



Church of St. Pancras

IRN 694

Location	Stari Trg near Slovenj Gradec
Time of origin	11th–18th century
Time of restoration	1986–1999
Chief Conservator	Janez Mikuž, Svjetlana Kurelac and assistants Bine Kovačič, Alenka Horvat
Visits	The church is closed, the keys are available at the nearby Slemenik farm on Grad or at the rectory of the church of St. Radegund in Stari Trg.

The building had developed as a series of separate building complexes distinguished by their structure as well as style. Each of the complexes was a separate unit, which holds true particularly of the nave.

Historical sources – particularly those from the period of the signing of the establishment deed of a Benedictine monastery, which was signed by Weriant de Grez in St. Paul in Lavanttal [in present-day Austria] – testify that the castle above Stari Trg was the oldest residential stronghold in Styria in 1091, apart from Rajhenburg. Experts agree that the lower part of the bell-tower of the church of St. Pancras was part of the old castle tower. Three-metre thick walls were preserved on the ground floor of the present bell-tower, with no entrance. That was certainly a remnant of the bergfrid, the most important castle tower which served for defence purposes within the castle complex, without comparison in contemporary Slovenia as to its form.

The castle was a fortified dwelling of the lord of the castle. After the extinction of the family of Spanheim it devolved with the entire estates of Slovenj Gradec to the Counts of Andechs-Meran. Berthold of Andechs, the Patriarch of Aquileia, who was a central figure of Slovene history, paid special attention to that part of his estates. He transformed the former hall of the castle into a chapel. The exterior of the building was homogeneous, the main entrance was on the western side and the top of the portal was enclosed by a tympanum created around the year 1240. The figurative composition with Mary holding Jesus on her left hand between two saints was made in the so-called early drawing style. “The painting of the 13th century was known primarily on the basis of sharply curved drapery on the tympanum of the church of St. Pancras on Grad near Slovenj Gradec.”¹ The accentuated contours and other stylistic features of that “al fresco” painting indicate its contemporaneity with the portal and other architecture. The original painting was replaced by a copy, the original being kept in the National Museum in Ljubljana.

1 KOMELJ I.: Dvajset let odkrivanja srednjeveških stenskih slik, *Varstvo spomenikov*, 10, Ljubljana, 1966, p. 44.

◀ Anton Lerchinger, detail of the painting in the dome of the holy stairs. “The holy stairs leaned on the exterior of the building, thus concluding the Stations of the Cross...”

“The castle was fortified in 1477, yet the Hungarians conquered and badly damaged it in 1488, so that the ruins were restored again only around the year 1493. It seems that the bergfrid and the church were restored as well, and gradually the surrounding walls too, while all the rest was left to fall into decay. The northern portal was built up and two round windows were made in the upper extension of the south wall originating from Berthold’s period. In the first half of the 16th century the church was fortified as a stronghold, and the bergfrid



The church before the renovation in 1977. “The condition of the monument complex was critical particularly as far as the construction was concerned...”

was reconstructed as a bell-tower in 1669 after it had crumbled in 1652. In the period between 1690 and 1695 a three-sided presbytery with a tomb of the same height as the church, yet narrower, was added. On account of that both the eastern windows of the nave were walled in and the eastern field of the vault was transformed.”²

The church of St. Pancras had undergone the greatest transformation during the Baroque period. A large presbytery was added to the uniform space of the chapel of Berthold the Patriarch. The holy stairs leaned on the exterior of the building, thus concluding the Stations of the Cross leading across the slope from the church of St. Radegund in Stari Trg. The vault of the staircase was painted with scenes of salvation and victory over sin. Scenes of the passion were depicted on the walls. The

2 CURK J.: Mislinjsko ozemlje – kulturna pokrajina, Zbornik Slovenj Gradec in Mislinjska dolina 1, Slovenj Gradec, 1997, p. 194.

frescoes were painted by the Baroque painter Anton Lerchinger in the seventies of the 18th century.

The volume of the monument erected around the year 1240 differed from most monuments in the same cultural area created during the Romanesque period that were subsequently taken over and adapted in the Gothic style. Attention is drawn particularly to the central monolithic column as the bearer of the cross vault. A Roman column found in the ruins of the near-by antique settlement of Colatio was presumably used for



View of the renovated church. "During the works no new evidence of the history of the building was discovered so as to facilitate solving the enigma of this unusual mediaeval architecture..."

it. Most probably the column had dictated the disposition of this unusual building since it defined the entire space, and particularly the four fields of the cross vault. Dr. Marijan Zadnikar stated that churches with square floor plans and central columns as bearers of cross vaults were particularly numerous in the late Gothic period in Austria, yet they were distinguished from the church of St. Pancras by an essential characteristic: apart from the square nave they all had a separate presbytery, which was not the case with St. Pancras until the Baroque period.

The condition of the monument complex was critical particularly as far as the construction was concerned, and its expressive quality was seriously curtailed primarily on account of inappropriate interventions. Sparse conservation works in the past were never finished and were performed without thorough knowledge of the historical substance of the building.

Plasterwork on the external facade was renovated on the basis of surveys. During the works no new evidence of the history

of the building was discovered so as to facilitate solving the enigma of this unusual mediaeval architecture.

Before the beginning of the restoration of the interior traces of paintings were discovered beneath the fallen or removed plaster. The paintings preceeded the construction of the presbytery – they originated from the end of the 17th century.

The plaster on the walls of the nave and particularly on the ceiling had moulded in several places due to the leaking of the roof. Subsequent wall paintings were executed in the secco



The holy stairs. "The frescoes were painted by the Baroque painter Anton Lerchinger in the seventies of the 18th century..."

technique, which produced a series of problems in the restoration: the physical opening of the paintings on the entire surface of the church, strengthening of hollow parts of the plaster with Casein glue, strengthening of coloured layers, filling the missing parts, and retouching. The same procedure was used for the ribs of the vault which were painted as well. The data gathered during the removal of the plaster were used for the reconstruction of the strip-shaped ornament executed in grey-white shades and burnt sienna. The removal of plaster on mouldings revealed remnants of polychromatism, yet insufficient for the reconstruction. An opening of an indefinite purpose was discovered in the north-western corner of the vault construction. It was subsequently closed and the plaster was deepened. There were no remnants of painting on the western wall, while there were clearly discernible traces of two rectangular openings. Another fresco of Mother of God in a frame made of coils was on the southern wall of the nave with

a clearly discernible layer of former frescoes beneath it. The upper layer was dated with the year 1673; still the first half of the 17th century. A consecration cross was presented on the southern wall – burnt sienna, the indication of an older painting. During the construction of the presbytery part of the painted plaster on the ceiling of the eastern wall by the triumphal arch wall had been damaged. The undamaged part was renovated in the Renaissance spirit.



View from the nave to the presbytery. "The church of St. Pancras had undergone the greatest transformation during the Baroque period. A large presbytery was added to the uniform space of the chapel of Berthold the Patriarch..."

Presentation of the present state

Three types of painting were discovered on the basis of making test boreholes:

- Baroque painting on the triumphal arch wall,
- painting from the end of the 17th century on the southern



Detail of the painted vault in the nave. "Figures of saints and busts of angels were painted among creepers and flowers covering the entire fields of arches in distinctive yellow and violet shades..."

and northern walls,

- painting from cca. 1580 on the vault of the nave.

In the process of restoration and presentation the appearance of the painting on the ceiling became discernible again. Figures of saints and busts of angels were painted among creepers and flowers (floral ornaments of stylized vegetation) covering the entire fields of arches in distinctive yellow and violet shades. The repetitive pattern of angel musicians with their instruments (the lute, flute, mandoline and harp) was dis-



Central column with the cross vault of the nave. "Attention is drawn particularly to the central monolithic column as the bearer of the cross vault. A Roman column found in the ruins of the near-by antique settlement of Colatio was presumably used for it..."

cernible in the fields of all cross arches except in those of the south-eastern arch, next to the triumphal arch wall. The motif of angels appeared in junctures of ribs and mouldings. The motif of Veronica's cloth could be traced in one of the fields of the north-western part of the cross arch, while the motif of St. Michael with the sword was painted on the northern edge of the field of the arch, and the painting depicting the Final Judgment ran along the entire northern wall.

The restoration of Baroque altars began simultaneously with the restoration of wall paintings. The altars were badly damaged due to years of neglect and inappropriate interventions in the past. The restorators were often faced with the dilemma whether the restoration would suffice to regain their original appearance since some parts were worm-eaten to such an extent that they simply disintegrated into dust. A lot of work and professional expertise was necessary to obtain their magnificent appearance.

The artistic creativity of the interior of the church was completed by Baroque altars from the second half of the 18th century, the work of local artist Janez Andrej Strauss and sculptor Janez Jurij Mersi, masters of altar painting and sculpture. They had promoted cultural growth in the territory of Slovenia and created an original artistic expression in a period when the artistic creativity in Slovene Styria had reached its pinnacle. The main altar was consecrated to St. Pancras, and the side ones to St. Aloysius and St. John of Nepomuk. The altar of St. John of Nepomuk leaning on the northern wall had hidden the remnants of the former entrance to the private gallery presumably used by Berthold, Patriarch of Aquileia. "This church is the only example where the paintings of Janez Andrej Strauss were not stylistically homogeneous, since they had been commissioned in different periods."³

By means of a long-term and qualitative renovation the monument was presented in all its eloquence, which would additionally facilitate further investigation. Considering the rich historical past of the region further archaeological excavations should be performed, on the basis of which the more precise origins of one of the most attractive architectural complexes in Slovenia could be determined.

SVJETLANA KURELAC

3 COBELJ Š.: Baročni slikarji Straussi, Založba Obzorja Maribor, 1967, p. 99.