Chantry chapels by burghers in Kutná Hora in pre-Hussite period

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This study is based on the social-historical understanding of the role of chantries and of liturgical memory in medieval society, as discussed especially by Otto G. Oexle and Michael Borgolte. Chantries as permanent pious gifts connected the world of the living with the world of the dead, kept the presence of the dead among the living and, simultaneously, contributed to the salvation of their souls through mutual solidarity between the living and the dead. This study also evaluates the insights of the new cultural history, which understands the endowments as symbolic capital in a given society, capital which enabled display of social status and legitimized power through ostentatious demonstration of devotion.

Under the House of Luxembourg, Kutná Hora was one of the most populous towns in Bohemia and Moravia as well as one of the biggest centers of mining and processing of silver ore in Europe. 1280's saw the origins of mining there, the first decade of the 14th century saw the city's founding. Kutná Hora was the residence of the central mint in the Czech kingdom and of the royal offices related to the mint and mining. It also attracted burgher elite, who participated in the mining entrepreneurship and traded with precious metals. They came from a number of important towns in central Europe and maintained extensive trade contacts. In 1380's, Kutná Hora also established itself as a temporary seat of the royalty, when king Wenceslas IV turned the mint into his urban palace. A Cistercian abbey, located in nearby Sedlec, also exercised important influence on the life in the town. Kutná Hora was founded on the abbey's land and, thanks to the great influence of the abbots, no mendicants were established in Kutná Hora. Cistercians from Sedlec also prevented the endowment of a parish church in the town; instead, the numerous churches in Kutná Hora remained subordinated to an older parish church in a distant village Malín, which was patronized by abbots from Sedlec. In the first half of the 14th century, the abbey at Sedlec also severely limited private endowments, as evidenced by hospital of Holy Cross, which a wealthy burgher Stephan Pirkner founded before 1324 but whose affairs were controlled by the abbey.

Written sources allows us to follow a total number of sixty-six burgher pious foundations in Kutná Hora, thirty-nine chantries or private chapels. These endowments peaked between 1380-1410 (with 1390's as the zenith), when burghers in Kutná Hora were finally able to extricate themselves from the oversight of the abbey and able to found a new church dedicated to Corpus Christi and St. Barbara on the lands belonging to the Prague chapter. The architect of the cathedral church, which came to house more than twenty chantries and private chapels, was probably the royal builder Peter Parler. The church, whose construction was founded by the burghers assembled in a pious fraternity of Corpus Christi, became one of the most important urban endowments in the Czech lands and in central Europe. The church of the Corpus Christi quickly took on the role of the main burgher church, the centre of devotion and chantry foundations, a role which was served up until that point by the main urban church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. A second large urban church, also dedicated to the Virgin Mary, became the center of piety and of chantry foundations by the town council. Liturgical anniversaries, as another type of a liturgical memory, were concentrated not only in the new church of Corpus Christi, but also in the urban hospital and in the abbey in Sedlec, which to some extent supplanted the role of mendicant convents in other medieval towns. Other smaller town chapels as parish churches in the countryside were outside of the attention of the burgers in Kutná Hora. This underscores the social function of the chantry chapels and liturgical endowments inside the burgher society.

The most numerous group of founders of expensive chantry chapels came from the ranks of city council members and their families, which belonged to the wealthiest in the town. The effort to solidify their social standing and present themselves as members of the ruling elite in the town was, however, often not the main reason for endowing chantries. There is a close correlation between chantry foundations and testament legacies, as well as a high participation of women among their founders. All the features mentioned above underscore a close connection between chantry chapels in Kutná Hora and pious gifts for the soul, which were, primarily, driven by efforts for salvation of the benefactor and his family. Chantries and chapels served for the purpose of display and confirmation of social ambitions of the wealthiest burghers only secondarily. In Kutná Hora, to own a chantry or a chapel was necessary for maintaining one's social standing, which is evident from frequent attempts of family members of council members to take over older foundations through rights of patronage. On the other hand, there was little evidence of pragmatic reasons for foundation of chantry chapels, which tend to be ascribed to medieval benefactors (effort to provide benefices for younger sons). The primary motivation of burgher benefactors was, in fact, an effort to establish permanent liturgical celebration as a means for salvation of the soul in an unstable world, ridden with crises from late medieval plagues to crisis of royal power, destabilization of the economy and society. Chantries were however not more expressions of fear of imminent death. They placed personal and family *memoria* in the context of wider social networks and strengthened guarantee of their continuation also in the case that the entire family would die out. Chantries became firm points, which – through the *memoria* of the dead – strengthened the relationships inside social networks in the burgher society, helped create identity of the social groups and strengthened social standing of important individuals and families.

Translated by Marcela Perett