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“The ladder of virtue” in Bath Cathedral

Among about thirty English cathedrals the cathedral in Bath is in every respect outstanding. It was founded by John of Tours in 1090 in violation of applicable legal regulations. That newly consecrated bishop from Normandy moved the headquarters of the diocese from its traditional seat in Wells to the Benedictine abbey in Bath. It was possible only because of an insolent act of simony “anointing the king’s hand with silver” [1, p. 261]. This was the beginning of a few-decade-long dispute over the cathedral status between the main chapters of both cities, which was over only after the Salomon’s decision was made to grant them both a status of cathedral governed by the same bishop. It can be assumed that the motivation of translocation to Bath was not so much the prestige of a city with Roman roots as the intent to take over the hot water springs which possessed healing qualities and were a source of significant revenues. The fact that the resort created by the Romans was the favorite meeting place for British high society in the Middle Ages was equally important for the resourceful bishop, and it remained popular until the beginning of the 20th century. During the times of John of Tours, King William II was one of the visitors of Bath who listened to the medical advice of the prelate. In order to authorize the controversial translation the construction of a huge cathedral basilica with a large choir in the presbytery and a circular ambulatory open to the transept began immediately. The building which was constructed consistently in line with the grandeur typical of the early Norman period survived until the end of the 15th century when Olivier King – the bishop of Bath and Wells – made a decision, unusual in English conditions, to demolish the Romanesque building [1, p. 508]¹. Due to both the respect for the past and the practicality of the people inhabiting the British Isles most interven-



Fig. 1. Cathedral in Bath, west front (photo: Z. Świechowski, 2009)

Il. 1. Katedra w Bath, elewacja zachodnia (fot. Z. Świechowski, 2009)

tions in the ecclesiastical buildings included extensions, conversions, sometimes architectural style updates, preserving the earlier structural elements. In this case, however, it seems that Bishop King’s foundation which used only the footings of the earlier cathedral’s nave was much smaller. It can be assumed that in this case the point was to develop architecture which would fit the refined tastes of the elegant resort’s clientele (Fig. 1). In 1500, Bishop King commissioned that task to two royal architects Robert and William Vertue [7, pp. 197–201]. They were famous for their boast, typical of Renaissance,

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¹ Cannon J., o.c. p. 508, note 6, after unpublished doctoral dissertation by L. Moncton, 1999: *Late Gothic Architecture in South West England: Four Major Centres of Building Activity at Wells, Bristol, Sherborne and Bath*.



Fig. 2. Cathedral in Bath, west front, fragment of the ladder of virtues on the north side (photo: Z. Świechowski, 2009)

Il. 2. Katedra w Bath, elewacja zachodnia, fragment drabiny cnót po stronie północnej (fot. Z. Świechowski, 2009)

of their own capabilities and they declared that the quality of vaulting designed by them for the new cathedral would surpass everything that had been designed earlier in England and France (*There shall be no one so gooddeley, neither in England nor in France*). Indeed the fan vault designed in the nave by the Vertue brothers in Bath significantly exceeds in its scale and affluent ingenuity the previous attempts at application of this kind of vault limited to Lady Chapels – Marian chapels designed on the axis of presbyteries as well as so called chantry-chapels – small chapel annexes frequently erected over the burial-place of the founder. An adequate or maybe even a higher level of perfection was achieved by the same team of architects in the construction of royal chapels founded by Henry VII designed at the same or around the same time at Westminster Cathedral and King's College in Cambridge [7, pp. 197–201]. Their vaults, which are considered to be the most important masterpieces of court school at that time (the 1st quarter of the 16th century), are the pinnacle of sublimation of fan vaulting forms that were constructed after the 1360s. The most original part of the cathedral in Bath is, however, the west front dominated by a huge window with moderate tracery. Most of them feature vertical accents in line with the Perpendicular style – the last great style in English Gothic². Two polygonal turrets at the height of clerestory

² The tracery window lights and divisions of the walls of the chapel in the residence in Windsor designed by William Vertue provide a close analogy. Its nave was vaulted in 1503 and the presbytery in 1506–11; com. [7, tabl. 181 B].

roofs above the aisles provide the architectural frame for the window which allows the light into the nave with its exquisite fan vault. In the upper section of the gable, on its axis, above a window opening, there is a figure of Christ Enthroned and fairly damaged reliefs below. Most probably they presented the angelic host or a gallery of saints as in many other English cathedrals such as for instance its rival in Wells [1, p. 199]. However, the program of figural reliefs has no equal not only in the English architectural sculpture but in the European context as well. The frontal face of the turrets on the sides, beginning from the height corresponding to the base of the big window, features ladders with twelve figurines climbing toward the terms set above the topmost step (Fig. 2). If looked at from up close, the figurines on the ladders represent winged angels and that is why the authors of British studies, including the latest ones, tend to describe the iconography of those illustrations as Jacob's Ladder as we read in Genesis 28:11–14 that while wandering to Mesopotamia Jacob *had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord and he said: "I am the Lord God of Abraham..."* The reliefs of the west front of the cathedral in Bath indeed feature all basic elements of the vision of Jacob's ladder such as a ladder between the earth and heaven where God is king or angels climbing the lad-



Fig. 3. Montenegro, Pivski Monastery, fresco with the ladder of virtues on the north wall of the narthex (photo: Z. Świechowski, 2009)

Il. 3. Czarnogóra, Pivski Monastery, fresk przedstawiający drabinę cnót na północnej ścianie narteksu (fot. Z. Świechowski, 2009)



Fig. 4. The ladder of virtues in *Hortus Deliciarum* by Herrad of Landsberg, 2nd half of the 12th century

Il. 4. Drabina cnót w kodeksie *Hortus Deliciarum* Herrady z Landsbergu, 2 poł. XII w.

der's steps. However, there is a significant difference between the vision from the books of Moses and the sculptures in Bath. Not all of the lively angelic figures on the west front climb steadily upwards, seldom looking downwards to check how high they have climbed so far. Two angels who climbed quite high, especially the one on the north side, despite still holding tight of the steps are evidently falling down. This is why it can be presumed that the reliefs decorating the front of the cathedral are not just a simple illustration of the text from the books of Moses but they refer to the iconography related to quite a large group of moralizing works. They apply the imagination stimulating motif of a ladder used to get from the misery of this world to the happiness of heavens. First of all the treatise on perfection by the Greek monk, John Climacus (died in cir. 600) titled the Ladder of Divine Ascent should be mentioned in this context [4, p. 631] where he describes the ascetic steps compared to the rungs in a ladder called the "ladder of virtues". The treatise was addressed primarily to monastic communities and therefore the oldest manuscript illuminations from the 11th century present monks climbing thirty steps of the ladder with the support of angels and under attack of devils with spears, hooks, arches, pulling them down with ropes as in the 12th-century icon from the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai [3, p. 329]. The preserved copies of the treatise and other works borrowing its metaphorical illustrations as well as the composition of a ladder with thirty

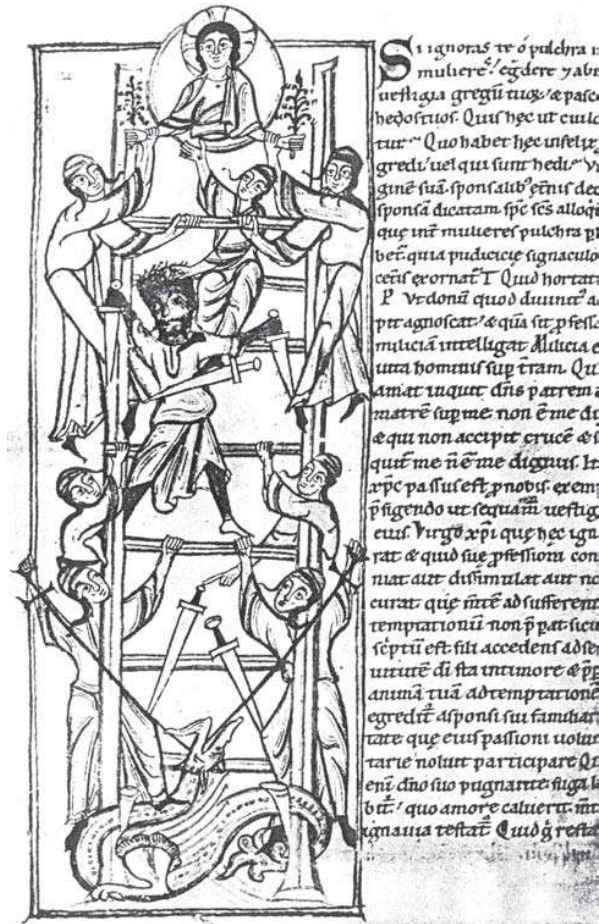


Fig. 5. The ladder of virtues, treatise *Speculum Virginum*, 2nd quarter of the 12th century

Il. 5. Drabina cnót, traktat *Speculum Virginum*, 2 ćw. XII w.

steps along its diagonal suggest that the identification of climbers of the ladder of virtues or the personification of the demonic evil forces, sometimes reduced to an image of a dragon at the bottom section, were not closely followed. This regards not only the works by monastic scriptoriums but the painted decorations of monumental interiors of Greek churches as well (Fig. 3). Even greater freedom and creative imagination in approach to the prototypes derived from the works by Climacus prevailed in the West. The subject of the ladder of virtues is also used in one of the illustrations from *Hortus Deliciarum* by Herrad of Landsberg [6, pl. LVI] (Fig. 4) addressed to the nuns in the convent. Apart from the attacking demons it also depicts representatives of various social estates, members of laity and clergy, combining ethical issues with social ones [2, p. 24]. This is the meaning for instance of the figure of a young cleric seducing a nun with a pouch full of money. Similar motifs of the ladder of virtue appear in the copies of very popular *Speculum Virginum*³. According

³ [5]. The author describes here a.o. a large series of illustrations from the manuscript Arundel 44 in British Museum.



Fig. 6. Cathedral in Bath, west front, relief symbolizing Bishop Oliver King (photo: Z. Świechowski, 2009)

Il. 6. Katedra w Bath, elewacja zachodnia, relief symbolizujący bp. Oliviera Kinga (fot. Z. Świechowski, 2009)

to that treatise, whose main subject is the battle of virtues with vices, among the accompanying illustrations there are scenes of hand-to-hand combat along with static confrontations of the tree of virtues and the tree of vices or the Wise and Foolish Virgins. They present a female personification of Humility piercing fallen Pride with a knight's sword [5, pl. 10]. These battle scenes are completed by an image of the ladder of virtues with holy martyr Perpetua reaching the topmost step with a Christ bust set there despite her ravaging Egyptian pursuer armed with misericords and swords. Her example is followed by the nuns climbing the ladder's edges (Fig. 5). In Bath, where there was no reservation of destiny for a specific group of people, the motif of fallen angels that joined the forces of hell was used. The ones that remained faithful to the Savior are going to heaven where there is a place for them. Usually the illustrations in manuscripts depict Christ who is waiting for the climbers. It is different in Bath where there are busts of bearded saints – undoubtedly the cathedral's patrons, apostles Peter and Paul. There is one more aspect of the unique composition of architectural sculpture of the cathedral in Bath, namely the hidden personal motif of the authors. Instead of a boring inscription on a commemorative plaque, the originator of the building – Bishop Oliver King – is honored by a unique pictorial rebus on the west buttress of north nave corner (Fig. 6). The bishop's mitre is nicely embraced by an olive tree, surrounded by a crown on the main branch under abundant leafy canopy. The two ladders of virtues are the evident allusion to the last name of the authors of the program, most probably of Norman origin. *Vertue* in French means virtue. Obviously both brothers – Robert and William – while trying to achieve perfection, virtually reached the topmost step of the ladders of virtues – one ladder for each of them.

Translated by B. Setkowicz

References

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„Drabina cnót” katedry w Bath

Katedra w Bath, której założenie, a właściwie przeniesienie z Wells w 1090 r., stanowiło przedmiot prawie stuletnich sporów, była ogromną bazyliką wczesnoromańską. Rozebrana została na początku XVI wieku, a na jej miejscu wzniesiono z inicjatywy biskupa Oliviera Kinga świątynię zaprojektowaną i w znacznej mierze zrealizowaną przez budowniczych królewskich, braci Roberta i Williama Vertue. Najbardziej oryginalnym rozwiązaniem tej budowli, zaliczanej do największych osiągnięć gotyku angielskiego, jest elewacja zachodnia. W ścianie szczytowej, po bokach z eleganckim maswerkim perpendykularnym dominuje rozległa kompozycja rzeźbiarska z motywami figuralnymi. Jest to unikatowe w architek-

turze europejskiej przedstawienie drabiny cnót, dotychczas nierozpoznane. Źródłem jest traktat Klimakosa, jednego z ojców Kościoła Wschodniego, a dokładniej ilustracji tego dzieła oraz iluminowanych rękopisów moralizatorskich nim inspirowanych. Po drabinie, której szczeble oznaczają stopnie doskonałości, wspinają się aniołowie, zmierzając ku popiersiom Piotra i Pawła, patronów katedry, i postaci tronującego Chrystusa. Niektóre spadają do piekielnej otchłani. Na reliefach fasady zostały ponadto zakodowane wątki związane z fundatorem i architektami: drzewo oliwkowe z koroną pod infułą uwiecznia imię i nazwisko biskupa, a dwie drabiny cnót nawiązują do tandemu braci Vertue (franc. cnota).

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Słowa kluczowe: katedra, Bath, Anglia