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The Romanesque Bronze Doors at Gniezno Cathedral Church: Some New Remarks*

Among many Romanesque bronze doors in Europe the old entrance doors of the metropolitan cathedral in Gniezno, in the North of Poland, are exceptional. They are decorated with 18 panels illustrating scenes from the life of St. Adalbert. The role of the patron saint was thus elevated to a status equal to that of Christ in the biblical story of Redemption and Salvation. This is actually an iconographic phenomenon which many scholars have been trying to understand and explain for over a century. But the extent of knowledge about the Gniezno Doors in Polish, Czech and German literature is modest and in stark contrast to their artistic quality.¹

- * This text is a preliminary study report. The final results will be published in: *Romanesque Saints, Shrines and Pilgrimage*, Oxford-London 2019.
1. See e.g.: J. Lelewel, *Drzwi kościelne płockie i gnieźnieńskie (z lat 1133, 1155)*, in: *Polska wieków średnich, czyli Joachima Lelewela w dziejach narodowych polskich postrzeżenia*, t. IV, Poznań 1851, pp. 261–329; M. Morelowski, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie a miniatury rękopisów leodyjskich w Berlinie i Brukseli*, „Prace i Materiały Sprawozdawcze Sekcji Historii Sztuki Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk w Wilnie” II (1935), pp. 407–465; T. Dobrzeniecki, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, Warszawa 1953; *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie*, red. M. Walicki, t. I–III, Wrocław 1956–1959; J. Stiennon, *La Pologne et les Pays mosan au moyen-âge. A propos sur la porte de Gniezno*, « Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale » 4 (1961), pp. 457–473; U. Mende, *Die Bronzetüren des Mittelalters, 800-1200*, München 1983; B. Mohnhaupt, *Typologisch strukturierte Heiligenzyklen. Die Adalbertsvita der Gnesener Bronzetür* in: *Hagiographie und Kunst. Der Heiligenkult in Schrift, Bild und Architektur*, Hg. G. Kerscher, Berlin 1993, pp. 357–368; P. Černý, *Das Leben des hl. Adalbert von Prag auf der Bronzetür zu Gnesen*, in: *Tausend Jahre Benediktiner in den Kloster Břevnov, Brannau und Rohr*, Hg. P. J. Hofmann, St. Ottilien 1993, pp. 157–202; A. Labuda, *Czytanie Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich. Przekaz i język obrazu*, in: *Tropami Świętego Wojciecha*,

Gniezno,
cathedral church,
bronze doors (after
Dobrzeński 1953)

→ Gniezno,
cathedral church,
bronze doors,
*Monkey eating
the grapes* (after
Dobrzeński 1953)

→ Gniezno,
cathedral church,
bronze doors,
left door, *Cutting
the grapes* (after
Dobrzeński 1953)



The date of the Gniezno Doors foundation and creation is uncertain and has long been the subject of much debate. Their dating has ranged from the mid-12th century to the 1170s, not on the basis of stylistic analysis or written evidence, but in hypothetic connections with powerful patrons. Many scholars focused on the unique iconography. It was repeatedly argued that probably some unidentified manuscripts from the cathedral library must have served as source and even the models for the scenes of St. Adalbert's life.² But none of the numerous copies of the known early hagiographic accounts is illuminated. In short, scholars have so far been unable to identify with any conviction, either the iconographic models or artistic provenance of the workshop. Some connections of the alleged bishop to France were suggested and some well-known technological possibilities of foundry workshops at the Meuse Valley were emphasized³ At the same time some formal similarities to the



red. Z. Kurnatowska, Poznań 1999, 235–256; T. Węclawowicz, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie. Rozważania na temat symboliki przejścia i warstw znaczeniowych*, in: *Tropami Świętego Wojciecha*, red. Z. Kurnatowska, Poznań 1999, pp. 257–284.

2. Among others see latterly: R. Grzesik, *Literackie wzorce ikonografii Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*, „*Studia Źródłoznawcze*” 36 (1997), pp. 1–7; G. Labuda, *Reminiscencje Pasji Św. Wojciecha z Tegernsee (około 1025) w scenach jego żywotu na Drzwiach Gnieźnieńskich (około 1180)*, in: *Homines et Societas. Czasy Piastów i Jagiellonów. Studia historyczne ofiarowane Antoniemu Gąsiorowskiemu w sześćdziesiątą piątą rocznicę urodzin*, Poznań 1997, pp. 53–63.
3. T. Dobrzeńcki, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie...*, op. cit., pp. 13–14; M. Morelowski, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie...*, op. cit.; M. Morelowski, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie, ich związki ze sztuką obcą a problem rodzimości*, in: *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie...*, op. cit., red. M. Walicki, t. I, pp. 42–100, passim; P. Skubiszewski, *L'art mosan et la Pologne à l'Époque romane. Problématique des recherches*, in: *Rapports historiques et artistiques entre les Pays mosan et la Pologne, du XIe au début du XIIIe siècle*, Liège 1981, pp. 39–48; U. Mende, *Die Bronzetüren...*, op. cit., pp. 84–93, 161–164; J. Stiennon, *La Pologne...*, op. cit., who saw the Doors as actually eclectic, because he pointed out not only Meuse but also German, Italian and even



Gniezno, cathedral church, bronze doors, *Peridexion tree* (after Dobrzeniecki 1953)



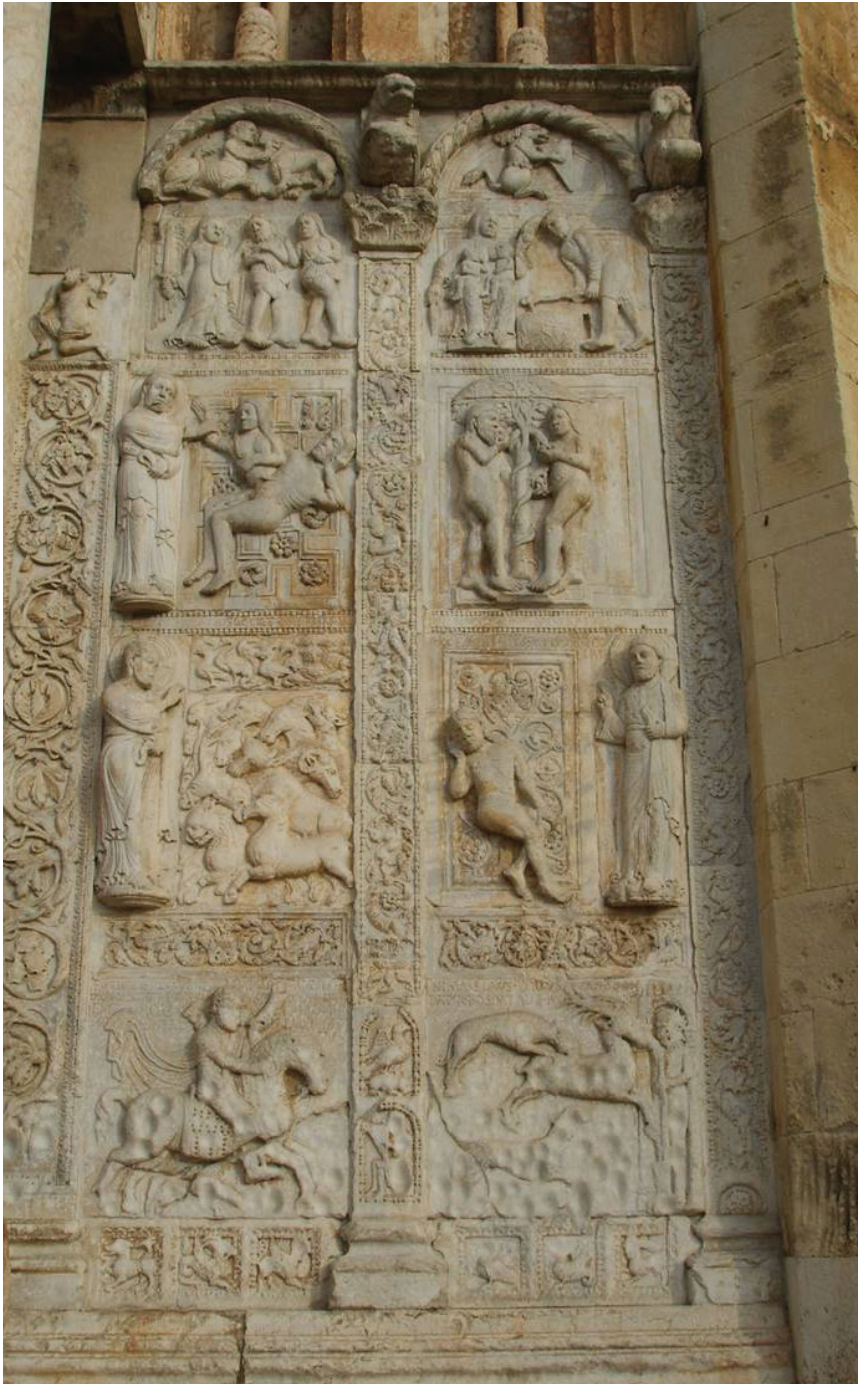
Gniezno, cathedral church, bronze doors, a *Tiger* (after Dobrzeniecki 1953)

North Italian sculpture were contradicted⁴ Nevertheless, the 'Meuse hypothesis' based mainly on historical suggestions became established as a certainty. However, it is important to emphasize the significant difference between the creator of the composition and of the craftsman who cast the bronze doors. After all, in the twelfth century, not all European bronze doors were cast in the Meuse Valley. Therefore I would like to follow the Italian trace and to develop this suggestion in a brief, critical analysis of the three most important issues concerning the doors: the iconography, chronology, and in the result – the workshop's patterns.

The Gniezno Doors were designed as an account of St. Adalbert's life seen as a journey from sinful secularity through the episcopal duties and monastic seclusion, to the missionary vocation that led to Martyrdom and Canonization. In other words, the iconographical programme should be named the *Transitus Sancti Adalberti*.⁵ This can only be understood and appreciated by reading the main panels in conjunction with the symbolic meaning of the creatures in the decorative borders, because they have been conceived as commentaries to the main story. These decorative borders seem to be extremely important both from the iconographic point of view, already described in many publications,⁶ and

Byzantine artistic influences. Similarly, T.Mroczo *Polska sztuka romańska i przedromańska*, Warszawa 1988, p. 154, saw at the Doors of Gniezno multiple influences, not only from Meuse Valley, but also from South German and North Italian countries.

4. L.Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe i estetyczne Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*, in: *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie...*, op. cit., red. M.Walicki, t. II, pp. 7–160. 2nd edition in: L.Kalinowski, *Speculum artis. Treści dzieła sztuki Średniowiecza i Renesansu*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 227–378.
5. See: T.Węclawowicz, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie. Rozważania...*, op. cit., passim.
6. First of all in: L.Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe...*, op. cit.; Z.Kępiński, *Symbolika Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich*, in: *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie...*, op. cit., red. M.Walicki, t. II, pp. 161–384;



Verona, St. Zeno's church, marble panels on the front wall (photo by T. Węclawowicz 2015)



Verona, St. Zeno's church, marble panels on the front wall, detail (photo by T. Węclawowicz 2015)



Modena, cathedral church, south west portal, *Cutting the grapes* (photo by T. Węclawowicz 2015)

above all, from an artistic point of view. It is thanks to the unique composition of any bronze door, that so wide and richly decorated edging never overlaps the narrative scenes. Narrative panels can optionally be modelled on hypothetical only hagiographic miniatures, so their comparative analysis is virtually impossible.

In contrast, the composition of the door framed with bordure and the bordure itself are easier for comparative analysis. They may prove to be the key to the analysis of the workshop.

At the bottom of the left door the hagiographical account begins. Here the most crucial moment in the life of Adalbert is his election to the Prague bishopric. A commentary on this scene is provided by the figure of a monkey eating grapes. Accepting Hrabanus Maurus' (Rabanus Maurus Magnentius) interpretation of a monkey as 'similitudo' 'hominis', or a sinful man, this configuration should be understood as representing Adalbert who made a decision to serve God.

Above, the three successive scenes focus on the depiction of work in the vineyard: cutting off the grapes, eating the grapes and pressing them in a barrel. These images provide a commentary on the episcopal ministry of Adalbert.

At the top of the left door, we see Adalbert abandoning his episcopal duties and taking shelter in the monastery in Rome, similar to the birds represented on the border which sit in the tree of 'Peridexion' hiding. According to 'Physiologus' doves flock to the 'Peridexion' tree because they like its sweet fruit, and because it keeps them safe from the dragon. Any doves which

T. Węclawowicz, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie. Rozważania...*, op. cit.

leave the shadow of the tree are caught and eaten by the dragon. Thinking about this depiction in the context of St. Adalbert's life, it seems that the secure life in the monastery is understood only as an illusion.

Let us now move to the right door. As we can see in the photo at the top of the right door



Modena, cathedral church, south west portal, *Cutting the grapes* (photo by T. Węclawowicz 2015)

St. Adalbert arrived at the pagan country by boat. Figures of wild beasts including a tiger and a centaur appear close to him in the floral border. They represent the wilderness of the pagan tribes. On the other side Samson fighting with the Lion is featured as an everlasting reminder of the heroism of Adalbert's mission. And in the lower part of the right door, beside the scene of "Laying the Remains of the Saint into the Grave", there appears Hercules fighting with the man-eating birds at the Stymphalus Lake (in Arcadia). Saint Adalbert defended Christian faith like the great heroes from Antique Mythology and the Old Testament.⁷

Even this short and selective overview of the iconography demonstrates an interesting imbalance between the two doors. On the left door the nine panels have been used to show episodes from nearly forty years of Adalbert's life and on the right door the same amount of panels are devoted to a few days of his mission, culminating in his martyrdom by the Balts. At the same time there is a corresponding discrepancy in the degree of formal articulation of the foliage in the border of the two doors. On the left door it is rather feeble, underdeveloped.

7. A more detailed description and analysis of the scenes hidden in the floral decoration of the border see: L. Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe...*, op. cit.; Z. Kępiński, *Symbolika...*, op. cit.; T. Węclawowicz, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie. Rozważania...*, op. cit.



Ferrara, St. George's church, west portal, *Adoration of the Magi*, (photo by T. Węclawowicz 2015)

Gniezno, cathedral church, bronze doors, *St. Adalbert enters the Magdeburg cathedral school* (after Dobrzeniecki 1953)



On the right door, the foliage is lush and blooming. This floral ornament is not an image of nature but a symbolic message.⁸ It seems clear that the iconographic programme of the Gniezno Doors has a strong focus: to represent the Baltic mission as the fulfilment of Adalbert's life and his destiny, which at the moment of martyrdom blooms like a 'purpureus flos' ['crimson flower']. That

is how Adalbert's death was described by, St. Bruno of Querfurt in the early 11th century in so called 'Vita altera'.

Apart from the artistic value of the work itself, and apart from the workshop patterns, the complexity of the symbolic language and the erudition of the local Gniezno clergy equally is astounding. The anonymous individual who conceived such sophisticated iconography moved freely in the world of symbolic beasts and employed his knowledge for the apotheosis of the patron

saint. It is obvious that the author of the iconographical program of the Gniezno Doors as well as educated viewers, would have thought and communicated in the language of symbols and in a sense by a ritual of symbolic display.

As it was said before, the stylistic comparison of the border decoration leads us to Italy. Not to Lombardy, as it was previously

8. L. Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe...*, op. cit., pp. 327–335, 343–345; pointed out the symbolic role of floral ornaments till the middle of the 12th century. The mimetic representation of nature has appeared later, in the second half of this century.

suggested,⁹ but more to the south, to the province of Emilia, and the works of Wiligelmo of Modena and his follower Nicolò da Verona.¹⁰ This thesis can be supported and developed. It is crucial to say that Willigelmo's workshop has been credited with creating the decoration of the western portal of the church of Regular Canons in Czerwińsk on the Vistula River, approximately 200 km east of Gniezno. Willigelmo's is in fact the first attributed North Italian workshop working in Poland before the mid-12th century.¹¹

Needless to ponder, whether the master who had worked at Czerwińsk, made a wax model for Gniezno



Modena, cathedral church, south west portal, *St. Gimignano's funeral* (photo by T. Węclawowicz 2015)

9. M. Morelowski, *Drzwi Gnieźnieńskie, ich związki...*, op. cit., p. 96; L. Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe...*, op. cit., p. 294.
10. L. Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe...*, op. cit., p. 295. About works of Nicolò and Wiligelmo see: *Nicholaus e l'arte del suo tempo. Atti del convegno Ferrara 1981*, ed. A.M. Romanini, 3 voll., Ferrara, 1985; E. Kain, *The sculpture of Nicholaus and the development of a North Italian romanseque workshop*, Wien 1986; R. Salvini, *La datazione dell'opera di Wiligelmo nella cattedrale di Modena*, in: *Medioevo nordico e medioevo mediterraneo: Raccolta di scritti 1934–1985*, ed. M. Salvini, vol. I, Firenze 1987, pp. 299–311; Ch. Verzár-Bornstein, *Portals and politics in the early Italian city-state. The sculpture of Nicholaus in context*, Parma, 1988; Ch. Frugoni, *Wiligelmo. Le sculpture del Duomo di Modena*, Modena 1996.
11. This thesis put forward by Teresa Mroczko nearly half a century ago (T. Mroczko, *Czerwiński uczeń Wiligelma*, „Biuletyn Historii Sztuki” XXXIII (1971), pp. 215–226; T. Mroczko, *Czerwińsk romański*, Warszawa 1972; T. Mroczko *Polska sztuka romańska...*, op. cit., pp. 103–105) has been approved by the majority of scholars (e.g.: P. Skubiszewski, *Sztuka romańska w Czerwińsku nad Wisłą*, „Nowe Książki” 2 /550 (1973), pp. 68–70; Z. Świechowski, *Quelques sculptures du XIIe siècle en Pologne et leurs rapports avec la sculpture romane en France*, „Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français» 1973–1974, p. 8). Rafał Quirini-Popławski presented lately a comprehensive polemic (R. Quirini-Popławski, *Rzeźba przedromańska i romańska w Polsce wobec sztuki włoskiej*, Kraków 2006, pp. 93–98), but his arguments are more historical than stylistic.

Doors, or was it another craftsman who simply repeated some motifs from Modena and Verona. The realities of medieval artistic networks on the eastern borders of Central Europe at that time are impossible to decipher. However, the puzzling similarities between the Gniezno Doors and works of the Emilian workshops should be highlighted here: most of all, the unique disposition of the narrative panels framed by decorative borders resembles a similar composition of the decoration around the western portal of the San Zeno's church in Verona.¹² Besides, it is worth emphasizing that in the same church there are famous bronze doors which show a few scenes from the life of San Zeno himself. Amongst many Romanesque bronze doors, where Christological iconography is dominant, the hagiographical scenes on the Verona and Gniezno Doors are exceptional.

Furthermore, the details of the human and animal figures in the Gniezno Doors' border are very close in type and in iconography ornamentation executed by Wiligelmo and Nicolò. The double arcades frames in panels of the left wing at Gniezno resemble the arcade motifs in St. George's church in Ferrara also executed by Nicolò. The scene of Adalbert's funeral on the right Gniezno wing seems to be related to a scene of St. Geminianus funeral from the south-west portal of Modena cathedral.

In conclusion, it is still impossible to identify with certainty either the maker of the Gniezno Doors or the author of their artistic program. The concept of Italian relationship from Emilia province is actually still hypothetical, but it seems to be better highlighted in comparative analysis than relationship with the Meuse Valley, based mostly on historical context. Crucial here are the suppositions based on the parallel analysis of the portal decoration in Czerwinski. Art historian should in fact read the work of art like a text, and leave the written texts to historians.

12. This example has already pointed L. Kalinowski, *Treści ideowe...*, op. cit., p. 295, however he drew attention only to the design of floral ornament on pilasters shafts.

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Abstract

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The Romanesque Bronze Doors at Gniezno Cathedral

Church: Some New Remarks

Among many Romanesque bronze doors in Europe the old entrance doors of the metropolitan cathedral in Gniezno, in the North of Poland, are exceptional. For over a century many historians and art historians have been trying to understand and explain its iconographic phenomenon. The Polish, Czech and German scholars have so far been unable to identify with any conviction, either the iconographic models or artistic provenance of the workshop. Some connections of the alleged bishop to France were suggested and some well-known technological possibilities of foundry workshops at the Meuse Valley were emphasized. This "Meuse hypothesis" based mainly on historical suggestions was approved. However, it is important to emphasize the significant difference between the creator of the composition and of the craftsman who cast the bronze door. Years ago only Lech Kalinowski pointed out some general formal similarities to the North Italian sculpture.

The purpose of this paper is to develop Kalinowski's suggestions and to emphasise the puzzling similarities between details of Gniezno doors and some Emilian works executed by Master Wiligelmo da Modena and Master Nicolò. The concept of Italian relationship from Emilia province seems to be better for the comparative analysis than relationship with Meuse Valley based mostly on historical context. Crucial here is the additional, parallel analysis of the portal decoration in Czerwinsk Abbey.

Keywords:
Romanesque
sculpture, Bronze
door, Gniezno
Metropolitan
Cathedral Church.

Abstrakt

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Romańskie drzwi z brązu w katedrze gnieźnieńskiej.

Kilka nowych uwag

Słowa kluczowe:
rzeźba romańska,
drzwi brązowe,
Archikatedra
Gnieźnieńska.

Wśród wielu romańskich drzwi z brązu w Europie drzwi wejściowe do katedry metropolitalnej w Gnieźnie są wyjątkowe. Od przeszło stu lat wielu badaczy próbowało zrozumieć i wyjaśnić ich treści ikonograficzne. Jednakże w przeciwieństwie do badań nad jakością artystyczną Drzwi, rezultaty badań w literaturze polskiej, czeskiej i niemieckiej są w istocie skromne. Nie udało się do tej pory przekonywająco zidentyfikować ani modeli ikonograficznych, ani proveniencji artystycznej i warsztatowej. Skupiano się na problematyce historycznej, m.in. na osobistych relacjach hipotetycznych fundatorów biskupich z Francją i podkreślano możliwości technologiczne warsztatów odlewniczych w dolinie Mozy. Owa „mozańska hipoteza” utrwaliła się w literaturze niemal jako pewnik. Należy jednak podkreślić znaczącą różnicę między aspektem artystycznym a technologicznym, czyli między twórcą kompozycji a rzemieślnikiem, który odlewał drzwi z brązu. Lata temu tylko Lech Kalinowski zwrócił uwagę na pewne ogólne formalne podobieństwa detali Drzwi Gnieźnieńskich do rzeźby północno-włoskiej.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest rozwinięcie spostrzeżeń prof. Kalinowskiego i przedstawienie relacji formalnych między dekoracją Drzwi a niektórymi dziełami regionu Emilii wykonanymi przez Mistrza Wiligelmo i Mistrza Nicolò. Wskazanie w analizie porównawczej środowisko emiliańskie lepiej tłumaczy proveniencję artystyczną Drzwi, niż owa „hipoteza mozańska”, oparta przede wszystkim o spekulacje historyczne. Ponadto istotna jest tu dodatkowa argumentacja poparta analizą dekoracji portalu w Opactwie Czerwińskim.