

Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin

<i>IRN</i>	3003
<i>Location</i>	Grad
<i>Planning and implementation</i>	12 th century, late 15 th century, 1729, 1955
<i>Renovation</i>	1958, 1979, 1983, 1987, 1989, 2006
<i>Chief Conservator</i>	Neva Sulič Urek

The Gothic church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in Grad stands at the foot of a low hill with a large castle complex hidden behind forest greenery. The church, composed of the nave, a large presbytery, a sacristy and a western tower typical of the Prekmurje architecture, differs from most other Gothic churches by the fact that the presbytery is taller than the nave. The nave and the presbytery are surrounded with buttresses. The late Gothic portal with baton moulding, leading into the church, can be accessed through the Baroque tower between two diagonally-placed buttresses. Another entrance to the church leads through a late Gothic portal with baton moulding in the southern façade. To the right, a rectangular Gothic window from an earlier construction phase can be found. The interior, which gives the impression of a harmonious whole, is illuminated through tall Gothic windows. The two-bay presbytery is spanned with a star-rib vault and features a Baroque altar, a work of Janez Klein from 1778. The central niche in the altar contains a Gothic statue of the sitting Blessed Virgin with the Holy Infant from around 1510. The northern wall of the presbytery is embellished with a Gothic tabernacle from the same period. The

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Vault in the nave before removal in 1955

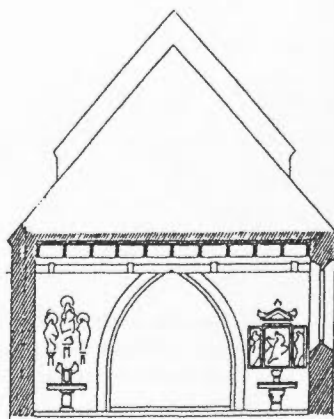




Presbytery

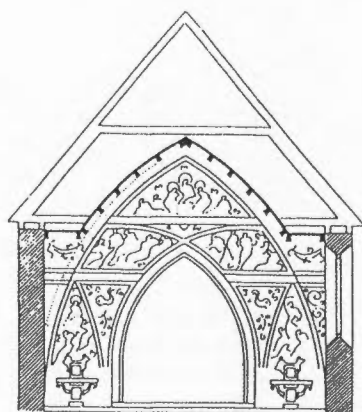
wooden structure of the ceiling supported with buttresses in the nave repeats the form of the Gothic triumphal arch in the presbytery. The nave was designed by the architect Jože Plečnik.

The church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in Grad is one of the most important and oldest church buildings in Prekmurje. According to archival sources, Bishop Liupram of Salzburg consecrated a church in 853 in Lindolverschirichun, a settlement that some historians identify as the predecessor of Lendava. In 1183 the Hungarian king Bela bequeathed the area of the present-day Grad, which was called Gornja Lendava until 1952, to the Cistercian monastery of Szenttgothárd. In 1208, during the lifetime of the feudal lord Nicholas of Eisenburg, the parish already existed and was by far the oldest in the area. An important role was played by the Order of St John, the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, who according to archival sources also resided in Sobota and Selo. According to the visitation report from 1756, the well-known Gothic wing altar from the early 16th century featured two figures of monks above the central balusters.



Original design of the ceiling
(Kuhar, Jože Plečnik v cerkvi
Marije Vnebovzete pri gradu,
2002)

The church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin was undoubtedly built back in the Romanesque period, but presumably a church had stood at the location even earlier. This is evident from the tower that stood separately from the church until the 18th century. It was characteristic of the oldest church architecture and was the only such example in Prekmurje. Unlike the tower, the present-day church dates from the late Gothic construction phase from around 1500. At that time, a taller presbytery was added to the old nave and the nave was probably renovated. The presbytery features the most beautiful Gothic tabernacle in Prekmurje, which is mentioned and praised in a visitation report from 1698, as well as a Gothic statue of the Blessed Virgin from around 1510 in the Baroque altar. Until 1941 the Gothic statue of the Blessed Virgin with the Holy Infant was part of the Gothic wing altar; its four panels with paintings and reliefs are on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. According to the art historian Emilijan Cevc, the altar displays influences of Gregor Erhart's workshop from Ulm. The visitation report also reveals that the church was vaulted and the vault decorated with murals in 1660. In 1729 a 35-metre tower was added to the western façade, replacing the former wooden turret on the church and the tower standing next to the building. Long before the Second World War, the tower began to lean to the west, pulling the wall of the nave with it. In 1942 the vault was left exposed for a longer period of time during the renovation of the roof and was damaged by rain. The impaired vault pushed apart the walls of the nave. In 1952 the priest Ivan Kolenc requested the assistance of the Institute of Monument Protection of Slovenia. Based on the report of the senior construction technician Jože Požauk of the Maribor Planning Bureau, the conservator Marjan Zadnikar summoned an inspection committee that confirmed the static report. At that time it was probably decided that the vault should be removed, because static reinforcement with iron pins was very expensive and problematic. The priest Ivan Kolenc invited the architect Jože Plečnik to participate in the renovation of the nave. Although his illness prevented him from visiting the church in person, Plečnik came up with a highly original solution to the problem of ramshackle walls. He proposed that lancet support arches from prefabricated concrete elements be built in the



Original design of the ceiling
(Kuhar, *Jože Plečnik v cerkvi
Marije Vnebovzete pri gradu,
2002*)

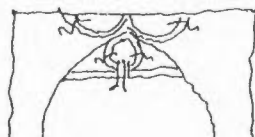
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interior. These arches echoed the shape of the Gothic lancet triumphal arch between the nave and the presbytery and relieved the pressure on the walls of the nave. On the new structure of the nave, Plečnik installed two pairs of rafters that carry the open roof structure, as is done in basilicas. He supported the roof with a horizontal structure that extends as far as the edge of concrete elements. He covered the ceiling with large decorative ceramic tiles. He placed a new choir loft in the width of the slanting roof structure and elevated it with a tall wooden fence, decoratively and visually connecting it with other wooden elements of the nave. Moreover, the church was stylistically unified with the colouring of the old and new walls and stone. The architect placed lanterns in ceramic elements on the walls, thereby creating the magic atmosphere of the heavens.

Unlike Bogojina, which was Plečnik's first contact with Prekmurje, the renovation of the church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in Grad was his last work. Both the planning and renovation works were described in great detail by the local priest Štefan Kuhar and published in a leaflet in 2002. The publication includes Plečnik's letters to the priest Ivan Kolenc and all five plans prepared for Plečnik by his student Anton Bitenc of Ljubljana. The plans date from 17 March to 1 September 1955. The renovation lasted from 11 July to 23 October 1955.

The renovation of the nave was implemented in several stages. According to the first plan, dated 17 March 1955, Plečnik prepared two proposals for the replacement of the Baroque vault. The first entailed a straight wooden ceiling resembling the wooden Gothic ceiling before the vaulting of the nave in 1660, whereas the second entailed four concrete profiled arches that echo the shape of the triumphal arch and reach as high as the roof. With the second plan, dated 24 April 1955, in which he obviously confirmed and later implemented the idea of concrete arches in the nave, he designed the choir loft and the ceiling composed of ceramic tiles. Plečnik later retained the tiled ceiling and abandoned the original design of the choir loft and the staircase. In the third plan, dated 27 July 1955, he envisaged the unrealised expansion of the church in the western part with the portico, where he designed a spiral staircase leading through the tower to the choir loft. In the fourth plan, dated 16 August 1955, he proposed the construction of an aisle to the north and a different design of the choir loft with a spiral staircase, which too was never implemented. The fifth, last and eventually implemented plan dated 1 September 1955 envisages the choir loft and the staircase leading to it. Plečnik used an altered design of the choir loft from the fourth plan. He transformed the profiled lancet triumphal arch into a supporting brick wall.

Plečnik's last drawing depicts a chandelier from the choir loft at the Grad church (Kuhar, *Jože Plečnik v cerkvi Marije Vnebovzete pri gradu*, 2002)



The renovation of the nave in 1955 was the most important change in the church after the Gothic construction phase. In 1957 the priest Ivan Kolenc renovated the exterior, whereas a year later, the Gothic tabernacle and the statue of the Blessed Virgin with the Holy Infant were restored. All works proceeded under the supervision of the conservator Marijan Zadnikar from the Institute of Monument Protection of Ljubljana. Maintenance, restoration and conservation works were carried out in the church by the Maribor regional branch of the monument protection service, which was founded in 1959. The restoration of the Baroque altar with the Gothic statue of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Infant, which took longer, lasting until 1983, was supervised by the restorer Bine Kavčič. In 1980 the presbytery was renovated according to the plans of the architect Jože Kregar of Ljubljana. In the early 1980s the central heating was restored, in 1983 the interior was re-decorated, in 1987 the roof was repaired and in 1988 the building received a new façade. In 2006 the staircase in front of the western tower was reshaped and reduced while retaining the existing grey stone following the wish of the parish. The church has been meticulously maintained over the past decades, largely by the priest Štefan Kuhar, who retired in August 2007 after publishing a valuable leaflet with an accurate description of the renovation of the nave according to the plans of our greatest architect Jože Plečnik.

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photos: page 34 MARIJAN ZADNIKAR, INDOK Centre Archive, page 35

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