

Symbolism and utilitarian significance of Cistercian fountains

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Abstract: *Symbolism and utilitarian significance of Cistercian fountains.* Water was an inseparable attribute of Cistercian monasteries because of their characteristic location in valleys. It was used for everyday activities and strong symbolic significance was attached to water as well. Cistercian monks were mystics and they consider water to be more than an ordinary liquid and their monastery gardens to be the glimpse of paradise. Fountains were important objects in Cistercian cloisters. They carried symbolic, ritual and practical significance, their ornamentation was rather in the background. Austere Cistercian aesthetics demand that all what might distract friars from their spiritual aim has to be rejected as trifling or evil. From broader research of Cistercian foundations emerges a characteristic group of fountains unknown in Poland, established by their formal similarity. These objects are made up as ritual wash basins (lavatory) and occupy part of the cloister garth area. Few Cistercian abbeys of Western Europe were lucky enough throughout the ages and today are able to present the original fountains. These small architectural forms join the tradition of cloister life and symbolism of “the fountain of life”.

Key words: fountain, Cistercian abbey, monastery, cloister, symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

Gardens in nearly each of the Polish Cistercian monasteries – still inhabited or not – are preserved in better or worse condition. Very few of them still have clear composition, plants or garden equipment, but seen as the integrity the

foundation gave credit to Cistercian art level, its diversity and richness. In Poland, these foundations evolved into such unusual forms that they deny severe Cistercian aesthetics with that richness. Modern gardens with numerous style accumulations are found in the abbeys situated in contemporary Poland. Such changes derive from gradual departure from principles of humility and poverty, what consequently made cloister and palace gardens nearly alike. How did the first Cistercian gardens look like we can only presume on the basis of archeological and archeobotanical research, what is the result of lack of even a single foundation that kept its original, medieval form until now.

According to the original Cistercian Rule, cloister architecture was described with qualifications: functionality, simplicity, logic of construction solutions and applying of the most recent technological achievements. Every part of Cistercian constructions expressed certain needs that followed religious duties as well as economic requirements. In almost every case, river valley constituted the axis of abbey’s spatial development and most part of the foundation was occupied by geometrical and consequently designed gardens, often stock up on water by an

efficiently working hydraulic system (situated underground and on surface). That system was the basis for fountains spurting out in different parts of the foundation. These water sources had important religious and functional significance in the abbey.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to identify the equipment of original Cistercian with emphasis on fountains. Research hypothesis assumes that fountains in Polish Cistercian foundations were situated in so called 'lavabo' (washrooms) in cloister garths and that these fountains fulfill complex function. The further purpose of the research is to present significance of fountains in abbeys, their localization, forms and functions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to describe Cistercian and their legacy referred to garden resources field research were carried out in Poland, France and Germany. This research included 24 abbeys, 40 aerial photographs and 30 archival maps were analyzed in Poland. Mother abbeys i.e. Cîteaux, Morimond, Clairvaux, Pontigny, La Ferté and Fontenay (as the most completely preserved Cistercian abbey, listed on UNESCO World Heritage List) were researched in France. In Germany the research included Maulbronn, considered to be the most completely preserved Cistercian abbey north of the Alps (also present on UNESCO World Heritage List). For many other European Cistercian abbeys (apart from mentioned above) numerous analysis of contemporary maps and photo-

graphs from the catalogue (Roux, 2005; Leroux-Dhuys, 1998) were carried out.

Historical analysis method was applied in this research in order to characterize fountains, their architectural detail and technology. Moreover, considering whole foundation preservation level in its original boundaries and establishing its current real function as well as for composition-spatial research, reconstructing of interior, legibility of composition and mutual spatial connections formal analysis method was used. Researched foundations were photographically documented in detail, along with local museums and archives collective.

The following research and analysis were applied in pragmatism of actions:

- Cistercian historical garden resources in Poland were catalogued – general cataloguing of the gardens due to describing the level of composition (arrangement) preservation,
- aerial photographs (1:5000) analysis in accordance with photo interpretation rules in order to characterize composition legibility and existing spatial connections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Position and significance of fountains

Considering spatial arrangement it is clear that Polish Cistercian monasteries referred to Cîteaux – French mother abbey – in this respect. That abbey was located in vast and flat river valley, sheltered by hills in the north, east and south and opened to the west. Beside the solid quadrilateral that included oriented church and actual cloister buildings new ones were established according to the needs and terrain conditions. Analysis

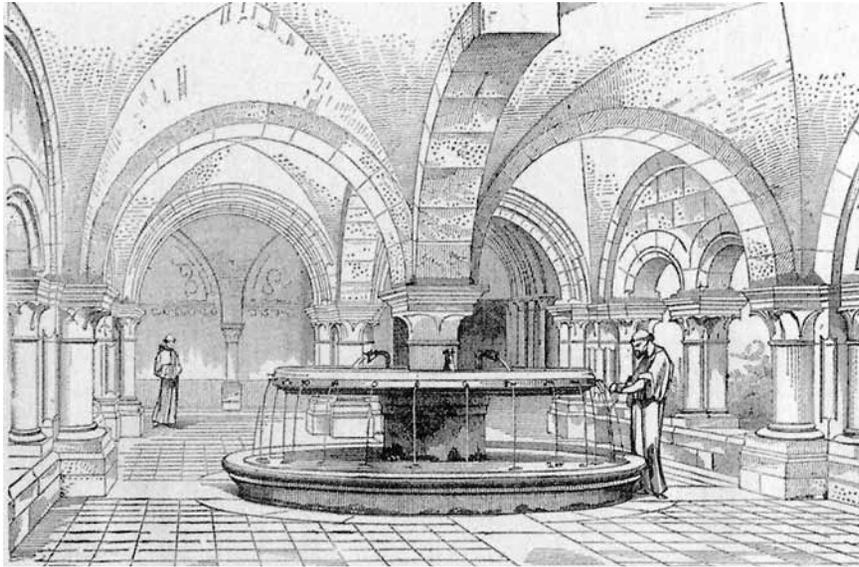


FIGURE 1. Restoration of the washroom by Viollet-le-Duc (Phot. Gaud, source: Deremble C., Plagnieux P., 2006, Fontenay abbey, France)

of XVII¹ and XVIII² plans allows the statement that fountains of varied spatial forms were very important equipment in many garden interiors. Such fountains were sometimes open and fully exposed on representative yards as well as build up, close to the cloister gallery wall in cloister garth.

It is certain that water was Cistercian element and they were able to make use of it (in unbelievable ways, considered available technology) and worship its sacredness too. They were mystics, thus significance of water that deserved to be Christ's sacrament – “water that rinses

anything, being not rinsed itself” – had eschatological importance. Cloister garth being a square with a fountain suggested kind of eternal (cosmic) prototype and was read as a diagram of Paradise that monks could experience through contemplation (Delumeau, 1996).

That central yard had a mystical function – according to monastery tradition – of depicting the Garden of Eden. There were washbasins, placed in the wall of the cloister gallery right in front of the refectory entrance used by monks serve eminently practical purposes and also for ritual activities. Pure water – when the location allows – was supplied from the spring, free from any impurities, rather than from the nearby river or canals. Water was taken from the uphill spring situated above the monastery level then transported by the system of pipes to the cloister fountain in front of the refectory (Fig. 1). Difficulties with getting drinking

¹ Own analysis on the basis of: *Vue cavaliere de la maison-mere. Gravure de p. Brissart sur un dessin d'Etienne Prinstet, 1674. Armoires de l'abbe Jean Petit (1670–1692), in: Pour une histoire..., p. 124.*

² Own analysis on the basis of: *Plan geometral et vue cavaliere de l'abbaye de Citeaux avec des projets de construction, jamais realises. Dessins d'Etienne Prinstet vers 1718, in: Pour une histoire monumentale de L'abbaye de Citeaux 1098–1998, Dijon 1998, p. 176.*

water, its symbolism of purity, so highly valued by Cistercians justify the luxury of fountain – considered not only as an ordinary cistern – protected by a polygonal pavilion. Water delivered to the fountain by the central column, supplies the upper basin, cascades to the lower – large – basin through the spigots. Water from the lower basin is transported to the monastery sewer system. The pavilion and the fountain was the only opportunity for the monastery architects to express a dose of imagination, because that objects were allowed to be in some way decorative (Leroux-Dhuys, 1998).

Fountains in Polish foundings

During the Middle Ages 26 monasteries³ were established on Polish grounds (present borders), situated in every historical district, i.e.: Wielkopolska, Małopolska, Śląsk and Pomorze. These monasteries derive from two filiations: Citeaux and Marimond. Only Kołbacz, Mironice, Bierzwnik and Oliwa represent Clairvaux line and the rest descend from Marimond line (Wyrwa, 1999). Architectural forms of fountains present in Polish monasteries are diverse and reveal rather low formal similarity. If some common features should be discussed then baroque, the most decorative fountains of Silesia origin could be taken into account. Their poor preservation state (Krzeszów) and stronger connections of their localization with representational yards and abbot's decorative gardens (Henryków) rather than with contemplative gardens makes it difficult to understand the complexity of their part and symbolism. In several cases fountains were situated within cloister

garths (Łąd, Obra, Pelplin), in abbot's gardens (Henryków), in entrance yards (Henryków, Obra) or within decorative gardens (Krzeszów).

Considered forms, the objects are quite varied – from baroque fountains (Henryków, Krzeszów) up to contemporary (Łąd, Obra), every one rather distant from the Cistercian style. Lavabo was not found although analysis of plans made by Cistercian abbey researchers (mainly archeologists) reveals that majority of cloister garths had lavabo. Unfortunately, none of that objects survived. Yet after the research of cloister garth in Lubiąż it is possible to state that type of fountain mentioned above could be present in the rebuilt central pavilion. Remains of earlier building with water device within the new pavilion could serve perfectly as an indicator.

Complex analysis of Polish abbey monastery plans (Wyrwa et al., 1999) allowed to state that there are the outlines present, characteristic for the pavilions with “lavabo” (similarly to Citeaux) and confirmed existence of well in the central part creates basis for a hypothesis about a complex water system, supplying water to fountains. Existence of such objects was stated by archeologists in Sulejów, Kamieniec Żąbkowicki, Kołbacz and Oliwa and described in archeological research reports (Augustyniak, Łużyńska).

In order to get full recognition of the resources information regarding the fountains, which were not preserved, has also been found.

According to Ciołek in the Oliwa Abby garden there was an admirable fountain shaped as an olive tree with silver leaves and fruit from which water was gushing into a marble cistern. A rustic fountain

³ Later also Cistercian convents were founded in Poland but the author did not research them.

also appeared and it was framed with natural rocks while the water gush was hidden on an islet made of rocks topped with a sculpture inspired by mythology. These non-extant fountains as well as traces of old splendour of the Abby garden in Henryków, where three of four fountains with personification of four elements have been preserved, are testifying that the original severe rules of the Cistercian aesthetics were slowly getting weaker and adopting more universal fashion (Ciołek, 1965).

Fountains of Western Europe

Two types of fountains are normally found in Cistercian monasteries, the „centralized” type and the „through” type. The centralized variety, a free-standing fountain – frequently with water cascading from higher basin to a lower one – is usually sheltered by a special fountain house – pavilion, that projected into the cloister garth. There are known examples of that type in France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany and Austria (Leroux-Dhuys, 1998). Single examples of the centralized type of fountains, being the equipment of lavabo and characterized by high formal similarity could be found in Western Europe abbeys (La Thoronet, Maulbronn, Poblet, Pontigny, Santes Creus, Valmagne). The nearest and the best preserved fountain of that type is located in German abbey Maulbronn (Fig. 2). Situated in a decorative pavilion on cloister garth area became the unquestioned main feature of the historic abbey. Fountain’s erection history is connected with the place’s name „Mule’s Well”. Every mentioned fountain is linked with others by round or polygonal forms of water basins from which water cascades.



FIGURE 2. Cistercian fountain in Maulbronn (photo: Milecka 2007)

Supplied by the system of pipes to more or less ornamented peak element to flow in numerous cascades down to lower, stone water basin. Saved plans depict⁴ that similar *lavatorium* was built in Cistercian mother abbey in Cîteaux and also in the second – probably even with greater influence on architectural matters – protoabbey Clairvaux⁵.

The second type – in the form of a long basin or trough – is usually situated against a wall in the cloister gallery, sometimes under a series of arches. This form is

⁴ Available at Cîteaux and Clairvaux museums.

⁵ Existence of the objects in Cîteaux confirmed by abbey’s plans published in: *Pour une histoire...*, documents exhibited in Clairvaux Museum, moreover author – during her field research in 2007 – affirmed fountain remains existence in former monastery gardens in protoabbey Pontigny.

most common in England, consisted of a long, shallow, rectangular trough or laver, sometimes divided into series of basins. It was built into the cloister gallery, usually against the refectory wall, under the cloister vault. In a large monastery such as Rievaulx in Yorkshire, there were two troughs flanking the refectory wall and they were lined with pewter (Leroux-Dhuys, 1998).

It would be extremely unfair to limit the presentation of the Cistercian fountains to objects situated only in the inner pleasure garden. To convince oneself of technical skills and wealth of Cistercian garden art in this respect it is worth seeing the fountains which are in Fontenay – the Abby established by St. Bernard just after establishing Clairvaux. The fountains which are on the area of the old cloister partly original, partly reconstructed are supplied with water from an efficient underground hydraulic system based on water of a small river – tributary Serein. On the Abby area there are two big pools with cascades, a round fountain on the main yard and a tiny watering trough. All the fountains are built with stone, without sculpture decorations, with one exception – a column with an angel situated on the main axis of the “big garden”. Unfortunately, in case of this Abby the lavabo was not kept but its existence in the past is testified by some historical plans which were confirmed by archeological excavations and the reconstruction presented by Violet-le-Duc. The idea of water as a source of life is firmly emphasized in another Abby at Les Vaux de Cernay. There is St. Thibault’s fountain covering a miraculous fertility spring, and its spatial form clearly refers to the form of a life fountain which is seen in a figure

„Evangeliaire de Charlemagne dit aussi de Godescalc: La Fontaine de vie”.

CONCLUSIONS

It is worth to emphasize that Cistercians building their first fountains spread early Christian traditions of fountains of life (*fons vitae*) (Fig. 3). The fountains were situated in various parts of monastery founding for symbolic, practical and everyday religious purposes. *Lavatorium* was usually localized in the central part of an abbey to fulfill an important role – the monks’ ritual ablutions were carried out there before entering the refectory or cloister garth⁶. Aside from mystic function lavabo served as a water tower for the monastery. Applying only gravity, water was supplied through terracotta pipes from the uphill spring and was further delivered to kitchen, refectory and finally to *lavatorium* tower. Used and excess water was piped away by sewage system to the outlet in the opposite, lowest part of the monastery.

Analysis of central fountain function allows to grasp the similarity of fountains situated at the entrance yards (until now attributed with decorative and representative functions). Fountains in that area were erected for pilgrims, that needed to “wash away their sins, not only their faces” before they could enter the House of God⁷. Cistercian pragmatism is clearly visible in that case.

⁶ “Truly – wrote St. Bernard – cloister garth is Paradise, the place protected by the wall of discipline, with many of precious treasures” – J. Delumeau, op.cit., p. 116.

⁷ Citation from sentence engraved in Greek on the stoup of Saint-Mesmin abbey near Orleans: “Wash away your sins, not only face” – M. Krenz, p. 72.



FIGURE 3. Model fountain of youth (source: Chastel A., 1993, *L'art français. Pre-moyen Age. Moyen Age.* Flammarion, Paris)



FIGURE 4. Cistercian fountain in Pontigny (photo: Milecka 2007)

Unfortunately, there are not many well preserved Cistercian historic fountains, lack of preserved lavabos and temporarily built fountains sparsely draw from Cistercian tradition. In Western Europe lavabos and other forms of fountains are present and found in different parts of monastery gardens. The best example is Fontenay with four simultaneously working fountains, however the objects are not original but reconstructed. Original lavabo is unique among garden equipment and – what shall be regretfully emphasized – is not always on prominent display. Pontigny (one of the mother abbeys in France) is a shameful example of such a state, where lavabo is split into two basins, situated in separate parts of the gardens, remote from the cloister garth. That prevent from identifying true function and place of that important and complete object in the space of former cloister garth (Fig. 4). Complex knowledge about architectural forms and functions of Cistercian fountains-lavatories is therefore essential. Such knowledge could lead to restoring to some monasteries the treasure of the central fountain, properly situated on its original place, serving not as an insignificant garden detail. That action would be crucial not only to preserve the original object and *genius locci* but also for the tourists sightseeing the monastery and exploring the mysteries and lifestyle of the Cistercians.

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Streszczenie *Symbolika i znaczenie użytkowe cysterskich fontann*. Cystersi, lokując swe klasztory w dolinach, uczynili wodę nieodłącznym atrybutem swych założeń. Służyła ona do celów partykularnych, ale miała także ważne znaczenie symboliczne. Dla mistyków, jakimi byli cystersi, znaczenie wody było olbrzymie, a ogrody były miejscami czynienia klasztoru na podobieństwo raju. Ważnymi obiektami w ogrodach cysterskich były fontanny, które przede wszystkim miały ważne przesłanie symboliczne i rytualne, także znaczenie praktyczne, zaś rola dekoracyjna miała tu znaczenie drugorzędne. W surowej cysterskiej estetyce wszystko co rozpraszało mnichów od spraw duchowych, było odrzucane jako błahe, wręcz złe. Celem pracy jest rozpoznanie wyposażenia dawnych ogrodów cystersów w zakresie fontann oraz przedstawienie znaczenia fontann w opactwach, ich lokalizacji, formy i funkcji, na podstawie badań przeprowadzonych na terenie wybranych opactw Polski, Francji oraz Niemiec. Szersze badania założeń cysterskich pozwalają na wyłonienie bardzo charakterystycznej grupy fontann, nieznannej na terenie Polski, którą łączy podobieństwo formalne. Stanowią one wyposażenie rytualnych umywalni (lavatorium), wnikających w przestrzeń wirydarza. W nielicznych opactwach cysterskich Europy Zachodniej zachowały się do

naszych czasów opisywane fontanny. Te niewielkie formy architektoniczne wiążą w sobie tradycję życia klasztorowego i symbolikę „fontanny życia”. Analizy planów sporządzonych przez badaczy opactw położonych we współczesnych granicach Polski dowodzą, że tego typu fontanny istniały kiedyś i na tych terenach. W pracy wykorzystano metodę analizy historycznej w odniesieniu do fontann dla określenia detalu architektonicznego i rodzaju stosowanych technologii. W odniesieniu zaś do całego obiektu – określenie stanu zachowania założenia w pierwotnych granicach oraz ustalenie rzeczywistej funkcji, jaką obecnie pełni dany obiekt. Do badań kompozycyjno-przestrzennych, odtwarzania wnętrza, czytelności kompozycji, wyposażenia, a także wzajemnych powiązań przestrzennych zastosowano metodę analizy formalnej. Przeprowadzone badania pozwoliły na stwierdzenie, że na terenie Polski mamy niewiele zachowanych historycznych fontann cysterskich, w tym brak przykładu lavabo, a współcześnie wybudowane fontanny dość „luźno” nawiązują do pierwotnej tradycji cysterskiej. Na terenie zachod-

niej Europy możemy odnaleźć zarówno lavabo, jak i inne formy fontann, które zlokalizowane są w różnych częściach ogrodów, przy czym w obrębie wirydarzy znajdują się dwa główne rodzaje fontann: „centralna” i „korytowa”. Najbardziej interesujące rozwiązania są opisane i przedstawione na włączonych do artykułu fotografiach.

MS. received March 2008

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