

Interview with the local historian

What's your name?

Václav Procházka.

What are the most important monuments in our town and why are they so important?

One of the oldest Olomouc stone buildings are remnants of the so called Bishop's Palace, which is also considered to be one of the most important Romanesque buildings north of the Alps. Gothic is best represented by the St. Moritz Church. As for Baroque, there are plenty of important buildings built in this style, so I will pick up at least two. The Holy Trinity Column on the Upper Square (*Horní náměstí*) is absolutely the most important monument in Olomouc, whose significance is also underlined by the fact that it is the only historical sight in our region which was put on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites List. Another one is the Church of the Visitation of Virgin Mary on the east edge of the city on a hill called *Svatý Kopeček* (which can be translated into English as the Holy Hill). The church was promoted the so called Basilica Minor, mainly because of its rich history and its significance as a pilgrimage destination.



Church of the Visitation of Virgin Mary



Holy Trinity Column

When were the important monuments built and what can you tell us about that historical period?

The oldest of the mentioned monuments is the Bishop's Palace built in the Romanesque style by the Olomouc bishop Zdik in the first half of the 12th century. In that time Olomouc was the seat of one of the appanage princes of the Přemyslid dynasty and at the same time the most important city in Moravia. These appanage princes were relatives of the Bohemian rulers to whom they were subjected. Olomouc was also the seat of the Bishop of Olomouc, one of only two bishops in our country in that time, which was another fact that made the city so important, and this palace was supposed to represent it.



Bishop's Palace

Building of the St. Moritz Church started in about 1412, but it was not finished until 1540. One of the reasons of the delay were cruel Hussite Wars which broke out in Bohemia and Moravia in 1419, several years after the Bohemian church reformer Jan Hus was burned at the stake in Constance (in Switzerland), and finished in 1434. All the lands of the Bohemian



Saint Moritz Church

Crown, including Moravia, were financially exhausted by the wars, and the length of building this church was one of the results.

Baroque is the style that really flourished in Olomouc and for this period I have to mention again The Church of the Visitation of Virgin Mary on the Holy Hill, and the Holy Trinity Column.

The Holy Hill was a popular pilgrimage destination and so a small local chapel was rebuilt into a much bigger church between 1669 and 1679. As a result the pilgrimages got even more massive, and the number of pilgrims on this little hill sometimes reached up to 130 thousand a year. The current look of the church comes from 1721 when the large wings of the church were finished.

The building of the Holy Trinity Column was a result of the same religious enthusiasm. It was erected shortly after a plague ended in the city. The city councilors first decided to build a so called plague column to thank God and Virgin Mary for ending the epidemy in the neighbouring Lower Square, but the city architect did not consider it splendid enough and decided to build another one, much more representative, dedicated to the Holy Trinity and to many saints whose statues were placed all around the column. Its building started in 1716 but was finished as late as 1754.

Who is the architect of the most important structure in your town?

Several architects participated in the final design of the Holy Trinity column. The first one and the most important one was the local stone mason and architect Václav Rener, who initiated building this structure and also devoted all his property to its finishing. Despite that he died before it was finished. He was followed by several others. Franz Thoneck, Johann Wenzel Rokický and Augustin Scholtz also died, one after another, before they finished their work and finally it was completed by Johann Ignaz Rokický.

What is your favourite site?

My favourite site is definitely the Holy Trinity Column, because its architecture is of world significance despite the fact that it was all made only by local architects and craftsmen. Nowadays there are much higher buildings in Olomouc, but I imagine that in the time of its completion it must have been a really splendid look at Olomouc from the distance with the column erecting above all its houses and palaces and with its gold-plated group of statues on the top, reflecting the sun rays far into the surroundings.



Top of the Holy Trinity Column

What is the most common architectural style?

Speaking about architecturally significant buildings, it is definitely Baroque. The reason is that the city was almost razed to the ground during the Thirty Years's War (1618–1648), and so it had to be built completely anew just in the time when Baroque was the prevailing European style. The 17th and 18th century were also times of big religious zealotry and so it is no wonder that many religious monuments originated then,



Baroque Caesar's Fountain

including the Basilica of the Visitation of Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity Column.

What was the purpose of the buildings? What were they built for? Do they still have this function?

Most of the mentioned buildings still have its original function, with the exception of the Bishop's Palace. As I have said before, this palace was built as a representative building of the Olomouc bishop Jindřich Zdík, but current archbishop resides in a different building not far from there and the palace is a part of the Archiepiscopal Museum.

As for the mentioned churches, they still keep their function of places of prayer, although nowadays they became also popular important touristic destinations.

The main reason of erecting the Holy Trinity Column was celebrating the Catholic Church but very soon it also became a source of big pride of Olomouc citizens who understood it as an important symbol of their town. The original reason still applies, although it is not as strong as it used to be, as religiosity of modern Olomouc citizens is much weaker nowadays. However, it has definitely kept its purpose of a valued city symbol.

Are they well preserved? Have any monuments been rebuilt? Why?

The Bishop's Palace suffered most of the mentioned monuments and nothing of its original equipment was preserved there, only the structure. Originally several other adjacent Romanesque buildings belonged to it too, but they were pulled down after several fires and a Gothic cloister was built in their place.

The St. Moritz church was heavily damaged by fire in 1709 and had to be partly renovated, and so this Gothic building also has some Baroque touch. Some more renovation took place in the 19th century too, leaving there elements of neo-Gothic architecture, including for example the altars.

The Baroque Church of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary suffered most during the World War II, when it was several times hit by the Russian artillery and for example the top of one of its towers was destroyed. However, it was soon repaired and nowadays it is in good condition.

The Holy Trinity Column survived all the historical events which have passed through Olomouc well and so its main enemy is the time itself along with all the natural elements like rain or frost. The largest renovation was done between 1999 and 2001, after it was found out that some of its sculptural decoration may collapse. Since that time it has been under detailed observation and its condition is stabilized.



Church of the Visitation of Virgin Mary after Russian bombardment in 1945

Are there any legends or anecdotes of the buildings?

Yes, there are. For example there is a legend based on historical facts connected with foundation of the Church of the Visitation of Virgin Mary. In February 1629 a rich Olomouc merchant Andryšek (who is a real historical personality) went horseriding into the woods near the city when suddenly a strong wind arose and he appeared in the middle of a snow storm,

which stopped after he got on a hill. He realized that he was standing on a sunlit place resembling the place on which he often saw Virgin Mary in his dreams. So he decided to build there a chapel dedicated to the Visitation of Virgin Mary, which preceded the today's basilique, and this legend was one of the reasons why the hill became such a popular pilgrimage destination.

I also like a legend connected with the Holy Trinity Column. In 1758, shortly after the column was finished, Olomouc was besieged by the Prussian Army and the enemy artillery was heavily bombarding the city by cannon shots. The legend says that Olomouc citizens were much more afraid of damaging the column than of damages on their property and so they made a procession out of the city walls, and risking their lives they went to beg the Prussian general not to shoot at the column. Surprisingly, the general not only spared their lives, but also let them return back into the city and allegedly ordered the artillery not to aim at the sacred monument. The event is reminded by a gilded replica of a cannon ball set into the shaft below the top of the column.



Replica of a stone shot in the shaft of the Holy Trinity Column

However, not only famous architectural monuments have their legends, there are many connected also with some minor sights, such as the one of the so called Palace at the Black Horse. In the past the houses did not have their street numbers, they had house signs instead, and the sign of this palace, standing in the Lower Square (*Dolní náměstí*) inspired the following humourous folk legend: A rich family used to live in the palace and one of their female servants fell in love with the son of the lord. She visited a herbalist who gave her a recipe for a love potion that the young man was supposed to drink. So she cooked it, but after she put it out to let it cool, another servant turned it over by accident and the potion was spilled into a bucket of water, which was given to a horse. As a result, the horse fell into so strong love with the girl that it pursued her everywhere, even into the upper rooms of the palace. The desperate maid finally jumped out of the window and killed herself. The horse tried to jump after her, but got stuck in the window and has stayed there, turned into stone, until nowadays.



House sign of the Palace at the Black Horse