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Theses of the PhD Dissertation

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Questions of Venetian Ornamental Sculpture in the Light of the
Early Medieval and Romanesque Well-Heads

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Budapest
2009

I. Research Objectives

In the dissertation I provide an overview of the history of research on early medieval and Romanesque ornamental Venetian sculpture; I compile and catalogue a corpus of about eighty items, and I develop a typology of well-heads. I analyse the motifs on the carvings, examining the role of the cult of Venice and 19–20th-century art trade in the spread and copying of well-heads. I also attempt to identify and separate 19th-century pieces. One of the main characteristics of the research on well-heads in our days is that well-heads are rarely taken into account when examining Venetian decorative sculpture. In the course of my research it became clear that well-heads made to secular order can only be effectively analyzed and interpreted together with ecclesiastic carvings. In most of the cases it seems unjustifiable that the motifs appearing on well-heads would carry any meaning, while it cannot be proven either that they have decorative purpose only. A new approach is needed, bearing in mind that the genre of the well-head is one of the few types of carvings made to secular order that survived from the analysed period.

The importance of well-heads in art history is that they represent the most important genre of secular sculpture in the era besides the *patere* and the *formelle* placed on the facades of palaces and houses. Well-heads are closely related to urban life; their primary purpose was to keep drinking water clean and to protect people and animals from falling into the well by a lockable cover. While to this purpose, the decorative function of well-heads standing in the middle of courts or squares can be considered secondary only, well-heads had an important role in the history of Venetian ornamental sculpture, and they form an integral part of its tradition.

The primary purpose of my investigation was the exploration, presentation and analysis of this little-known group

of carvings of early medieval and Romanesque ornamental Venetian sculpture. My main aim was to collect the remaining pieces and to analyse their characteristics in terms of form, style and motifs, and to describe the evolution of the motifs used. Because of the peculiarities of the corpus, I would also like to contribute with my analysis to our understanding of the sculpture of the era. This is necessary because even today little is known about the emergence, the displayed features and functions of this genre. The well-heads described here, which have been in part unknown, undated or misdated, were carved during two distinct periods separated by a millennium. The first period spanned from the 9th to the 12th century, while the second started in the second half of the 19th century and ended at the beginning of the 20th. The extent and distance of the two periods show the difficulty of the investigation.

II. Sources and Methods

Venetian well-heads offer an exceptional opportunity for a comparative examination of secular and religious sculpture. Because of their formal determination, the carvings vary relatively little in terms of motifs, and offer little opportunity for a comprehensive examination of early medieval and Romanesque sculpture. My research focuses on the relationship and interaction between form and design, with particular regard to other Venetian carvings of the period. I attempt to analyze the network of the decorative elements of well-heads by taking into account carvings to which little attention has been paid, and by establishing new relationships.

In addition to their formal specification, I also compare the well-heads under scrutiny to other Italian pieces of the genre. Moreover, I place them in the context of Venetian stone cutting, and I examine their relationship to it. During my work I tried to

keep in mind the whole corpus of early medieval and Romanesque Italian and Byzantine sculpture with the aim of determining mediation processes, the influence of workshops, pattern books and the carvings on each other.

In my research, I have drawn sharp boundaries in time and genre. I only analyze motifs appearing on well-heads, and I do not deal with a number of important and frequent ornaments of Venetian sculpture of the era. I identified about one hundred and seventy motifs in total; the number of their variants is over three hundred. I describe the motifs one by one, and I classify them using six main categories: geometric, floral, architectural, symbolic, animal and human figure motifs. Within the six main categories I progress from simpler motifs toward increasingly complex ones. When describing individual motifs, I occasionally register variants and minor variations as well. However, the analysis of motifs is often made difficult by the wear of surface and the fragmentary nature of the pieces analyzed.

In the first step of my analysis I did not separate motifs found on 19th-century well-heads carved in Carolingian or Romanesque style from the ones on medieval ones, because 19th-century motifs probably originate from earlier pieces that are now lost, and because most of them also appear on medieval carvings. The analysis of motifs that do not fit into the class of medieval elements is therefore more than instructive, as it may help in identifying non-medieval pieces. It was during my research that certain motifs turned out to have a wide prevalence, while others could be considered specific to Venice only.

When I attempt to create a typology of the motifs occurring on well-heads and to provide a stylistic and historical analysis, I primarily focus on the prevalence and the possible meaning of the motifs. The carvings, which provide subject matter for both art history and archaeological research, offer a good opportunity to examine the role of Venice in the

transmission of motifs, and to present the process during which motifs spread first in Byzantium and then in the whole region of the Alps and Italy, and finally receded into the background.

In relation to the provenance of well-heads originating from Venice I examined the activities of art dealers, and I analysed the main criteria for the identification of counterfeits.

I carried out basic research both when analyzing the history of the genre and when I explored the artefacts themselves. It became apparent that there was a lack of such research in the field. I am aware of the fact that the corpus of artefacts can by no means be considered complete, and that it will probably be expanded by numerous pieces. The catalogue I prepared is primarily aimed at giving an accurate description of the carvings, and to analyse and interpret them from a stylistic and iconographical point of view.

III. Summary of the Results

Until recently, it was a hypothesis made by researchers of Venetian Romanesque sculpture that early Venetian well-heads—as well as Roman ones—were commissioned by the Church. The uncertainty is due to the scarcity of documentation related to well-heads and to the fact that these artefacts were extremely easy to transport. These facts render it difficult to provide a clear answer to questions concerning the provenance of well-heads and the differentiation between secular and ecclesiastical commissions. While based on the reference by Marin Sanudo to the five wells in the crypt of S. Marco, one could assume that water-related ceremonies in Byzantium influenced those in Venice, I could not find any reference in the 14th-century ritual book of the Basilica to a working well in the traditional sense, providing fresh water.

The overview of the motifs shows that a number of aspects need to be taken into account when separating medieval well-heads from 19th- and 20th-century ones. The fact that certain motifs are unknown or do not recur in early medieval and Romanesque Venetian ornamental sculpture leads to the conclusion that well-heads decorated with them were sculpted in the 19th century by masters who used motifs other than Venetian ones from other areas and periods based on contemporary pattern books. Motifs of different ages appear together on some carvings, which is also a characteristic of 19th-century works. On a number of well-heads, 19th-century origin is also supported by their style and the method of stonecutting in addition to the characteristic of the motifs used.

The research contributed by a number of details to our knowledge of the spread, the variations and the meaning of early medieval and Romanesque motifs. It also provided an opportunity to examine the widespread use of certain motifs, and drew attention to several significant conclusions which are also relevant to Hungarian Romanesque stone carving. It confirmed the assumption that surface conditions determine the usability of certain patterns. Refining the classification of motifs proved to be problematic after a certain point because of their appearance in the same compositions.

Venetian well-heads formed an organic part of contemporary stone cutting, but no decorative system specific for this genre seems to have developed. These artefacts were probably carved by the same craftsmen who made architectural elements of churches—namely, capitals, sills and rood-screens—as the motifs used on well-heads are largely identical to those on ecclesiastical carvings. Motifs used until the end of the 12th century are rooted in Byzantine and Italian traditions. The wide prevalence of some of the motifs allows the conclusion that pattern books greatly contributed to their spreading, while in addition to these books, the most important

agents of transferring these elements were Byzantine masters arriving in Venice. However, the masters carving well-heads had to utilize these motifs on new forms with hitherto unknown surface conditions. Stonecutters, therefore, not only employed an existing decorating scheme, but they treated it freely, and transformed it.

In the memoirs of travellers from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, in guidebooks and literary works, Venetian well-heads appear as typical accessories of the city. If they are mentioned, mostly the two bronze well-heads in the court of the Doge's Palace are praised. Two authors describe the well in the Arsenal, while others refer generally to a well-head of a palace, a cloister or a square. The motif of the well-head also surfaces in 18th- and 19th-century literary works inspired by Venice. This may have contributed greatly to the 19th-century interest in well-heads, and to the development and prosperity of this branch of art trade.

A high demand appeared for Venetian well-heads in the second half of the 19th century from European and overseas museums, the aristocracy and private collectors. The Budapest Museum of Fine Arts is in the possession of one of the largest collections of Italian art in Hungary, including a total of ten Venetian well-heads. They were partly purchased by the museum directly from Venice, while other pieces found their way to the collection due to the nationalizations of the 1950s.

As in most European countries, interest in and demand for well-heads from the aristocracy also appeared in Hungary. Travelling to Venice, purchasing carvings and placing them in home gardens were closely related to similar activities in England and Germany. With an international context in mind, overall, it can be suggested that there were no prominent writers, poets or guidebook writers in Hungary who wrote about Venice and Venetian sculpture, and while interest in well-heads is documented from the 1840s in Germany, and from the 1860s in England, the Hungarian aristocracy started to purchase such

items only from the 1890s. The emergence of well-heads in Hungary was the result of particular, multiple transfer processes. Its defining feature is the high number of copies of Venetian originals and forgeries made in Hungary. Another important feature is that one well-head became the medium of displaying mythological themes.

In the second half of the 19th century one can observe the increasing popularity of well-heads. During this period, as the number of original pieces possible to sell decreased, more and more copies and imitations appeared. The demand from the aristocracy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire seems to have been satisfied by art dealer Max Schmidt. His photo collection and inventory books kept in the Museum of Kiscell show that his company had more than one hundred types of “Pozzo” products. It can be established that “Pozzo” was a name utilized for a wide range of products—in terms of size, material and form—from flower-stands and baptismal fonts to well-heads. Pairing the definitions and descriptions with pieces represented in the photographs or with existing pieces is difficult. The Schmidt Company lent and sold these works of art to its clients in the upper middle class or the aristocracy to decorate their homes and the gardens. I have also found that through the production and trade of well-heads, Max Schmidt was in connection with a number of foreign and Hungarian companies, such as the Roman Sangiorgi Gallery, the terracotta manufacture of Bondi family in Signa and the Zsolnay factory in Pécs.

Romanesque copies and imitations show a variety of forms, and Venetian motifs are often mixed with other elements, mostly inspired by pattern books. As the result of this combination, the pieces vary considerably in form and motifs. Using pattern books containing unrelated groups of motifs led to the appearance of carvings that are distinct from original pieces both in terms of form and in terms of their decorative system. Copies and imitations are identifiable by taking into account

three aspects: 1. the material of the piece; 2. the similarity or dissimilarity of shape and motifs to those of early medieval and Romanesque works; 3. the method of processing the stone, which is closely related to its style. Even if the motifs did have meaning in the Middle Ages, 19th-century stonemasons were certainly unaware of this, and it is partly due to this fact that certain motifs were slightly transformed. Sculptors used existing forms and sample compositions, but they also invented new ones. The examination of the motifs also shows that 19th-century carvings often contain a significant amount of modern motifs in addition to medieval elements. I present examples which show the process in which well-heads underwent a transformation in their form and became unsuitable to fulfil their original function, while they were still placed in their traditional position.

During the research, it became clear that Venetian well-heads have an important role in the history of decorative stone cutting, and should have an appropriate place in the analyses of the genre in this era. This branch of the ornamental sculpture has been discussed separately by most art historians. My work questions this marginal situation of well-heads, and it helps to discern their relationship with the other branches of Venetian stone cutting.

As a final step, let me summarize some of the unresolved issues that my research helped to identify. Even after a careful study of the ceremonial books of S. Marco and a full exploration of the crypt, only little is known about the role of water and the wells in the Cathedral. Therefore no well-head commissioned by the Church could be identified unambiguously, which would have made it possible to compare secular and religious pieces. A further task is to investigate the origin and spread of the described motifs, extending the research to all branches of art. Further research is needed to explore the success of well-heads in 19th-century literature and art trade in other countries of Europe, particularly among the French, Polish and Russian

aristocracy. Furthermore, all carvings should be examined for possible influences by pattern books to determine the individual inventions of stonecutters. Further investigation is needed to determine whether motifs appearing on these carvings lack any meaning, or at least in some cases they carry some kind of symbolic sense. I am sure that further research into these questions will contribute to our understanding of the characteristics of well-heads in terms of form and motifs, and of the history of Venetian early medieval and Romanesque stone cutting.

IV. Publications in the Subject of the Dissertation

“Il ciborio della Chiesa S. Michele Arcangelo di Metelliano a Cortona: una proposta di ricostruzione.” *Annuario dell’Accademia Etrusca di Cortona XXXI. 2004–2005* (2006): 75–83.

“Rapporti veneto-ungheresi nella scultura dell’XI–XII secolo.” *Commentari d’arte XIV*. (2008): 5–10.

“A velencei kútkávák irodalmi említéseinek szerepe a Velence-kultuszban. [The role of the literary mentions of Venetian well-heads in the cult of Venice.]” *Fiatal kutatók és Olaszország*. Ed. József Pál, Dénes Mátyás, Márton Róth. Szeged: SZEK Juhász Gyula Felsőoktatási Kiadó, 2008 (2009). 123–129.

“A Schmidt-cég ‘pozzói’-nak problémája. – The Well-Heads of the Schmidt Company.” *Omnis creatura significans: Tanulmányok Prokopp Mária 70. születésnapjára – Essays in Honour of Mária Prokopp*. Ed. Anna Tüskés. Budapest: CentrArt Association, 2009. 291–296.

“La Pieve di S. Maria di Confine a Tuoro sul Trasimeno.” *Nuove Ricerche su Sant’Antimo*. Ed. Adriano Peroni, Grazia Tucci. Firenze: Alinea Editrice, 2008. 45–49.

“Venetian Well-Heads in the English Literary Heritage and Art Trade.” *New Concepts and Approaches in English and American Studies*. Ed. Tibor Frank, Krisztina Károly. Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó, 2009. (Under publication)

“La fortuna letteraria e collezionistica delle vere da pozzo veneziane.” *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino* 2009. (Under publication)

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