



Epidemic monuments in Budapest

2020-12-01

Due to 145 years of Ottoman rule, during which most of the Hungarian capital's medieval built heritage was wiped out, the bulk of the sculptural monuments commemorating epidemic outbreaks date from the 18th century onwards. Most of them can be found in the historic centres of the towns out of which modern-day Budapest evolved.

Holy Trinity Column, Castle District (District I)

The baroque Holy Trinity Statue is located in Trinity Square, opposite the famous Matthias Church. The column commemorates the victims of two Black Plague outbreaks that had swept across Europe in 1691 and 1709. Merely five years after the recapturing of Buda from the Turks by the united Christian armies in 1686, other than rebuilding the destroyed and depopulated city, the new colonists had to face another serious trial: the plague. The citizens made a solemn oath to erect a column as an act of gratitude if they survived the epidemic. The first pillar was erected between 1700 and 1706 to commemorate the plague of 1691. There was a second major outbreak in 1709, after which the Council of Buda decided to erect a much bigger and more impressive Holy Trinity Column. The sculptors were Philipp Ungleich and Anton Hörger and the new column was completed in 1713.

The sculpture on the top of the column by Philipp Ungleich is a typical baroque Holy Trinity depiction and is the only remaining original part of the monument on the site, the others having been replaced by copies after World War II. The shaft of the column is decorated with statues of saints surrounded by puttos, replicas of Ungleich's originals. Three of them can be linked to epidemics: St. Roch, patron saint of plague victims, St. Sebastian, a protector during epidemics and St. Francis Xavier, who was chosen as patron saint of Buda during the plague. Also the bas-reliefs on the pedestal (copies of Hörger's works) refer to the black death: the central piece depicts a biblical scene with King David begging God to spare his people from the plague outbreak. The Latin inscription above shows his argument: because of penitence. The next relief shows the sufferings of the townspeople: people are praying, some are dying, while above them, the hand of God passes a twig to an angel to punish the sinners. The silhouette of Buda castle in the background makes the interpretation and location of the scene unmistakable.

Marian Column, Mária Square (District I)

This impressive monument standing since 1834 on today's Mária Square, has a height of altogether six metres, the shaft amounting up to two-thirds. Its creator was Anton Hörger, the same artist who took part in the making of the second Holy Trinity Column in Trinity Square in the Castle District. In its present form, the monument is a torso: merely the top figure of the Madonna and the child has survived, adorned with a large sun out of gilded copper. This depiction is a reference to the Woman of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation, identified by the Catholic Church as the Virgin Mary. The rest of the figures that once decorated the column



unfortunately did not survive – one of them portrayed St. Catherine of Siena, patron saint of the sick and dying.

In 1710, the inhabitants of the Watertown suburb made a pledge to erect a plague-column after the previous year's epidemic. Yet the column was only erected in 1724, and was first located next to the Danube in today's Batthyány Square. It originally stood there in an open chapel, where the faithful could attend mass during the plague while the churches were closed. A century later in 1826 the column was dismantled and later on transferred to its current location. In 1938, the sculpture of the Blessed Virgin Mary had to be recarved. It fell from its pedestal and broke apart during World War II, restored again in 1985.

Marian Column, Krisztina Square (District I)

This simple column with the Virgin Mary atop is the oldest public sculpture in present day Budapest. It was commissioned by the master glazier Mathias Janisch in 1702 as an act of gratitude for the passing of the plague. It originally stood next to Vérmező Park (at Alkotás Street 1), but was transferred to its present place in 1855. The damaged statue was removed altogether in 1927 and brought to the Municipal Museum, the copy that can be seen today is a work by Antal Fischer from 1928. The statue is an exact replica of the original and depicts the Immaculate Conception: the Virgin Mary with a halo around her head steps upon a globe encircled by a serpent, the symbol of sin.

Holy Trinity Column, Újlak (District II)

Wikipedia - autor: Fauvrit

This statue standing today at Zsigmond Square, a couple of kilometres north of the Castle Hill along the Danube originally stood in front of Matthias Church on Trinity Square. Its earliest piece is the Holy Trinity sculpture on the top and was completed in 1699, a year before the foundation of the column was laid. It was a present by the state minister Archbishop Kollonich, a leading figure of the Counter-reformation in Hungary. Though the monument was inaugurated in 1706, secondary figures were added till 1709. However, it was removed from Trinity Square that very year in order to be replaced by the larger one that can be seen there today. So the first column was given as a present to the magistrate of Újlak (Neustift) in 1712.

The monument was built by two Italians, the architect Vererio Ceresola and the stone carver Bernardo Ferretti. Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the limestone construction underwent several renovations and reconstructions – the most extensive of them being in 1856, when the baroque pedestal had to be replaced altogether.



Holy Trinity Column, Óbuda (District III)

Wikipedia - autor: Kaboldy

Óbuda (Old Buda) was one of the three municipalities that - together with Buda and Pest - merged into the modern Hungarian metropolis in 1873. One of its main squares was the Szentlélek (Holy Spirit) Square, where a baroque Holy Trinity column stands. The monument commemorates a particularly devastating wave of the plague in 1739 (the last one of this scale), when nearly half of the town's population fell victim to the epidemic. In the aftermath, the surviving inhabitants decided to erect a Trinity statue that was co-financed by the Zichy family, the local landowners at the time. The limestone monument was erected very soon after the plague between 1740 and 1743 with a height of 10.4 metres. The name of its designer is unknown. The sculpture on top of the triangular-based column is a depiction of the Holy Trinity, surrounded by a score of other statues below, most notably the Virgin Mary, standing atop a globe in the centre part. She is flanked on the pedestal by St. Francis Xavier, the patron saint of Buda, and St. Charles Borromeo, who was active during the Milano plague in the 1570s and by the martyr St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters. Below the Virgin Mary is a bas-relief of St. Rosalia in a cave - a hermit from the 12th century, whose relics are said to have stopped the Palermo plague of 1624. Another bas-relief of her adorns the facade of the adjacent parish church. On the corners of the fence surrounding the column, there are three further statues: the 3rd century soldier and martyr St. Sebastian, most commonly portrayed in connection with the plague since the Middle Ages and St. Roche, the French pilgrim who tended to plague victims in 14th century Italy. He is commonly depicted with a dog by his side that is said to have saved him from starvation, when he himself fell ill. The third saint of the fence, St. Felix of Valois was the patron saint of the Trinitarian order, whose members tended to the sick during the plague of 1739.

The monument was damaged in 1945 and was pointlessly disassembled in 1956, whereafter the statues were taken to the Kiscell Museum. Its re-erection took place in 1998.

Votive altar, Óbuda (District III)

Wikipedia - autor: Kaboldy

The Votive altar, or as it is also known, the St. Florian Monument is located at the busy junction of Flórián Square. This altar in its present arrangement was assembled together in 1819 and is a unique altarlike ensemble. Its three main figures are 18th century statues of the patron saints against the plague (St. Charles Borromeo) and the elements, flood, fire (St. Florian) and



earthquake (St. Philip Neri) – all of which had hit Óbuda within a couple of decades. The local landowners, count Miklós Zichy and his wife commissioned their court architect the famous baroque sculptor Karl Bebö to create them. The limestone statues were carved between 1758 and 1763, the plague saint St. Charles first finished – its original stood at the centre of the composition between two columns, kneeling in front of an angel, holding a crucifix.

Having been set up in 1819 in Flórián Square, this statue ensemble did not evade the destructive forces either. In 1919, the invading Romanian troops damaged it heavily, whereafter it was restored in 1928, only to be mutilated again in 1937 by a mentally confused shoemaker. The altar was finally removed in 1948 because it stood in the way of the newly built Árpád Bridge and its pieces were transferred to the Kiscell Museum. It took several decades until it was re-erected near its original place in 2012. The St. Charles Borromeo statue had to be recarved altogether, due to the original's bad condition.

Phylloxera Cross, Óbuda (District III)

On the north-western outskirts of modern Budapest next to the old road to Vienna, next to the so-called Phylloxera chapel stands a cross that was erected in 1886 by Martin Raab and his wife Maria Hiedl. Both the chapel and the crucifix were erected out of gratitude, because the phylloxera plague had spared the lands around – as they believed – miraculously. In reality, the sandy soil of the valley prevented the pest from doing harm. By that time, the phylloxera louse, imported from America in the 1850s, had already devastated over two-thirds of Europe's vineyards, among them the thriving winegrowing industry of Óbuda.

Marian Column, Szervita Square (District V)

Until the end of the 19th century, the city of Pest also had its own Holy Trinity Column that stood in front of its main parish church, but it did not survive. The Marian Column (1729) is only a couple of streets away. Though this monument opposite the 18th century Servite Church was not originally linked to an epidemic, it gained special importance later on. Ten years after its erection the plague broke out again, so the church was closed and the Servite monks could pray in the open for its passing. The first baroque statue of the Virgin Mary is attributed to the local sculptor Anton Hörger or Andreas Rieder. By the 1930s this original was in such a deteriorated condition that it needed to be replaced. The current, reshaped version of the statue with the starred halo around its head is Dezső Erdey's work from 1942.

St. Roche Chapel and the plague hospital, Gyulai Pál Street/Rákóczi Street (District VIII)

One of the historic monuments related to the plague that can still be seen today is not a statue, but a building. Located by the busy Rákóczi Street near the city centre, the St. Roche Chapel



and the adjacent hospital remind us of the epidemics that hit the town of Pest in the 18th century. In 1711, the inhabitants of the city made a pledge to erect a chapel dedicated to the two plague saints, St. Roche and St. Rosalia. Six years later a small edifice was erected outside the city walls – it is the apse of the present chapel. After the notorious plague of 1739, they built an extension to the building two years later, the tower being the last addition from the mid-18th century.

St. Vincent Memorial Column, Gellért Hill (District XI)

On the southern side Gellért Hill, behind the famous Gellért Baths stands a column erected in 2005 to commemorate the once flourishing local viticulture destroyed by the phylloxera epidemic in the 1880s. It was commissioned by the Újbuda District Council and the local German Minority Council. The work by the sculptor Antal Czinder relies on traditional 18th century models: the figure of St. Vincent, patron saint of the vintners stands on a Doric column holding a grape. The slopes of the Gellért Hill were once covered with vineyards. Today, only some street names and the aforementioned memorial remind us of them.

Holy Trinity Column, Nagytétény (District XXII)

The once independent village of Nagytétény lies on the south-western periphery of the Hungarian capital. Next to its partly medieval parish church in the city centre stands a modest baroque Holy Trinity monument. It was commissioned by the local landowner József Rudnyánszky and his wife Julianna Száraz and erected between 1739 and 1740. Concluding from this date and from the attributes, it was most likely set up to commemorate the plague that had hit some of the towns in the vicinity (for instance Óbuda) so severely. The sculptor remains unknown. It consists of an ionic limestone column with a statue of the Holy Trinity atop, the column is flanked on the two sides by the figures of St. Sebastian and St. Roche. The pedestal on the front is designed as an altar table-slab or mensa that forms a “cave” in which the bas-relief of the third plague saint St. Rosalia lies, holding a crucifix in her hand.

St. Sebastian Statue, Soroksár (District XXIII)

Soroksár, a former Swabian village (as the Germans are called in Hungary) like Nagytétény, is positioned next to a side branch of the Danube on the southernmost edge of the capital. The Zopfstil (early Neoclassical style) statue depicts St. Sebastian, one of the most renowned plague saints since the Middle Ages and stands today in one of the side streets of the settlement (Táncsics Mihály St. 135). Having been erected in 1803, it is one of the latest manifestations of its type. As the inscription on the pedestal reads, it was commissioned by a local man called András Purczeld – the same surname that one of the greatest football players of all time, Ferenc Puskás bore in his younger years.