

# The material culture of the Premonstratensian nunnery at Strzelno

Krystyna Sulkowska-Tuszynska

*Strzelno (Poland); 12th–19th century; architecture; monastery; altars; burial*

A small town in the central part of northern Poland (Kuiavia), Strzelno owes its complex history to Premonstratensian nuns. They initiated the construction of two churches: the Rotunda of St. Procopius and the basilica of the Holy Trinity.

Archaeological investigation of the convent hill at Strzelno was conducted by the Nicolas Copernicus University in Toruń in 1981–86, 2000 and 2001. The research project was directed by Prof. Jadwiga Chudziakowa, with Prof. Zygmunt Swiechowski acting as the academic consultant.

## The Romanesque period

The Romanesque Rotunda of St. Procopius features a round nave (8.1 m in diameter), square chancel (5.1 x 5.1 m) and a semicircular tower. To the north, the nave adjoins two apses, and the only church entrance is situated in the south. The focal point of the northern end of the nave is a stone tomb, built perhaps to hold the founder's remains. The chancel features a reconstructed stone altar and, on its northern wall, a cast of the foundation tympanum depicting the seated Christ with his right hand extended in the gesture of blessing. The original tower was very likely to have had a gallery. The rotunda is built of stone ashlars. One of them, to the right of the entrance, bears an incised monogram of the name PETRUS. The Rotunda is regarded as the masterpiece of Polish Romanesque architecture. The basilica of the Holy Trinity – the convent church – is eight times the size of the Rotunda. It features a transept and a remarkably complex east end: the elongated chancel is flanked

by two annexes to the north and south, the eastern walls of the transept have apsidioles, while two round towers rise between the annexes and the transept. At the west end, the church is flanked by two rectangular towers (4 x 4 m). The Romanesque church had a gallery resting on a continuous foundation built in the *opus emplectum* technique (1.25 m wide). The gallery topped a room with two doors which lead to the northern and southern towers. The most beautiful elements of the basilica interior are Romanesque columns separating the nave from the aisles, decorated in bas-relief. The two eastern columns are divided into three horizontal bands, each containing seven arcaded niches with human figures inside. The figures' gestures and attributes indicate that the northern column depicts the Vices, and the southern one the Virtues. Of the western columns, one is covered with spiral carvings, while the other one is smooth. Each of the four columns has differently ornamented capitals and different bases.

As demonstrated by archaeological investigation, the internal partitions of the Romanesque and Gothic church were unlike those employed in the Baroque and present church.

The chancel of the Romanesque church was connected to the annexes by two pairs of column-supported arches. Passages leading from the round towers to the annexes and further on to the chancel were situated near the western arches. The round towers, which are homogenous with the church itself, were joined to the annexes by sandstone steps. The focal point of the chancel, the apse, was occupied by a stone altar, whose possibly semicircular mensa was made of cream-yellow sandstone. The entire chancel area was separated from



the aisles with a rood screen, rebuilt in brick and set on a stone underpinning. The screen was fitted with at least two sandstone slabs with semicircular terminations (only two of them have been preserved). The transept featured two galleries situated opposite each other in its northern and southern ends. Their lower parts could have been decorated with small wall-columns with round or octagonal crocket-decorated bases. It is very likely that stone altars were originally located in the small apsidioles. They were eventually replaced with two other altars, situated much nearer to the chancel and featuring straight mensas (1.6 x 1.9 m) built of narrow 'finger' bricks, and massive stone ashlar at the sides (44 x 44 x 67 cm). They could have been decorated with small columns (shafts 30 cm in diameter) bearing floral and geometric designs, which were found during archaeological excavations.

The church had three entrances: one in the north and two in the south. The portals were topped with semicircular tympana depicting figural scenes in bas-relief. Today only one tympanum remains in its original location, in the northern wall. The sandstone jamb of the northern portal (3.13 x 1.75 m) supports a massive trefoil-shaped panel. Its central part depicts Christ sitting on the throne, flanked by apostles, with a dove above his head and a dragon and a lion at his feet. The portal frame featured columns with bas-relief decoration. Another stone slab, the foundation tympanum, was placed in the southern wall of the church, in its western bay. It represents St Anna holding the infant Mary; to her right kneels the founder with a model of a church in his hands, and to her left a woman holding a book, possibly the first prioress of the convent. The scene is framed by the inscription. The third tympanum, which was found in the mensa of a Baroque altar, represents the Annunciation and depicts the torsos of the Virgin Mary and Archangel Gabriel, and the Tree of Life. This tympanum could have been originally placed above the southern side entrance, which was eventually made into the entryway to the wooden early medieval cloister. It is very possible that the framed portal crowned with this tympanum featured two small columns with the Tree of Life ornament. A capital of such a column, recycled and used as an ashlar, was found during the research of 2001.

Archaeological examination failed to locate the Romanesque flooring *in situ*, but several small fragments indicate that the chancel area was originally paved with ceramic tiles stamped with bird, deer and plaitwork motifs. They were covered with rust-green or dark-grey lead glazing. Although only the thickness of the tiles is known (2–3 cm), it can be assumed that they were the same size as the unornamented, unglazed or green-glazed tiles paving the aisles (13 x 13 x 3 cm). The collection of miscellaneous ceramic building materials which were formed and fired on the convent hill at Strzelno also includes large slabs of arched moulding (c. 24 x 48 cm). When placed next to one another, they formed a frieze decorating the upper storeys of the church. Half- or fully-covered with green glazing, they must have lent the church a particular glamour. It is very likely that after a fire at the beginning of the 14th century the windows were filled with stained glass. This Romanesque church featured a flat beam ceiling, and its roofs were covered with flat tegulae with raised edges and with semicircular imbrices.

From the end of the 12th century to around the 14th century, the area around the rotunda and between the two churches was occupied by a cemetery. All burials were always east-facing inhumations. A majority of lay female burials dating from the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century contained bronze or silver temple rings.

No traces of the oldest, wooden convent buildings have been discovered. They are likely to have been destroyed by a post-medieval cemetery, and by the construction of three chapels.

Everyday material culture, not connected with the sphere of the religious life, is represented by large amounts of pottery, comprising mostly brittle, thick-walled vessels fired dark brown or beige, mainly kitchen pots and large storage jars. More delicate conical cups are rare and special; possibly used in liturgical contexts.

## The Gothic period

The Gothic period at Strzelno saw the construction of a masonry monastery and the reconstruction of the basilica, and ended in a great fire in 1534. It coincided with the reign



of the Jagiellonian dynasty, whose members bestowed a number of privileges on the convent. The tower of the Rotunda of St Procopius acquired a brick buttress; the cemetery around it was no longer in use.

The basilica underwent major alterations. In c. 1459 the chapel of St Barbara was created by expanding the southern annexe, to which another annexe of identical size was added. The chapel vault was supported by a central Romanesque column. In the middle of the eastern wall there stood a brick altar (2.2 x 2.2 m), crowned with a canopy whose corners were mounted on small wooden columns from the west. The high altar looked similar. The walls of the entire chancel, up to a height of 1.4 m, were covered with polychromy depicting religious scenes. Above the Chapel of St Barbara, a treasury was built.

The northern annexe acquired an additional entrance, which led to the southern wing of the convent buildings. A chapel devoted to St Norbert was appended to the southern aisle. Two new, small altars (1 x 1.50 m) were placed between the aisles. The entire basilica acquired new flooring, which was laid several centimetres above the Romanesque floor level; it consisted of unornamented square ceramic tiles (21 x 21 x 3 cm). Finally, the flat ceiling was replaced by cross-rib vaulting.

A particularly large-scale undertaking was the construction of the convent buildings. Although they have begun to be investigated only recently, one can already argue that the southern wing housed the chapterhouse and the refectory, and that a warming house was situated at the junction of the southern and eastern wings. Cellars in this part of the convent yielded a fifteenth-century hypocaust-type furnace with a rectangular chamber (1.45 x 1.90 m) containing five brick grate ribs. The portals of the convent were built of shaped bricks, the flooring of narrow 'finger' bricks, and the windows were glazed with round bull's-eyes. Because of the successive additions made to the claustral buildings, this section of the former cemetery gradually ceased to be used for burial.

At that time, in addition to common kitchen and household vessels, refined dining sets began to be used. The refectory table would have been set with steel-grey polished jugs, cups and drinking bowls, and with various dishes, bowls and plates which appeared in

the first half of the 16th century as well. Moreover, beautiful Jacobakannen jugs of the Rhineland origin and small drinking bowls. It is also known that sick nuns used chamber-pots.

## The Renaissance and early Baroque period

The next period, which lasted from the mid-16th to the beginning of the 18th century, was marked by the Reformation and Counter-reformation. It was a difficult time for the Strzelno convent.

The Renaissance did not bring major architectural changes. Inside the basilica, the high altar was replaced by a larger and taller one, with brick steps in front of the mensa. The upper part of the mensa was covered with a sandstone slab and decorated at the front with a wide band of polychromy with the motifs of bands and triangles in smalt, ochre, red lead, ferric oxide red and organic black. The Renaissance floor-tiles were slightly larger than Gothic (23 x 23 x 5 cm) and decorated with concentric circles and squares. The windows were filled with diamond-shaped quarries or with the first glass panes. The rood screen was dismantled.

The southern wing of the convent was expanded. The convent buildings featured two kinds of heating systems: hypocausts, located in cellars, and tile stoves, built of glazed or unglazed tiles.

Increasingly, glazed vessels were used for dining, while ceramic slip-decorated and metal vessels began to be used for cooking. Moreover, glass vessels were becoming more and more popular, although at first their use was restricted to liturgical and pharmaceutical purposes.

In 1624 and 1630, fifteen nuns died of the plague. They were buried in the Church of the Holy Trinity in wooden coffins, with their bodies covered with a thick layer of lime and the coffins smeared with birch tar on the inside and outside. The bodies had holy medals of St Benedict placed by their sides, crosses and coins on the lips and woollen or silk scapulars on the chests. It is noteworthy that glass rosaries of the early 17th century consisted of 150 beads (!). In the graves, the rosaries were often accompanied by holy medals of the Virgin Mary of Częstochowa. The coffins, set with



ornamental studs, had their ends inscribed with the IHS monogram or with plague-related Latin mottoes, such as 'We shall escape pestilence, but not death'.

The convent's standing continued to deteriorate until the beginning of the 18th century, which hindered its cultural development.

## The Baroque period and the dissolution of the convent

During the Baroque, the most crucial alterations affected the façade and interior of the basilica. The Renaissance high altar was replaced by a new one which featured six large columns supporting a gilded crown. The mensa was raised, and a parchment consecration act of the altar, issued in 1748, was placed in the reliquary together with St Amatus's relics which had been brought from Rome. A silver-plated antependium adorned the front of the altar. Chancel arcades were walled up, and the chancel acquired inlay-decorated stalls.

Renovation work was done on the celebrated massive altar of the Holy Cross (14 m high) that occupied almost the entire northern wall of the northern transept. The new altar, created in 1743, was made of wood and embellished with nineteen saints' effigies and three case reliquaries containing 658 relics.

The northern portal was walled up and the new plaster covered with Polish inscriptions. Three linked confessionals were placed by the northern wall, occupying its entire length. The Baroque reconstruction of the basilica interior ended in the lining of the four Romanesque columns with bricks and transforming them into pillars, and in laying a new marble floor (tile sizes 44 x 44 x 5–8 cm and 30 x 30 x 5–8 cm). Under the floor, as many as nine burial crypts were built.

The altar standing in the Chapel of St Barbara was removed and the chapel was enlarged by a vestry with a burial crypt underneath. The vestry interior was equipped with new chests of drawers, and its walls were covered in polychromic depictions. By the south-western corner of the basilica a new chapel was erected and dedicated to St Restitut. Ellipsoid in plan, it housed an unusual coffin reliquary. The basilica interior was altered further by the removal or extension of some altars and the creation of new entrances leading from the transept to

the annexes. The church façade was also modified: the towers were topped with helm roofs, and a porch was added to the main, western entrance to the church.

As regards the convent buildings, a new timber-cased well was dug in the northern part of the cloister and the northern convent wing was completed. Between 1717 and 1728, Provost Jakub Wolski undertook the construction of a provosts' hall to the south-west of the basilica, on the site of older buildings. The focal points of its interior were two unique stoves, whose white tiles were hand-painted in blue with scenes of everyday life. Manufactured in northern Europe, the stoves reflect north-western European influences.

Among the common movable goods used in the convent were glass vessels, so-called bell beakers, which are found mainly in the chancel area and which could have been used in liturgy and as lamps. Household vessels included large glass demijohns and large bottles, and an increasing number of wine and beer bottles. Slip-decorated and glazed ceramic vessels also gained popularity. In pantries, glass bottles were used alongside stoneware ones. Dining tables were set with faience, and sometimes also with china.

Objects used for liturgical purposes included precious cloth-of-gold chasubles ornamented with silver, gold and multicoloured embroidery, dalmatics, and enormous leather-bound missals. The dead were still being buried in wooden coffins which sometimes bore painted images of crosses, the Virgin Mary's cryptograms, and the skulls-and-cross-bones. Bodies rested on layers of sawdust or grass. Some coffins contained unique imitation eggs made of china, and rosaries with wooden skulls and white and red coral beads.

Initiated by the First Partition of Poland (1772), the decline of Strzelno Abbey concluded in the decision of Prussian authorities to dissolve the convent in 1837. As a result, the convent buildings went to ruin. At the end of the 19th century, three wings of the claustral part of the convent were dismantled.

So ended the history of the Premonstratensian nuns at Strzelno. Much effort is invested in revealing the provincial culture of the convent, which combines the sacred with the profane in such an harmonious way, and which contains elements testifying to its links with western Europe.



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### Address

Krystyna Sulkowska-Tuszynska  
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun  
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology  
Podmurna 9/11, PL-87100 Torun