

The Development of Catholic Altar Architecture on the Territory of Belarus During the 17th Century – the First Half of the 19th Century

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Abstract—The reasons influencing the formation of altars during the 17th century – the first half of the 19th century are figured out on the basis of the system conception. Predominant style schools of that time architecture supported by edited treatises and sketchbooks with engravings and reproductions of European artificers are determined on the assumption of disclosed and studied archival materials of architectural-artful altar development of Belarus during the 17th century – the first half of the 19th century is analyzed in this paper. The extent of different European architectural schools impact is determined. Architecture development tendencies depending on the material and belonging to a congregational or monastic temple are revealed. Possible variants of architectural-compositional concept are simultaneously envisaged.

Keywords—*catholic altar; retable; catholic church; compositional schemes of altars; sacred art*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church on the territory of Belarus (that used to be a part of Grand Duchy of Lithuania) dates back to the 13th century, the period of Duch Mindovg's governing. In the beginning of the 17th century it managed to get a dominating position having pressed Orthodoxy and Protestantism. The formation of architectural-stylistic and volume design concept of a temple and its interior decoration took place synchronically with the development of Catholicism. Nowadays there are 58 catholic temples with historical elements on the territory of Belarus during the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century. There are 35 catholic temples with absolutely authentic interiors and 23 catholic temples with partially survived altars.

Contemplating catholic altars in chronological order of appearance on the territory of Belarus during the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century, it is evident that they underwent diverse modifications concerning the shape of compositional concept, decorative ornamentation and a material make. Not only new style schools, but also social-political conditions and financial factors influenced them. Lumpiness of architectural concepts varying from complicated and sophisticated to the simplest forms (that is explicable by financial opportunities of a customer) became

visible in the catholic temples during the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century. This significant detail makes us study catholic churches and altars from a “noble” point of view, classifying them on the base of belonging: congregational and monastic. As a rule, financial grants on the construction of temples and interior decoration were given by magnates and well-to-do nobility. The fund used to be lands with peasants settlements and the site for the construction of the first, as a rule, wooden Catholic Church.

II. THE FACTORS INFLUENCING THE FORMATION OF BELARUSIAN ALTAR ARCHITECTURE

The position of Roman-Catholic church in Grand Duchy of Lithuania much grew strong during the reign of Duch Yagailo, who was converted into Catholicism in 1385 and founded Vilna episcopacy.

Several factors simultaneously affected the formation of altar on the territory of Belarus during the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century. First and foremost, there were predominant style schools of architecture of that time, supported by editing tractates and sketchbooks with engravings and reproductions of European artificers. Precise preferences and financial opportunities of a client, talent extent of a designer and a producer, also their personal tastes and education had a great role. Financial opportunities directly influenced the quality of construction and aesthetic appeal of a temple architectural appearance. It is notable that the simplest forms were frequently characteristic of congregational rural catholic churches while monastic, vice versa, had sophisticated architectural-compositional concept.

It is necessary to understand that such difference did not depend on the material of a structure. So, it is impossible to reckon that altars in wooden temples had less artful sculptural decoration than in stone ones. On the basis of this fact, the altars during the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century may be divided into 3 types according to the level of artful-aesthetic skill:

- Unique, embodying progressive ideas of that time architecture;

- Solid, supporting and repeating architectural forms, represented in tractates and sample-reproductions of European artificers;
- Copied from the samples of the 1st and the 2nd types of architectural heritage by craftsmen.



Fig. 1. Unique skill (one of the three levels of artful-aesthetic skill in the construction of the altar) shown in the altar principal, Budslav.



Fig. 2. Solid skill (one of the three levels of artful-aesthetic skill in the construction of the altar) in the altar principal, Kamai.



Fig. 3. Copied from the samples (one of the three levels of artful-aesthetic skill in the construction of the altar) in the altar principal, Kamennaya Oshmyanka.

Altars with innovative concepts and highest professional level of performance in any material, either it is stone, timber, plaster or pictorial art belong to the first type. As a rule, such items were made according to the preliminary project of an architect that was realized by the best artificers of that time: artists, cutters and sculptors. These altars got universal recognition as models to emulate. It is possible to see the reminiscence of their samples even in the poorest parochial catholic churches. Such examples are the altars of Jesuit Catholic Church of St. Yana in Vilna, Dominican Catholic Church of St. Spirit in Vilna, the catholic church of St. Peter and Paul canons Lutheran on Antokol in Vilna, the illusionistic retables of altars principal in Budslav ("Fig. 1"), Gholshany, etc.

The altars of good professional level, performed in any material by artificers-producers either with the help of an architect or without belong to the second type. Graphic samples were used as a model of architectural-compositional making published in Europe and adapted to local interior peculiarities. Such examples are the altars of Franciscan Catholic Church in Grodno, the parochial Catholic Church in Volpa, the congregational Catholic Church in Kremenitsa, the congregational Catholic Church in Komayi ("Fig. 2"), Odelsk and other places.

Illusionistic and wooden retables made by craftsmen without special education belong to the third type. Earlier items created by professionals of adjacent territory were taken as a sample of this design type. This type's examples are: the altar principal and the altar minor of a congregational catholic church in Trokeli, the altar principal in the chapel of Kamennaya Oshmyanka ("Fig. 3"), and etc.

During the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century, the architecture of a catholic church underwent

influence of various European schools. Interesting architectural treatises and samples-reproductions brought by designers, customers and priests-monks that came to Grand Duchy of Lithuania from Poland. They contributed to the appearance of new ideas and styles. The influence of Netherland School was typical of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the 17th century. Knowing that till the 17th century there was no Western tradition of making carved altars and sculpture on the territory of Belarus. It is possible to suggest adoption of such skills from Prussian and Polish artificers. Similarity of Poland Minor compositional concept to altars may be explained by common sources of inspiration from tractates of Dutch, Belgian and German artificers: Gabriel Kramer [1], Vredeman de Vretes [2], Cornelis Floris [3], Gotfrid Muller [4], Vendel Ditterline [5]. Closeness of Prussia (where the influence of Pomerania [6] and Gdansk [7] was felt) contributed to the penetration of Dutch and North German tendencies in wood carving.



Fig. 4. The altar principal, Hrodna (OFM) (Examples of the use of a sample from a tractate in the construction of altars.)

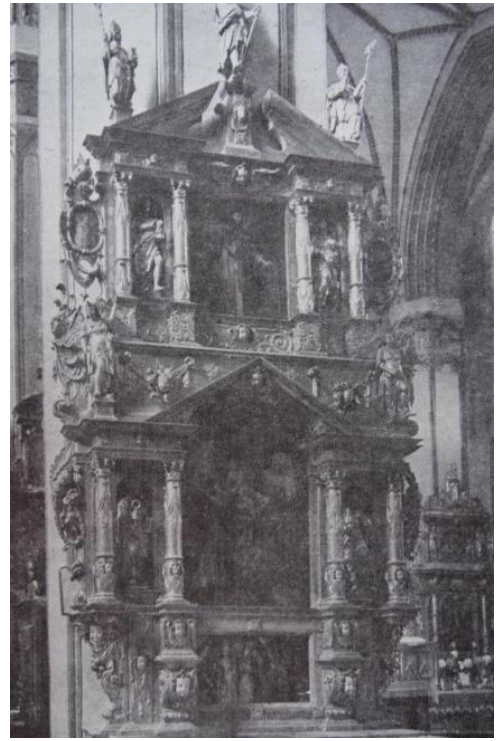


Fig. 5. The altar secondary, Frombork (examples of the use of a sample from a tractate in the construction of altars).

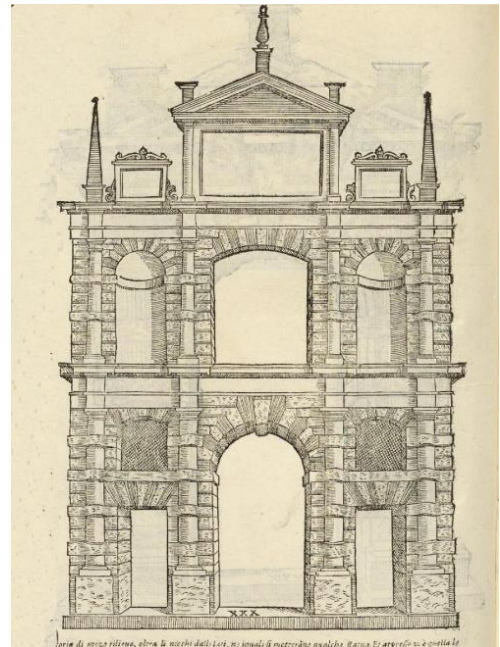


Fig. 6. Print from the tractate Serlio (examples of the use of a sample from a tractate in the construction of altars).

However, graphic illustrations from tractates and sample-prints were not precise models to copy shape. As a rule, they were sources of inspiration. Several ideas taken from diverse graphic illustrations were used for the recreation of new items. Such example we can see in the retable project of Franciscan Catholic Church altar principal in Grodno (see "Fig. 4") and the altar minor of the Catholic Church in

Frombork, Poland (see "Fig. 5"). Comparative analysis of these 2 structures points out the usage of common composition technique, but appreciable difference of 60 years gap does not let us speak about the authorship of the same artificer or a craft guild as crownings differentiate them. Both motifs may be found in the samples of North German and Italian artificers (see "Fig. 6").

In the 17th century the most widespread compositional schemes of altars existed: motifs of triaxial triumphal arch and uni-axial portal. One more compositional scheme that became widespread was a window area interpretation or portal theme, arched or rectangular in completion. More frequently this type was applied when choosing more complicated material for pressing-natural or artificial stone. It is visible on the examples of the altar minor of Jesuit Catholic Church in Nesvizh, the altar principal of parochial Catholic Church in Rouzhany, the altars and tombs of Krakow and neighboring areas (shown in "Fig. 7"). Subsequently, this scheme interpreted in the shape of a porch reappears in a new style of Classicism in the end of the 18th century.



Fig. 7. The altar principal, Rouzhany (reconstruction of the author).



Fig. 8. The altar principal, Stolovichi (reconstruction of the author).

Beginning with the 1st quarter of the 18th century Austrian and South German artificers create series of samples-prints dedicated to minor architectural shapes in sacred interior. Mass edition of such omnibuses was in the 1750s-1760s [8]. Yet, common schools of composition and style concepts may be found in the altars of Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth since the 30s of the 18th century. It is possible to explain this by earlier exclusive editions of such artificers as Paul Decker (1713), Johan Jacob Shoubler (1730).

It is possible to suggest that the samples of South German and Austrian contributed to the creation of altars in the style "Vilna Baroque". Tendencies of rich local ornament usage and creation of integrated space, where all the boundaries between pictorial art, architecture and sculpture are erased, are traced namely in these works. Such an idea of natural arts unity was presented by Shoubler. For example, the altars principal of Dominican catholic churches in Stolbtsy, of Carmelites in Grodno, Vilna, parochial catholic church in Lida, of Franciscan catholic church in Gholshany, Stolovichi and etc. (shown in "Fig. 8")

III. THE EVOLUTION OF ALTARS ON THE TERRITORY OF BELARUS DURING THE 17TH CENTURY ~ THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

In the context of above listed peculiarities of items creation becomes possible if to place their features in chronological order, concerning appearance, to clarify key periods of altars of Belarus during the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century. The change in stylistic-compositional and technological characteristics took place at a crucial moment. It determines the division of altar history into 6 time lines:

- The 1st period (1594-1667) is characterized by high artistic craftsmanship level of performance and

ideological-compositional concept. The altars outstood due to elaborate decorative elements, sculptures and big amount of carved details. Marble altar retables were installed only during this period.

- The 2nd period (1667-1700) is characterized by simple form items, temporary concepts and also by high-quality items created by professional artificers. A new kind of material (stucco) for creating altar retables appears.
- The 3d period (1710-1738) is characterized by the division of architecture into monastic and congregational types. The former represented higher level of architecture irrespective of the structure material. The main material of altar structure is wood. The quality and manner of decorative elements making is not inferior of the items quality on adjacent areas.
- The 4th period (1738-1772) is noted by a new type of altars made of artificial stone with marbleization resembling natural stone. Illusionistic and wooden altar retables were also used. At this time more vivid disjuncture between monastic and congregational architecture happened. Monastic architecture was characterized by high level of artisanship and ideological-compositional concept.
- The 5th period (1772-1795) demonstrates predominance of illusionistic retables and wooden altars of simplified form or with minimal usage of carved wooden elements in Classicism style in the interior decoration. Vivid difference between monastic and congregational catholic churches altar architecture had place. Its creation was performed by local artificers, perhaps.
- The 6th period (1795-1863) is characterized by turning to Baroque traditions as Classicism did not get accustomed in temple interiors. But the items of this period are characterized by simplicity of shapes and inaccuracy of proportions. The production of wooden parts was stopped at this time. A tendency of shifting items from one Catholic Church to another and modification of wooden altar retable into a new construction with maximal application of original elements. Gradual process of forms simplification took place at that time. But altar elements performance was not of high quality because of local artificers.

During the 17th century ~ the first half of the 19th century altar retables were installed in catholic churches without architect's participation, in general. Interior items were bought from craft producers that specialized in the production of single style temple staff. It is known that such guilds existed in Swieta Lipka (Poland), Krolewick (now it is Kaliningrad), Grodno, Vilna, Mogilev and other towns. The production of jubes, baptisteries, altar retables, enclosing grills with balustrades was performed in guilds of this type.

Manufacturing of wooden altar elements was conducted by, at least, two artificers, one of whom was a woodworker and the other-a woodcarver-decorator, whose duty was to install strong and solid load-bearing structure. The next step was the decoration of a retable with carved decorative ornament and sculptures. The artificer, as a rule, dealt with the most complicated task-design and sculptures making. The rest of work was done by assistants.

The situation changes dramatically in the middle of the 18th century when the leading role in Catholic Church interior design was given to an architect. His task becomes creation of Catholic Church integrated space. The appearance of new material contributed to a major breakthrough in altar and retable architecture on the territory of former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. After fire accidents in Vilna in 1737, 1748 leading material becomes plastered brick with subsequent marbleization and stucco decoration. Foreign artificers begin arriving in the city from Bavaria, Germany, Northern Italy, Central and Northern Poland. Political and economic situation in Vilna had important role in the establishment of Baroque art. Local magnates had financial opportunities to invite high-priced architects from abroad realizing their desire to match the status of a European city. Fires that almost ruined Vilna gave incentive to use new materials and technologies in the city architecture. Common European tendencies brought by invited foreign architects influenced the formation of "Vilna" altar, first of all. It is possible to state, that the origin of an architect had direct impact on numerous architectural concepts in the city. But a town-planner drew his ideas from European artistic centers, creatively giving a new meaning to them in his works.

The technology of a traditional retable manufacturing consisted of two stages. The first step included the building of brick architecture construction. After that the whole framework was covered by a layer of grey plaster, which optically leveled the geometry of such composite members as columns, cornices and pilasters. On the second stage thin finishing layer of stucco was applied with a batch of multicolored pigment which was polished and covered by wax after drying. As a result, a retable seemed to be made of marble or any other ornamental stone. Such technology was very effective. It did not need any recoloring, but it demanded certain level of skill. That is why it was enough to use only one layer of plaster in many villages and towns. After the framework processing an artificer of plaster got down to work. He beautified the construction by sculptures, planters and other decorative elements. The most difficult work was of a sculptor as it demanded the highest skill and talent. In the end of the 18th century altar retables often remained without sculptures because high-level architects died.

But work was not always portioned out between an architect and an artificer. The examples are known when an overman was a designer at the same time. It is confirmed by contracts concluded during the construction of Bernardine catholic church in Vitebsk, according to which the altar principal had to be projected by Joseph Fontana III in 1753 [9] and two altars minor were assigned to the local stucco

worker Ludwig Yazdasky in 1757-1758 [10]. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that in the middle of the 18th century not only artificers from abroad were masters of altar construction technology, but also local ones, whose names remain unknown to the history of architecture. Jesuit catholic churches' clients very often became artificers. Special architecture course was run in two Jesuit collegiums on the territory of former Grand Duchy of Lithuania: In Vilna and Polotsk [11]. Jesuits tended to use the service of architects and stucco-artificers, artists and sculptors belonging to a conferee.

IV. CONCLUSION

Using chronological order of items construction as leverage, altar transformation on the territory of Belarus is traced and artistic architectural characteristics of different time lines are figured out. In the 1st part of the 17th century altars made of wood were used and only sporadic ones were made of marble. In the 2nd half of the 17th century altars were made of wood, in general, but stucco altars also got widespread use. During the 17th century linear-planar way of composition was predominant. From the 2nd decade of the 18th century and till the 1740s subbottom-space compositions were introduced to altars principal's production. From the end of the 1730s to the 1770s of the 18th century "Vilna Baroque" dominated in dynamic shapes of stone altars. But traces of this style direction can be noted in the samples made of timber. In the 18th century catholic churches belonging to monasteries got richer and more professional interior decoration in comparison with parochial ones. From the last third of the 18th century till the middle of the 19th century there was a tendency of shape simplification, application of compositional techniques and decoration typical of Classicism. By the end of the 18th century common tendency of gradual altar architecture development demise was shown. Distinguishing feature of items made by local artificers in the 18th century became large-scale production of altars made of planks, which were emblazoned in the technique of illusionistic pictorial art. This approach enabled reach necessary visual effect at minimal expenses and short period time consumption.

The altar architecture during the 17th century ~the first half of the 19th century was affected by, first of all, European tractates and sample-prints; secondly, artificers and European architects that came from abroad, introduced their regions' traditions to local architecture. Totality of these factors explains significant similarity between compositional and decorative-plastic composition of altar retabes on the analyzed territory with North German architecture in the 17th century and with South German in the 18th century. But, in spite of Western European influence there was absolute copying of either graphic, or natural samples in altar design on the territory of Belarus. Sacred Baroque architecture on the territory of Grand Duchy of Lithuania forming in the general tendency of European region nevertheless was under the influence of local conditions. Despite of such close links with Europe, Grand Duchy of Lithuania altar architecture has its own recognizable shape and distinguishing features

typical of Belarusian lands. Its specific characteristics need further deep study.

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