts - in the 2nd half of the 14th century

The period of Charles the fourth was not only the era of the highpoint of the imperial politics and the representative culture of the court. It was also a period of a slow disintegration of social structures, nationalist sentiments and a gradual destruction of religious unity.¹ All these facts had an impact on the formation of new concepts in the visual arts.

Gradual changes in the presentation of reality can be seen in the urban environment, especially on the northern tympanum of the church of Our Lady before Týn.²

The attention that was given to the sculpture decoration of the church of Our Lady throughout the 20th century, ended with the summarizing study of Jaromír Homolka in the early 1970s.³ The topic has been approached again at the end of the 90s by Milena Bartlová and Jiří Fajt. Nevertheless, they disagreed on the dating period and stylistic plane of the monument.⁴

Recently, the lower dating period of the 1360s and 1370s has been accepted for the sculpture decoration in the northern portal of the Týn church. The other decorations have been also dated and put in chronological order. For instance the northern sedile with the bust of Wenceslaus the fourth, has been confirmed as the first newly added element in the existing organism of the church. This sedile can be dated to around 1380.

The new dating was mainly based on the new stylistic analysis. It verified the use of Italian decorative patterns as assumed by Jiří Fajt⁵; Aside from the sculpture of Vienna, a close correlation with the sculpture of Nuremberg of 60s–70s of the 14th century, has been proven.⁶

¹POLC 1999, 207.

²On the subject: PEROUTKOVÁ 2015, 263-288.

³On the subject of sculptural decoration of church esp.: PEČÍRKA 1932, 23-43 – OPITZ 1935, 91-98 – KUTAL 1962,

50–66. – Idem, 1984, 250, 252. – HOMOLKA, 1970, 141-143. – Idem. 1974 – NEJEDLÝ 1985, 465–468 – FAJT 2004, 207-220 – BARTLOVÁ 2001, 111-136 – GRUEBER 1877, 84-87, 152-153. – DIDIER/RECHT 1980. – STIX 1908, 69–132. – PINDER 1924. – BACHMANN 1969.

⁴Jaromír Homolka dates the landmark to the second half of 1480s, Milena Bartlová to the middle of the 15th century, Jiří Fajt to 1460s. – HOMOLKA 1974, BARTLOVÁ 2001, 111-136, FAJT 2004, 207-220.

⁵FAJT, 2004, 207-220.

⁶The formal similarity of the decorative consoles in the choir of the church of St. Sebald in Nurnberg, the reliefs bearing the scenes of Passion of identical composition at the same place (choir building 1361-1379), related formal attributes on the consoles of the church gallery in the church of St. Virgin Mary (about 1360), related facial designs on the tympanum in the western portal of the St. Lawrence church (after 1340), etc. on the subject: PEROUTKOVÁ 2015, 263-288.

The early dating period was also indirectly confirmed by the new dendrochronological analysis.⁷

As a new tool in our dating framework we used iconography and the new iconological context, especially in the case of the tympanum of the northern portal. I think that it is right here, that we can see the full reflection of the new theological discourse in the visual arts.

The selection of the scenes of the devotional character, and also the extremely emotionally charged reliefs, defy the ordinary narrative forms on reliefs in tympanums of the town churches of this period /like in Gmund, Augsburg, Freiburg, Nurnberg, etc./. It is the exceptional nature of this iconographic motive under the cross, on the middle board of the Týn tympanum that caught attention of Jaromír Homolka and lead to his thinking about the deeper meaning of the scene.⁸ Prof. Homolka was the first to connect the iconography with the person of Wenceslav the fourth. And in his study from 1972, he dated this monument to the end of the 1380s.⁹

I believe that despite the fragmentary nature of the historical material, dating back to the second half of the 14th century, we can see in this case study the early phases of changes taking place in the traditional iconographical schemes. We can even see the direct influence of current social events and new spiritual trends.

On the boards of the tympanum, we do not perceive some kind of unchanging and rigid scheme of Christian order, but rather a beginning of an effort to record the new theological discourse. Right here, right now something new and exciting is happening, so it is necessary to summarize and encode this in a visual form, for the general public. In this case, in the concourse of the small square in front of the northern portal of the new and ambitiously growing Týn church, which was the main parish church of the Old Town patriciate, and also the counterpart to the newly built Old Town town hall.¹⁰

Moreover, in 1365 the Týn church became the parish church of the Augustinian Konrad Waldhauser¹¹ and later also of his successor Milíč z Kroměříže;¹² the center point for

⁷ The dendrochronological analysis of the wooden structures in the church was carried out for NPÚ Praha by ing. Tomáš KYNCL in June of 2013. For instance, the results of a dendrochronological analysis of the door leading to the vestry provided a very early dating period of about 1345+ (20). The quickly advancing works on the northern nave were recorded as early as in the 1460s. By 1365 the corner house on the Týnská street no. 629/I was newly repositioned „ex opposito beate virginis in Laeta curia“ (TOMEK 1865, 23-25) The historical structural analysis showed the sculptural decoration of the northern portal up to the funicular arch was not a later addition. At the beginning of 1480s the side navels of the church were already vaulted and finished. (EKTRT 1886, 294)

⁸ HOMOLKA 1974, 57, 64.

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ On the subject: TOMEK 1865, 1855. – TEIGE/HERAIN 1908

¹¹ LOSKOT 1909, 31. – NECHUTOVÁ 1979-1980, 51-57. – LAMBERT 1999, 417-424. – HLOBIL 1985, 270-272. – Also on the subject: František ŠMAHEL 1947, 1-10, NECHUTOVÁ 1979, 56-60.

the formation and dissemination of the protoreformational ideas; a place, with a strong connection to the newly founded university. The atmosphere at the university fanned theological dispute and nationalistic tendencies helped spread the word in the urban areas.

With Konrad Waldhauser came to Prague a charismatic personality and a critical preacher, but later he was succeeded by the even more progressive and nonconformist Milíč z Kroměříže, who had much closer ties with the social underworld of the towns of Prague.¹³ It was Milíč z Kroměříže, who first put emphasis on sermons presented in the Czech language, and also on the new dissemination of the Czech Eucharistic prayers.¹⁴

Even with the superlatives that are often mentioned with the rule of Charles the fourth, this was a time of fragmentation of the Christian ideas¹⁵ and this fact was pragmatically used by Milíč's progressive eschatological church policy, carried out with full imperial support of Charles the fourth.¹⁶

Jan Milíč was a true connector, being able to bind together the protoreformational world of the lower social strata in the town with the early humanistic court, which he knew very well from his youth. His efforts to transform Babylon into Jerusalem, despite all the various problems, were ideologically and financially supported by the imperial chancellery.¹⁷ Milíč became the pragmatic part of the spiritual concept of Charles the fourth.¹⁸

I believe that especially in the case of the Týn church, the political and religious atmosphere had a direct influence on the decoration of the northern tympanum. On its boards we can clearly see a new kind of visualization and an iconography of a distinctly moralizing character. Moreover, as Jaromír Homolka pointed out, the composition of the tympanum reminds us more of an altar triptych.¹⁹ That would fully correspond with the atmosphere of this period and also with the great popularity of the preaching phenomenon in urban environments. It would also support the connection between Konrad Waldhauser, Milíč z Kroměříže and the newly created religious center. From what we know about Waldhauser's preaching habits, we can suppose, the public preaching could take place on the small square, right before the northern portal of Týn.

¹²On the subject: KŇÁK 1957 - LOSKOT 1911 - MOREÉ 1999..

¹³MOREÉ 1999

¹⁴Vita Milíci 416, NEJEDLÝ 1954, 101,102. – POLC 1999, 216

¹⁵POLC 1999, 206..

¹⁶Recently on the subject: JANEGA 2015, unpublished

¹⁷On the subject newly:1999, Recently: JANEGA 2015, unpublished

¹⁸More on the subject: JANEGA 2015.

¹⁹NOVÁK 1946, 59.

In the scene under the Cross, full emphasis is placed on the sinner, the secular figure of the centurion and Mary Magdalene, not as would be expected on the Virgin Mary and St. John. We see them in a sort of a religious passion, at the time of their conversion.

More than a third of the tympanum is dominated by the portrayal of the carrying of the soul of the Good Thief to heaven; on the crucifixion, his face bearing a close resemblance of that of Christ. In contrast the face of the Bad Thief is very caricatured. The spectator is presented with a set of devotional scenes of Flogging and Crowning, where the emphasis is placed on the shedding of the Christ's blood. The whole scene has obvious ties to the Holy Trinity, where the accent is put on the Holy Spirit, sent to the side of the sinners.

The overall impressiveness of the tympanum was strengthened by the colorful polychrome. The tympanum deals with the most basic, but up to date, aspects of the religious life in the middle ages. It deals with the salvation of one's soul, and for this, it employs a very emotional and dramatic, yet comprehensible form. This is something we can also find in Waldhauser's or most of all Milíč's preaching.

Jaromír Homolka was unable to explain the unusual conception of Mary Magdalene, based in her intense relationship with the centurion.²⁰ The Italian motive used with Mary Magdalene under the cross was more firmly established during the 1340s and 1350s, /like in Kaufman's Crucifixion, the master of the altar in Vyšší Brod/ From 1360s it is less frequently used, Magdalene being absent from the Master Theodoric Crucifixion, St. Barbara Crucifixion and the Cibulka tryptich. Etc. In the case of the portal of Týn, the presence of Mary Magdalene is transformed from the passive participation in the Christ's suffering into an active role in the miracle of conversion following the admission of the Eucharist.

We know that on a personal level Arnošt z Pardubic was an admirer of Mary Magdalene (the seal, the figure under the cross in Roudnice).²¹ But it was Milíč z Kroměříže, who, in the Old Town of Prague, in his so called New Jerusalem, founded, with the archbishop's blessing, the chapel of st. Mary Magdalene, the patron of the sinners (1372).²² He had been trying to solve the painful problem of prostitution in the towns of Prague before. It was affecting a wide spectrum of population, and it was connected to usury and reached up to the highest levels of the mendicant orders.²³ The New Jerusalem was built, based on Milíč's visions, not far from the Týn church. Here, on behalf of the Emperor's chancery, he

²⁰ HOMOLKA 1974, 78.

²¹ ROYT 2014, 18.

²² BALBÍN 1939, 24

²³ Abortivus, I D, fol. 239 In: MOREÉ 1999, 120.

bought most of the buildings, previously used as brothels. The transformed houses then provided aid to sinners and prostitutes, and also served the new religious community.

In Milíč's sermons and in his Czech prayers, we can find many common points of reference with the atypical iconography of the tympanum.

“Many amongst the saints used to be great sinners, but the blood of Christ turned them back.”²⁴

“The God reveals the truth to us through those, who are small – the smallest are the greatest”²⁵

In the *Abortivus*, Milíč considers the preacher's role as the most important one, showing the difference between good and evil and leading people to live on the side of good.²⁶ Milíč newly opened the question of the frequent reception of the Eucharist by the laymen.²⁷ The impact the Holy Eucharist had on the soul of the Christian was indeed of deep interest to Milíč. He considered it to be a true remedy for the human soul.²⁸ And it was this element, the sudden passion of the soul, when the person is being stained by the blood of Christ, which had the foremost position on the boards of the tympanum of Týn.

Milíč, who was a proponent of the apocalyptic visions, believed that the final eschatological battle would be fought inside the soul of each and every being.²⁹ At the final moment, everyone will have to make a choice, whether to stand at the side of God or join the forces of evil.³⁰ By practicing the Holy Communion, the believer comes into direct contact with Christ.

“You have given us your body, and your holy blood to help us vanquish the evil deeds, you have given the sick the spiritual remedy, the blind their light, you have washed our fragile and ailing souls, you have cured the blind”³¹

„... you have opened your side to feed us with your holy flesh, to quench our thirst with your holy blood, so every knee bents before your name“.³²

„You have protected us with the cloth of your holy martyrdom, with your holy cross, the holy nails, your holy crown your holy lance, which pierced your side.“³³

²⁴ *Abortivus*, I D, fol. 239, In: MOREÉ 1999, 120.

²⁵ Milíč following Matthew – *Abortivus* I D, fol. 239, In: MOREÉ 1999, 120.

²⁶ *Abortivus*, I D, fol. 154, In: MOREÉ 1999, 120.

²⁷ POLC 1976, 174-177.

²⁸ POLC 1976, 174-177. - MOREÉ 1999, 120. – HOLETON 1989, 24-27.

²⁹ MOREÉ 1999, 120., 34-n.

³⁰ MOREÉ 1999, 34-n.

³¹ Milíč, the Czech prayer before the Holy Communion, in: VILIKOVSKÝ 1938.

³² Milíč, the Czech prayer to the Christ, Ibidem

³³ Milíč, the Czech prayer to the Christ, Ibidem

„You, Holy Spirit, who are the cause for the holy body of our dear Jesus Christ, enlighten us, sinners, with your true knowledge, so that our souls stay on the path of good.“³⁴

„To you Christ, and to your dear Father and the Holy Spirit we give our blessings.“³⁵

The enlightenment or recovery /of the centurion/ as exemplified by the dynamic spiral, is an expression of the inner spiritual sight, at the time of encounter with God's grand plan of redemption. The shock, taking on a form of a helix, represents the moment when the profane and the Holy touch one another.

It is with Milíč, that we find the first signs of differentiation between two types of sight: the physical and the spiritual.³⁶ What the tympanum of Týn provides, is the possibility, for the viewer, to participate in the theological and artistic framework of the age, in a visual form, as created by Jan Milíč.

It is possible to see the new “encoding” of the spiritual realities into the arts, to be quite different from what we can experience on the reliefs of Vienna's st. Stephen's dome (1365). Here, st. Paul, at the time of his conversion, is falling down, in the characteristic rotational movement, to the ground. Both these works have distinctly emotional undertones.

In comparison, the relief of Vienna uses a more thought-out effect, employing modern Italian trends, such as the phasing of the narrative within the frame. When studying both monuments, the connection between Konrad Waldhauser and the school of st. Stephen and his ties with the Austrian duchy, are of particular interest.³⁷

The statuary of St. George in the Prague castle, being from the same period, shows the same quality of the progressive line of thought (1372). Here we also find the same principles of dynamism matching the higher iconographic purpose.

It is with the sculpture of Parlěř, that we find the newly differentiated approach to capture the various levels of reality. In the lower triforium, the sense of realism is strengthened by the colorful polychrome (1374-6), also akin to the works of Parlěř's and Milíč's contemporary, Master Theodoric. Here, we can find the weakening of the classical forms. (after 1367) Theodoric, with his new techniques of painting, allowing for more colorful naturalism, brings his saints closer to the real world. They occupy an actual and detailed stage, and by allowing them to almost step out of the frame, he thus redefines the frame's role.

³⁴ Milíč, the Czech prayer to the Holy Spirit, Ibidem

³⁵ Milíč, the Czech prayer before the Holy Communion, Ibidem

³⁶ MOREÉ 1999, 34-n..

³⁷ LOSKOT 1909, 33.

Later on, we cross yet another boundary. The art of the Master of the Třeboň altarpiece (around 1380) is no longer confined to the realm of the rational, but strives to convey the reality of a man's inner spiritual reaction to the mysteries of the world. In connection with the real sfumato conception of the space, are the mystical scenes embedded in a factual time frame; could it be the night scenes, nocturnes?

It is also in the person of Jan z Jenštejna, that we find the developing trends of courtly estheticism and stylistic norm more befitting the newly discovered spiritual depth.³⁸ During the 1380s, he commissions the painting of his visions, both in the castle in Roudnice and in the chambers of the archiepiscopal palace in Prague. Here, from the written sources, we know that quite a conflict was taking place between the caricatured reality of the papal schism and the reality of the paramount spiritual beauty of the Christ and Virgin Mary. Jenštejn also expresses, in nontraditional iconographic forms, his own view of the actual political situation inside the Church.

Here we can draw on professor Homolka's ideas again: *"... Before, Arnošt's visions led only to the commissioning of the conventional paintings of saint Mary. Charles' vision from Terenzo lead to the founding of the Marian choir in the saint Vitus cathedral and the suggestive experiences of Jan Milíč were recorded only in the written form"*³⁹.

It is here that I feel a mistake is calling for a correction. I believe the impact of the new line of thought on the breakdown of the conventional iconographic principles can be detected as early as at the end of the 1360s. Here, we can look for the newly formed ways of thinking about the image and its function.

The depiction on the tympanum of Týn is still rather firmly connected to the wider traditional frame, but the iconography is already subject to certain modification, which allows us to take a look into the personal nature of Milíč's, very likely progressive, visions.

New compositions were being developed in the urban environment during the reign of Charles the fourth, later on to influence the visual arts of the second half of the 14th century. They show the way from the traditionally conceived painting to the modernly structured one.

It can be said, that there is a gradual change of perception of reality, that affects every aspect of creative arts, regardless of social environment. This new perception naturally requires new ways of expression.

³⁸ HOMOLKA 1977, 116

³⁹ HOMOLKA 1977, 117

The progressive person of Jan Milíč z Kroměříže, aspiring to revive the society through the construction of the New Rome, New Jerusalem, played a pivotal role in this quest since the end of 1360s.

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