

THE RELICS OF THE SAINTS IN THE CATHEDRAL OF VILNIUS BETWEEN 1387-1655

The Cathedral of Vilnius housed a unique collection of relics unequalled by any other church in Lithuania. The fact that a greater part of the Cathedral Treasury consists of different types of reliquaries testifies to their importance and popularity of the cult of saints. Most of the relics appeared in the cathedral in late medieval and early modern period.

The only complete relics of a saint in medieval Lithuania were the relics of Prince Casimir Jagiellon, patron saint of Lithuania. St Casimir was buried in Vilnius cathedral in 1484, however he had been venerated at his burial site already in the sixteenth century. The relics of Prince Casimir were placed in the Gasztold Chapel in 1604 and in 1636 they were transferred in a solemn procession to a chapel dedicated to the saint. In 1652 the Apostolic See instituted the Feast of the Transfer of the Relics of St Casimir in Poland Lithuania that fell on the Sunday following the octave of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, i.e. after 22 August.

The cult of the relics in Lithuania emerged at the time of the christianization of Lithuania in 1387. An important event in the history of the Cathedral Treasury was 1501 diplomatic mission of Bishop Erasmus Ciołek to Pope Alexander VI undertaken in the name Alexander Jagiellon, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Surviving inventories of papal gifts list the relic known as the *Titulus Crucis* (part of the Title of the Cross), the relics of Christ's manger, the relics of Ten Thousand Martyrs, other relics included the blade-bone of St Sebastian, the head of St Praxedes, the forearm of St Prudence and St Candida the Virgin, the relics of the earth collected by St Helen at the Holly Cross, the relics of St Jerome's stole and the relic of the bloodstained robe of St Thomas à Becket. The fate of most of these relics is unknown. Some of them were handed by King Alexander Jagiellon to the Cathedral of Vilnius.

The public exposure of the relics for the adoration of the faithful was to take place on the eve of the appropriate feast at Vespers, and on the feast day during the holy mass called *Matura* as well as Vespers. A separate article fixed the order in which the relics were to be shown to the faithful Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, Christmas as well as the Feast of Saints Stanislas, Cosmas and Damian, and at the Feast of the Holy Knights. The relics of the Table of the Last Supper were to be placed in the sacristy before the Maundy Thursday mass. From there they would be carried in a procession to the church in the presence of the bishop, canons and the lower clergy.

In 1539 Vilnius Voyvod Albert Gasztold donated to the Cathedral three silver reliquaries for the relics of the bones of saint John the Baptist and Saint Adalbert, the teeth of Saints Margaret, Dorothea and Apolonia as well as the relics of St Eustachius contained in a cross-shaped reliquary.

The inventory of the Cathedral Treasury from 1598 mentions many objects that do not belong to the so-called Ciołek Register of 1501. These are, for example, a reliquary with the coat of arms of the Gasztold family that contained relics of St Adalbert, a reliquary for the relics of the teeth of Saints Apolonia, Barbara and Dorothea, the head of St Dorothea, a reliquary cross with the relic of the teeth of St Stanislas.

The cult of the saints was an important element of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. In the first half of seventeenth century the cathedral relics included the relics of Saints Florian, Ursula and her Followers, Eustachius, Benno, Hermolaos, Vistricia the Virgin, Placidus the Martyr, Jozafat Kuncewicz and Petronella.

Counter reformation promoted the cult of the so-called Saints of the Catacombs whose relics were excavated from the newly-discovered Roman catacombs. Most probably, the relics that were received by Vilnius Cathedral between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries belonged to this category, except for the relics of st Saturnine and Callistratus. The former were brought in 1631 by

Vilnius Jesuits who carried the relics into the cathedral in a solemn procession and placed at the main altar. The latter were a gift of Pope Innocent X and were brought to Vilnius from Smolensk. The relics had a turbulent history. During Polish-Muscovite wars they were carried away to Moscow, however in 1672, once the truce had been signed, Alexander kotowicz, Bishop of Smolensk recovered the relics and placed in Vilnius Cathedral. 1743 cathedral visitation files note a small silver coffin with the relics of martyr and soldier Callistratus that came from the Cathedral of Smolensk. The relics were handed to Hilzen, Bishop of Smolensk in 1746 who intended to place them in the newly-build Chapel in Newel. Their later fate is unknown.

During the wars with Sweden Vilnius Cathedral lost among half of its relics, therefore the year 1655 is an important caesure in the history of the cathedral treasury. Some other relics were lost later in the course of historical catastrophies. The relics that survive until the present day is the relic of the arm of St Stanislas and a crystal cross-shaped reliquary containing the relics of St Eustachius.