

REVIEW ARTICLE

Origins of Romanesque Rotundas in East-Central Europe

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Moravia's History Reconsidered: A Reinterpretation of Medieval Sources. By Imre Boba. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971. Pp. 167. Price: Guilders 24.30. ISBN 90 247 5041 5.

During the pre-Romanesque and Romanesque periods, a large and characteristic group of round churches appeared in East-Central Europe, particularly in the territory of medieval Poland, Bohemia and Hungary, though similar structures may also be found in parts of Germany, Austria and Yugoslavia. The earliest examples, dating from the 10th and early 11th centuries, were built as chapels of dukes and royal palaces. The form continued to be favoured after this time, but the function changed. From about the mid-11th century, many of them were built as seigneurial chapels for castles and fortresses. Yet the majority were constructed as simple village parish churches and flourished in that capacity from the 11th to the 13th century.

Almost all of the early chapels are known from excavations, and most of them have been discovered since World War II. Because of the recent nature of the discoveries, there is as yet no comprehensive work published on the subject. A number of studies have been written concerning the results of excavations done within the boundaries of one or the other of the countries in the area under consideration. Some deal with the problems of a single structure, while others take a wider view and discuss a particular group, or the rotundas of an entire country. There now seems to be enough ground to go beyond such local studies and to draw some general conclusions concerning these structures in the whole of East-Central Europe.

These round churches probably derive from Carolingian and Ottonian models. The early rotundas seem to imitate, both in their basic form and function, a venerated prototype, Charlemagne's imperial palace chapel at Aachen. Almost as soon as it had been built,

this church became a symbol of the whole Carolingian Empire, and of the strength of Charlemagne. Furthermore, bolstered by the reminiscences it bore, it symbolized the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, his palace in Constantinople, and the central churches built in Jerusalem. The oft visited, and highly admired church of Aachen was one of the most frequently copied buildings of the Christian world. Contemporary imitations appeared, and the Ottos were responsible for a whole series of copies all over the Empire.

The influence of Aachen reached the newly Christianized countries of East-Central Europe, which took, as their most important model, the Empire of the Ottos, and through it that of Charlemagne. By building their palace chapels on a central plan, imitating Aachen, the first rulers of these lands endeavoured to absorb and share the legitimacy of that proven Empire, and to show themselves similar, if not equal, to their western neighbours. For obvious economic and technical reasons, the palace chapels of these territories were built on a considerably smaller scale and with a much simpler architectural construction than that of their idealized prototype.

The most impressive monument from Bohemian territory is the *Saint Vit of Prague*, which was discovered during the excavations of 1911 and 1931 in the castle of Hradčín.¹ From the relatively meagre wall-remains, Professor Cibulka's reconstruction proposes four large, horse-shoe shaped apses at the cardinal points of the round nave. Since the inner diameter of the central part is 13 m, quite large compared to the other monuments of the area, Cibulka reasonably suggested that there must have been a series of pillars or columns around the centre of the interior supporting a cupola. The Prague church was built by Prince Venceslas as his palace chapel in the first half of the 10th century, but certainly before 940. The other early Czech monuments, much smaller in size and simpler in plan, such as the *Saint Clement at Levý Hradec*, the *Saint Peter at Budeč*, the *Saint John the Baptist at Vyšehrad*, the *Saint Peter at Stará Plzeň*, the *Saint Désiré at Lysa*, and the *Holy Mary at Znojmo*, were all situated in ducal or royal castles, and served as private chapels of the Přemislid family.² Most of them have a circular nave with a semi-circular apse, and in almost every case date from the 10th or early 11th centuries.

In Poland also, the earliest monuments are closely connected with the palaces of the ruling dynasty, the Piasts.³ Archaeological research has brought to light five early administrative centres, from which in four cases round or centrally planned chapels were found. The chapel of *Ostrów Lednicki*, built originally with an emphasized central tower supported by four strong pillars, was connected to the palace. The staircase tower suggests a special choir for the ruler, which could have been approached directly from his living quarters. In Giecz, the same

basic system can be seen in the form of a simpler, completely round chapel. At Przemyśl, attached again to a palace, the chapel has a round nave and a semi-circular apse towards the east. In the *Wawel of Krakow*, the church has a more complicated ground plan with four large apses at the cardinal points, thus strongly resembling the *Saint Vit of Prague*, although on a reduced scale. The remains of a staircase tower leading to a choir were also discovered here. The Polish monuments date from the second half of the 10th and early 11th centuries, and were built either by Mieszko I (mid-10th c. - 992) or by his son, Boleslav the Brave (992-1075). Their local prototype must have been built in either Poznań or Gniezno, if not at both of these sites, where the palaces have unfortunately not yet been excavated.

The earliest Hungarian rotundas, dating from the late 10th to the mid-11th century, follow the same line as the Bohemian or Polish monuments.⁴ The earliest example is the palace chapel of Duke Géza (970-990) at Esztergom, one of the first capitals of Hungary. Significantly enough, it is dedicated to Saint Vit and, with its more complex ground plan, is reminiscent of the *Saint Vit of Prague*. A second rotunda came to light directly beside the north wall of the cathedral at Veszprém, in an early ducal castle, which was later owned by the queen. Its orientation is quite different from that of the cathedral, which must have been under construction, if not completed, in 1002. The rotunda was most likely built earlier. A third important monument was excavated at Sárospatak on the south side of the Gothic parish church. Here again, the orientation of the rotunda is very different from that of the later building. Sárospatak served as one of the early royal residences in Hungary. The round church was probably built by King Andrew I (1042-1060). In the 13th century, a castle, replacing the old royal residence, was built in a different part of the town. As a result, the chapel lost its original function and became the local parish church. Soon afterwards, a larger church was built directly beside it, and retained the old privileges attached to the rotunda. We learn even from documents of the late 14th century that the parish church was exempt from episcopal control, and was directly under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Esztergom, a privilege characteristic of royal chapels.

Amongst the early rotundas of these countries, there is but a single group, those discovered in the territory of the so-called Great Moravian Empire in the valley of the northern Morava River in present day Czechoslovakia, which do not seem to fit the general development. Although the churches of Mikulčice and Staré Město can be associated with centres of importance, none of them can be considered as palace chapel. At the same time, since Moravia was overrun and completely destroyed by the invading Hungarians

between 900 and 907, their excavators and all Czech architectural historians date them to the 9th century, predating the rotundas previously mentioned.⁵

In Mikulčice, three rotundas were found in the vicinity of the fortification. The most interesting one (no. 6), found north-east of the castle, has a horse-shoe shaped apse both on the eastern and western sides of the round nave, a form which may be a derivation of more complicated structures. The walled cemetery around it, containing a number of rich graves, suggests that the church had a considerable importance. The second rotunda (no. 7) is a simpler monument with a poorer cemetery around it, and was found somewhat further away from the castle walls. The third church, completely circular from the outside, has four, semi-circular niches built into the thickness of its interior walls. It is considered to have been a baptistery. Neither in function, nor form does it appear to belong to the group under discussion. The fourth rotunda, probably with a horse-shoe shaped apse at the east side of the round nave, is from Staré Město.

According to Czech scholars, Mikulčice must have been the centre of Great Moravia, the princely site of Rastislav and Svatopluk, and perhaps already of Mojmir I, while Staré Město could have belonged to a member of the ruling family or to one of the important families of the Moravian court. Not only has it been presumed that these round churches were built in the 9th century, but new research has often connected them with the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius, and has sought their architectural prototypes in the region of the Adriatic, a Slavic cultural sphere. It has also been argued that these rotundas, being the earliest of their type in East-Central Europe, had to be the prototypes of the Bohemian and other examples, and even the more complicated structures, such as the *Saint Vit of Prague*, must have derived from them.

Through a critical analysis of historical sources, Professor Boba in his recent work, *Moravia's History Reconsidered*, reached the conclusion that Moravia of the 9th century did not exist north of the Danube as has been generally believed. Indeed, a principality called Moravia did not exist at all. It clearly shows from the examination of western, Byzantine and Church Slavonic written documents that what has been considered the country of Moravia was in reality a Slavonic principate around the town of Marava (Maraha, Margus), the Sirmium of antiquity (today Sremská Mitrovica, Yugoslavia). This town, and the territory under its jurisdiction, was inhabited by Slavonians (in Latin *Sclavi*, *Slavi*; in Church Slavonic *Slaviene*). It was not an independent political formation, but a patrimonium of Slavonia, which extended from the Dalmatian coast to Belgrade and Niš.

The geographical localization of this "Moravia" is a key factor when considering the extent of the mission of Cyril and Methodius amongst the Slavs. In the light of Boba's research, the bishopric/archbishopric of Methodius could not have been situated north of the Danube. It is apparent from the sources that Rastislav of Marava, together with the other Slavonian princes asked the Byzantine emperor, Michael III, for a teacher. Kocel thereupon requested the pope to appoint Methodius to the episcopal see of Saint Andronicus (Saint Andronicus is known to have been bishop of Sirmium in Roman times) on the territory of Rastislav. Pope Harian II made him the archbishop of "all the Sloven lands", and not of "all Slavs" or "all Slavic nations", as it has been mistakenly translated. As we learn from a letter of Pope John VIII (872-882), Methodius' see was Marava, that is to say Sirmium: "Methodius reverentissimus archiepiscopus sanctae ecclesiae Marahensis", which became "Methodius, archbishop of Moravia" only through erroneous translation. Beside the language difficulties, the former interpreters of the question neglected the fact that in the 9th century, and already earlier, a see had to have a cathedral: it was *impossible* to appoint a bishop or archbishop simply to a territory or a country. Looking at the problem purely from the legal view-point, Methodius could not have been made a "missionary bishop", or a "bishop-archbishop without a see", or "nominally the bishop of Sirmium" working in the court of Svatopluk north of the Danube with a see either at Nitra or Velehrad. Furthermore, the diocese of Methodius is called *diocesis Pannonica*, which—while it included Sirmium—could not have even partially been north of the Danube.

In this light, the rotundas found at Mikulčice and Staré Město could not have been "Moravian", and are not necessarily to be dated as early as the 9th century. This early dating was not deduced from the archaeological finds of the cemeteries around the churches, but was concluded mainly from the historical fact that the Hungarians demolished Moravia in the early years of the 10th century, in which case the churches must have been built, they conclude, prior to the invasions.

Under the circumstances, there can be little doubt that the *Saint Vit of Prague*, built sometime before 940, must have been the earliest round church of these territories. It was this building, a derivation of the palace chapel at Aachen, which served as a prototype for the other Czech rotundas, a view which was suggested by Cibulka himself as early as 1934. However, this view has been completely rejected in recent works emanating from Czechoslovakia. The round churches discovered at the so-called "Moravian" sites may consequently be dated some time between 940 and the early 11th century.

In Hungary, the first round church, built in Esztergom at the end

of the 10th century, was dedicated to Saint Vit, as was the Prague church. Notwithstanding the possibility that there might have been here direct influences from Aachen, which would be quite understandable from the dynastic and political connections of the Árpáds, the similar dedication may show links with the neighbouring court of Prague. Since Saint Adalbert, the bishop of Prague, visited and aided Duke Géza in 995, he might have instigated the building of the Esztergom rotunda. The other Hungarian examples probably have derived directly from it.

The *Saint Vit of Prague* and the other early Czech rotundas might also have had some influence on the round palace chapels of Poland. Duke Mieszko, who was baptised in 966, married a Bohemian princess, Dubravka. At the same time, however, a closer influence of Aachen is apparent in Poland, which may be explained by the political relations with the Ottos of Mieszko I, and particularly of Boleslav the Brave. Of the new monarchies, it is in Poland alone that the rotundas are not only built in a castle, but are actually constructed together with the royal palaces, clearly a simplified variation of Charlemagne's ensemble. That all these structures were dedicated to the Virgin Mary, an otherwise uncommon dedication in these lands at this time, again shows a strong Carolingian tradition.

Arguing from the conclusions reached by Professor Boba, it can be stated that the earliest rotundas of East-Central Europe do not derive from those round churches discovered at the so-called Great Moravian sites. Through Ottonian influence their major source of inspiration was Charlemagne's palace chapel at Aachen. Naturally, when the type was established with the building of the *Saint Vit of Prague*, this local example influenced many of those built later both within Bohemia and in the neighbouring lands, while direct connections with Aachen can also be seen.⁶

NOTES

1. Cibulka, J., *Václavova rotunda svatého víta*, in the series *Svatováclavský Sborník*, I, Praha, 1934; Merhautová, A., "Les débuts de l'architecture du haut moyen âge en Bohême", *Mélanges offert à René Crozet*, I, Poitiers, 1966, p. 116; Merhautová-Livorová, A., *Einfache mitteleuropäische Rundkirchen: Ihr Ursprung, Zweck, und ihre Bedeutung*, Prag, 1970.
2. Kořán, I., "Tradition des églises à plan central de Bohême", *Mélanges offert à René Crozet*, II, Poitiers, 1966, pp. 1058-59; Merhautová (1966), pp. 111-117.
3. Zurowska, K., "L'origine du vocable de Notre Dame dans les chapelles palatines des premiers Piasts en Pologne", *Mélanges offert à René Crozet* I, 1966, pp. 159-167.
4. Gervers-Molnár, V. *A középkori Magyarország rotundái* (Rotundas of medieval Hungary), with English summary, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1972, pp. 26-30; Dercsényi, D., "Vorromanische Kirchentypen in Ungarn", *Acta Historiae Artium*, XX/1-2 (1974), pp. 6-8, fig. 11.

5. Cibulka, J., "Le chiese della Grande Moravia", *Sancti Cyrillus e Methodius, Vita e Opera*, Prague, 1963, pp. 86ff; Kořán (1966), pp. 1057-66; Kotrba, V., "Cirkevní stavby Velké Moravy" (Churches of Great Moravia), *Umeni*, XII (1964), pp. 325ff; Merhautova (1966), pp. 111-117; Poulik, J., *Dvě velkomoravské rotundy v Mikulčicích* (Two Great Moravian rotundas at Mikulčice), in the series *Monumenta Archaeologia*, XII, Prague, 1963.
6. Deriving from a number of different sources, other types of round churches also appeared in these countries from at least the 11th century.