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The Fresco Cycle of the Holy Virgin in the Franciscan Church of Keszthely

The fresco cycles of the former Franciscan church at Keszthely in Western Hungary count to the richest examples of this art in Central Europe. After its discovery in 1974, its restoration took almost a decade and it was published in several articles and catalogue entries. However, there are still obscure points in the decoration system among which I would like to clarify to a certain extent the cycle of the Holy Virgin.

The Franciscan church was built by one of the most important aristocrats of his age, Stephen (II) Lackfi, who was an important member of the court of King Louis the Great (i.e. ban of Croatia and Dalmatia 1371-72, voivode of Transylvania 1372-76), and King Sigismund (palatine between 1387-92), but after losing this position he revolted against the king and was massacred in February of 1397. He was buried in the Franciscan church at Keszthely where his tombstone is still preserved.

For the dating of the church, the keystones can serve as starting points. In the sanctuary there is a keystone with the damaged coat of arms of the Angevin dynasty and another one representing the dragon of the Lackfi family, thus that part was surely built before 1397. In the nave, however, the symbols of another family, the Gersei Pető, can be found, which can be attested in the region after 1404 and owned the town from 1427. The fresco cycle is limited to the sanctuary. Since in the lower zone painted symbols of the Lackfi family are preserved, it was probably ready before the founder's death of 1397.

The frescos were not preserved in a splendid condition. Therefore the iconographic description of the program is extremely difficult. So far Mária Prokopp was dealing with the problem most extensively. She realized that the lowest part of the program depicts busts of prophets and apostles, with the Volto Santo in the eastern wall. Above the cornice there are three rows depicting on the north side the life and Passion of Christ and standing saints between the windows. The uppermost row above the windows is dedicated to the Holy Virgin.

Here there are only two scenes that are more-or-less clearly readable. The fresco on the south-east wall was identified as the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple while the preceding eastern mural was named as the Presentation of Jesus. However, logically, the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple should be preceded by the scene of the Birth of Mary, as it happens in such well-known cycles as the Scrovegni chapel at Padova. Therefore we should examine if the fresco on the east wall at Keszthely can be identified in this way. If we recall the composition of Giotto from Padova, we find that the basic arrangement is similar and the striped textile can be understood as the cover of the bed of St Anne. The bed is represented in certain cases in diagonal position, such as in the miniature in the Visconti Book of Hours (before 1395). Anne often holds the child Mary as an offer in the miniatures of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. Thus, the right side of the fresco of Keszthely can be identified with the birth of the Virgin without problem. Nevertheless, we should explain the left side with the two sitting men.

These figures are quite typical for a series of paintings produced in Siena in the 14th and 15th centuries. The Birth of the Virgin, represented by Pietro Lorenzetti in 1342 (Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo) depicts two bearded men, one of them with a halo. He is Joachim receiving the good news of the birth of his daughter. The closest analogy from this series can be found in the predella of Andrea di Bartolo from ca. 1400 (Washington, National Gallery). Common in the two compositions are the separation of the rooms, the two men in the left side, the cross-vaulted space in the right side, the woman holding the child, and even the servant's reaching hands for the baby. On the other hand, the figure of St Anne and the servant holding the infant Mary are merged and some details are left.

This close connection between a Siennese painting and the fresco of Keszthely calls the attention to the Mariological cycles of Siena. As is well-known, the cult of the Holy Virgin was extremely intensive in this Tuscan town. The most important charitable institution of the town was the Spedale di Santa Maria, built opposite to the Duomo. Its facade was decorated by the frescos of the Lorenzetti brothers, executed in 1335. The four images painted by the Lorenzettis represented the Birth, Presentation and Betrothal of the Virgin and the Returning to the House of her Parents. Although these have been destroyed by the 18th century, their compositions were so popular that many copies and variants survive from the 14th and 15th centuries.

Most important copies are the fescos depicting the Presentation and the Betrothal in the Augustinian church of San Leonardo al Lago from 1360-70 by Lippo Vanni; the frescos of the sacristy of the Duomo by Benedetto di Bindo in 1411-13; the Coronation altar at Montalcino from 1388 and the frescos in the San Guglielmo chapel of the church of St. Augustin of San Gimignano from 1390-1410, both by Bartolo di Fredi; the predella scenes by his son, Andrea di Bartolo around 1400 (Washington); the panels painted by Niccolò di Buonaccorso (1348-88) somewhat earlier (Uffizi and London); the predella of the Fondi Altarpiece, commissioned from Giovanni di Paolo for the St James altar in the San Francesco of Siena in 1436 (Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale); the altarpiece of Sano di Pietro for the Capella dei Signori of the Palazzo Pubblico, dated to 1448-51, which are the most faithful followers of the Lorenzetti compositions (Ann Arbor, Vatican, Altenburg); and the predella paintings of the Annunciation altar from the church of San Pietro a Ovile in Siena (ca. 1455), attributed to Giovanni di Pietro (now in Philadelphia and the Louvre).

In short, the famous compositions of the Lorenzetti brothers were highly influential for more than a century in Sienese painting. However, there are naturally variations of the same motive, which is visible in the architectural setting, the additional figures and certain compositional formulas. Therefore it is advisable to find the place of the Keszthely frescos within this Sienese tradition.

The composition of the Birth of the Virgin, as we have seen, is close to the predella of Andrea di Bartolo. This originates from the tradition of the Bartolo workshop, which can be characterised with the servant with the child Mary in her lap and the other girl on the left with her reaching hands. This motif is also known from Benedetto da Bindo in the sacristy and the predella of Sano di Pietro, but in a mirrored way. The additional room on the left side with the bearded men is closest to the later Bartolo painting in San Gimignano, followed by Andrea in this predella.

If we look at the Presentation of the Virgin painted at Keszthely, we should recognize that the composition is organised within a hexagonal building. In the middle there are two priests standing, on the right in a tribune a group of young girls are waiting for Mary, with their folded arms, two standing Jewish men on the right, and St Anne on the left, looking at her daughter who is walking on the steps to the priests. This composition originates also from the Lorenzetti tradition, however, the pictures of the Bartolo workshop are not the closest analogies in this case. Bartolo moved the centre of the scene to the left of the building, which lost its central position and the diagonal steps, so impressive in the related fresco of Taddeo di Gaddi in Florence, were emphasized. Some of the pieces painted for the Duomo, such as the frescos of the sacristy by Benedetto da Bindo and the altarpiece of Paolo di Giovanni di Fei, applied a section of a basilical building instead of the hexagonal construction. More conventional is the predella of Sano di Pietro, but the building is somewhat more complicated. The simple hexagonal building appears in the earliest images, such as the fresco of Lippo Vanni at San Leonardo and the predella of Niccolò di Buonaccorso. In these images the young girls are depicted in a way closely resembling to Keszthely. They are also present in the altarpiece of Paolo di Giovanni Fei, which is the only analogue of Keszthely in the double number of the priests.

Thus, the first two scenes of the four represented once in the facade of the Spedale in Siena can be identified with great certainty at Keszthely. Following this logic, we should ask whether the two other scenes were also present in the Hungarian church. Unfortunately, the next scenes are very fragmentary in Keszthely. Therefore I can only hypothetically argue for the identification of the last scene on the south side with the Betrothal. It seems to me that in the middle of the composition there is a man with open red mantle, with standing figures on his both sides. These figures, turning towards each other, have halos. This is resembling to the composition of Bartolo di Fredi in Montalcino. Nevertheless, in Keszthely the figure on the left seems to be the Virgin while in the Sienese tradition she is usually standing on the right. However, such changes may occur, and it is not difficult to find parallels in the Italian tradition as well as in the French miniature painting or German panel painting.

A further problem is the identification of the rest of the scenes at Keszthely which is undoubtedly longer than the Sienese prototype. Between the Presentation of the Virgin and her Betrothal, logically, the selection of Joseph should be narrated. At this point the cycle of Giotto in Padova depicts the Consignment of the twigs and The prayer for the flowering of the twigs. This motif in the German miniatures of the 15th C. is usually represented with diagonally placed altars. The composition is centralised in the mural of Mappach in South-Western Germany, painted ca. 1500. In Keszthely the scene is depicted in an architectural framework, around an altar on which the green twigs can be clearly identified. It seems that behind the altar the candidates are kneeling; among them the most prominent is a man dressed in red and

grey, possibly Joseph. The main lines of the composition of the next, highly damaged scene seem to be comparable. It is also organized by an architectural framework, with possibly an altar in the centre and with figures around it. On the right the man in red and grey appears again. Therefore it can be supposed that it is the continuation of the selection of Joseph which would precede quite logically the last scene, the Betrothal.

What can we say about the first four scenes of the cycle at Keszthely? Unfortunately their state of preservation is tragic. From the first two scenes we have only very small fragments, from the third practically nothing. Only the fourth scene preserved some coloured surfaces and underdrawings, however, these cannot provide enough information for a clear identification. As far as it can be seen, it is also representing a building, with an altar in the centre. The vertical stripes of the altarclothes is similar to those in the scene of the selection of Joseph. On the left there is a red pair of shoes, indicating that someone is scarifying at the altar. At this point of the story, before the Birth of the Virgin, the story of Joachim should have been depicted. Right before the Birth, usually the Meeting at the Golden Gate is represented, however, in our case it can be excluded. It is much more probable that the sacrifice of Joachim is depicted here, although it is somewhat earlier in the cycle of Giotto and represented in the nature. I think, this can be a rare case when the sacrifice is in the Temple. In contrast to the pictorial tradition, the text of the Protoevangelium of James describes that after meeting with Anne at the Golden Gate, Joachim went to the temple and brought his offerings to God. The first three scenes are probably in connection with the beginning of the story of Joachim

Thus, although there are some uncertainties, the Mariological cycle of the Franciscan church at Keszthely with its nine scenes is a relatively long and elaborated series. Among the nine scenes, only three can be related to the Lorenzetti frescos on the facade of the Spedale of Siena, however, at least in two cases the connection to the Sienese tradition seems to be extremely strong. According to Vasari, there was a fresco cycle depicting the life of Mary starting with the expulsion of Joachim and ending with the Nativity of Christ in 12 scenes in the church of Santa Maria della Pieve in Arezzo, painted by Pietro Lorenzetti, however, this is completely lost. Nevertheless, there is a cycle in the main sanctuary of the cathedral of Orvieto, painted by the Sienese master Ugolino d'Ilario in 1357-64. Between the story of Joachim and the Nativity it divides the cycle to 12 scenes. Seven of them can be relevant from the point of view of Keszthely: Expulsion of Joachim, Annunciations to Joachim and to Anne, Meeting at the Golden Gate, Birth, Presentation and Betrothal of Mary; their composition is related to the Sienese tradition. However, the Flowering of the twigs and the Sacrifice of Joachim in the Temple are missing, therefore these examples cannot be regarded as the starting point.

The elaborated Mariological cycles in Italian painting is started by a panel painting in Pisa from the late 13th century. The series of the scenes, divided on both sides of the Madonna, narrate with some inconsistencies after the Annunciation (!) the story of Joachim and Anne. On the right side in the third row we can identify the sacrifice of Joachim, stepping to the altar from the left, ministered by angels. The story arrives to the point of the Golden Gate in the fifth row on the left, and continued by the Birth and the Presentation. Instead of the Betrothal, four saints are depicted in the last image field. Regardless its inconsistencies, the panel of Pisa can be useful in understanding the cycle of Keszthely.

The most influential Mariological cycle is unquestionably the fresco series of Giotto in the Scrovegni chapel. Twelve scenes tell the story related to the birth and betrothal of the Virgin. Full equivalency cannot be suspected in the arrangement of the Italian and Hungarian cycles, however, the second half of the story is harmonizing well: the 7-11th scenes of Padova are good parallels of the 5-9th episodes in Keszthely, depicting the Birth, Presentation, two scenes of the Twigs, and the Betrothal. The first four scenes of Keszthely are more obscure and although there were probably identical elements, the Sacrifice of Joachim before the Birth is certainly a difference.

Thus, the Mariological cycle seems to be originated from a Tuscan tradition. Regarding the selection of the scenes, Giotto and his followers seem to be influential, but not directly. Closer is the link to the composition of two or three episodes once decorating the facade of the Sienese Spedale, however, the cycle at Keszthely seems to be more elaborated. That is exactly the significance of the frescos in this Hungarian town: it is not the only known follower of the Sienese Lorenzetti tradition outside of Italy, but should be registered among the longest Mariological cycles in trecento fresco painting. The Mariological emphasis of

the cycle cannot be explained differently than taking into account the deep veneration of the Holy Virgin by the Franciscan Order which inspired the creation of the rich fresco decoration at Keszthely.