

Death and Bernard of Clairvaux in Selmečbánya (Banská Štiavnica, Slovakia) at the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*

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“as one dead in the bottom of a tomb”¹

Abstract: *The standing grave statue of Provost Georg Schönberg in Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia), inscribed with the year 1470 and depicting the prelate as a living person, bears the influence of Nikolaus Gerhaerts von Leyden. One of the two stone tablets belonging to it with inscriptions from around 1486, the year of the death of the provost, describes the corpse of the deceased, feeden by worms in the tomb.*

The memento mori representations of the corpse or skeleton eaten by worms are not unusual in the funeral art of late medieval Europe, but there is almost no precedent of it on the territory of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom. The only such monument is the part of a special “collection” of late medieval tombslabs placed secondarily in the outer wall of the medieval Castle-church (the former parish church) of Selmečbánya. Besides the tombstones of Georgius Cerndel (Görig Körndel, d. 1479), cameralist of Selmec, Johannes Hohel (d. 1480), a burgher of the town, and Gregory (d. 1516), possibly parson of the settlement, there is a wilfully damaged slab of reddish volcanic stone, depicting a skeleton-like figure with worms and frogs, holding a scythe. It is the personification of the Death, without any reference to a concrete person. In the museum collection of the former church there is a corner-fragment of a tombslab, carved of similar stone with similar framing, the German inscription of which – VOR GEORGY IST GESTOR[BEN] (“died before the day of Saint George”) – is formed of similar humanistic letters, as the inscription of the slab depicting the personification of the Death. The two pieces might belong together – at least on the level of the client. The personification of the Death belonged perhaps to a more complex work of a danse macabre – up to now without any parallel in the mural painting or in the sculptural arts of medieval Hungary.

* Selmečbánya, Banská Štiavnica, Schemnitz, present-day Slovakia. The Hungarian version of the article: “Mint egy halott a krypta mélyiről” – A halál és Clairvaux-i Bernát Selmečbányán a 16. század elején,” *Ars Hungarica* 42 (2016): 353–68.

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¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 5 Scene 3, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 356.

The inscription of the stone slab with the Death refers to the mortality, too: FORMA FAVOR POPVLI FERVOR IVVENILIS OPESQ(UE) DIRIPVERE TIBI NOSCERE QVID SIT HOMO. A close version of this text can be read in the Avicenna-incunabulum of John Filipec (Pruisz), bishop of Várad (Nagyvárad, Oradea, now Romania) in Hungary and Olmütz in Moravia (d. 1509), now in the Sächsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden. A hand-written verse in Latin on the back-cover of the book is signed by the bishop of Moravian origin, with a short comment in Czech language. The first two lines of the verse: “Forma, fa... populi, feruor iuuenilis, opesq(ue) / Surripuere tibi, noscere quid sit homo.” These verses (and two more lines of the Filipec-text) can be traced back to the “Meditationes” linked in late medieval times with the name of Bernard of Clairvaux, but written in the thirteenth century by an unknown author.

Keywords: *tomb monument of Provost Georg Schönberg, memento mori, Banská Štiavnica/Selmecbánya, personification of the Death, John Filipec (Pruisz) bishop of Várad and Olmütz, Meditationes of pseudo Bernard of Clairvaux.*