

Klara Valentova
The Renaissance Altar in Zbraslav

English abstract

In the first half of 16. century an altar dedicated to St. James was ordered by the Cistercians for their monastery church of St. James. It was the first work of woodcarving in our country to show features of the Renaissance. This altar is very interesting both in terms of its realisation and of its iconographic meaning. It is made like a flat carving and the whole surface is covered with polychrome, gilding and silvering. It is 7 metres high and mobile. It consists of a predella and three altar extensions. The predella is crossed by an epistyle which supports the first altar extensions with four columns. On the two inner columns there is a square extension with another two columns and on it is the highest semi-circular extension. The main plan of this altar is a trunk, which shoots forth from the body of Jesse and grows up from below to the top, bearing the fruits of the line of David through the altar's architectural structure. On the altar there are eight Jewish kings, six from before the exile and two after the exile. The family tree culminates with Joseph and the Virgin and the whole altar with the throne of mercy, the four symbols of the evangelists, the child Jesus and the dove. In the centre of altar stands the Virgin in the guise of the Assumpta and beside her are the apostles, the sons of Zebedee. On her's right is St. John, the favourite of Christ and on her left is St. James, who assumes this position because he is the patron saint of the church for which this altar was originally made.

In the Christian tradition the root of Jesse expresses the family tree of Jesus Christ. This is because in the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, is written, that a shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse and will be fruitful and that the spirit of Yahweh will rest upon him.

This spirit of Yahweh will rest upon the one who is to be the Messiah, who has been chosen by God and who is going to come forth from the line of David. The Jews still await this Messiah, while Christians have already found him in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Scripture this topic is dealt with in the apocalyptic literature, particularly the Old Testament prophets Daniel and Ezechiel.

St. John, the beloved disciple of Christ, who is also on the altar, depicted beside the Virgin, also wrote about this in a very interesting literary style. This book is called the Revelation of Saint John and it is the final book of the New Testament. Motives from this book are used to express the culmination of the Old Testament trunk of Jesse.

Professor Ivo Kořán is of the opinion that this altar was made around 1525 in the workshop of the Augsburg sculptor Adolf Daucher. In 1522 several events took place which could serve as evidence for his opinion. In this year a new abbot, Jan VIII, was elected. He received an inventory of the monastery, in which the altar was not yet present. In the same year Queen Maria of Hapsburg took the monastery under her protection. She was the wife of Ludvik Jagellon and sister of Ferdinand Hapsburg, whose court at that time, in opposition to the iconoclastic movement, was concentrated on production in the flourishing Imperial city of

Augsburg.