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e-mail: zeltite.barsevska@du.lv

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The Architecture of Preiļi Chapel

Ilmārs Dirveiks

*Daugavpils University, Institute of Art
Vienības Street 13 – 230, Daugavpils, LV-5401, Latvia
dirveiks@gmail.com*

Abstract

Preiļi chapel was built in 1817. It is a remarkable example of the late classical period manor building in Latgale of the 19th century. The chapel characterizes oeuvre of the architect Vincenzo Macotti, which is an important personality in the history of art and architecture in Latgale. The tombs of Borh family who were the owners of Preiļi Manor are typologically rare monuments, and, among others, highlight the rich cultural and stratigraphic information (here is an ancient crypt beneath the present crypt).

Key words: Preiļi Chapel, Tomb, Gable, Portico, Vault, Cladding, Cupola.

Introduction

The basement (tomb) part of Preiļi Manor Chapel was surveyed in the summer of 2013 (Dirveiks 2013). The building is located at the northern entrance gate of Preiļi Castle Park (municipal address: Preiļi, Kārsavas Street 4). In order to develop a theoretical framework before preparing the optimal reconstruction project, a visual technical and architectural inspection of the building was carried out. Primarily, the acquired information is for the chapel managers and planners to facilitate the planning of the building work in good time.

Preiļi chapel: history, architecture, nowadays

Although there is no documented evidence, it is likely that Preiļi chapel was designed by the Italian architect Vincenzo Macotti, who was a friend of the Borh family and built the manor and castle chapel in Varakļāni (1814).

Preiļi chapel is a plain analogue of Varakļāni chapel building. Both buildings are nearly identical, only compositional arrangement of parts is different. There are signs of a later 19th century rebuilding in Varakļāni chapel – apparently a clumsy addition, extending the porch to create a larger underground space. In fact, the project of Varakļāni chapel was used three years later in Preiļi without any specific modifications.

Local dean Skibņevskis consecrated Preiļi chapel on September 20, 1817. Construction of the building was funded by the estate owner Joseph Heinrich Borh (1751–1835). The

ground floor was used as part of a memorial room and a chapel for worship. The Borhs' family tomb was installed underground. The Preiļi Manor visiting log of 1829 is very important for the architectural research of the building. It gives an overall picture of the situation shortly after the building was built.

It is mentioned in the description of the visiting log that the main entrance of the chapel had seven stone stairs. This could probably be understood as stone or brick steps. The first half of the 20th century photographs featured remains of bricked steps (Figure 1). In the fronton above the columns, there was polychrome painted representation of the care of god – a triangle with God's eye in the middle (not preserved). The chapel roof was covered with painted green tin, but on the top of the roof was a wooden sphere with a cross. The chapel had a balcony for singers. It is noted that under the chapel there is a tomb for the family members of the count. Unfortunately, in 1829 the chapel cellar was not described in more detail.

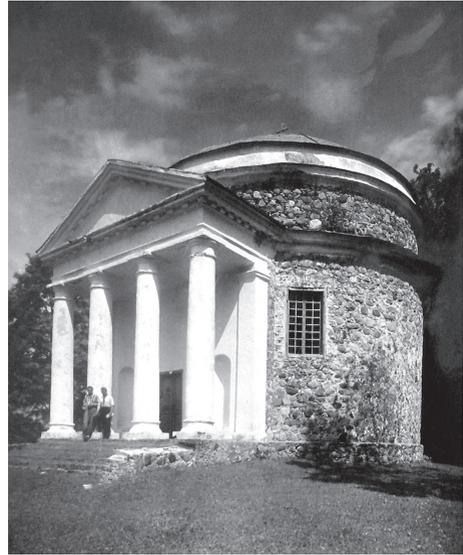


Figure 1. View to the chapel in the 1930's (MDC Nr. 2334-2-KM).

In the 1860's Michael Borh began to arrange the sale of his property and moved to Vitebsk. In 1866 Borh sold Preiļi village to an English trader from Manchester Johan Fredrik Heinrik. Only the chapel was left unsold (Anspaks 1996: 44).

In 1919 the chapel was demolished and in its place an atheist club called "Closer to the Light" was installed. During the period between wars, the chapel became the property of the Roman Catholic Church. After the World War II, the chapel was taken over by the state and gradually completely vandalized. There was a broken out hole on the top of the central vault of the tombs.

The historic windows and doors, wooden balconies and stone entrance stairs disappeared during 1991. The basement entrance has been bricked up since 1978. The restoration project of the chapel was developed in 1992 (architect A. Lubgans). Starting renovations in the 90's, the building was saved from sudden collapse, because it was unused for a long time. Looking objectively from today's perspective the accomplished work has allowed the building to survive into the 21st century. After 1995, when the Roman Catholic Church regained its ownership of the chapel, it has been gradually restored. In 2005, while carrying out the new reconstruction and improvement project, the chapel was given a new tin roof with cupola and a cross on top, along with facade and interior repairs. In 2007 the stairs to basement were renewed and drainage around the building was installed.

As early as in the year 2000 archaeological excavations revealed that the chapel building was located in the former grave site from the 17th/18th century. Hypothetically, this could be the place where a church was built in 1676. However, there is no evidence found so far (Vilcāne 2010: 206). The archaeological excavation lead by Antonija Vilcāne was carried out in the cellar in 2008. The archaeological research discovered very important and interesting information (including a rare find – front part of the uniform dress). Burials were found and it is clear that the present chapel was built on an older one. It is expected that older structures have survived from the 18th century tomb – a circular room covered with brick cupola. It is likely that the outside of the cupola was covered by a roof.

The tomb room is covered with brick vaults. Space is divided by four square-shaped posts, making a total of nine bays. Central aisle and four neighbouring aisles are covered with cross vaults. The other aisles are relatively triangular according to the plan. There are arch formwork boards preserved in the two small triangular shape aisles. Originally they were boards from a wooden roof of another building. Currently, the tomb has two ventilation openings, but the description in 1829 mentioned only one. The space of the old tomb was excavated in the central aisle (among four posts). The planning scheme of the oldest tombs actually is analogous to the new one for the chapel construction period. The spatial composition of the 18th century tomb has been simple – irregularly shaped circular building with one entrance and one ventilation hatch. The old tomb walls are built of stone, using bricks for the openings and the cupola, where some brick coating still remains (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Central vault and remaining constructions of the old barrow in the centre (Photo by I. Dirveiks).

Most likely, in 1817 the cupola of the old tomb was demolished leaving some of the lower level brick layers which are now visible. The new entrance was aligned with the old one. From outside the entrance opening is lower than the surrounding ground level. There are eight steps down from the brink of the old entrance until approximate floor level of the tomb. The old tomb floor was made from bricks with dimensions of 6 x 13 to 13.5 x 30 cm and the surface has the characteristic finger streaks left by craftsmen. Analogue features

are found on the cupola bricks. Circular bypass, of course, was not meant to be functional, but it has a constructive role (Figure 3).

Nowadays, however, the bypass is one of the original key elements of Preiļi tomb, which is used to attract visitors.

The new chapel and the crypt of 1817 was not built exactly on top of the old “circle” type walls. Two of the four poles which supported vaults were laid on the old walls of the building so that the support pole edge coincides with the edge of the wall. The other two poles are set away from the old walls. It must be noted that the discrepancy could be explained by the fact, that the old

tomb wall did not have a perfect circle configuration. Given the asymmetric positioning of the support poles, namely, the two poles being directly on the walls of the old tombs, one must pay attention to the condition of the covering of the room. However, neither the stakes nor the vaults have any horizontal cracks observed in them, which could point to the support compaction and deformation of the vaults. In addition, under these posts additional masonry to the old tomb wall was created in 2008. At the bottom of the old tomb exit there is a small place paved with bricks.

Preiļi manor chapel with the tomb is a remarkable example of the late classical period Latgale manor buildings. The chapel characterizes Vincenzo Macotti, who was a significant personality in the art and architectural history of Latgale. The tombs of the manor owners are typologically rarer monuments, which, among others, are highlighted by the rich cultural and stratigraphic information (tomb beneath the tomb).

The current value of the tomb is its spatial resolution (composition of vault bays), as well as the old structure of the revealed tomb burials.

Conclusions

Currently the general aim of the tombs' renovation is connected with the development perspective of the entire Preiļi palace complex. This is a unified manor ensemble: the castle, garden (site of the old castle), chapel (the crypt) and stable. The tomb's full use for memorials and tourism function may be successfully carried out only in the context of using the entire complex. At present, the actual sequence of events is contrary to the scheme outlined above: the chapel (the tomb), garden (site of the old castle), stable and castle.

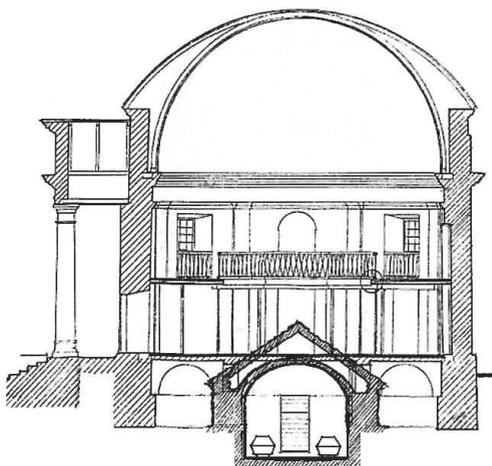


Figure 3. Location of the old 18th century barrow below the new building (I. Dirveiks' sketch).

Primary task of a practical restoration of the tomb is to prevent damage to the basement constructions, and to provide the conditions for further survival of the building alongside the complex reconstruction measures without compromising the heritage value of the building.

Preiļi estate tomb is no longer used. Nowadays it has cultural and historical significance. In such case, it would be possible to give the public access to the tomb attributing to it an educational function. Therefore, the further restoration task of the tomb as a unique cultural, historical and architectural monument is to display the parts of the manor complex and to include them in the active tourism routes, thus granting public access.

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