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Hospitaller Architecture in Central Europe: The Grand Prior of Bohemia

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Abstract

This proposal deals with the study of the architecture of the Order of Malta in Prague and it wants to structure a project of knowledge for a territorial and cultural heritage. The scientific approach is based on the comparison of documents (conserved in central archives both in Rome and La Valletta) and architecture already existing, with particular attention to the detailed analysis of the work of art. Attention is given to the purposes of knowledge, management and conservation of the heritage.

This project finds its place in a research of history and documentation of architectural heritage and environment. History and a multi-disciplinary research method are also the foundation of all forms of protection and enhancement. A cognitive-critical action is needed in the analysis of historic and artistic context: some historians deal with the heritage of Malta, but often with different specific approaches without an overall look. A history of the Hospitaller architecture in Prague is still to be studied in its typologies. Complementary visions may open new points of view on research and find the innovative perspective with a multidisciplinary method: theory and practice converge in representations of the architecture of the Order, in a milieu quite different from the historical context of the Sixteenth Century. Analysis of the early history of the Grand Prior of Bohemia has only appeared very recently. A model for the creation of Hospitaller houses could be postulated only through an examination of local conditions and even the evolution of provincial hierarchies could be studied. The penetration of Eastern European society by the Crusade ideology has to be examined as a necessary background to the reassessment of the early activity of military orders.

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1. Introduction

The geographical extent of the Order possessions could have developed on one side the ability to change and to constantly improve the property, consisting of Hospitals and Commanderies - essential instruments for the heritage economic management and for the new territories political control -, and on the other side to make Malta a well-fortified land. In the seven Centuries after its founding, the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St. John reached a major economic power and a strong hierarchical administrative structure based on the organization in sections, or national languages, said «Tongues» [1]: Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, Castile, England, Germany. The General Chapter of the Order decided in 1319 to consolidate the Hospitallers by corresponding entities to homogeneous linguistic areas – called Tongues -. Each of these was including Priors or Grand Priors, bailiwicks and Commanderies. The chief of each Tongue, called Pillar and later Bailli, was selected from the dignitaries and each of these dignities was attributed to Tongues [2]. These were not modelled on the modern nation-states, but on the national language systems of Western Europe.

1.1. Hospitallers in Central Europe

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The Order of Saint John established itself slowly in the northern France and even in Italy, where the Hospitallers [3] built its network of hospitals till about 1150.

In Central Europe no evidence exists of its presence during the first half of the twelfth Century: during the Second Crusade (1147-48), there were the first foundations and, at Duisburg, on the lower Rhine, the Order built its Hospital and its Church. One of the first preceptors was in Weben in 1160 and the royal foundation of Prague is first known in a document of 1158-69. The document marks the gratitude of King Ladislaus to whom Raymond du Puy had offered Crac des Chevaliers as a residence when he took part in the Second Crusade [4]. The Order was invited to Bohemia by Prince Vladislav II, who had taken part, with the armed forces of King Conrad II of Germany, in the Second Crusade during which he learned of the Order's activities. The project was formulated with the aim to introduce the Hospital as a religious order into his municipality. This fact soon became an innovation for the Hospitallers, who had not previously been committed to extend their European possessions. The new province of Bohemia under a resident Hospitaller Prior was created since the earliest days of the Order. The first foundation of the new province was that of the Order's convent in Prague.

The continuing aggregation of properties, administered by the Prague convent, led eventually to support four religious congregations. A second house in Prague with the name of 'Na bojišti' was founded between 1179 and 1183 (Fig. 01). The Order's headquarters became the Church of Our Lady beneath the Chain, which name referred to the chain used to shut the Commandery's gate or to block boats and rafts along the river. Subsequently, other Commanderies were founded and the most important were in Strakonice, Horažďovice, Manětín and Český Dub. The task of the Hospitallers who settled in that area was essentially to bring security and to mark their foundations: traveller's hospices were common and the most important was that of Prague, built on the west bank of the Moldau and next to the bridge giving the access to the city. The military style of the church's towers suggests that it was built with a particular attention to the protection. The Priory had there an extensive enclosure – recalled by the church's name - and it grew under the Prior temporal jurisdiction. The Hospitallers were not the only religious order that did not transform all their land donations into monastic sites and they preferred having a different situation with the grant of a manor and an adjacent church. For a time, it may have been reasonable to administer complexes building of different functions (stables, oratories, etc.) from an adjacent Preceptor, which may explain why these associated buildings rarely appear in the sources. Hospitallers did not transform all the churches into conventual houses (*domos conventuales*), but they only exercised patronage over them.



Fig. 1. Church of Our Lady beneath the Chain, with the courtesy of Ed. Holden. Courtesy of www.edholden.com.

2. Prague and the Hospitaller architecture

Prague is an example of the typical double-storey houses of the Order, which had the function of both church and hospital. This arrangement is very characteristic in Central Europe and can be sometimes found in other places. The best surviving specimen is the Commandery of Nieder-Weisel in the Rhineland, which offered protection to the pilgrims. Between 1225 and 1265, a two-storey Doppelkirche was built in Nieder-Weisel near the old monastery that had passed into the possession of the Templar Knights. The upper storey was operated as a hospice for retired brothers of the Order, and for the treatment of villagers or outsiders who sought medical help; no charge was made for these services. The lower storey was used for religious purposes (Fig. 2).

During the early years of the fourteenth Century the Langue of Germany had a very strong position and there was a populous and prosperous community, which was well established at Cologne, Steinfurt, Wesel, Prague, Breslau and Mailberg. Even new foundations were at Küsnacht and Strasbourg. Bohemia had a great prosperity and the House of Prague was an interesting example. Lots of priests became university graduates and at least thirteen schools existed in the different houses, of which Prague had 27 pupils in 1373 and Strakonitz 21 [5]. In the fourteenth Century Bohemia finally shook off its subjection of German Knights and from 1337 the Priory was characterized by a time of prosperity even in architecture and artistic enrichment; lots of churches were built or embellished.

The integration of an institution such as the Hospital also had its impact into the Czech society: this time of prosperity was interrupted by the Hussite wars and in 1420 the House of Prague was destroyed; the church was reduced to ruins leaving only its two towers. The priests' convent was rebuilt in 1422 but the Prior moved to Strakonitz, where he established his residence. The Strakonitz priors had the right of Pontificalia in 1512, thanks to Pope Julius II, only until such time as the convent in Prague would be restored.

In 1565 the bohemian Knights fought to defend Malta and in 1571 there was the famous battle of Lepanto [6]. The Peace of Westphalia confirmed the loss of Catholic endowments in Germany: in Bohemia the highest superior of the Order was given with the title of Grand Prior in 1629 and both the convent and the Grand Prior moved back from Strakonitz to Prague in 1694; so the capital city recovered its status of the seat of Prior of Bohemia. A new church was built over the ruins of the medieval one and in 1727-1738 it became a sumptuous Prioral palace (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Castle of Strakonitz, prioral seat of Bohemia 1420-1684. Courtesy of www.wikimedia.com.

2.1. The collapse of the Grand Prior of Bohemia and Austria

The Grand Priory of Bohemia was the only one to withstand the general collapse of the Order's structures in the chaos of Napoleonic expansion and the secularisation of Europe: in spite of the encountered adversities, the Bohemian Grand Priory survived till the Twentieth Century [7]. In 1881 the Emperor Franz Joseph I raised the Grand Prior of Bohemia and Austria to the rank of Prince of the Austrian Empire.



Fig. 3. The palace of the Grand Priors of Bohemia in Prague (Malá Strana). Courtesy of www.prague.eu

The Grand Priory retained its Commanderies and its jurisdiction, and even the novitiate of Prague continued to train a numerous clergy for the Order's churches. But with the fall of the monarchy, the Order's properties were eroded by land reforms and the economic crisis spread in all the country. For political reasons, the Grand Priory was split into two parts in 1938 (Grand Priory of Bohemia and Grand Priory of Austria) and only in 1990 it was restored in Prague.

3. Discussions

Today, while the German Commanderies have disappeared since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century without a trace, the Convent of Prague remains the centre of the Order in Bohemia. The Convent was the ancient seat of the Priory of Bohemia and of numerous command posts that have survived almost entirely since the XII Century. Armed with the support of Bohemian kings, Moravian margraves, dukes of Silesia, Poland and Austria, the Hospitallers of Bohemia achieved a rapid development and established their territorial possessions. They soon began to spread over Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia (Prussian and Austrian), Austria, Styria, Carinthia and Carniola. The founding dates of the main Commanderies attest the rapid development of the Order in those territories.

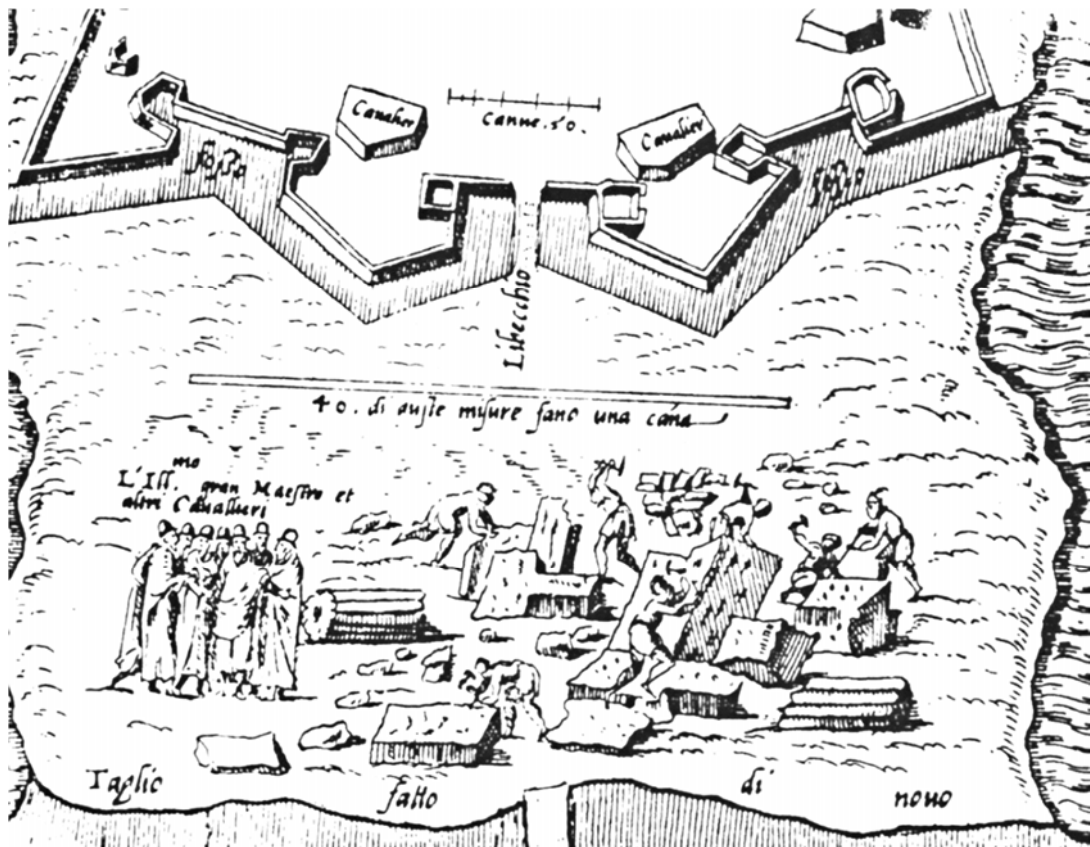


Fig. 4. A picture of Domenico Zenoi (1566). Courtesy of De Giorgio R., 1985, A city by an order, Malta, p. 88.

The archives of the Priory have followed the fate of Commanderies; they remained intact and the dossier of Prague is one of the most complete of the Hospitallers archives. They are kept in the Palace of the Grand Prior, next to the Malta Priory church and convent, in a painted room dating from the Hussite war (beginning of the XV Century).

This project finds its place in a research of history and documentation of architectural heritage and environment. Complementary visions may open new points of view on research and find the innovative perspective with a multidisciplinary method: theory and practice converge in representations of the architecture of the Order, in a milieu quite different from the historical context of the Sixteenth Century (Fig. 4).

4. Conclusions

History and a multi-disciplinary research method are also the foundation of all forms of protection and enhancement. A cognitive-critical action is needed in the analysis of historic and artistic context: some historians deal with the heritage of Malta, but often with different specific approaches without an overall look. A history of the Hospitaller architecture in Prague is still to be studied in its typologies. Analysis of the early history of the Grand Prior of Bohemia has only appeared very recently. Through an examination of local conditions and provincial hierarchies, it has been possible to postulate a model for the comprehension of Hospitaller Houses creation in Bohemia. The penetration by the Crusade ideology into the Eastern European society has been examined as a necessary background to the reassessment of the early activity of military orders through that region.

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