

The Sigisimund Chapel and Jagiellonian humanist ideas

For the King's Glory



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The Sigisimund Chapel at Wawel Cathedral in Kraków, dating from 1533 and drawing upon the best models of the Italian Renaissance, symbolized royal power and the greatness of the young Lithuanian-Polish dynasty

King Sigisimund I (1467-1548) was educated by Kraków humanists and was convinced of a monarch's duty to cultivate the virtue of "magnanimousness" - thus alongside the Renaissance modernization of Wawel Palace which he launched nearly immediately upon ascending the Polish throne in 1507, he was no doubt also planning to quickly erect a mausoleum for himself adjacent to the cathedral.

Such plans were nevertheless set back not only by warfare with Moscow, Moldavia, and the Tatars (1507-1514), but chiefly by the lack of an appropriately qualified artist capable of producing such a structure in the Italian *all'antica* style. It was not until 1515 that Primate Jan Łaski managed to find the Tuscan sculptor and architect Bartolomeo Berrecci and bring him to Kraków for the job, which would become known as the Sigisimund Chapel.

Tracing the construction

Preserved archival records (mainly bills) enable us to closely retrace the progression of work on erecting and decorating this royal mausoleum. In late 1516 and early 1517 Berrecci fashioned a wooden model of his work, presenting it to the king in Wilno (Vilnius) in 1517. Following preparatory work *in situ* (razing the Chapel's gothic precursor, erecting the burial crypt, and laying the cornerstone), in 1520 construction and decoration work had reached up to the base

of the tambour. The architectural decoration and sculpting of the interior, lined with relief-carved slabs of domestic, greenish-grey sandstone and partly of brownish-red marble imported from Hungary, proceeded in 1521-1524. The years 1524-1527 saw the tambour and dome decorated, while sculpted figures were added in 1526-1530. The consecration ceremony was performed on 8 June 1533, but it was not until 1538 that the Chapel obtained its magnificent altar of gilded silver and painted panels - a superb creation by a team of Nuremberg artists: the sculptor Peter Flötner, the founder Pancraz Labenwolff, the goldsmith Melchior Baier, and the painter Jörg Pencz.

The marks of antiquity

Investigation of the genesis of the decorative forms, in turn, reveals that Berrecci and his associates were informed by the broadly construed circle affiliated with Giuliano da Sangallo (1445-1516). Hence the rosettes filling the coffering of the dome, extraordinarily rare in Italy, which reveal at the same time a good familiarity with analogous antique

The Sigisimund Chapel of Wawel Castle, styled after the Italian Renaissance, is the mausoleum of King Sigisimund I

works. Sangallo's characteristic fascination with antiquity is likewise evident in the Sigisimund Chapel.

One especially astonishing aspect of the Chapel is the discernable influence of almost contemporaneous works by the epoch's most brilliant artists: familiarity with Rafael's "School of Athens" (1509-1510) and "Triumph of Galatea" (1511-1512) manifests itself in the chosen mythological motifs, while reliefs by Michelangelo from the earliest stage of his work on the tomb of Pope Julius II (1505-1506) guided the artists working in Kraków as models for a range of motifs, influencing the stylistic forms of certain parts of the grotesque decoration.



Piotr Jamski

The dome of the Sigisimund Chapel harks back to the style of ancient Roman tombs, much-studied during the Renaissance. The architect's inscription is visible at the apex: "Bartholo Florentino Opifice" ("by the workmanship of Bartolomeo of Florence")

Analysis of stylistic forms and archival research, in turn, has enabled four different sculptors to be identified for the red marble figures. The tondi representing the four evangelists and the figure of St. Peter are presumably the work of a sculptor by the name of Zoan, likely from Venice. The most well-executed figures, St. Paul and St. Sigisimund (the latter betraying a familiarity with Michelangelo's "David"), should be ascribed to Bernardino Zanobi de Gianotis. The less impressive figures, St. Wenceslas, St. Florian, and St. John the Baptist, were probably sculpted by Philip of Fiesole. Lastly, the most important works in the ideological sense – the tondi depicting David and Salomon and the grave statue of the sponsor king himself – represent the output of Berrecci himself.

The four elements

It is unclear whether the mausoleum's Marian affiliation (as a Chapel of the Ascension of the Blessed Virgin Mary), adopted from its Gothic predecessor, was decisive for the central shape of the construction as its central dome form, harking back to the style of ancient Roman tombs (much-studied during the Renaissance epoch), had become nearly obligatory in the Italian sepulchral architecture of the time. It is also hard to ascertain whether the artists realized the symbolic, cosmological significance of the circle-plus-square form, stemming from the Pythagorean-Neoplatonic interpretation of Vitruvius' (III, 1) notion of

the human body's perfect proportions, inscribable within a circle and square.

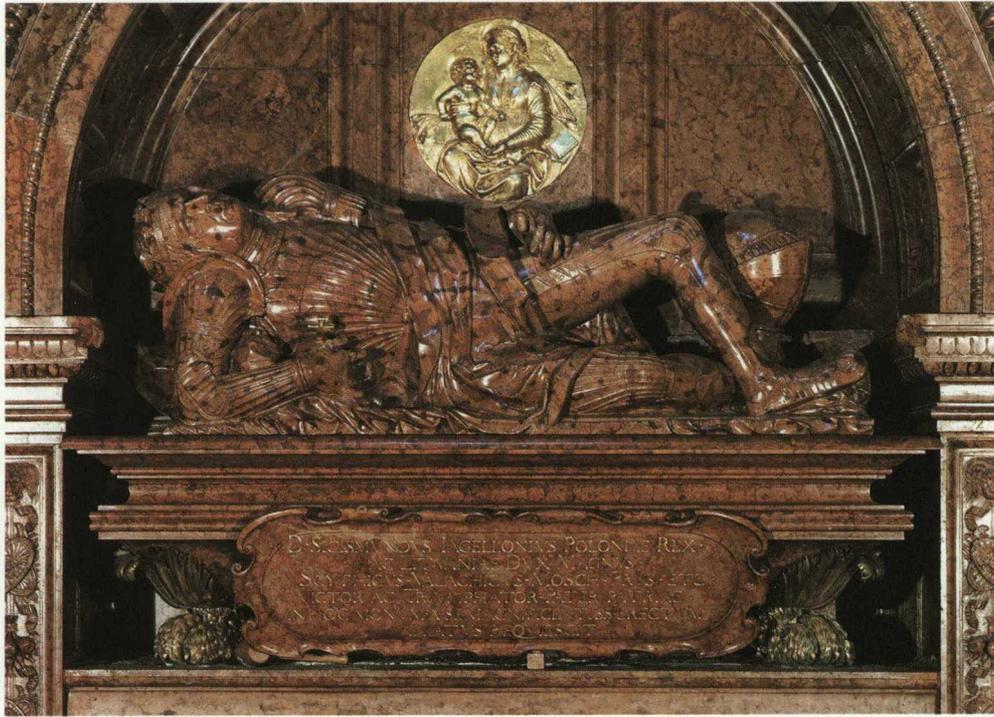
However, the sectional distribution of the reliefs within the Chapel do reveal an echo of cosmological thinking. Up to the joist level the relief panels are dominated by zoo- and phytomorphic motifs, whereas the higher attic belt section depicts water-related scenes. Both of these zones are thus affiliated with the first pair of the elements (the fundamental components of Nature): earth and water. The tambour, pierced by windows, irrefutably suggests a link to the third element, air, while the dome's rosettes (traditional symbol of stars) seem to invoke not only the astronomical sky, but also the fourth element: fire. Finally, the illuminated lantern bearing a seraph head, a symbol of God, is a symbolic representation of the *empireum* beyond the stars. This section-by-section distribution becomes interpretable in the light of the sepulchral purpose of the Chapel, perhaps referring to the antique belief that the human soul wanders through the four elements after death, which moreover dovetails with the conviction prevalent in the court of Sigisimund I that the soul's route leads *ad astra*.

Sphinxes and cherubim

This eschatological thread within the Chapel's themes, manifesting hope for the king's glory in the afterlife, continues through its decoration – employing both motifs of mythological origin, such as genii bearing lit

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The sculpture of King Sigisimund on his sarcophagus invokes ancient depictions of water gods and Hercules, symbolizing the notion of the hero-king



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torches, dolphins and sphinxes (grave guards from Roman sarcophagi), as well as of course strictly Christian motifs. The latter include cherubim heads on the pilasters embracing the tomb, figures of saintly patrons (of the king, the cathedral, and the state), a medallion of the Madonna with Child (the traditional advocate of the deceased) and a quotation from the Apocalypse on the wall over the sarcophagus: "Blessed are those who die in the Lord."

Also well developed is the thread of monarchic glorification, commemorating the earthly deeds of the deceased, stressing his position as ruler, reinforcing Sigisimund's fame among his descendants. The portal promises to lead to the mausoleum of a victorious ruler comparable to Roman emperors, as is suggested by the depiction of an ancient triumph among the *militaria*. The tasks of a victorious ruler traditionally included ensuring peace and prosperity to his kingdom and subjects, hence such decorative motifs as acanthus leaves, cornucopia, and garlands of fruit should be interpreted as symbols of fertility.

Akin to Moses and Salomon

Themes related to the nature of royal power, its exercise and duties, were in turn expressed via religious, Christian and Old Testament depictions. This is particularly clearly visible in the decoration on the throne wall. Above the

monarch's seat, a pair of gilded angels raises a closed crown culminating in a cross, emphasizing the sovereignty of the Polish king, dependent on no one but God. The monarchic theme of this wall is continued above the two saints' statues by the images of Old Testament kings – the psalmist David and the just Solomon, traditionally honored as models for a Christian ruler to emulate, simultaneously personifying two different aspects of wielding power: faith and justice. It is no coincidence that Solomon is depicted as a portrait likeness of the Chapel's founder – the king of Poland was widely likened to this biblical king, and he himself compared his erection of this marvelously decorated and lavishly adorned shrine to Solomon's work, the Temple of Jerusalem. Such a symbolic reference is suggested both by the inscription carved on the outside of the Chapel: "Lord You cherished [sic!] the splendor of Your home" and by the unprecedented form of the designer's signature: "*Bartholo Florentino Opifce*" ("by the workmanship of Bartolomeo of Florence"). This can only be explained in terms of Old Testament texts about the erection of the Tabernacle in the desert and the Temple in Jerusalem. In both cases God inspired the builders: Moses and Solomon. Through this typological parallel, in erecting the shrine King Sigisimund became, like Moses and Solomon, a tool in God's hand,

while Berrecci brought in from distant Italy became the Creator's appointed executor of this work of God.

Mythology and politics

A separate explanation is necessary to clarify the sense of the mythological scenes woven into the grotesque decoration of the Chapel interior. We know that in the Renaissance era, mythological themes were most frequently drawn upon to express moralizing and allegorical ideas, as well as to refer to contemporary events and individuals. An interpretation in the moralizing vein may be applied, for instance, to the figure of Cleopatra visible among the ornaments, a traditional symbol in this epoch for the virtue of valor. The same can be said for such images as the cupids treading upon strange monsters, or the naked couple seen tied to a leafy throne, straining against the tangled plants. They express notions of the battle between mankind and the unbridled forces of nature, between virtue and sin, between the forces of good and evil. They encourage us to recognize the existence of a contemporary thread within similar Chapel imagery. More encouragement comes from the scene of a pair of satyrs fighting a wild, watery, bearded figure, with the fray being joined by a young man stylized as Hercules. If we recall that the "aquatic" portion of the Chapel decoration was being produced through 1522, it is hard to resist seeing this as a symbolic reference to current events then playing out in the Baltic region: the Prussian war against the Teutonic Knights (1519–1521) and King Sigisimund's struggle against the spread of Protestantism in the Pomeranian cities leading up to his crackdown on the Lutheran revolt in Gdańsk (1525). It must be borne in mind that the courtly literature of the day described followers of Luther as the "monsters of our stormy century" and likened them to the Hydra defeated by Hercules.

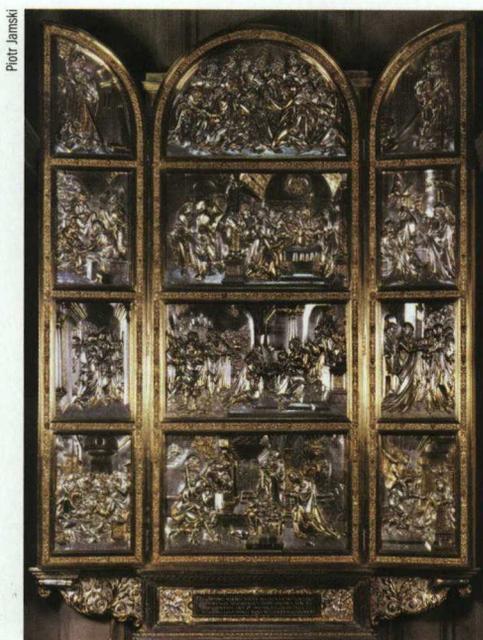
The two main thematic lines of the Chapel, glorification and eschatology, are brought into especially clear focus in the conceptual content of the royal tomb itself. The figure on the sarcophagus was carefully composed. The monarch's depiction wearing armor of course dovetails with the notion of the king as triumpher. His pose, reclining on his elbow with bent and crossed legs, is modeled after ancient representations of both water gods

and relaxing Hercules; together with other conceptual references to the same ancient hero this allows Sigisimund to be seen as his modern embodiment.

Like many of the above cases, here too we can surmise that the Polish monarch specifically ordered his Italian artists to model his mausoleum after the art of ancient Rome. We can perceive something more in this than just the ordinary fashion for humanism. An explanation for this phenomenon, astonishing to find in Poland, must be sought in the ethnogenetic myth though which the historian Jan Długosz, the young Zygmunt's erudite tutor, tried to elevate the status of the young Lithuanian-Polish dynasty. He maintained that alleged likenesses between the pagan religions of the Lithuanians and Romans and the Lithuanian language's perceived affinity to Latin proved that the Lithuanians were the descendents of political refugees who had left Italy in 714. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this mausoleum for the ruler of a Lithuanian dynasty was intended, at the king's express wish, to invoke the works of ancient Rome so strongly. ■

Further reading:

Mossakowski S. (2006). *Kaplica Zygmuntowska (1515-1533). Problematyka artystyczna i ideowa mauzoleum Zygmunta I [The Sigismund Chapel (1515-1533) - Artistic and conceptual issues of the mausoleum of King Sigismund]*. Warsaw: Liber pro Arte.



In 1538 the Chapel was embellished with this exquisite altar of gilded silver, the work of artists from Nuremberg