



Wawel - History of the Castle

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Wawel is a limestone hill in the centre of Kraków upon the Vistula River with a complex of impressive historical monuments of unique historical and artistic values. This extraordinary sanctuary determines the Poles' identity, is their national and cultural symbol. Wawel used to be the seat of Polish rulers, their necropolis and place where the Polish history took shape.

Wawel of the Piast dynasty

Towering above its vicinity and surrounded by swamps, the rock of 228 m above the sea level attracted human groups since the beginning of the Palaeolithic period as early as 100,000 years BC. In the 9th century Wawel was the centre of the Vistulan tribes' union. At the end of the 10th century Boleslav the Brave captured the Wawel burgh and incorporated the Lesser Poland in the Piast state. In 1000 the Kraków bishopric was established as part of the Gniezno archdiocese and the Wawel cathedral building was erected. In the 1st half of the 11th century the stone pre-Romanesque buildings were erected in connection with the ruler's residence of sacral and secular nature, e.g. the four-apse rotunda of St. Felix and St. Adaukt, the baptistery rotunda at the cathedral, the "quadrangular building."

During the reign of Casimir the Restorer in the years 1034-1058 Wawel became the main capital of the state. The reconstruction of ruler's residence started a new phase of construction, already in the Romanesque style (palace with the two-storey hall, the so-called hall of twenty-four pillars with a chapel, the palace basilica of St. Mary of Egypt). In the 2nd half of the 12th century Wawel became a burgh of extraordinarily high importance with the number of sacral buildings reaching ten and the expanded residential complex.

At the turn of the 13th and 14th century the hill was surrounded with a stone defensive wall at the site of the previous wooden and earth works. Clear division was then established between the upper castle, that is, the royal residence (constructed throughout the entire 14th century) and the lower castle which provided service and economic facilities. At the initiative of Władysław the Elbow-high and with participation of Bishop Nanker the Gothic Cathedral was constructed and consecrated in 1364. In the 14th century and the 1st half of the 15th century, during the reign of Władysław Jagiełło, the castle fortifications were reconstructed and expanded (towers: Jordanka, Złódziejska, Lubranka, and the Lower Gate defensive complex).

Heyday during the reign of the Jagiellon Dynasty, decline in the 17th and 18th centuries

The peak period of the development of Wawel's architecture and artistic culture coincides with the rule of the Jagiellon Dynasty, particularly Sigismund the Old and Sigismund Augustus. In the years 1506-1534 the Gothic palace was rebuilt into the Renaissance residence with the magnificent Arcade Courtyard. The royal Sigismund Chapel, the model work of the Renaissance art in Poland, was added to the Cathedral in the years 1519-1533.

After the fire of 1595 a part of the residence was reconstructed in the early Baroque style. At the northern wing of the palace Giovanni Trevano, the royal architect directing the works, erected two towers: Sigismund III Vasa's tower and the so-called Sobieski's tower. In the years 1655-1657 the palace was destroyed by the Swedes. The greatest catastrophe in the history of the castle was caused by the fire of 1702. Started by the Swedish soldiers, the fire devoured the Renaissance interior decoration. The act of destruction was completed by the partitions of Poland. In 1795 the Prussians stole the coronation insignia that were irretrievably lost. With the



loss of independence, Wawel became the relic of national remembrance in the spirit of the Romanticism. It was here that the national history was taught.

Time of partitions and world wars

Throughout the majority of the 19th century the hill was occupied by the Austrian troops. The lower Wawel castle was destroyed through the demolition of, among others, the Gothic churches of St. Michael and St. George, the cathedral school, Priest Borek's house and the Lower Gate complex. In 1846 Kraków was finally incorporated to the Austrian Monarchy and turned into a fortress. The hill was encircled with defensive walls with bastions, while crownwork fortifications erected in the years 1790-1792 by Polish engineers were heightened. The royal palace and the Seminary building were turned into military barracks. In the south-west part of the hill the large hospital building was erected, and the site of demolished vicars' houses now accommodated the convalescents' home.

The thorough restoration of the cathedral and the adjacent buildings took place in the years 1895-1904 under the direction of Sławomir Odrzywolski, and in the years 1905-1914 by Zygmunt Hendel. In 1905 works started on the renovation of the palace, and from 1916 they were led by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz. In 1921 the so-called Herbowa (Coat of Arms) Gate and the viewing loggia were erected on the northern side. In the inter-war period Wawel functioned as the residence of the head of the country.

During the Second World War the hill housed the occupational authorities of the General Government and Hans Frank. The so-called royal kitchens and the Austrian hospital were reconstructed; on the southern side the Bernardine entrance gate was constructed in 1942. After 1945 one of the Austrian hospital buildings and the convalescents' home were demolished, and a new structure was erected to house the offices of the Royal Castle at Wawel Hill.

Today Wawel Hill is a monument of the national past, a historical residence comprised of several museum exhibitions located in the palace building and the old royal kitchens. The Cathedral Museum is a separate unit presenting items related to the history of the chapter, historical examples of gold smithery and weaving, paintings and sculptures.