

CZECH REPUBLIC



The Ancient Heroes in Baroque Olomouc

Barbara Pokorná

Maybe it seems too much to look for a link to the ancient world in areas that Roman colonisation affected only marginally, leaving almost no trace. Yet even here, with varying intensity in the most different times, we find evidence of ancient traditions faithfully maintained, even if at first sight there only remain ingenious construction and art principles based on Greek and Roman culture that are hidden in a sophisticated form to an uninitiated observer.

According to recent archaeological excavations, the official history of Olomouc is deeply rooted in the Slavonic past before 1055, which is referred to by the first indisputable report of this area preserved by the chronicler Cosmas³. An interesting legend about the founding of the town, however, has to be dated at around 57 BC, when a group of Roman soldiers under the leadership of Gaius Julius Caesar stopped here. He was so enchanted that he fortified this place and in his honor it was then called Julimons or Julimontium. In fact, however, after 1459 in the period of humanism, which was associated with Roman antiquity directly in its ideological program, the older name Olomutium was forcibly Latinized, thus giving rise to an attractive legend that the founder of the city was Gaius Julius Caesar.

Already in the early phase of the development of Olomouc in the late 10th century, the preconditions for social and topographical zoning of the city, which represented a rising hierarchy, became evident. In Olomouc the social hierarchy was reflected also in a quantitative symbolic aspect based on the Roman metrological system, which was based on foot⁴ and stage⁵. A few centuries later, when the dynamic Baroque came to Olomouc, there was a unique sculptural program that used the ancient principles to locate dominants in the urban area and thematically drew from Greek and Roman antiquity.

The form of the present Upper Square in Olomouc originated in the course of seven hundred years of development. The most dynamic period in terms of construction works was associated with the years of the traumatic Thirty Years' War. These circumstances paradoxically awakened in Olomouc citizens an intensely creative effort and three generations of citizens worked on a set of works that had fateful significance for the city. In the centre of Olomouc, a unique set of fountains was created in the first half of the 18th century, crowned by sculptural figures known from ancient mythology. As in ancient Rome the fountains in Olomouc were not only an important source of drinking and service water but also played an irreplaceable visual role in the urban setting. The impressive location of fountains at the junction of streets and squares recalls similar locations of fountains in Rome by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Vistas of the main streets of the centre of Olomouc were completed according to the model of prospective scenography of a baroque theater, always dominated by a significant sculpture,



Figure 20: Plan of Olomouc fountains: 1. Neptune, 2. Hercules, 3. Jupiter, 4. Tritons, 5. Caesar, 6. Mercury, 7. Arion



Figure 21: Caesar fountain

³ Kosmova kronika česká, (lat. orig. Chronica Boemorum), the oldest Czech chronicle written in 1119–1125, translated by Karel Hrdina, Praha 1975

⁴ passus = 1.48 m

⁵ stadium = 125 passus = 185 m