

Symbolism, aesthetics, faith – a few words about religious decoration on tile stoves

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Selected examples of stove tiles are presented in this article in the context of an iconographic analysis of their relief decoration, which included Biblical symbols and scenes as a reflection of the people's need to surround themselves with religious motifs that expressed their spiritual beliefs. Stove tiles were decorated with motifs that were widely recognized and important in the lives of ordinary people. These images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints and scenes from the Scripture helped individuals to keep and defend the faith, especially in times of need. They gave people the much needed feeling of God's presence in their lives and at the same time allowed them to express their religious beliefs by decorating furnaces with this type of motifs.

KEY-WORDS: stove tiles, iconography, decoration, religious motifs, saints and martyrs

Man has always needed images and symbols to understand the spiritual world, to get closer to and to be able to commune with God. Art served this role, as did the more mundane objects, crafted by anonymous potters, that are found in archeological excavations after many centuries. Decorated with religious motifs, they are a reflection of a longtime desire that people have to be surrounded with Biblical scenes and symbols, helping them to keep and defend their faith, especially in times of need. Tiled stoves decorated with religious motifs of the Christian faith – images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints and scenes from the Scripture, narrative, moralistic, didactic, hagiographic and symbolic – expressed individual religious beliefs and ensured God's presence in the lives of ordinary people. Thus the stove tiles presented in this article are a source of information on the level of religious awareness of the inhabitants of central and eastern Europe in the Middle Ages and early modern times.

The presentation of selected themes from the Old and New Testaments, and the lives of the saints and martyrs visualizes the range of religious motifs present on tiled stoves. Images were well recognized, interpreted and understood. They included characteristics and/or attributes that were like a code, permitting communication and

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transmission of the content, especially when the vast majority of the population was illiterate. Today, they illustrate aspects of life in the past. Differences in the way certain scenes were represented can also be demonstrated depending on time and place.

One of the most popular themes from the Old Testament since medieval times is the Temptation of Adam and Eve in Paradise – the Sin of Adam from the Book of Genesis. The images on tiles depict the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the center with the serpent entwined around it, symbolizing Satan, embodying evil that leads man to destruction and to hell. Adam and Eve are shown on either side, covering their naked bodies, an explicit indication of sin having been committed and evil beginning to rule. Adam appears mostly on the right side of the tree, Eve as the source of sin being shown on the left, traditionally considered as the ‘wrong’ side. The occasional reversal of the composition is difficult to explain at this stage of the research. Was it a deliberate act or simply ignorance or error on the part of the craftsmen making the mold?

Execution is realistic, even if schematic. Examples from the region of Poland are known from Gniezno (15th century; Janiak 2003: 85, fig. 144), Babice (15th–16th century; Dąbrowska 1987: 125, fig. 16: 4–6), Wleń (15th–16th century; Buśko and Dymek 1995: 20, fig. 11f), Jarocin (beginning of the 16th century; Grygiel 2001: fig. 10: 2). An interesting example from Bolesławiec (15th century; Żemigala 1987: fig. 93) compiles scenes from both the Old and New Testaments. It was common practice and often appeared in typological sets. In this case, a pelican at the top of the tree is a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice; the reading is that the Original Sin led to the death of Christ on the Cross.

Tiles decorated with the Temptation of Adam and Eve in Paradise motif are also known from Brno (15th century; Nekuda and Reichertová 1968: Tr. XCVIII: 5) and Kroměříž (15th century; Nekuda and Reichertová 1968: Tr. XC) in the Czech Republic and from Kaunas in Lithuania (first half of the 16th century; Žalnierius and Balčiūnas 2007: 246). The tree in the Lithuanian example is schematic and Adam seems to be shown on the left. An ornamental arcade is characteristic of this and other tiles from this city, and there is an evident difference in the manner of representation between medieval and renaissance images.

The Original Sin resulted in the expulsion of the first people from Paradise. Adam and Eve are shown covering their nakedness (Ge 3: 7–11). Representations of this kind are known from Kraków (16th century; Lichończak-Nurek (ed.) 2011: 410–411), Nové Strašecí (middle of the 15th century; Hazlbauer 1998: 48) and Brno (15th century; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 17, fig. 6). The message is the same, but the rendering is different. A guardian angel at the gates to Paradise is depicted with a sword. This scene reveals and emphasizes the drama of the moment.

Another example from the Old Testament is a scene of Samson fighting the lion, also quite popular, referring to the Book of Judges. Typically, it shows a man holding a lion’s jaw. Examples from the territory of Poland are known from Gniezno (first

half of the 15th century; Janiak 2003: 80, fig. 127) and Jarocin (beginning of the 16th century; Grygiel 2001: fig. 13:2). Parallels from the Czech Republic come from Brno (end of the 15th century; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 18, fig. 11), Bouzov (end of the 15th century; Hazlbauer 1996: 66–67, fig. 32), Pisek (15 h; Brych 2004: fig. 81) and Olomouc (middle of the 16th century; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 18, fig. 13).

The next scene is the prophet Jonah spat out by the whale. He was a prefiguration of Christ in religion and art and references to Jonah are a preview of Christ's death and resurrection. The New Testament is thus hidden in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is explained in the New Testament. Abel and Isaac were also a prefiguration of Christ and the Crucifixion was compared to the copper serpent that Moses used to treat humans. Fragments of a tile have been preserved from Gniezno (first half of the 15th century; Janiak 2003: 80, fig. 126) and parallels come from the Czech Republic, from Lipnice (second half of the 15th century; Hazlbauer 1998: 68) and Praha (15th and 16th centuries; Hazlbauer 1998: 69).

Scene from the New Testament include the very popular Annunciation, connected with the Marian cult. The Virgin Mary as the Mother of God was exemplary testimony of a noble mission contributing to universal salvation. The message was that people should not give up, that they should trust and live in accordance with the divine laws. In Annunciation scenes, she is often shown as the Queen Mother holding her son and as a compassionate mother standing below the cross. This theme decorated heating stoves from Jankowo Dolne (first half of the 15th century; Janiak 2003: 81, fig. 128), Czersk (second half of the 15th century; Dąbrowska 1987: 125, fig. 16: 1–2) and Jarocin (beginning of the 16th century; Grygiel 2001: 238, fig. 11: 1); in the lattermost one, the Virgin Mary is placed in the center with an angel on the left giving her a lily as a symbol of purity, innocence and virginity. Tiles from the beginning of the 16th century from Grodno (*Archeologia* 2012: 151) show typical motifs: a kneeling Mary, an Angel and a dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. On a tile from Malbork (*Pospieszna* 2013: 60–61) there is a fragment of an Annunciation scene with Mary shown kneeling. In these examples the Virgin is depicted in the typical gesture of consent and submission. There is also a wrapper with the words: *ecce ancilla*, translated here as servant, which refers to the words from the Gospel: And Mary said: '*I am the servant of the Lord*'. Representations from Germany (Geslingen, end of the 15th century; Stuttgartard, 15th century; Ulm, end of the 15th century; and Lörrach, second half of the 15th century) (*Furnologia* 2015) constitute an interesting parallel, showing a realism and precision in the execution of detail that allows even architectural elements, such as windows, to be reconstructed. In these examples, the gesture of consent and submission of the Virgin and a dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit may be observed.

St. Veronica holding a scarf was a common motif. The *veraicon* theme presents Christ's suffering and his tormented face reflected on Veronica's scarf when she wiped sweat from his face on the way to Golgotha. The image was supposed to be created

without the participation of the human hand, in a miraculous and supernatural way. In Western art Christ is often represented as suffering, with closed eyes, a crown of thorns and a martyred expression. The theme of wiping the face with a cloth comes from the Middle Ages; it is the Sixth Station of the Cross and it was widespread in the art of the 15th century. Saint Veronica may have never existed. There is no mention of her in the Gospel. The fact that Christ was given a scarf to wipe his face is mentioned only in the apocrypha and the letter is not recognized by the Church as reliable. Nevertheless, Veronica and her scarf were one of the most popular themes in art. Veronica is known from Kętrzyn (beginning of the 16th century; B. Pospieszna (ed.) 2010: 317), Kowno (16th century; Žalnierius and Balčiūnas 2007: 242, fig. 1: 1), Rožnov (end of the 15th century; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 24, fig. 44) and Dambořice (end of the 15th century; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 24, fig. 43).

The culmination of the Passion is the Crucifixion. Golgotha is the place from which Christ's authority as King of the Universe, based on love and suffering, was exercised. The throne manifested in the cross is a symbol of his suffering and his reign, reminding Man that God has not left him, that he loves Man. In scenes of the Crucifixion, Christ's Cross is typically shown in the center. On the right, honorable side of the cross there is Mary and on the left side, John the Evangelist, Christ's favorite disciple (Starowieyski 2011: 77–80). The preserved tile fragments come from Bestwina (15th century; Dymek 1995: 30, Tr. XVI: d), Martinice u Votic (15th century) (Nekuda and Reichertova 1968: 342, Tr. XXXVIII: 2) and Heffenburk (15th century; Hazlbauer and Gabriel 1998: 384, fig. 1). An interesting example from Jankowo Dolne (first half of the 15th century; Janiak 2003: 29, 86, fig. 148) shows the Mother of Sorrows (*Mater Dolorosa*), the sword of sorrow next to her. It is a symbol of suffering, which was foretold during the Presentation in the Temple (Lk 2:34).

The sun and moon on both sides of the cross, the Moon on the left and the Sun on the right, are interesting motifs as cosmic bodies with advanced symbolism and meaning. They could personify, among others, the masculine and the feminine (Kobielus 2000: 84). The sun was identified with the person of Christ, on the grounds of the prophecy of Malachi, the Sun of Justice, and combined with Jesus's Passion (Mal 4:2). Examples from the Czech Republic include tiles from Praha (second half of the 15th century; Brych 2004: fig. 122).

The preserved tile fragments from Kołbacz (16th century; Kamiński 1997: 237, fig. 8:5) deserve mention. They show a set identical with the earlier system, but differing in the workshop style and richness of the ornament. The skull placed at the foot of the cross is an interesting feature. According to the Evangelists, Christ died in 'a place called Golgotha, which means, The Place of the Skull.' (Mt 27:33), symbolizing, according to tradition, the burial place of Adam's skull. The dying king on the cross was to wash the skull with his blood as a sign of redemption of the Original Sin and a symbol of control over the world. The Tree of the Cross was often compared to the Tree in

Paradise, the latter carrying the message of death and sin, the former of life and salvation (Starowieyski 2011: 339).

The next motif is a pelican feeding its young with blood. It is present on tiles from Bestwina (15th century; Dymek 1995: 32, Tr. XIII:a), Czudec (15th/16th century; Lubelczyk 2008: 255), Gniezno (15th century; Janiak 2003: 98, fig. 199), Jankowo Dolne (15th century; Janiak 2003: 182, fig. 181), Kostelec nad Černými Lesy (second half of 15th century; Durdik and Hazlbauer 1993: 298–299, fig. 7: 1) and Mohelnice (second half of 15th century; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 26, fig. 52). In Christian art, the pelican was a symbol of generosity and sacrifice, love and mercy, an emblem of the Eucharist and Christ. In most depictions, the pelican is shown in a nest or on branches symbolizing this nest, its beak at its breast to feed the young with its own blood (Kopaliński 1985: 847; Forstner 1990: 847).

Images of saints and martyrs were also very popular. Representations on tiles reflect the existence of a cult of patron saints in the region and demonstrate the richness of manifestations of religious life in medieval Europe. Figures of holy martyrs refer to life according to the Scripture: ‘We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. At all times we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies. Throughout our lives we are always in danger of death for Jesus’ sake, in order that his life may be seen in this mortal body of ours. This means that death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. The scripture says, “I spoke because I believed.” In the same spirit of faith, we also speak because we believe. We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus to life, will also raise us up with Jesus and take us, together with you, into his presence. All this is for your sake; and as God’s grace reaches more and more people, they will offer to the glory of God more prayers of thanksgiving. Living by Faith. For this reason we never become discouraged. Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day. And this small and temporary trouble we suffer will bring us a tremendous and eternal glory, much greater than the trouble. For we fix our attention, not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts forever.’ (Online Bible Edition, 4.31: 2 Co 4: 8–18).

In the Bible there are many passages about the life that Christians should lead and what the followers of Jesus will come up against, e.g.: ‘... Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it. Will you gain anything, if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! There is nothing you can give to regain your life. For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will reward each one according to his deeds. I assure you that there are

some here who will not die until they have seen the Son of Man come as King.” (Online Bible Edition, 4.31: Mt 16:24–28).

While it is not possible here to list all the saints depicted on the tiles and to present the tiles with their depictions, we should mention a few. First there is St. Andrew. A tile from Wrocław (second half of 15th century) (Lisowa and Lasota 1989: 90–92, fig. 5: b), made up of faces and a three-dimensional figure on a stand, shows the saint modeled on a sculpture from a portal (Lisowa and Lasota 1989: 100–102).

Saint Barbara was a very popular motif on tiles. She had been locked up in a tower by her father for defending Christianity and then beheaded with a sword. She was considered a patron saint of good death or eternal life. Her attribute is always a tower with three windows symbolizing the Holy Trinity and the sword. Her images were often accompanied by a crown of Martyrdom or crown of eternal glory, and the palm of martyrdom, which symbolizes the death of Barbara, and a lily as a symbol of innocence and virginity. Tiles decorated with the motif of St. Barbara are known from Kały Wrocławskie (15th century; Gündel 1934: 289, Tr. XXII: 5), Bytom (15th century; Andrzejewska 2004: 125, fig. 10), unknown city in Silesia (second half of 15th century; Smoleńska 1975: 274, fig. 15), Gniezno (beginning of 16th century; Janiak 2003: 87, fig. 153), Kaunas (15th century; Žalnierius and Balčiūnas 2007: 242, fig. 1: 1), Olomouc (about 1500; Loskotová *et al.* 2008: 27, fig. 59) and Banská Bystrica (15th century; Holčík 1978: fig. 75; Mácelová 2009: 273, fig. 8.1).

The theme of St. George killing the dragon was highly popular on tiles in the 15th and 16th centuries. St. George was a Roman legionary in the 4th century, sentenced to death for refusing to worship pagan gods. Tiles are known from Bolesławiec on the Proсна river (15th century; Żemigala 1987: 15, 18–21, fig. 1,7), Jankowo Dolne (15th century; Strzyżewski 1993: 38, 132, figs 64–65; Janiak 2003: 82, 87, figs 134, 154, 157), Gniezno (15th century; Janiak 2003: 41, 87–88, figs 155–156), Strzyżewo Paczkowe (15th century) (Janiak 2003: 41, 88, fig. 158), Wenecja (15th century; Świechowska 1949: 100–101), Ciechanów (beginning of the 16th century; Dąbrowska 1987: fig. 81), Oświęcim (15th century; Moskal 2012: 78–79), Babice (15th century; Dąbrowska 1987: 125–125, fig. 17), Golez Castle in Krajowice (15th century; Muzeum 2015), unknown location near Radomsko (15th century; Kopera and Pagaczewski 1909: 7), Wrocław (Dymek 1995: 30, 254; Fekacz-Tomaszewska 2010: 195, fig. 4), Chudów (beginning of the 16th century; Nocuń 2010: 23; Tarasiński 2010: 127, fig. 3), Wleń (15th/16th century; Buško and Dymek 1995: 23, fig. 11: h–i), Namysłów (15th century; Gündel 1934: 291, Tr. XXIII: 6), Legnica (15th century; Strauss 1928: 72; Czechowicz 1993: 24) and in the Czech Republic from Chrudim (15th century; Frolik 2003: 52, 55), Cineves (15th century; Ławrynowicz and Nowakowski 2009: 120, 131, fig. 18), Hrobce (15th century; Ławrynowicz and Nowakowski 2009: 120–121, 130, fig. 12), Hoješín (15th century; Frolik 2003: fig. 54), Hefflenburk (15th century; Smetana and Gabriel 1988: fig. 1: 5), Kostelec and Černými Lesy (15th century; Durdik and Hazlbauer

1993: fig. 6: 5), Kralštejn (14th–15th century: Nekuda and Reichertová 1968, Tr. XLI: 6), Lipnice nad Sázavou (15th–16th century; Ławrynowicz and Nowakowski 2008: 307–308, fig. 8). Sites from Romania include Suceava (15th century; Batariuc 1999: 259–260), Vaslui (15th century; Batariuc 1999: 259–260; Gruia 2006: 30–31), Făgăraș (15th century; Gruia 2006: 27, 35), Feldioara (15th century; Gruia 2006: 24, 37). The depictions differ in composition, detail, presence of princesses or items such as a building or the royal couple in a window.

Numerous finds of tiles decorated with images of saints are a valuable source for the conversion to Christianity and the development of the new faith in Poland and central and eastern Europe. The iconography on tiles is one of the manifestations of the phenomenon during the Middle Ages. The Christian community believed in the intercession of saints in prayers addressed to God and often kept relics or images of saints. Items, like the stove tiles, expressed respect for defenders of the Christian faith and were treated at the same time as a kind of amulet or talisman. This religious attitude coupled with numerous pictures of saints, visible symbols of faith, spread the cult of the saints to distant sites.

Analysis of selected iconography images brings us to the spiritual sphere of man and his needs, allowing an exploration of religious life and cultural space. Stove tiles and their decorations are an important historical source which facilitates us to know past culture and society.

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