

Reviews

Zborna crkva sv. Vlaha u Dubrovniku [The Collegiate St Blaise Church in Dubrovnik], ed. Katarina Horvat-Levaj. Dubrovnik–Zagreb: Dubrovačka biskupija, Institut za povijest umjetnosti and ArtTresor naklada, 2017. Pages 460.

More Than a Mere Monograph of St Blaise Church in Dubrovnik

The research in the field of history and art history of Dubrovnik has ebbed and flowed over the last hundred years. The most recent two decades deserve to be included among the better, or even the best moments, comparable to the first decades of the post-WWII period, when Dubrovnik and its archives were a meeting point of major historians and art historians of Yugoslavia. Today, the art history of Dubrovnik is in the focus of a broad circle of international scholars, and the meeting of diverse approaches constantly deepens our knowledge of the city's artistic heritage.

Over the last few years, a couple of comprehensive monographs of the artistic monuments of this important South-Adriatic emporium have been published. Based on archival research, *Kuća u Gradu* by Nada Grujić, and *Katedrala Gospe Velike u Dubrovniku* are certainly worth mentioning. Yet another representative monograph ought to be added here, *Zborna crkva sv. Vlaha u Dubrovniku*. This book deals not only with the present-day Baroque church of St Blaise, but equally so with its predecessor, even centuries before 1348, when the church of the patron saint was erected on today's site.

In the chapter *Sveti Vlaha, božanski zaštitnik Dubrovnika, čuvar njegove slobode i mira* (*St Blaise, heavenly protector of Dubrovnik, guardian of its freedom and peace*), starting from archival sources, Nella Lonza investigates the circumstances that led to the choice of St Blaise as the main city protector and the construction of his church in the fourteenth century. On the basis of papal bulls by which the pallium was bestowed on the new archbishop and which determined the days of the year on which he was allowed to wear it, she has provided firm proof that the feast of St Blaise was included into that list not earlier than 1158, which explains why St Blaise could not have functioned as the city patron saint prior to that date. Venetian rule did not restrict the veneration of the local patron. The newly acquired relics of St Blaise's left arm were deposited in the cathedral treasury on 5 July 1346, where they remained well after the completion of the new church of the city patron. Lonza thus rightly asserts that the building of the new church cannot be related to the arrival of the holy relics, nor to the resistance against Venetian rule, considering that in the latter half of the 1340s (at least, as judged by the archive material) Dubrovnik witnessed no counter-Venetian activities. The building of the church in 1348—as has already been recorded in older literature—was directly linked to the outbreak of plague.

In the chapter covering the first church of St Blaise in the city, Danko Zelić supports Lonza's conclusions by providing an overview of the circumstances that preceded the erection of the new church. Apart from the procurator of reliquaries in the cathedral, in the mid-thirteenth century also chosen were the *procuratores reliquiarum* in the church of St Blaise. Unlike the fourteenth-century church on the site of the present-day church of St Blaise, its predecessor, apparently, was a private (patronage) church, while the procurators, representatives of the city government, supervised only its holy relics. The procurators of the new church, however, were to bear the title *procuratores ecclesie*, i.e. procurators of the whole church. The process of locating the first church is hampered by the absence of material leads, meagre descriptions of its location in the sources and the fact that the chroniclers, as regards this issue, followed the official standpoint of the Ragusan authorities: that since the earliest of times, the church of St Blaise has stood *in platea*, i.e. on the same site

where it stands today. Well-grounded is Zelić's assumption that the church stood on the site of St Clare's convent, and not in its vicinity, nor on the site of the Puncjela Tower. Older tradition by which the relief with the image of St Blaise on that tower might suggest that his shrine was located there—given that, unlike other similar carved works, the saint on it is depicted in seated position—may just as well be discarded, because the mentioned relief was installed on the tower in the mid-fifteenth century, after it had been removed from the facade of the Rector's Palace.

Ana Marinković sets out to reconstruct the church of the city patron that once stood on the site of the present-day Baroque church by employing the remarkably rich archive sources from the time of its construction, old illustrations and descriptions. Its closeness with the cathedral has already been suggested thanks to countless available documents of the church's construction and furnishing, yet the new documents and their 3D visualisation certainly add an astonishing dimension. Regrettably, as in other reconstructions of the kind, here too in certain details we have to satisfy ourselves with speculations. Despite explanations in the text, the reader is at times led astray in his understanding of the exact reconstruction of the specific details, such as the construction of the arcades on the outer walls of the side aisles.

As expected, the core of the book is devoted to the present-day Baroque church of St Blaise. The fact that it survived the disastrous 1667 earthquake has been experienced as yet another in the line of patron's miracles. During the construction of the new cathedral, the old church of St Blaise therefore assumed temporarily the functions of the main church. For the medieval church of the city patron, however, the fire that broke out in the night between 24 and 25 May 1706 proved fatal. Ragusan senators came to a prompt decision to build a new church, and unlike the period after the earthquake, they turned to their agent in Venice, who was instructed to find the builders. In her contribution, Katarina Horvat-Levaj brings a detailed account of the leading among them, architect of the new church, Marino Gropelli. Gropelli and his architectural solution for the church of St Blaise are presented through the comparisons with Venice and Veneto. A striking and at first glance fairly uncommon spatial solution with ground plan in the form of the Greek cross is explained by Venetian influence. In the Venetian Lagoon, marked by its strong Byzantine tradition, similar churches recurrently appeared throughout the early modern period. Despite this, an important question needs to be raised here: how was it that Marino Gropelli came to be invited to Dubrovnik, when his architectural works in Venice were virtually non-existent? Future research might shed some additional light on the role of the Ragusan agent in Venice, Giovanni Antonio Benevoli, in the commission. For the time being, Katarina Horvat-Levaj draws some interesting parallels with the works of Giuseppe Sardi and his nephew Domenico Rossi, considering that Gropelli belonged to the inner circle of their collaborators. Although by the time of St Blaise's construction Sardi had already passed away, we should bear in mind that the Ragusans had previously commissioned him to furnish the Franciscan church.

Similar to the comprehensive monograph on the Dubrovnik cathedral, this book offers a good insight into the furnishing of the church (the contributions by Daniel Premerl, Radoslav Tomić, Bojan Goja, Željka Čorak and Silvija Banić). Among the many significant, and partly previously unpublished works of art presented, the high church altar may be singled out. It was traditionally attributed to Marino Gropelli, since he was foremost a master sculptor, and, apparently, did not only provide the architectural design of the church, but also the rich sculptural decoration of its facades. Only most recent research has come forth with different interpretations of the main altar. It was Damir Tulić who has followed the right path, as he proposed Giovanni Battista Gropelli, one of Marino Gropelli's sons, as the author of the altar. Documents published by Tomić shift the dating of the altar to 1747–1748, its author in the sources being recorded as Francesco Gropelli, son of Marino and brother of Giovanni Battista Gropelli, with whom he kept a joint workshop in

the mid-eighteenth century. As the work of Marino's sons is fairly understudied, a well-documented altar in St Blaise church will doubtless be an excellent launch pad for further research.

At the end of the monograph, Ivan Viden and Antun Baće have provided a chronological survey from the nineteenth century to the present, including the renovation after the last war in the 1990s, while the furnishing of the church, similar to the approach in the previous monograph, has been presented in a summarised, though practical, catalogue.

If there is a criticism to be made of this book—which may also be said of the other, even most recent art historical studies of Dubrovnik—it is the perplexing use of the name/surname forms, which not only concerns patrician surnames with their inconsistent Croatian and Italian, i.e. Latin variants. Occasionally, for example, when referring to the medieval church of St Blaise and the master builders of Italian origin and whose names also appear beyond the frame of Croatian historiography, Croatian name form is strictly used, which in some cases disguises the identity and may lead to confusion. Additional problem are the names which owe their corrupt form to earlier traditions. Regrettably, the rich appendix containing archival documents fails to include documents bearing the names of the master engineers (*protomagistri*) of St Blaise church from the close of the fourteenth century. Although their names are meticulously listed, omitted are the most important works in which they had been previously mentioned and an overview of their extant works.

This well-designed monograph, furnished with numerous quality photographs, brilliant texts, extensive bibliography and for the future research useful regesta or transcriptions of the most important archival documents, certainly falls within the best of Croatian art history production over the last years. Considering that the recent monograph on the cathedral has been published in English translation, there is reason to hope that this volume too will see its English version and thus become accessible to a wide international audience. Hopefully, sooner or later, other ecclesiastical complexes of Dubrovnik—Jesuit, Franciscan and Dominican—will also find their place in similar studies.

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