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THE SO-CALLED ARMOUR OF ST. WENCESLAUS – A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Abstract:

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Saint Wenceslaus (907-935) is the most important Czech patron. His brother Boleslaw I, who according to the legend had abandoned future saint at the moment of his murdering, subsequently brought his body to the Prague stronghold and buried in the rotunda of St. Vitus led to his canonization. Veneration of the saint had spread out very fast since the 11th c. In the 12th c. St. Wenceslaus became a patron of the whole Bohemian state and eternal overlord whereas every next Bohemian ruler was only his temporary earthly representative. Czech people began identify themselves with him what lead to strong consolidation of Czechs in the Middle ages. The most significant St. Wenceslaus's mementos had been storing in the St. Vitus Cathedral treasure room for ages. It was helmet and chain mail as well as sword and spear. These are dated back to the 10th c.

Key words: armour of St. Wenceslaus, helmet of St. Wenceslaus, coronation sword of St. Wenceslaus, death of St. Wenceslaus, kult of St. Wenceslaus, inventory of St. Vitus Cathedral treasure

The cult of saints has been a part of Christianity from its beginnings. Saints who sacrificed their life for their faith reached a level close to God, and so they acquired the role of mediator between God and believers, an advocate and a protector. Before the regular public worship of a saint their canonisation was necessary. This was done by means of a declaration in church, often accompanied by a transfer of remains, their so-called translation. From the 10th c. bishops of the Roman church had canonised saints with feasts in honour of the deceased during holy days, or by the transfer of remains. But Pope Alexander III declared in 1181 the exclusive right of the Holy See to perform canonisations.

The bodies of saints were initially interred in graves, but since the end of the 1st millennium, under the pressure of an increased enthusiasm for their miraculous influence, their remains were frequently taken out and placed in chapels, crypts or under altars. They might be transferred to decorated reliquary shrines located within the altars or above them. As the number of churches had increased, a desire for such remains to be put into the newly built altars also increased. Both bodily remains and the original garments found in the coffins were considered as holy relics. Other objects that might have been in contact with a saint played the role of secondary relics.

Besides the worship of Jesus Christ, Our Lady, the Apostles and Saints such as Martin, Michael and George, that was characteristic then for all the Christian world, a cult of saints developed that was connected with the earliest formation of states and their churches throughout Europe.

Those saints who had lived in the earlier Middle Ages were considered above all as patrons of the Czech people. Some of them had been the first Christians in the Czech lands (St. Ludmila, St. Wenceslaus), others had played an important role by establishing a bishopric in Prague (St. Adalbert) or by helping to spread the activities of the Church (St. Agnes, St. Prokopius). The importance of most of these patron saints of the Czech people dated from the emergence of the Czech state. So they were dynastic saints; some of them became "Everlasting Rulers", and so they helped to establish the basis for a Czech national consciousness. This idea was supported not only by the ruling dynasties and the church, but gradually also by the nobility and the citizens.

The tombs with the remains of St. Wenceslaus, St. Ludmila, St. Adalbert, St. Prokopius and St. John of Nepomuk are all found within Prague Castle – in the cathedral of St. Vitus, in the basilica of St. George and in All Saints' church.



Fig. 1. The so-called armour of St. Wenceslaus – front side view (© Prague Castle Administration). *Photo by J. Gloc.*

Ryc. 1. Kolczuga św. Wacława – widok z przodu (© Zamek Praski). *Fot. J. Gloc.*



Fig. 2. The so-called armour of St. Wenceslaus – back side view (© Prague Castle Administration). *Photo by J. Gloc.*

Ryc. 2. Kolczuga św. Wacława – widok z tyłu (© Zamek Praski). *Fot. J. Gloc.*



Fig. 3. The collar of so-called armour of St. Wenceslaus – front side view (© Prague Castle Administration). *Photo by J. Kopriva.*

Ryc. 3. Kołnierzy przy kolczudze św. Wacława – widok z przodu (© Zamek Praski). *Fot. J. Kopriva.*

St. Wenceslaus is the most important patron saint of the Czechs. He was born about 907, the son of the Czech Duke Vratislav and his wife Drahomíra. When he was young he was strongly influenced by his grandmother St. Ludmila, who educated him in the castle of Budeč. He assumed the government about 924. The chronicles tell us that he was very devout, but also a thoughtful ruler – he consolidated the unity of the Czechs and he tried to avoid conflicts. For that reason he consented to pay homage to the Emperor Henry I. This relationship aroused protests from his brother Boleslav I and part of the court, and a quarrel ensued which led to the crime of murder. Duke Wenceslaus was invited to the castle of his brother at Stará Boleslav, where he was killed on the 28th September, 935.

After the fratricide Boleslav I had the remains of Wenceslaus translated to Prague Castle and buried in the rotunda of St. Vitus, after which the canonisation of St. Wenceslaus followed. The new

dynastic saint lent support to the foundation of a bishopric for Bohemia and Moravia. The cult of St. Wenceslaus was accepted in his homeland as the cult of a good ruler, who interceded for the land and guaranteed peace. Some legends, mostly of foreign origin, tried on the contrary to portray the Duke as if he had been a reforming monk, who did his duty as a ruler only under compulsion. The cult of St. Wenceslaus spread very quickly from the 11th c. onwards. He became a patron saint of all the Czech people in the 12th c., not just of the ruling Duke and his family. He had become the “Everlasting Ruler”, the owner of all the land and people in the country. A Duke was only his temporary deputy. The Czechs considered themselves as “servants” of St. Wenceslaus and this idea informed the imagination of the medieval Czech nation (Bravermanová 2005, 89-118; 2010, 139-167).

Most of the precious relics of St. Wenceslaus were deposited near to the place of his final burial, in the Treasury in the cathedral of St. Vitus. These



Fig. 4. The collar of so-called armour of St. Wenceslaus – back side view (© Prague Castle Administration). *Photo by J. Kopřiva.*

Ryc. 4. Kołnierz przy kolczudze św. Wacława – widok z tyłu (© Zamek Praski). *Fot. J. Kopřiva.*

consisted of his helmet, his armour, his sword and his lance. The lance was lost long ago, but the other items have been preserved until now.

The helmet, or at least part of it, could perhaps have belonged to St. Wenceslaus in the past. The skull is hammered from one piece, the lower circumference has a border, to which originally protection for the ears and back of the head was probably riveted (Hejdová 1966; 1967; 1968).

The nasal bar and the border rim are decorated with a silver inlaid figure on a cross and other geometrical motifs and are attached to the skull with rivets. This part was probably made in Northern Europe about 1000. It was considered to be the helmet of St. Wenceslaus from about the end of the reign of Duke Boleslav II, who died in 999. It probably became a part of the treasure of St. Vitus at that time and was mentioned in the chronicle

written by (the so-called) Kristián (Merhautová 1992, 169-179; Bravermanová 2008, 60).

The ceremonial Coronation sword was for a long time identified with the weapon acquired by Charles IV for his coronation in 1347. But it has been recently found that on the blade there is a layer of “pattern-welding” (sometimes called “welded damask”), which was a technology used in the Early Middle Ages. So the date of the sword remains uncertain. It was repaired in the 13th and 14th c. and played an important role in the Coronation of later Czech kings (Bravermanová 2007, 105-124).

The armour also belongs with the oldest accounts relating to the most important Czech saint. It is made of mail and consists of two parts: a shirt and a collar with a neck-defence (fig. 1-2). The iron rings of the mail are either welded or riveted. The neck-defence is decorated on its edges with three rows of gold¹ rings, and its lower edge

¹ Identified by XRF analysis.

is attached to the upper edge of the collar (fig. 3-4). The maximum length of the armour is 103.5 cm, the length of the right sleeve is 49 cm, the length of the left sleeve is 51 cm, the maximum width with the sleeves is 167.5 cm, the height of the neck-defence is 7.8 cm, the width of the collar is 16.5-17 cm, the total width of the collar with the neck-defence is 48.6 cm.

This armour has been always dated to the 10th c. (for instance Podlaha, Šittler 1903, 7-9; Schráníl 1934, 159-172; Nechvátal 1961, 57-61), but the lack of comparative material prevented conclusive identification. It was believed that the shirt and the collar with the neck-defence were from the same period, and it was pointed out that on the armour there are some later repairs, including the treatment of the back (or front) opening. It was suggested that the place of manufacture might have been a foreign (West European?) workshop (Durdík 1989, 38) or even a Central European workshop (perhaps the work of refugees from Great Moravia?) (Merhautová 2002, 546).

A new desire for a fresh interpretation has recently brought an archaeologist from Vienna, Professor Erik Szameit, into cooperation with the Czech experts, Jiří Košta, Jiří Hošek and Milena Bravermanová. The armour has been examined very carefully. The mail of the eldest part of the skirt was always made from a pattern of four welded rings each connected with one riveted ring (the numbers of welded and riveted rings are equal, so every ring is then connected to four others).

With regard to this pattern and to its unusually long sleeves they dated the shirt to the 10th c. and suggested it had been made in the western provinces of the Byzantine Empire or in the area between Byzantium and Persia. The neck-defence with gold rings was probably made somewhat later; the pattern of the mail is the same as on the shirt, but the rings are finer. It is also possible that the collar was made in the Czech lands with gold rings as a celebration for St. Wenceslaus. The shirt was also repaired at that time, with similar technology to the neck-defence, with finer rings. The collar was probably made in the late Gothic period, as its rings are all riveted. It had possibly covered damage to a part of the neck (Bravermanová 2008, 60-61).

The armour is mentioned in historical sources for the first time in *The Legend of St. Wenceslaus (Ut annuncietur)*. From the beginning of the 13th c. St. Wenceslaus' weapons (*arma* in Latin) were exhibited at his celebrations. These objects were then kept in the treasury of the Prague bishops'

church (*Vita sancti Wenceslai* 1917, 29-30). It is not obvious what weapons were included under the term *arma*. The next definite note is in a document from 1333, where the task of taking care of the weapons of St. Wenceslaus is given to the farrier Herman (again the term *arma* is used). The weapons are now clearly mentioned – the helmet, the armour and the sword (*Katalog...* 1956, 53). All these items were also enumerated by the so called Second Successor of Kosmas when the victory of the Přemysl King Otakar II over the Hungarian king in the battle of Kressenbrunn in 1260 was credited to the Czech patron saints – St. Wenceslaus, St. Adalbert, St. Prokopius and the Five Holy Brothers. At that time, St. Wenceslaus was seen on the battlefield in his armour, with his helmet on his head and with his sword in a scabbard trimmed with gold and precious stones (*Příběhy...* 1874, 318). The armour was then regularly mentioned in the inventories of the cathedral treasure in the years 1354, 1355, 1368, 1387, 1420, 1454; from the end of the 15th c., in 1512 and in the years following (Podlaha, Šittler 1903; the inventory from 1354, IV, register n. 54; the inventory from 1355, XVIII, register n. 210, the inventory from 1368, XXVIII, register n. 210, the inventory from 1387, XXXVII, register n. 192, the inventory from 1420, LXIII, register n. 55, the inventory from 1454, LXIX, register n. 23, the inventory from the end of 15th century, LXXXVI, register n. 323, the inventory from 1512, XCVII, register n. 36).

Together with the helmet and the sword and other items, it was regularly displayed at the presentation of St. Wenceslaus' relics in what is now Charles Square in Prague. This event gradually developed every fifth year from 1354 on the day of the Assumption of Our Lady (Podlaha, Šittler 1903, 56).

From the early Middle Ages St. Wenceslaus has been painted in art either as a Duke in a cloak and Duke's cap or as a knight in armour, a so-called *miles christianus*. Sometimes he would be shown with a cloak over his armour, usually with cap on his head, but sometimes with a helmet. He would hold a lance, a sword, a banner or even a martyr's palm in his hands. The armour was painted in a way corresponding with the fashion of the period; only sporadically was the real armour used as a model, and that was recently (*Svatý Václav...* 2008).

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TZW. KOLCZUGA ŚW. WAĆŁAWA – WPROWADZENIE HISTORYCZNE

Streszczenie

Św. Waćław jest najważniejszym czeskim patronem. Urodził się ok. roku 907, a w 935 r. został zamordowany w wyniku spisku jego brata Bolesława I na grodzie w Starej Boleslav. Po morderstwie Bolesław przywiózł szczątki Waćława na gród w Pradze i pochował go w rotundzie św. Wita, doprowadzając do jego kanonizacji. Od XI w. kult św. Waćława bardzo szybko się rozprzestrzenił. W XII w. św. Waćław staje się patronem całego państwa czeskiego, zostając jego wiecznym suwerenem, a każdorazowy władca Czech jest jedynie jego czasowym reprezentantem na ziemi. Czesi sami zaczęli się z nim identyfikować, co doprowadziło do silnej ich konsolidacji jako narodu już w średniowieczu.

Większość z najznakomitszych pamiątek przypisywanych św. Waćławowi przez stulecia była przechowywana w miejscu jego ostatniego spoczynku – skarbcu Katedry św. Wita. Były to przedmioty związane z wojennymi zajęciami Waćława: hełm, kolczuga, a także miecz i włócznia. Do naszych czasów nie przetrwała jedynie włócznia świętego.

Spośród nich hełm można z dużym prawdopodobieństwem łączyć z Waćławem. Jego dzwon wykuto z jednego kęsa żelaza, a jego dolną część wzmocniono nitowaną, żelazną obejmą, która najprawdopodobniej posiadała jeszcze pierwotnie dodatkowe elementy – ochraniacze na uszy i kark. Do dzwonu donitowano również nosal z pierścieniem, ozdobiony platerowanym srebrem wizerunkiem krzyża i motywami geometrycznymi. Ten element datowany jest na ok. 1000 r. i wiązany z oddziaływaniami północnoeuropejskimi. Uważa się, że hełm ten stał się jednym z pierwszych przedmiotów przechowywanych w skarbcu Katedry św. Wita, założonym po śmierci Bolesława II (999 r.).

Ceremonialny miecz koronacyjny, zw. Święto-waćławowskim, był długo wiązany z ceremonialną zbroją, którą miał dostać Karol IV na swą koronację w 1347 r. Ostatnie badania wykazały jednak, że na głowni miecza znajdują się resztki znaku wykonanego wczesnośredniowieczną techniką damastu skuwanego. Jest zatem możliwe, iż miecza używał św. Waćław. W XIII i XIV w. został przerobiony i odtąd pełnił doniosłą rolę w czasie koronacji władców Czech.

I w końcu pancierz, który jest przypisywany najważniejszemu z czeskich świętych. Składa się on z dwóch części: kolczugi i kołnierza. Żelazne ogniwa pancerza połączono nitami lub zgrzano. Obecnie oddzielnie zachowany kołnierz jest lamowany trzema rzędami złotych ogniów.

W źródłach pisanych o pancierzu po raz pierwszy wspomina *Ut annuncietur (Legenda o św. Waćławie)* z początków XIII w.: w święto św. Waćława było wystawiane uzbrojenie świętego, które przechowywano w skarbcu praskiego biskupiego kościoła. Bardziej szczegółowe informacje zawiera dokument z 1333 r., gdzie zanotowano, iż kuśnierz Herman musi dbać o uzbrojenie św. Waćława: hełm, pancierz i miecz. Wszystkie te przedmioty wymienia również tzw. Drugi Kontynuator Kosmasa: w bitwie pod Kressenbrunnem w 1260 r. ingerencji św. Waćława przypisano zwycięstwo Przemysła Ottokara II nad królem węgierskim. Święty miał być wówczas obecny na polu bitwy w pancierzu, z hełmem na głowie i mieczem w pochwie zdobionej złotem i drogimi kamieniami. Kolczuga jest następnie regularnie wymieniana w inwentarzach skarbcza katedralnego, według których była wraz z mieczem i hełmem oraz innymi przedmiotami ukazywana ludowi w czasie prezentacji relikwii świętego.

Kolczuga była dotąd datowana na X w. Ostatnio jednak wykonano nowe badania, które pozwoliły na postawienie kolejnych hipotez. Sposób wykonania najstarszej partii kolczugi jest zawsze taki sam: cztery zgrzewane ogniwa były łączone przy pomocy nitowanego pierścienia. Taka technika wykonania i długie rękawy kolczugi wskazują, że datowany na X w. pancierz może pochodzić z zachodnich prowincji Bizancjum lub z obszaru położonego pomiędzy Bizancjum a Persją. Kołnierz ze złotymi lamowaniami powstał nieco później – technika wykonania splotu ogniów jest taka sama jak w kolczudze, ogniwa są jednak mniejsze. Jest zatem możliwe, że kołnierz powstał już w Czechach, a złote ogniwa zostały wykonane dla uczczenia świętości Waćława. W późnym średniowieczu do kołnierza domontowano rodzaj „peleryny” chroniącej ramiona zbrojnego.

Tłumaczenie: Piotr N. Kotowicz