

Medieval monastic architecture in Slovenia

Monastic architecture has a particularly prominent place in western European medieval architecture. By monastic is meant in particular the three oldest western European monastic orders to have been created; the Benedictine, Cistercian and Carthusian, the monks of which were the initiators and mainstays of such building.

The Benedictines, also after the Cluniac reforms, were responsible for the highest achievements of European Romanesque architecture. The famous Carolingian ideal plan of St. Gall from the beginning of the 9th century, which shows the overall monastic building organism and is the work of the Middle Ages, and not perhaps a successor to late antiquity, was the essential plan of Benedictine monasteries and did not change. They consistently used longitudinal buildings for the churches of their order, mainly a basilica with nave, two aisles and a transept, thus a groundplan in the form of a Latin cross. Cluny, in Burgundy, as the centre of the great monastic family and state, which was supposed to develop into a French Rome, also had this form. The other church there, the so-called Majolus church from the middle of the 10th century, known in art history as Cluny II, had to make way in the 11th century for Cluny III, the largest Romanesque, French and abbey church of all time, and the major architectural achievement of the European Middle Ages. This fairytale architectural masterpiece became a victim of the French revolution. Only modest remains have been preserved of it.

The Benedictine order, with a mass of abbeys and priories, covered the entire of Latin Europe. Its reach extended to Slovene lands, too, since they had always lain at the heart of Europe and its events, including cultural. Many Benedictine monasteries were founded on Slovene territory, or in its direct vicinity, to the west and north, now outside the narrower Slovene lands (Rosazzo, Moggio, Millstatt, Ossiach, Arnoldstein, St. Paul), though on Slovene territory itself, only Gornji Grad was founded, in 1140. We do not know a great deal about its architectural appearance, since it had already ceased to exist in the 15th century because of the founding of the Ljubljana diocese, and in the 18th century, the medieval monastic church was replaced by a Baroque one. Modest hints of the monastery's Romanesque and Gothic architecture have been only indirectly preserved in the records of episcopal visitations in the 17th century, and in some preserved pieces of sculptural decoration from the demolished cloister, which replaced the original wooden one in the 13th century. On the basis of visitation reports, and Vischer's graphic representations from the end of the 17th century, it can reasonably be assumed that the Benedictine church at Gornji Grad was a Romanesque basilica with nave and two aisles, and three pairs of pillars (piers) and two pairs of responds spanned by four pairs of semi-circular arches. It had no transept, and on the eastern side, the longitudinal nave and aisles were terminated by three flush semi-circular apses. Both nave and aisles had flat wooden ceilings, and the church was lit from above, through clerestory windows, which are also frequently mentioned in visitation reports, as well as through smaller windows in the northern aisle. Windows were not possible in the southern aisle, since the cloister rested against it. The monastic church of Benedictine Gornji Grad was thus adapted to the architectural spirit of the Order, as well as the wider cultural environment, in which the more important parish churches, with nave and aisles, were modelled on central European examples, that is Bavarian, Lombardian, Austrian and Hungarian. The Benedictines, in other words, together with respecting their Rule and the building tradition of the Order, always also adapted to the vernacular building particularities of the lands in which they settled. The Benedictine church of Gornji grad, therefore, did not enrich the Slovene monastic Roman-

esque with any new type of building, which was not already familiar here from architecture not of that Order. So the results of Benedictine building activity in Slovenia were relatively modest. The circumstances of the time here, and the modest capacities, clearly could not offer the conditions for any kind of great Cluny or Hirsau building.

Because of dissatisfaction with conditions in the Benedictine order which, despite the new Cluniac reforms, had come very far over the centuries from the original monastic ideal outlined in the Benedictine Rule, the reformed order of Cistercians was founded in Burgundy in 1098. In planning their monasteries, and in the architecture of the churches of the Order, they had nothing else to hand than to continue the ancient Benedictine building tradition. In such a spirit and in such conditions, in 1132, on the initiative of the Patriarch of Aquileia, Peregrine, they began to build Stična (Sittich), the oldest monastery on the narrower Slovene territory, and the first Cistercian settlement on Slovene lands. They relied entirely on the Benedictine tradition in the plan of their monastery. As far as the architecture of their abbey church is concerned, it would have been theoretically possible for them to have introduced the changes which had been brought about at precisely that time by the most famous Cistercian and the greatest spirit of the time, the Abbot of Clairvaux, the ascetic St. Bernard. However, the French builder of Romanesque Stična, the legendary *cementarius*, Michael, who is mentioned in contemporary archival sources, and who came to Stična with the first abbot, Vincent of Morimonde, decided on something entirely different. He retained the basilica groundplan for the church, with nave and aisles from the Benedictine tradition, with seven pairs of arcades on rectangular piers and with a transept, and a powerfully stressed chancel with a square sanctuary and two chapels of equal length beside it. These three sanctuaries were still not terminated towards the east in the square "Bernardine" style, but with three flush semi-circular apses, together with two apses added to the ends of the transept arms, so that there were five altogether. Except for the chancel, the entire interior, including the transept, which was of the same height and width as the nave, and the crossing, was covered by a simple, flat wooden ceiling. Instead of the "Bernardine" groundplan, which later spread throughout Europe wherever the Cistercians settled, all the way from Portugal to Poland, Stična with its church, consecrated in 1156, epitomises the archaic Benedictine groundplan of Majolus church in Cluny from the middle of the 10th century, known as Cluny II, as it has been reconstructed with all certainty by the excavations of the American architect, Kenneth John Conant. With such a groundplan, and the constructional appearance that derives from it, the Stična Romanesque basilica, which was still retained in all the main components under the Baroque covering, or is at least well documented, has been unique in Europe as a Cistercian church since Hardehausen in Westphalia, founded in 1155 and similar in groundplan, was razed to the ground in 1812. For liturgical needs and in the spirit of the reform of the Cistercian Order, Stična took over, with only minor changes, the groundplan of the Cluny-Hirsau architecture of a basic Latin cross. In place of open arcades, the boundaries between the presbytery and the two chapels by the choir were closed by full walls, to make them suitable for the monks' private mass, and instead of columns, masonry rectangular piers support the arcades of the nave. These had a more modest and unifying effect than individually over-stressed columns, since piers are only the remains of a wall pierced by semi-circular arches. Even with the absence of a masonry belltower, either on the example of the transept spire of Cluny, or a pair of them by the western facade or as a side "eastern belltower" on the Hirsau example, Stična throughout the Middle Ages was satisfied with a wooden steeple on the

roof, since in 1157, the Cistercian order expressly forbade masonry bell-towers on its churches.

With these individualities, Stična is an entirely unique example, in the Cistercian context, of Cluny-Hirsau-reform architecture, modified only with a number of Cistercian particularities - a genuine incunabulum of the Cistercian Romanesque and, at the same time, the most prominent and largest monument of the Romanesque in Slovenia. Stična's appearance will long be a focus of European architectural interest.

The second Cistercian foundation on the narrower Slovene territory was founded by the Carinthian Duke Bernard of Spanheim, by his market town of Kostanjevica on the Krka, in order to reinforce his extensive possessions towards Croatia. The church of the monastery of Fontis S. Maria has a completely different appearance to that of the century older Stična; not only because it is almost the only part to have been preserved of the original core of the monastery from the 13th century, but especially because its already "Bernardine" architecture, which can be well reconstructed despite the Baroque adaptation, demonstrates all the characteristics of the severe reform architecture at the transition of the Romanesque to the early Gothic, which predominates in it stylistically. The basilica design with nave and side aisles, a groundplan in the form of a Latin cross, was preserved from the Benedictine tradition, though already subordinated in everything to the requirements and needs of the Order and its second founder, the ascetic St. Bernard. Beyond the transept, a short presbytery is terminated by a square wall towards the east and no longer, as in Stična, with semi-circular apses, and at its sides, there are two pairs of lower, and spacially separated chapels, accessible only from the transept. Pointed arches connect the nave and the aisles, instead of semicircular arches, and all parts of the church are vaulted with cross-ribbed vaulting and are no longer covered, as in Stična, with a modest wooden ceiling. With these innovations to Cistercian architecture, Kostanjevica is ranked among the numerous typologically related buildings of this order throughout the lands of Latin Europe. However, Kostanjevica abbey church has a number of particularities which give it a more prominent place among related buildings. All the elements of the skeletal structure, the capitals, the bosses and brackets, are richly carved and sculpturally decorated. The Romanesque geometric forms of the capitals have already been entirely abandoned and, under the influence of the awakening awareness of nature and its phenomena, basic forms of foliate capitals have taken over, ornamented with stylised leaves and flowers, though they have not yet adopted the naturalist imitation of nature that appears later, in the mature Gothic. Even the bases of the clustered piers are no longer sheer and geometrically stiff but, clearly compressed under the weight which they carry, they spread over the edge so that they have to be supported with tiny consoles. Not only the details but also the spatial design, which is the principal component of the architecture, is decisively Gothic, including the stress on the bays, which run through the nave and both aisles with uniform width, and which will become the main spatial unit in the Gothic.

On the narrower Slovene territory, in today's state of Slovenia, two excellent examples of medieval Cistercian architecture are thus preserved: Stična and Kostanjevica, the former as a rare monument of the Cistercian high Romanesque, still powerfully anchored in the Benedictine, i.e., Cluny tradition; one might almost say: a non-Cistercian Cistercian church. The latter, Kostanjevica, is an example of early Gothic monastic architecture, a like among likes, whose sculptural decoration raises it high above the average. We can be proud to have both as part of our

cultural heritage. If Cistercian Stična signifies an explicitly west European, Burgundian-French import, models for Kostanjevica should probably be sought in the Hungarian-Pannonian cultural space, to which the Burgundian Gothic simply leaped from its great homeland, without any kind of German or Austrian mediation. Even the richness of its sculptural decoration is strongly indicative of the Czech-Hungarian influence.

The great spiritual turmoil which, precisely at the end of the 11th century, gave birth to the reformed order of Cistercians, spontaneously gave rise in the shelter of the French Alps in 1084, to the completely new Carthusian order which, even more than the Cistercians, abandoned the Benedictine tradition, and not only in the spiritual approach and in the way of life but also in architecture chose entirely its own path. As a logical result of the deepened spirituality, and above all the way of life of the Order, which completely withdrew from the world and added to collective monastic isolation also the isolation of individual monks, thus breaking entirely with the Benedictine, cenobitic way of life, a completely new kind of monastic settlement was created: the Charterhouse. In comparison with the Benedictine and Cistercian building practice, it opens a completely new world for researchers of medieval monastic architecture. No more of the older or newly reformed Benedictine tradition, everything was created entirely anew from the requirements of a completely different purpose and approach to monastic life, and the profound Carthusian spirituality: to be alone in search of one's own God and to live in prayer and contemplation throughout life in the isolation and silence of one's cell, as Guigo, the fifth prior of the Order's mother house, the Grande Chartreuse, wrote at the start of the 12th century in the 12th chapter of the Order's statute, the *Consuetudines*. The main building component of a Carthusian monastery is thus the great cloister – *galileja maior* – around which the monks' cells are strung as independent monastic dwellings with small gardens, completely closed to the world, and even visually separated from each other. Another important component of a Carthusian monastery is the church, in which the entire community of the reclusive order gathers for common rituals and prayers three times a day and again in the middle of the night, with the remarkable night offices. Since the Carthusians do not recognise processions, the need for a three-aisle interior disappeared and with it, the basilica plan. A Carthusian church is thus consistently a single-space vaulted oratory with strongly pronounced length, dictated by the functional disposition: the sanctuary with the high altar, the monks' choir, the choir screen, and the brothers' choir in the extreme western part of the church. Because of the pronounced eremitic part, with the monks' cells, the cenobitic part of a Carthusian monastery, with the small cloister, chapterhouse and refectory for feast days, has much less significance than in the cenobitic monasteries of the Benedictine tradition, since the Carthusians only occasionally use these common rooms. The ground-plan, interconnecting the basic components of a Carthusian monastery – the church, the great cloister and the cenobitic part – was completely free in the Middle Ages. It was adapted to the available land, and only from the Renaissance onwards was it planned strictly geometrically in relation to the central axis, which ran longitudinally through the church, and on which the entire settlement of the order was symmetrically based. So a Carthusian monastery is a completely new phenomenon in medieval monastic architecture, which broke completely with the old Benedictine tradition.

All four medieval Slovene Carthusian monasteries were of this type. The first three of them, founded in the 12th and 13th centuries, are at the same time the oldest in Central Europe and thus on the territory of the

medieval German state, as well as the first outside the two motherlands of the order, France and Italy. The oldest of them, the Charterhouse of Žiče, mentioned in original sources as "Vallis S. Joannis Baptistae" or "Seitz", was founded around 1160. Today, we know it only from very eloquent and partially protected ruins, which are supplemented by rich historical graphic documentation. From the period prior to its consecration in 1190, the outer walls of the great church (*ecclesia maior*) are preserved, a typical single nave vaulted building which was thoroughly reconstructed in the Gothic period. Despite the brevity of this outline of medieval monastic architecture in Slovenia, it is nevertheless necessary to draw attention to at least two of the church's characteristics: the first is that the sanctuary, with the high altar, had a square termination towards the east, on the Bernardine example, not a semi-circular apse. This particularity of the Carthusian Romanesque was first established in Europe precisely in the first Slovene Carthusian monasteries and was later also adopted as a basic finding in European scientific literature. The second particularity of early Carthusian churches, including Žiče, is that the sacristy and the chapterhouse are each placed on their own side of the sanctuary and that all three eastern terminations stand flush, in a single straight line. We could also mention that at the time of the establishment of Žiče Charterhouse, the monks and lay brothers, or converts, lived entirely separated in two independent settlements. The former in the "upper house" (*domus superior*) with the great church, while the converts had their own lower house (*domus inferior*) almost two kilometres lower down in the valley, in which stood their *ecclesia minor* which is still preserved in entirety in today's Špitalič, as an excellent early Gothic building from the end of the 12th century, the work of French masters.

The second Carthusian monastery in Slovenia, called in Latin "Vallis sancti Mauritii", in German "Gairach" and in Slovene "Jurklošter", was first founded around 1170 by the Gurk bishop, Henry, and since it then fell into decay, the Duke of Styria, Leopold VI of Babenberg, the Illustrious, undertook its renovation in 1209. The church was consecrated in 1227, and it is the only part, with all the groundplan characteristics of the Carthusian Romanesque which have already been mentioned, that has been preserved of this Carthusian monastery. Its vaulted architecture, with the powerful ribs of rectangular cross-section, points to a Lower Austria derivation and to the homeland of its second founder, and it also became the model for the so-called "Laško group" in our non-monastic Romanesque architecture of the 13th century, with its secondary starting point in Laško.

Of the third settlement of the Carthusian order in Slovenia, Bistra, founded in 1255/60, called in Latin "Vallis iocosa" and later in German also Freudental, lying on the edge of the Ljubljana Barje, today only the small cloister from the 15th century survives. The church, which at the time of its creation was not far from the Carthusian building ideal and the early particularities of its architecture, was razed to the ground in 1808, after the dissolution of the Charterhouse. From plans made in 1793 can be gleaned the characteristic Carthusian single nave church with sacristy and chapterhouse by the sanctuary, with all three mutually separated spaces terminated towards the east in a straight line.

So only Pleterje in Dolenjska, renovated in 1899, situated along the northern flanks of the Gorjanci range, remains as an active Charterhouse. It was founded in 1403 to 1407 by Count Herman II of Celje, it fell into decay in the 16th century, and in 1904 the Order completely rebuilt the Carthusian settlement, which still exists today as the easternmost monastic settlement of this West European order. The medieval

Carthusian monastery, with all the characteristics of a free plan and disposition of its building elements, is at least partially known from graphic documentation from the 17th and 18th centuries. Fortunately, the old Gothic church has been preserved in entirety and was professionally renovated and the original appearance restored some decades ago, so that it now ranks among the finest and best preserved medieval Carthusian churches in Europe. It was erected at the beginning of the 15th century and consecrated in 1420, and the building repeats all the characteristics of a Carthusian church, i.e., a long, vaulted, single nave space which, of course, is expressed in Gothic stylistic dialect, in accordance with the time of its creation. Its noble architecture, and especially the sculptural decoration, demonstrates the orientation which predominated in Central Europe, i.e. the artistic heritage of the great architect and sculptor Peter Parler. Instead of the square Romanesque eastern termination, the church took over the Gothic polygonal termination, and the sacristy was transferred to the northern side beside the chapterhouse, where the small cloister was also situated, the traces of which are still clearly visible. A further particularity of the Pleterje church which should be mentioned is that the monks' choir is separated from that of the brothers by a masonry, Gothic, rib-vaulted choir screen, with a walkway on top of it, which divides the church space transversally. Yet another particularity is that in the interior, perforated earthenware vessels are built into the upper part of the walls, so-called "voice-makers", which were intended to improve the acoustics of the church space for the frequent instrumentally unaccompanied choral singing of this order of eremites, which is still practised today.

The tale of medieval monastic architecture in Slovenia could be longer and would have to be so to embrace and describe in detail everything which the older West European monastic orders created of major European artistic importance on Slovene lands. Stična with its, for the Cistercians unusual, almost archaic, plan of a Romanesque basilica, and the three early Carthusian monasteries, the oldest in Central Europe, which have also been included in international science through findings about the characteristics of the Carthusian Romanesque. Slovenia can be proud that it possesses some key monuments of medieval European monastic architecture, which decisively enrich the domestic cultural heritage. The research which has been done and a number of scholarly publications mean that our homeland is no longer a blank on the map of Europe.

The Slovenes do not have any world famous monasteries, and only from books do we know their sonorous names, like Mont-Saint-Michel, Cluny, La Grande Chartreuse, Fontenay, Westminster, El Escorial or Montserrat, because historical destiny has not been inclined to us. So we pronounce the domestic names Stična, Kostanjevica, Žiče and Pleterje with so much more Slovene and European pride, since they represent the great creativity of the human spirit and the genius of Christianity in our land.

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