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Dating and composition of the Vyšehrad type Romanesque floor tiles

ANNOTATION

An attempt is made to evaluate the oldest terracotta relief tiled floors in Bohemia – their chronology, iconography and composition technology. Chronology of the Vyšehrad type of tiles is currently based on two conceptions: it was produced either in the end of the 11th century or in the period around the year 1130. After critical analysis of those published finds, which have a high degree of potentially accurate dating, the earlier date is considered more probable. The newly recognised composition principle of the eponymous tiled floor, found in the 19th century in the basilica of St. Lawrence at Vyšehrad in Prague, was based on a different idea than the composition of square tiles. A re-construction design of the Vyšehrad type tiled floor and its interconnection with the architectonic disposition of the building as a work of a master of European format is suggested. An attempt to compare the construction of the Vyšehrad type of floor with the groundplan of the surrounding building has so far been made in case of St. Wenceslaus rotunda only, where coherence was proved. Revealing the composition principle of the floor from hexagonal Vyšehrad type ceramic tiles as a complicated construction with a strict inner structure opens further possibilities regarding their iconography and comparing the iconography and composition of other early medieval floors in Europe.

SUMMARY

The theme of this article was given by the need for anchoring the dating of the archeologically discovered and excavated remains of the St. Wenceslas Romanesque rotunda at Mala Strana in Prague. So far the only criterion for dating its origins is a tiny fragment of the floor surviving *in situ* in the north-eastern part of the nave, in front of the step into the apsis (fig. 9). It is composed of embossed hexagonal terracotta tiles of the St. Wenceslas variant of the Vyšehrad type (fig. 1). The find from the year 2004 (described in detail in ČIHÁKOVÁ/MULLER 2006) gives the *ante quem* date for the origins of the rotunda. Stating of this date is currently not definite. Chronology of the Vyšehrad tiles type has been unsatisfactorily discussed in a long term by two great scholars, the only ones in this field, A. Merhautova and B. Nechvatal, with mutually significantly different conceptions. A. Merhautova does not specialise in the Vyšehrad tile type itself – she analyses it in the framework of the Ostrov 1. terracotta floor tile type. She connects this group exclusively with the Ostrov monastery production, which according to her opinion, was considered to supply all Bohemian sites with these products (this assumption is already outdated – VAŘILOVA 2001). She dates the origins of this production and thus the production of the Vyšehrad tile type to the year 1130. B. Nechvatal views the Vyšehrad tile type as an autonomous phenomenon connected with the period of the duke – king Vratislav II (duke 1061–1085, as king Vratislav I in 1085–1092). Finds of the Vyšehrad tile type in a smooth variant, reduced to smooth triangles at the Prague castle (HRDLIČKA 1997), together with the style of the sphinx (DUFKOVÁ 2001) and of the lettering (NECHVATAL 1984) indicate much older dating than the year 1130. The strongest argument against this date are the finds from the St. John the Baptist basilica at the Ostrovian monastery. A square tile from the later 2nd period of the Ostrovian terracotta tiles was found below the wall of the choir, which was built in 1137 or shortly before this date (MERHAUTOVA 1988, BŘIČAČEK / MERHAUTOVA / RICHTER / SOMMER 2006). If the conception by A. Merhautova is correct, the production of the hexagonal Vyšehrad type tiles and of the later square tiles would be separated by only seven years or less. In that period they would have to produce minimally all the tiles for all the church floors where their evidence has been found so far. Moreover the ideological conception would have to be totally changed with the inception of the square tiles of the 2nd group. If the tile below the choir wall was not directly from the production, but from a destroyed floor (the state is not described), the 1130 dating for the Vyšehrad type tile production is thus demolished. Therefore dating of the Vyšehrad tile type to the end of the 11th century, the period of the king Vratislav I is more acceptable. However one cannot exclude the reuse of well preserved tiles in a newly composed floor at a later time. A criterion in such case could possibly be the furnishing of the floor bedding.

Also the composition of the tiled floor can be an additional argument for an older dating of the Vyšehrad type. So far the largest fragment of a floor tiled with these ceramic tiles survived in the St. Lawrence basilica at Vyšehrad in

Prague. Despite the previous opinions we can now state that there was a perfect order in the composition of the tiles. The principle of the composition is a very complicated construction with strict inner orders coming out from circles, their intersections and their gradual linking into planispherically larger units of orders. Circles are modified in this case into hexagons as the shape between circle and square. The composition of the floor is laid from several motif levels (patterns) in a gradual hierarchy. At present the three lowest composition patterns can be defined. The first pattern is the basic composition element of the Vyšehrad tile type, applied also in the St. Wenceslas rotunda floor (fig. 4), which is composed of a combination of one embossed hexagonal tile and six smooth triangles set in the shape of a “Star of David.” In the second pattern each motif is the centre of a circle surrounded by a wreath composed from six embossed tiles with the other three motifs (fig. 5, 6). All motifs are mutually equivalent. In the third composition pattern the motifs are arranged to a hexagon, with the same motif at each apex and in the centre. The length of the hexagon edge is given by the number of five tiles (2x identical motifs at the ends of the edge plus 3x other motifs in between), from which originates the model with four embossed motifs applied in the basilica at Vyšehrad (fig. 7). With such a complicated perception of the floor decoration in the St. Lawrence church it is indisputable that the composition hierarchy continued to higher patterns, surely composed in harmony with the architecture. Interpretation of the iconographic construction will be probably hidden in the highest unit, in its intersection with the groundplan of the church and in the recognition of the apexes and centres of the complete composition. Nevertheless the published floor fragments found *in situ* are so small that they do not enable the differentiation of further levels. Intentional and well thought out harmony between the floor composition and the architectural disposition is apparent from the reconstruction of the basic floor plan in the St. Wenceslas rotunda at Prague Mala Strana (fig. 8). To the contrary from the iconographic composition the laying down of the floor tiles was quite simple working process. The composition regularly repeats a single short sequence of four units in oblique lines and a sequence in the next line with the correct shift; the rule was the same sequence, but in the inverse order on the horizontal lines (fig. 7). We presume that the composition of the floor decorated with the Vyšehrad type tiles was planned by an architect of the European style.

Fig. 1. Prague-Mala Strana, Malostranske Square, rotunda of St. Wenceslas in no. 2/III. Ceramic embossed tiles of the Vyšehrad type in the variant of St. Wenceslas, found *in situ* (photo M. Pavala).

Fig. 2. Prague-Vyšehrad, St. Lawrence basilica. A 1903 drawing of the floor fragment deposited in the Lapidarium of The National Museum (unlike on the photograph there is a difference in the orientation of the square border tiles). Different embossed motifs marked off in yellow (measurement and drawing A. Wiehl; on the left – adopted from Nechvatal 2007; on the right – the groundwork taken from Merhautova 1988).

Fig. 3. The drawing from fig. 2. elaborated planispherically preserving the colours of individual motifs.

Fig. 4. Prague-Mala Strana, Malostranske Square, rotunda of St. Wenceslas in no. 2/III. Composition principal of the **1st pattern** – “David’s star” composed of 1 embossed tile and 6 smooth triangle tiles – the basic composition of the Vyšehrad type floor.

Fig. 5. Prague-Vyšehrad. St. Lawrence basilica. Composition principle of the **2nd pattern** – each embossed tile is surrounded by hexagonal embossed tiles with the other three motifs.

Fig. 6. Prague-Vyšehrad. St. Lawrence basilica. Composition principle of the **2nd pattern** – each embossed tile is a centre of a circle from hexagonal embossed tiles of the other three motifs. The floor is covered by a dense, coherent net of circles to each motif; the nets to individual motifs mutually overlap. The motifs are replaced by numbers: **1** – gryphon, **2** – sphinx, **3** – Nero, **4** – lion.

Fig. 7. Prague-Vyšehrad. St. Lawrence basilica. Composition principle of the **3rd pattern** – **in red** the apexes and the centre of the hexagon composed of a single motif. **In brown** composition done by repetition of a single sequence. Motifs replaced by numbers as in fig. 6.

Fig. 8. Prague-Mala Strana, Malostranske Square, rotunda of St. Wenceslas in no. 2/III. One of the possible reconstructions of the Vyšehrad type floor composition, gained by elaborating the fragment found *in situ*. The key points on the blue cross axis indicate that the composition was a result of a project prepared by a Romanesque master. The green points are the apexes of a hexagon written into the circular outline of the building. The edge at the east corresponds with the eastern outline of a large red sandstone block – part of the step into the apsis.

Fig. 9. Prague-Mala Strana, Malostranske Square, rotunda of St. Wenceslas in no. 2/III. A tiny fragment of the composition with two motifs (**1**- gryphon, **2** – lion), the principle of which could not be decoded.

English by Linda and Patrick Foster