

Jan Havrda – Michal Tryml

The Magdalenian and Dominican monasteries of St. Mary Magdalene in Malá Strana, Prague (An archaeological contribution to understanding their structural form)

ANNOTATION

An extensive archaeological excavation during 2003–2005 enabled a building development analysis of the medieval church of St. Mary Magdalene, which was formerly integrated in a gothic Magdalenian monastery at Malá Strana. Later modifications of the church and the monastery between the 14th to 17th centuries were revealed. They culminated, in the 17th century, in a complete reconstruction for the use of a Dominican monastery, which existed on the same site between 1604–1784. The discovery of Romanesque structural remains predating the origins of the church opened the question of its predecessor. The exposed walling of the polygonal gothic east end of the church, which includes the altar foundations, were preserved in situ, conserved and with the minimum of modification, opened for public display. This is a positive response by the private developer to archeologically uncovered heritage monuments.

SUMMARY

Only a few written sources (with the first record from 1329) and later illustrations provide evidence for the existence of the Magdalenian monastery with the church of St. Mary, which was originally situated on the plots of the houses no. 378 and partially on no. 459. New information was gained from the largest excavation so far undertaken on the left bank of Vltava in response to the conversion of both houses into a hotel in 2003–2005. Simultaneously a survey of the historic buildings was carried out along with a new compilation of the documentary evidence. In the northern part of the site (house no. 387) the foundations of the complete polygonal end of the church of St. Mary Magdalene were revealed immediately below the ground floor. The walls were preserved up to one metre above the original ground surface. Only the top of the walls in the southern part have been damaged by a burial chamber, built after the destruction of the Gothic presbytery. In the corners there are vault pillars with circular sections and orthogonal an foot without plates. Both external corners of the presbytery were later supported by pillars with later modifications and enlargements in brick. The trenches along the presbytery wall, both interior and exterior, did not reach the subsoil; they were stopped on the level between the foundations and the above ground walling. The exposed walls were conserved and are presented for public display with a minimum of repairs.

The nave of the church, with wall fragments discovered in a trench outside the house, was 9,8m wide. The length can only be estimated from the Post-medieval plans to almost 16m. While the form of the church can be reconstructed to a certain extent, that of the other convent buildings is not clear. A small fragment, probably of a convent building, is adjacent to the church on the southern side and a wall uncovered further to the east may be a fragment of the monastery enclosure wall.

The monastery was destroyed early in the Hussite Wars and was never restored. Presumably the nave was destroyed and the presbytery existed further as an individual building, but its end was demolished sometime in the first half of the 17th century, when enlargement was necessary. This modification was achieved by building the side walls further to the east presumably in 1613, when the site became a property of the Dominican order.

During the next phase of the rescue excavations other wall foundation fragments were revealed to the east from the house no. 387. The evidence suggests that the building of this structure was interrupted, conserved and never finished. Since the wall formed an opened semi circle, it is interpreted as foundations of the eastern end of a church, possibly belonging to a church from an unknown phase of the Dominican monastery development of 1613–1637. At this phase the form of the buildings was still roughly copying the medieval structure of the Magdalenian monastery. In the 1630 the Dominican monks gained a rich patron, which led to abandonment of the current conception and the initiation of a new, generously founded monastery. The new monastery church, with still standing massive structures, was founded in 1656 together with a monastery, which was abolished by Joseph's reforms in 1784.

The excavations also produced new information concerning this later period. The foundations of the northern convent wing and relieving arches for the western ambit wall were revealed during the excavation of the yard. Finally some of the artefacts, which could be connected with the activity of both of the monasteries, are described, such as architectural fragments and metal book clasps for example.

Fig. 1. Prague historic towns; the site of the Magdalenian and Dominican monasteries of St. Mary Magdalene at Mala Strana in black.

Fig. 2. Block of houses at Mala Strana surrounded by the streets Karmelitska, Ujezd, Hellichova, Nebovidska and Harantova (no. 387, 459, 388 – the deconsecrated Baroque church of St. Mary Magdalene). The excavation area in grey.

Fig. 3. The northwest part of the former ambits of the Baroque monastery. Situation immediately before the excavation in November after the demolition of the press factory hall and removal of recent dumps, up to 3m thick.

Fig. 4. The northwest part of the former ambits of the Baroque monastery. The built-in press hall was demolished. State in 1997.

Fig. 5. The northeast part of the former ambits of the Baroque monastery without two built-in one-floored wings. Top right, the former Baroque church of St. Mary Magdalene, today the Museum of Czech music. Current state of the hotel complex.

Fig. 6. The southwest wing of the Dominican monastery with the ambits before reconstruction. View from the ambits (from northwest). The state in 2003 after the demolition of the outbuildings from the 19th and 20th century.

Fig. 7. The former Dominican monastery of St. Mary Magdalene at Mala Strana. Southern ambit corridor. View from the east during reconstruction in 2006.

Fig. 8. A section out of the "Vratislav wood engraving" by Jan Kozel and Michal Petrlé from 1562. The oldest known picture of the site. Position of the church of St. Mary Magdalene (in grey) indicates that the monastery buildings must have been to the south of it (to the right). Bottom right the church of St. Lawrence in Nebovidy.

Fig. 9. A discreet house no. 387 in Karmelitska street conceals several distinct building phases of the church of St. Mary Magdalene, rebuilt in Baroque period for the use of Dominican convent. View from the northwest.

Fig. 10. Mala Strana, the block between the streets of Karmelitska, Hellichova, Nebovidska and Harantova. Plan of current state with the monastery fragments found during the excavation: **1** – the Romanesque constructions partly used for the Gothic church building, **2** – presbytery of the church of St. Mary Magdalene, **3** – deserted nave of the same church, **4** – presumed position of the Gothic convent, **5** – Post-medieval orthogonal enlargement of the church to the east, **6** – medieval cemetery, **7** – medieval wall of the monastery enclosure, **8** – newly discovered wall of an unfinished church end from the 1st half of the 17th century, **9** – Renaissance buildings in Nebovidska street, **10** – Post-medieval monastery cemetery, **11** – high Baroque church, **12** – remnants of the northern wing of the Dominican monastery, **13** – foundation pillars of the western ambit of the Baroque monastery, **14** – southern wing of the high Baroque convent (1680s).

Fig. 11. Mala Strana – Karmelitska street, house no. 387. Simplified plan of the revealed and presumed church fragments. **Brown** – a curve of a foundation wall with its face highlighted, **blue** – enlargement of the Gothic church end to the east, **red** – polygonal end of the Gothic church and foundations of the altar, **lighter blue** – Post medieval burial chamber. Reconstructed wall fragments of the medieval church nave (**lighter red**) below the paving of the parking area at Karmelitska street, only the fragments below the pavement in front of the house were documented. **Black** – previous revealed Romanesque constructions, **grey** – previous presumed Romanesque constructions.

Fig. 12. On the right section through the Gothic east presbytery wall and interior layers. Completed from partial sections in a point trench done to the foundations of the church. Situation of the section see Fig. 11, section A. **Brown** (layer 46) – subsoil (soil based on slope sediments); **blue** – early medieval settlement stratigraphy, **dark blue** (layers 8, 20, 11, 12, 10, 42, 13, 22, 35, 24, 37, 26, 29, 50) – building debris to level the surface before laying the Gothic church floor (layer 2), **layer 30** – the building level during the presbytery building period; **light green** (layers 17, 18) – built up of the floor in the 16th century; **red** (layers 4, 16) – built up from the first half of the 17th century. On the left the vault pillar in the SE corner of the presbytery and sections through the pillar.

Fig. 13. The presbytery wall of the deserted church of St. Mary Magdalene during conservation. To the right foundation of the altar. The floor finished with replicas of medieval tiles.

Fig. 14. North-eastern part of the deserted monasteries. View from the north onto the medieval plaener wall, probably the enclosure wall of the Magdalenian monastery (see Fig. 10: 7).

Fig. 15. North-eastern part of the yard of the deserted monasteries, today the main hotel entrance. The entrance gate leads to the Maltese square. The arrow shows the remains of the original medieval monastery enclosure wall presented in the current paving.

Fig. 16. Friedrich Bernard Werner (after an older drawing?), around 1740. The Dominican monastery with the new dominant church is drawn in slightly schematic way. On the left the old church not integrated in the building organism. Northern wing of the monastery was probably reduced.

Fig. 17. The former Dominican monastery of St. Mary Magdalene at Mala Strana. The excavation area. On the left the wall tops of the eight revealed pillars, which carried relieving arches for the western ambit wall. View from the south.

Fig. 18. The most southern foundation pillar of the Dominican monastery ambits built already in the 17th (?) century was the only one preserved including the relieving arch. This pillar is presented in the hotel basement.

Fig. 19. View from the south to the north part of the Dominican monastery during excavation. The two foundation walls are remnants of the north wing of the monastery. On the very bottom – fragmented and damaged part of the foundation wall of the unfinished north ambit. Top right – the gate into the Maltese square.

Fig. 20. A section of the orthographic plan by J. D. Huber (1769). View from the southeast. The view into the ambits shows several ambit arches. Important is the appearance of the north wing, where the right (eastern) part of the ambit corridor is probably absent.

Fig. 21. A find of a plaener post fragments, reconstructed in the laboratory of NPU and presented in the hotel corridor.

Fig. 22. Finds which can be associated with the monastery community: book buckle and accessories found in the area of the Magdalenian monastery.

English by Linda and Patrick Foster