THE MURALS OF THE ROMANESQUE CHURCH OF VELEMÉR

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Abstract

The village of *Velemér* is in western Hungary. Data regarding the village go back to the end of the 13th century.

According to available data, the church has always been known by the Holy Trinity name. Although recorded documentation references the church only from 1360 on, scholars of ancient architectural styling surmise that it was most likely erected during the last decades of the 13th century.

Upon entering the church of Velemér, one would see to emerge slowly from the mystical dimness the colors, images, and compositions of what is left from the works of art of a master — and, maybe, of his school of the middle ages. The totality of the paintings i.e. the complete iconography comes together, in a manner typical of the period of scholasticism, according to the rules of sermonic-theory, so called *ars praedicandi*. The images provide a sort of pictographic essay about each member of the Holy Trinity. Thus, the murals reflect a great homily presented not verbally but in a closely related, artificial language system of icons and symbolism. Hence, the individual images are not words, not even depictions of concepts, but the 'couriers of truth'.

1 Introduction

Rising to an elevation of 217 m (712 ft) above sea level, the *Holy Trinity Church* of Velemér in western Hungary is a filial adjunct of the Roman Catholic parish of the next village, *Kercaszomor*.

Data regarding the village goes back to the end of the 13th century. It is likely that the name of the village means 'white light' or 'sunshine', and, perhaps, can be linked to the name of *Prince Velemér*, one of the chieftains of the Eastern Goths who settled in this region, *Pannonia*, during the middle of the 5th century.

According to available data, the church has always been known by the Holy Trinity name. Although recorded documentation references the church only from 1360 on, scholars of ancient architectural styling surmise that it was most likely erected during the last decades of the 13th century.

At one time, murals adorned the church on both the inside and outside walls. Today, only traces of the exterior murals are visible, specifically on the south wall of the steeple and on the adjoining westward wall surface. This latter mural of yore once depicted a

Figure 1: Southern view of the church.

Figure 2: The eastern window.

scene with *St. Chistopher* urging people to lead a Christian life and go to church. This mural complied with the ancient practice of presenting Christopher as he is carrying Christ so that his face is turned in the direction of the settlement and, thus the villagers approaching therefrom could meet the gaze of his eyes. Thence the saying from the middle ages: "Nobody dies an evil death the day they saw St. Christopher."

Based on writings dating to the middle of the 18th century, we know that the arriving worshipers were able to see in the doorway at the foot of the steeple a mural that showed an *Adam & Eve* scene and in the tympanon above the door a picture of Christ reminding us of His biblical statement "I am the way". Nothing is left of these paintings.

Let us then proceed with a visual examination of the images or, rather the building blocks that support them.

Figure 3: Detail from the upper part of the sanctuary.

2 The Sanctuary

The church has been built with strict adherence to ancient construction rules. Accordingly: its lengthwise orientation is east-to-west, the sanctuary being to the east and its window positioned in such a way that, through it, the first rays of the rising Sun, on the feast of after whom the church is named, would illuminate the image or symbol of the name-giver, in this case, the three concentric circles on the inner side of the victory arch.

The images provide a sort of pictographic essay about each member of the Holy Trinity. In examining the murals, we do not follow the ordering set by theology but, rather start with the most striking image.

The Son. Opposite the symbol of the Holy Trinity inside the chancel, we can see the face of Christ as if it were imprinted upon a cloth, reflecting what tradition holds about Veronica, the maiden who handed a veil to Christ to wipe His face while He was carrying the cross on the way to Calvary. The name Veronica comes from the classical Greek *veron ikon* meaning 'true image', and, by depicting Christ in this form, the artists of the middle ages intended to emphasize a "credible" vs. "man-made" face of Him.

In the Christian creed, Christ, the Son of God who became man, has a dual personality, His divinity is symbolized by the brightness of the window: "I am the light." His humanness is depicted by a floral ornamentation in the window recess: starting out of a letter 'O' on one side of the window, a vine ascends to form a stylized 'M' at the top and descends on the other side into a second 'O' (OMO = *homo*, meaning 'man' in Latin). The 'M' is adorned by nine flowers signifying the nine months of the human fetal growth. The Latin text around the window admonishes us that the respect the image garners should be directed at what is depicted, not the art work.

Figure 4: The Annunciation inside the sanctuary.

This window representing the dual nature of Christ is integrated into a scene that heralds the imminent of Christ, the man. On the left of the window, i.e. on the north-east wall, archangel *Gabriel* gestures the sign of 'V' (*verbum* = 'verbose') with his fingers, his greeting spelled out on a flowing ribbon: "Ave, gratia plena. Dominus tecum." (Hail, full of grace. The Lord be with you.) Above Gabriel, a winged lion symbolizes *Mark the Evangelist.* On the right, there is Mary with an open book next to her. Readable is the prayer from her lips: "Magnificat anima mea Dominum..." (My soul glorifies the Lord...) Above her, the eagle is the sign of the evangelist *John.*

We must mention here that the order in which the evangelists are depicted does not always follow the canonical sequence of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John. Certain religious writers established different sequences. For example, *Hugo de Saint-Victoir* or *Honorius d'Autun* established an ordering principle whereby the Sun (symbolizing Christ) and its relation to the four compass points set the sequence: *a*) Mathew on the north — his gospel starts with the birth of Christ; *b*) Luke on the west — his gospel is about the tribulations and death of Christ: the Sun sets in the west; *c*) John on the south — his gospel glorifies God's eternal Light — the Sun is the brightest in the south; *d*) Mark on the east — his gospel ends with Christ's resurrection and ascension; rising Sun.

In this iconography at Velemér, the Holy Trinity symbol occupies the west wall and the sanctuary is not rectangular (see the diagram); hence, the artist was unable to position the signs of all four evangelists according to the compass points. Starting with Mathew on the north and skipping the west wall, he goes full circle in a counter-clockwise direction, Luke on the south, John to the south-east, and Mark to the north-east. It is interesting to note that, if September is considered the starting point of the year — as in the ancient religious calendars — the same sequence is evident: the feasts of Mathew, Luke, John, and Mark are observed on Sept. 21, Oct. 18, Dec. 27, and Apr. 25, respectively.

The Father. The person of the Son refers back to the one who has begotten Him. In the artist's rendition, this is manifest in Gabriel archangel's right wing spreading over to the northern wall surface, whose icons represent the Father. Since it is impossible to portray Him in a painting, He is depicted through actions and characteristics construed to be uniquely His own: Creator and Almighty (this is called the appropriative method); there is, however no creation scene. He is perceived only through a symbolic image structure whose certain elements were derived from interpretative religious explanations of biblical statements and allegories: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" and "Wisdom builds a house for itself". The phrase "in the beginning" may have several meanings: "the beginning of time", "in the Son", or "before everything".

The artist elaborated on the last interpretation. To that end, he chose the angelic symbol, the cherub (a human-faced angel or a winged youth). Today, only fragments of the green cherub wings are visible. It is noteworthy that the cherub is also the symbol of St. Mathew.

The interpretation of the "artist of the universe, wisdom builds a house for itself" is apparent in two symbolic representations: Through the arts: on his knees in front of the ark of the covenant, *King Solomon*, while consecrating the ornate house he has built for the Lord, prays with an entranced expression and arms stretched out toward heaven, his prayer on a ribbon flowing from his hands.

According to the findings of art-history, the Solomom image, in addition to depicting a biblical scene, is also the self-portrait of the artist. The proof of this is evident in the triangular artist-emblem visible on the floor next to the knees and also in the text of

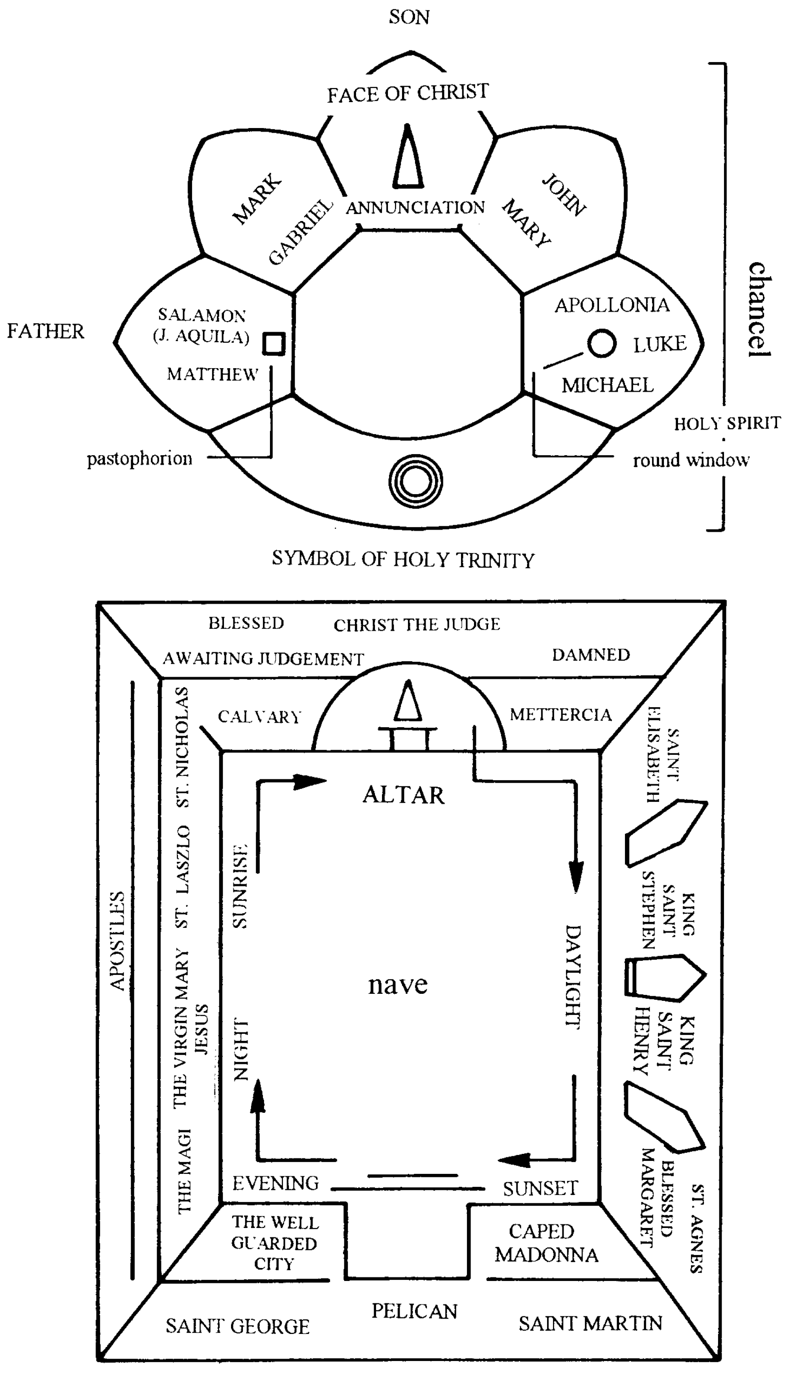

Figure 5: Overall view of the murals.

Figure 6: Fragmentary parts of the Holy Wisdom.

the prayer. In Latin it is: “Omnes Sancti Orate Pro Hoc Ioanni Aquila + pictore.” It carries a dual meaning. The capitalized initials convey a hidden content: O SOPHIA = Oh Wisdom! (holy Wisdom, the church-builder!). The direct meaning of the prayer reads in English as “All Saints, pray for me, John Aquila painter”. Thus the duality of the image is complemented by the dual nature of the prayer’s contents. It is very likely, though that *John Aquila* was not the real name of the artist for, in medieval times, the name John Aquila was commonly used in reference to scribes, codex-copiers, and masters of religious art. Also, St. John — the author of gospel and epistles, and considered the patron saint of artists — was represented by the biblical iconographic symbol of an eagle (Latin *aquila*).

Some details are known about the accomplishments of the artist, incognito “John Aquila”. He prepared the murals in Velemér (1377-1378), in Bántornya (today: Turnisce, Slovenia; 1382), and in Mártonhely (today: Martjanci, Slovenia; 1392). At this latter site, he professes to have been the builder of the church and designates his birthplace as Radkersburg in Austria (Regede, Radgona). He is thought to have painted one of the layers of the multi-coated murals of the round-church, and also the murals of its cupola, in Nagytelek (today: Selo, Serbia). Style critics credit him with murals in Muraszombat (today: Murska Sobota, Slovenia). According to others, he has painted in Transylvania, Vienna, Florence, and Radkersburg; this, however, is merely conjecture without any proof.

It is not known whether the artist was a clerical or layperson, even though art-historians classify him as a worldly individual, particularly because of his self-portrait referenced above. The cutoff/slashed, striped shirt, in which *King Louis the Great* of Hungary from the Royal House *Anjou* is also depicted in pictorial chronicles, might prompt us to think that he could have had connections to the royal court. As for the artist’s emblem, it can also be found on an artifact in Kígyóspuszta and, in Buda, on the grave-stone of a painter by the name Abel.

Through the allegory of Holy Wisdom: below the wing of Archangel Gabriel, there is depicted, in the glow of an aura, a saintly Lady holding a church in her arm. The church is the house erected by the Holy Wisdom, i.e., the temple is Christ's Body which is destroyed and subsequently rebuilt on the third day.

The Holy Spirit. The south wall of the sanctuary holds an iconographic treatise about the third person of the Trinity. A round window denotes the Sun at high noon and, indirectly, the Holy Spirit. In religious literature, the biblical statement "God comes from the south" was used as a reference to the Holy Spirit.

Below the window, a challis, a missal, and decanters are visible. They imply the *epiclesis*, i.e. that part of the eucharistic prayer that follows the consecration of the bread and wine during mass, to invoke the Holy Spirit's blessings upon the sacrificial gifts.

Above the window, a bullock faced man signifies St. Luke whose gospel starts with Zacharias sacrificing a bullock. The name Luke has a connection to the Latin *lux* meaning brightness (south). On a writing stand, two books credit him with the gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles*. St. Luke is shown wearing slippers; in iconographic images, only Christ's immediate disciples are depicted bare-footed. In Luke's gospel, Christ says "This is the cup of my blood" instead of "This is my blood"; this emphasis on the container instead of the contents is manifest in the prominently detailed challis.

To the east of the window, the image of *St. Apollonia* used to be located, as the name still visible above implies. It is unfortunate that the image is eroded for, researchers believe, it was the earliest painting of the saint in Hungary. From her biography, we know only that, when threatened with being burned alive unless she would loudly curse God, she voluntarily leaped into the towering flames because the the Holy Spirit's fire glowing in her soul was much greater than the blazing pyre.

To the west of the window, we find the judgment scene. Wearing a violet-colored tunic (*tunicella* — princely garb), an angel stands, with a double-edged sword held in his right hand and poised to strike from eye-level, the hilt of the sword ending in a small orb in a manner typical of the time period. In the left hand, he holds a scale ready to "weigh" the merits of an earthly life that just ended. The angelic figure is that of St. Michael, the chief officer and guardian of Heaven. In one pan of the scale, the soul of the departed is symbolized by a spired church (a medieval practice), the pen being pulled downward by an angel; in the other, a naked body represents the flesh, and bat-shaped devils are yanking it down (bats are creatures of the darkness with wings unfit for soaring). The names of the devils are still legible *Sathanas & Beelsebul*.

The Calendar. Let us again look at the cherub (green wing), the sign of St. Mathew, on the north wall of the sanctuary. His feast is Sept. 21. One year plus eight days tacked on — as hinted by the eight flowers of the ornamentation on the inside of the victory arch (west wall) — would reach the feast of St. Michael, Sept. 29 of the following year (his sign is on the south wall, directly opposite). At the astronomical midpoint of this "extended year" is March 25, the feast of the Annunciation (the sign of Archangel Gabriel is on the north-east wall, roughly in the middle!). Thus the spatial positioning of the three images depicting St. Mathew, St. Michael and the Annunciation, on the one hand, and the calendar dates of their respective feasts on the other , have an interdependence.

Some further thoughts concerning the iconography of the south wall of the sanctuary result in some rather interesting conclusions. The round window between the images of St. Apollonia and St. Michael, fell on June 6 which is the astronomical midpoint between the feast of St. Apollonia, Feb. 9, and St. Michael, Sept. 29. The Sunday preceding *Pentecost*, (May 30 in 1378) which is also the Sunday following the feast of the Ascension, was the medieval feast of Christ's Face — especially is Rome's Christian church that was

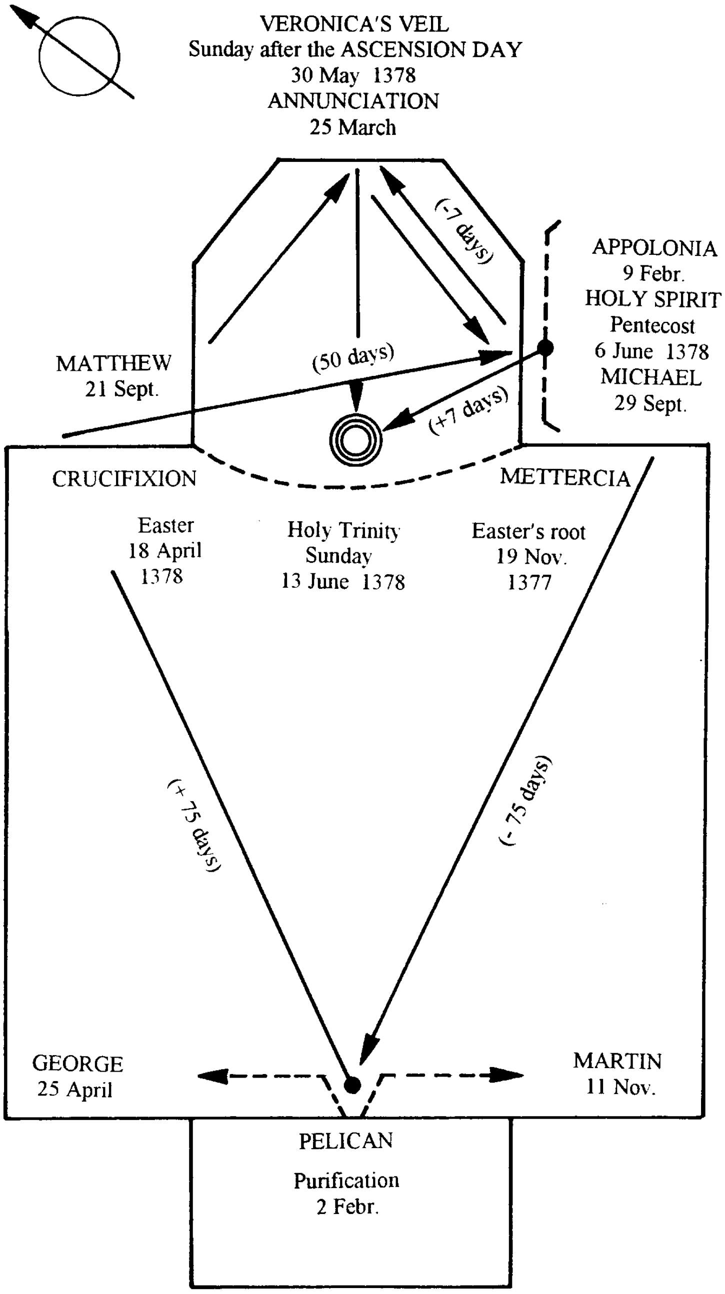

Figure 7: The calendar connections.

formerly the *Pantheon.* The Sunday following Pentecost (June 13 in 1378) is the feast of the Holy Trinity. These dates demonstrate another example of the independence of the spatial positioning of the images and the date sequence of the feast symbolized by those icons: Christ's face (east) directly opposite the triple Sun = Trinity (west) and the Holy Spirit smack in the middle (round window — south).

Where does the Sun rise? Before exiting the sanctuary let us draw imaginary straight lines from the Trinity symbol on the west wall Ythrough the centers of the two windows of the sanctuary. These two lines mark the direction of the sunrise in winter and summer, respectively. This observation is of interest because in the middle ages there was an on-going argument as to what easterly direction should relied upon in designing churches. Generally, true east was accepted as that at the time of the spring equinox.

3 The Nave

Let us view the nave side of the victory arch. The left leg of the arch depicts Easter, as it is symbolized by an image of the crucified Christ and the statement: "Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus" (Our Easter, Christ has been sacrificed). In 1378, Easter Sunday fell on Apr. 18 (a significant date in the history of the Church: the first papal coronation in Rome, after Avignon). The other leg supporting the arch shows the *Mettercia*-image, the *Anna–Maria–Jesus* grouping, with a date of 1377 as documented Flóris Rómer in the 19th century. The ancient feast of St. Ann fell on Nov. 19 in 1377. That was the root of the Easter of 1378. The midpoint between Nov. 19, 1377 and Apr. 18, 1378 is Feb. 2, 1378, feast of Mary's Purification. On the center of the west wall above the entry-way, the image of a pelican represents this feast (legend has it that the pelican washed her nearly-dead chicks with her own blood in an attempt to revive them). This is still another example of the afore-mentioned interdependence of images and dates. Furthermore the dates associated with the imagery demonstrate the inescapable conclusion that the murals were prepared in the 1377/78 time-frame and that the name of the church derives from, and honors Holy Trinity Sunday, June 13, 1378.

The message of the rest of the imagery in the nave is that the church is a house of worship. Christ admonishes us never to cease praying. In medieval times this admonishment implied an observance of the canonical hours. The images are based on these hours of worship.

The south wall. South is the triumph of the Sun, the compass point of maximal brightness. To the medieval man, it symbolized a graceful merging with God, the bravery found in faith, the role of righteousness in every-day life, thus the virtue of mercy an unselfishness an active, charitable life. Hence it follows that, the south wall should be adorned by pictures of saints whose lives were steeped in these qualities, who were "abiding the heat of the Sun".

The three narrow windows divide the wall into four fields, each of them depicting a saint that marks a specific prayer-hour and also signifies one of the virtues.

Prima — the first hour, the beginning of the workday: 6 am; the virtue of wisdom being represented by an image of the wise woman, *St. Elizabeth of the Royal House of Árpád of Hungary.*

Tertia — the third hour, the day's second prayer session, 9 am, and the virtue of justness (righteousness) symbolized by St. Stephen of Hungary. Stephanos means crown,

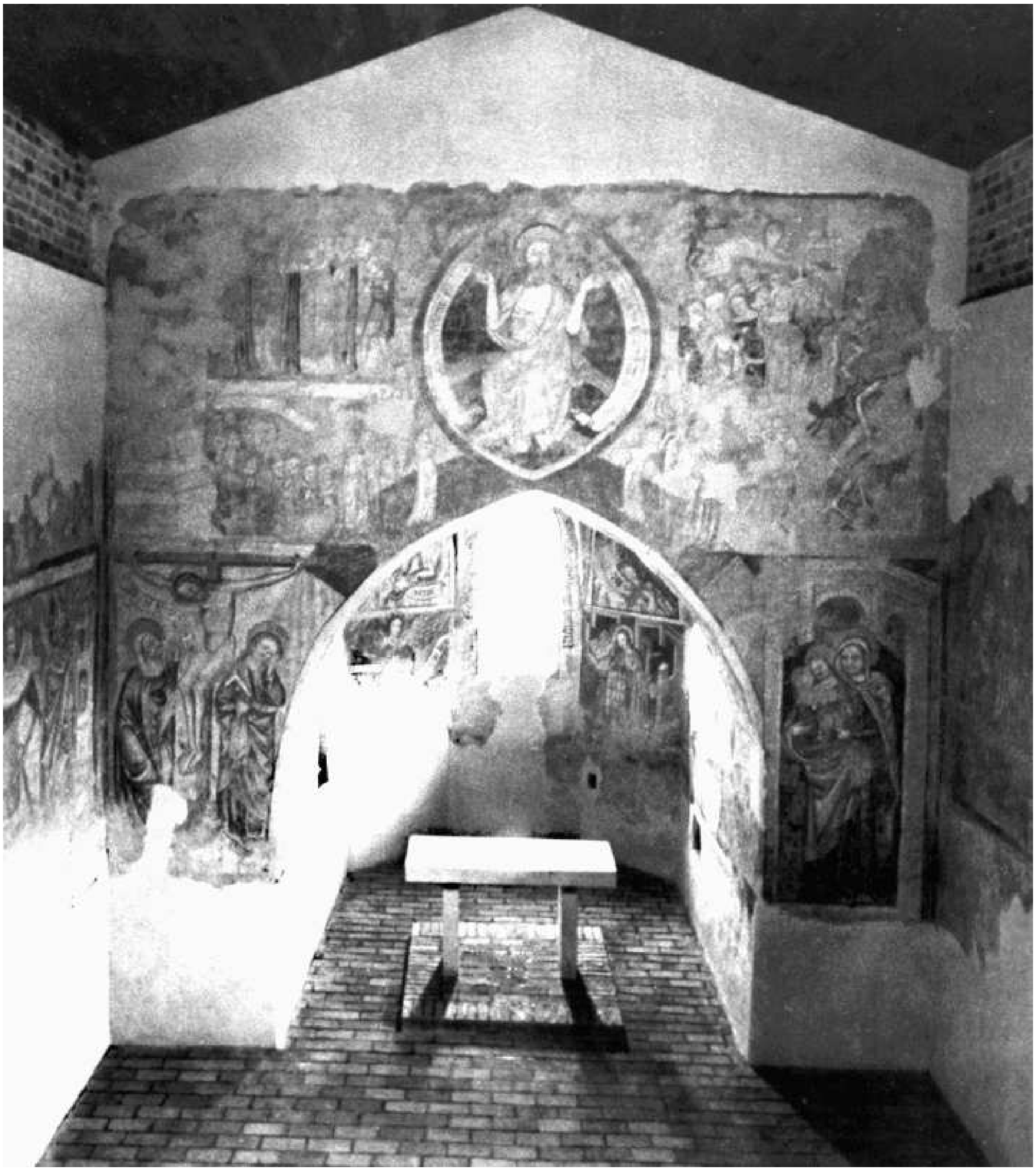

Figure 8: Look at the nave.

Figure 9: Crucifixion

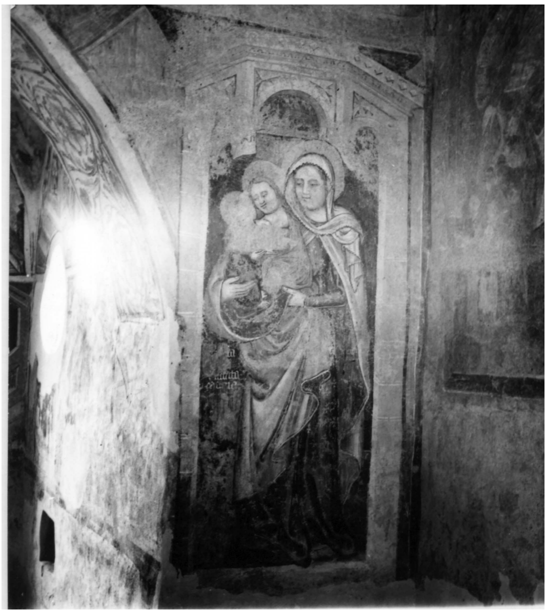

Figure 10: St Anne, Holy Mary and the child Jesus:the so called *Mettercia image.*

and in biblical context the crown of justice (*corona justitiae*). That the badly damaged painting is indeed a depiction of King Stephen is attested to by official documentation from the middle of the 18th century. The same document provides data relating to the next two images.

Sexta — the sixth hour, the third prayer time, 12 noon. The virtue of fortitude was aptly portrayed by an image of *St. Henrick*, the brother-in-law of St. Stephen. The artist chose him because of his character, determination, and bravery. In ancient times, it was believed the devil's temptations were the most intense around noon (*diabolus meridianus* = noon devil), hence that is when one needed to be strongest in resisting.

Nona — nineth hour, the fourth prayer hour, 3 pm, the time when Christ's head slumped as He has given up his soul. The badly damaged image is that of a woman saint. By deductive reasoning, based on known methods of iconographical symbolism, it is very likely that the painting represented the virtue of temperance through the image of either *St. Agnes* virgin martyr or *Beatific Marguarite* (since canonised) of the House of Árpád.

The west wall. The entry-way splits the lower part of this wall into two fields, facilitating a double-tiered image structure which, nonetheless presents a unified message. The medieval man considered the sunset, the twilight and the west compass point as the power of darkness and temptation from which one needs to find refuge. To the south of the entrance on the lower part of the wall, such a haven is depicted by the Virgin Mary's cape, a shelter that stops the advances of evil; Her cape protectively covers those who are seeking her help. Above Her, in the top tier, is another example of saintly protection, *St. Martin*, the soldier-man on his horse, offering half of his cloak to a clothesless beggar. The coupling link is the horse in jumping to the north side of the upper tier where *St. George* fights the dragon from his horse. Below him in the lower tier is the counterpart of Mary's cape, is the city guarded by a wall protecting its peaceful citizens.

St. Martin also signifies the time of the twilight prayer (*lucernarium*) and also the day the trade shops started working by lantern-light. On the feast of St. Martin, (Nov. 11) the lighting of lanterns was a ceremonious event. The picture of St. George symbolizes the time of total darkness and the night-prayer hour (completorium).

In the center above the entry-way is the image of the pelican, as we have seen earlier. It is noteworthy that, in addition to representing the feast of Purification, it symbolizes purgatory as well.

The north wall. Having no windows, it shields the worshipers from the cold of the North. The huge wall surface has room for a sizable, three-tiered composition. It treats the north compass point interpretively by fixing the times of night-time prayer hours and is, in its entirety, based on the Scripture readings for the feast of Epiphany.

Here is a broad-brush description of the composition, proceeding from west to east: in the bottom tier, three kings from the orient arrive and are received, from under a canopy, by the Christ Child in His Mother's arm; since the Scripture states that every king serves the New-born King who hears and listens to the prayers of the poor, the image of *King St. László of Hungary* is included to the right of the canopy to represent all the worldly kings and *Bishop St. Nicolaus*, on behalf of the poor, completes the lower tier. In the top tier, in two-some groupings, the bare-footed apostles used to be depicted; this painting is very badly damaged. In the white field between the top and bottom picture-rows, at one time, the beginning words of the twelve sentence s of the Apostles' Creed were visible in Latin.

The three kings came to Jeruselem from Tarzis, the same place from where King

a **b**

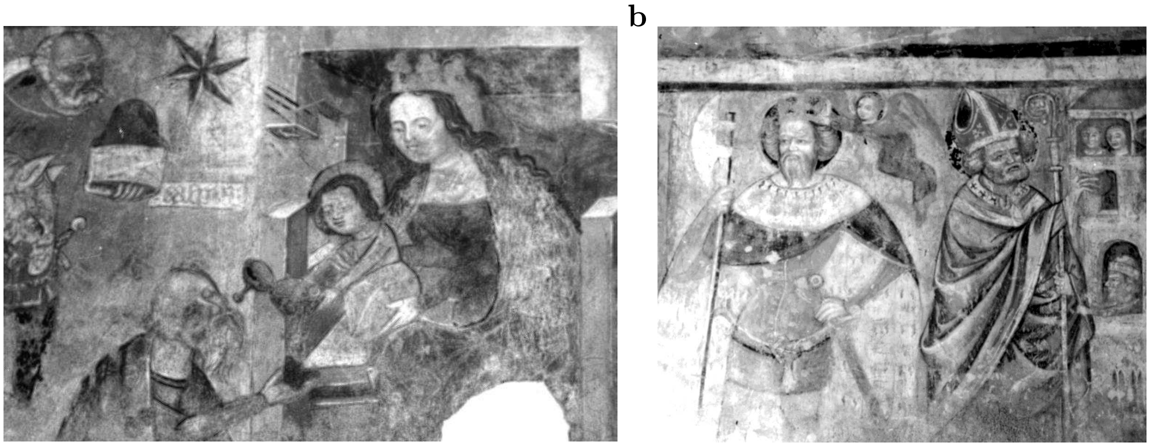

Figure 11: Details of the north wall's painting (a) Adoration of the Kings (b) King St.László and St.Nicolaus

Solomon has purchased a monkey, a peacock, and gold out of which He had spears and drinking vessels made. Hence, there is a monkey in one of the saddles and, in the "toasting scene", a Saracen drinker holds a golden cup and his servant carries a spear. The name of the king in front of the canopy is legible: *Caspar(us)*. It is likely that he is also a depiction of Hungary's King Louis The Great. The second king is middle-aged, the third is young. The horses are noteworthy in that the snorting, kicking, and rearing horse sequence is identical to that found in a description in the Book of Job. Further notable is the fact that the kings are shown wearing falconry gloves; very likely , this is a reference to the concurrent observance of the shamanistic falcon holiday and the Christian Christmas. The three kings also symbolize the prayer hour of the night vigil (*nocturni*).

On the other side of the canopy, King St. László is wielding a halberd in his right hand, his left hand resting on the hilt of his sword. An angel is placing the crown on his head because, according to chronicles, he was elected king against his wish and he longed for a heavenly crown and that of the Living King more than he wanted the earthly one. Because of his personality, he was considered and is depicted here as the bright Morning Star and symbolizes the Church's prayer awaiting the dawn (*duliculum* = dawn or *laudes* = exaltation).

St. Nicolaus, whose name means victory (*Niké*), signifies the triumph over the night and, indirectly, over the darkness of sin. According to the story on which the scene depicting him is based, there were three maidens whose poor widowed father was unable to marry them off for lack of dowry. When the father was about to allow his daughters to prostitute themselves, St. Nicolaus saved them from sin and poverty by secretly tossing money to them through their window. The daughters are visible by a third-floor window as, two floors below, the father is reaching out and touches the cloak of the secretive benefactor.

The apostles are included because, in one of the readings taken from St. Agustine, it is said that, just like the star heralded the birth of Christ to the wise men, the apostles, like a second sky (hence the top-tier presentation), herald the same news to us.

The frontal of the victory arch. The iconography is organized around three images of Christ: a "dear Christ" with Ann and Mary (south side of the arch) — a "suffering Christ" on the crucifix (north side) — and a "Majestic Christ" (top center). In ancient times, the crucifixion scene always portrayed Christ facing west and with His back toward

Jerusalem; thus the guarded city on the opposite (west) wall is symbolically Rome and, in an indirect sense, a soul that is closed to sin. It is interesting to note how Mary's hands are clasped together and the folds of Her garment are more pronounced than in the other images.

In the middle of the top picture series, inside an almond shaped aura, Christ sits on the vault of the sky, his feet resting on earth, and His countenance is dreadfully stern. Against the blue background of the universe, He is raising His scarred hands and His judgmental utterances are on a flowing ribbon. Above the multitude awaiting the final judgment on His right, He summons those who gained salvation: "Enter the kingdom of My Father"; to the damned on His left: "Away into eternal flames!"

Thus concludes — only to start again — the pictorial sermon about the One God in Three Persons and the man who created this monument in God's honor and for the betterment of his own and every one who would follow him down *through the corridors of time*, that silent keeper and ravager of all works of art.

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The Editor