

BETWEEN DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE AND PROPAGANDA:

MIRACULOUS IMAGES OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN MARIAN PILGRIMAGE CHURCHES IN SLOVENIAN STYRIA

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Resumo: *O propósito deste artigo é discutir vários aspetos das representações milagrosas da Virgem Maria em várias igrejas selecionadas de peregrinação de Maria na Estíria, Eslovénia. O artigo tem como principal foco as práticas devocionais e o contexto propagandista de tais representações. Ao longo da história, os originários da Estíria (eslovenos e austríacos) eram especialmente ligados à Virgem Maria enquanto patrona das terras de Habsburgo. Consequentemente, as imagens milagrosas de Maria e os seus vários tipos eram extensivamente difundidos. A grande popularidade da Virgem Maria ou o seu carácter milagroso, atribuído às suas representações, resultou na fundação de muitas rotas de peregrinação e igrejas. A importância destas imagens pode ser verificada através de ex-votos, livros de milagres e representações de milagres nos interiores das igrejas, imagens-reíquias e várias práticas devocionais¹.*

Palavras-chave: *Virgem Maria; Imagem milagrosa; Livro de milagres; Peregrinação; Propaganda.*

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to discuss different aspects of the miraculous depictions of the Virgin Mary in selected Marian pilgrimage churches in Styria, Slovenia. The paper focuses in particular on the devotional practices and propaganda context associated with such depictions of the Virgin Mary.*

Throughout history Styrians — Slovenian and Austrian alike — have been particularly strongly attached to the Virgin Mary as the patron of the Habsburg lands. Consequently, miraculous images of the Virgin Mary in various forms were widespread. The immense popularity of the Virgin Mary and the miraculousness attributed to her images encouraged the foundation of many pilgrim routes and churches. The importance of such images can be seen in ex-votos, miracle books, the depictions of miracles in church interiors as well as the numerous holy cards, not to mention the diverse devotional practices².

Keywords: *Virgin Mary; Miraculous image; Miracle book; Pilgrimage; Propaganda.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of Marian iconography dates back to the beginnings of Christianity in the territory of present-day Slovenia and over time Slovenians also developed a strong attachment to the pilgrimage tradition. Alfred Hoppe already

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over a century ago emphasised that we are a pilgrim nation with an exceptionable number of churches³. In other parts of the former Austrian lands the first pilgrimage sites emerged on the graves of saints, while in Slovenia the first pilgrim churches were devoted to the Virgin Mary⁴. The majority of shrines to the Virgin Mary differ fundamentally from the sites dedicated to other saints, since the Virgin Mary's bodily relics are very rarely preserved — only her milk and hair are known as primary relics — so pilgrimage routes developed based primarily on the veneration of her images and consequently pilgrimage sites with miraculous images emerged⁵. Usually the pilgrims turned to the Virgin Mary with prayers connected to health and the body⁶.

Medieval pilgrimages were suppressed under the Reformation, which was embraced by numerous noble and townsmen⁷, however Catholic renewal began as early as the end of the 16th century. Here the Wittelsbach family from Bavaria was at the forefront, followed by the Habsburgs, especially archduke Ferdinand⁸, who, with the help of local bishops and the Jesuits, undertook the recatholisation of the former Austrian lands. The nobility and other wealthier individuals often participated financially in the renovation or construction of churches, since the majority of them were Protestants who, in 1628, had to choose between accepting the Catholic faith or being exiled and losing their assets⁹. Thus, at the beginning of the 17th century, their donations served as a symbol of belonging to the Catholic faith, while later they were mostly only a sign of prestige¹⁰. It was similar with pilgrimages: under the Counter-Reformation these also became an act of political expression and a proof of belonging to the Catholic faith, with the Virgin Mary becoming the central figure of the resurgence of the Catholic faith¹¹. Despite the fact that researchers have noticed a greater localization of religious activity during the Counter-Reformation, long-distance pilgrimages were revived and continued until the middle of the 18th century¹². Mariazell, which became a national shrine of the Habsburg family and their lands, had a decisive role in the Counter-Reformation in historical Styria¹³. At first, the Habsburgs were very favourably disposed to the Christian religion in general and to pilgrimages in particular, however, as early as Maria Theresa's time they began to issue decrees that would

³ HOPPE, 1913: 882.

⁴ KEMPERL, 2011: 29.

⁵ PETRIČ, 2008: 63.

⁶ RAMŠAK, 1996: 98.

⁷ KEMPERL, VIDMAR, 2014: 12.

⁸ KEMPERL, 2011: 20.

⁹ KEMPERL, VIDMAR, 2014: 12.

¹⁰ KEMPERL, 2011: 66.

¹¹ EBERHART, FELL, *ed.*, 1966: 31.

¹² TINGLE, 2020: 11.

¹³ EBERHART, FELL, *ed.*, 1966: 31.

limit these processions or even prohibit them. The latter actually happened in the reign of Joseph II with the introduction of the so-called Josephine Reforms: in a 1783 decree, processions, confraternities, and most feasts were prohibited, and a year later, the closing of pilgrim churches was ordered¹⁴.

In Slovenian ethnic territory approximately 60 pilgrimage churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary were built¹⁵. The construction of these churches in Slovenia as well as in some other, former Habsburg lands flourished in particular at the time of the Turkish sieges and by the time of the Counter-Reformation the veneration of the Virgin Mary had turned into a real national cult¹⁶. Styrian pilgrims most often attended pilgrimages at the largest state pilgrimage site in Mariazell¹⁷, and the influence of the latter can also be detected in the furnishings and the propaganda style of Slovenian churches.

The success of an individual's pilgrimage experience depended on the pilgrim's connection to the place of pilgrimage; the pilgrim's participation was therefore controlled by means of a structured practice (rituals, gestures, and also emotions). Consequently, the landscape of a pilgrimage centre, which comprised natural and also symbolic terrain with a set of accompanying legends, folklore, and narratives, was of key importance¹⁸, as well as constituting a basis for further propaganda¹⁹. The context of the latter as well as the associated patronage are of key importance in understanding the phenomenon of pilgrim routes and the veneration of the Virgin Mary. As early as the 18th century, the nobility and the bishops were no longer running church commissions, this role having been mostly taken over by ambitious priests²⁰. At the time of and after the Counter-Reformation, pilgrimage routes became so numerous that only those where propaganda was used — pilgrimage holy cards, miracle books or descriptions of miracles, etc. — attracted a large number of pilgrims²¹. In Slovenian Styria, miracle books certainly existed but they are not preserved or are considered lost. Evidence of these books can be seen in depictions of miraculous events in church interiors, next to which numerical marks were also inscribed. On the other hand, a much greater number of pilgrimage holy cards has been preserved.

¹⁴ KEMPERL, 2016: 151.

¹⁵ *Vide* HAJNŠEK, 1971.

¹⁶ DOLENC, 1987: 183, 185.

¹⁷ MEDVED, 1898: 47.

¹⁸ TINGLE, 2020: 116-117.

¹⁹ Until the 16th century, the Latin term for propaganda (like the related verb propagate) only referred to a plant/animal reproduction. It was only in the late 16th century that the term gained a new, religious meaning of spreading Catholic culture abroad, when Pope Gregory XIII formed a commission of cardinals *de propaganda fide*. The term was associated with religion until the 19th century, when it was first used in a military context (FELLOWS, 1959: 182). Nowadays it denotes «influencing, manipulating, controlling, promoting, changing, inducing, or securing the acceptance of opinions, attitudes, action, or behaviour» (BAYER *et al.*, 2019: 26).

²⁰ KEMPERL, VIDMAR, 2014: 13.

²¹ KEMPERL, 2011: 52.

1. TWO EXAMPLES OF THE VENERATION OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN SLOVENIAN STYRIA

The focus of this article is on two examples of pilgrimage shrines to the Virgin Mary in Slovenian Styria which have depictions of miracles in frescoes in the church interior: Sladka Gora and Zagorje near Pilštanj. The latter has already been researched in detail in particular by Renata Novak Klemenčič²² though Sladka Gora has not yet been systematically researched. Both churches have in common not only frescoes depicting miracles of the Virgin Mary, but also once extant lists of miracles or miracle books and numerous pilgrimage holy cards. At the time of the main pilgrimages both churches are thought to have made use of the special practice of a pilgrim procession, the so-called *pilgrim swirl* (explained below), which was characteristic of the rare shrines to the Virgin Mary²³ in Styria²⁴ and Lower Carniola²⁵. Another characteristic of both churches is that they are located in small hamlets, yet stand out because of their monumental presence, size and rich furnishings. However, two key differences between them are the time of their creation, although both experienced a peak of popularity in the 18th century, and the context of their patronage. The Marian church in Sladka Gora was built in 1754 by a priest, while the church in Zagorje was founded by the Counts of Cilli in the 14th or 15th century, but an artistically educated nobleman played a key role in the renovation and popularization of the church in the 18th century. Nevertheless, they both — the priest and the nobleman — decided on a complex Marian iconography and on emphasising the miraculous nature of an image of the Virgin Mary through the depiction of miraculous local events.

1.1. THE PILGRIMAGE CHURCH OF THE MIRACULOUS MOTHER OF GOD ON SLADKA GORA

According to the legend written in the parish chronicle after oral tradition, the pilgrimages to Sladka Gora began in 1738, when a discovery was made in the hollow above the village which triggered mass gatherings at the original Church of St. Margaret of Antioch in Sladka Gora. It is not known what kind of a discovery this was, however, since after this a new church was built and dedicated to the

²² NOVAK KLEMENČIČ, 2016.

²³ I have come across only two exceptions, which are not proven. Johann Weikhard von Valvasor cites the church of St. Bartholomew in Izlake (RAMOVŠ, 1975 [1977]: 49), while both the yearbook of the church in Sladka Gora (METLIČAR, ed., 2004: 167) and Niko Kuret also cite St. Vid near Ptuj (KURET, 1970: 235). If there was an established tradition of such a procession, it suggests that the cult of the Virgin Mary was strongly developed in these locations.

²⁴ In Styria, the pilgrim swirl was performed in Sladka Gora, Ptujška Gora, Šmarje pri Jelšah, Brestanica, reportedly in Zagorje near Pilštanj (METLIČAR, ed., 2004: 167; KURET, 1970: 235) and also Tinsko (ŽAGAR, [s.d.]).

²⁵ Zaplaz nad Čatežem, Primskovo, Ševnica, Žalostna Gora nad Mokronogom, Muljava, and Trška Gora are mentioned in connection with the pilgrim swirl in Lower Carniola (METLIČAR, ed., 2004: 167; KURET, 1970: 235).

Virgin Mary, it can be assumed that the finding was connected to the Virgin Mary. An ambitious priest, Janez Mikec, is thought to have founded a congregation of the Immaculate Conception in St. Margaret's church next to the altar of the Immaculate Conception as early as 1741. At that time the dogma of the Immaculate Conception had not yet been adopted (1854). The congregation is thought to have recorded more than 5,000 members in its first year. Since each year there were more pilgrims, around the year 1744 Mikec began the construction of the new church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which was consecrated by Archbishop Karl Michael von Attems on 25 July 1754²⁶.

The plans for the church were prepared by Maribor architect Jožef Hoffer (1700-1764)²⁷. The interior of this Late Baroque *Gesamtkunstwerk* consists of rich furnishings made by various workshops. The identity of the artist who created the high altar remains unknown²⁸, however, side altars were made by the sculptor and woodcarver Ferdinand Gallo (ca 1709-1788) from Celje. The altars in both chapels, both confessionals, and the pulpit were made in the workshop of Janez Jurij Mersi (1725-1788). The sculptures on the pulpit, on the crown of the façade and on the organ case were made by Jožef Straub (1712-1756), and the frescoes by Franc Jelovšek (1700-1764) between 1752 and 1753²⁹.

The miraculous statue of the Virgin is placed in the niche of the high altar. In her right hand she holds a sceptre, and in her left hand is the Child. They both wear crowns. The sculptor of this image is unknown, as is the precise dating. The statue represents the Miraculous Virgin of Sladka Gora — *a Baroque-type Pilgrim Mother of God* — for which an abstract geometric form is characteristic³⁰, with a rich, embroidered dress, from which only the head and the palms emerge. This type of miraculous images of the Virgin Mary started to become prominent in Slovenia only in the 17th century inspired by foreign models and started to spread only towards the end of the century. It is considered as the most popular in Slovene Baroque art. At that time, it was also popular to dress and adorn other types of miraculous images, which the Josephine Reforms prohibited as early as 1783. This marked the end of the phenomenon of *the Baroque-type Pilgrim Mother of God* (except in folk art)³¹.

²⁶ Parish archive Šmarje pri Jelšah. *Gedenkbuch der Pfarre Maria Sessenberg, 1334-1888*, 3-6.

²⁷ KEMPERL, 2012: 146.

²⁸ It is possible that Franc Jelovšek prepared a sketch for the high altar, however, this was never attested to in a document, and different stylistic characteristics indicate the possibility that it is a reconstructed older altar (possibly from the former church of St. Margaret).

²⁹ METLIČAR, ed., 2004: 105.

³⁰ Owing to the abstract nature of the image it is harder to differentiate between reproductions of these images (e.g. on the pilgrimage holy card, the paintings in other media, etc.) if they do not have any annotations (MENAŠE, 1994: 215).

³¹ MENAŠE, 1994: 214-216.



Figs. 1 and 2. Fragments of a fresco painting depicting the former, St. Margaret's, and the present Church of the Virgin Mary at the time of the construction³²

³² The figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17, 18, 19 are all from the author's collection.



Figs. 3 and 4. Pilgrimage church of the Miraculous Mother of God on Sladka Gora, exterior and interior

The miraculous image from Sladka Gora is placed in a heart-shaped frame in front of the stained glass, through which intense light permeates, giving the image a special ethereal character. The Virgin Mary looks like an apparition, and the positioning of the clouds, rays of light and the angel heads next to the image also contributes to this effect. According to inventory records, the stained glass was made in 1863. It can only be guessed what was in this place before³³; a hint can perhaps be found in the frescoes, which depict the main altar, however, the miraculous image is less visible owing to the poor preservation of the painting. From what can be gathered, apparently two silent figures originally stood next to the Virgin, possibly *putti*, while she was crowned by two angels or *putti* (not with a garland as today). The lanterns, now hung next to the image, were added later.

The main purpose of miraculous images was to strengthen piety³⁴, which was also enhanced using various forms of propaganda — such as for example depictions and descriptions of miracles or miracle books, pilgrimage holy cards, holy objects and processions. The latter played a particularly significant role especially at the time when religious-based medicine was still practiced. Illness was understood as a consequence of non-adherence to religious rules, which is why it was thought that patients could only recover with the help of prayers, penance, offerings, pilgrimages and the like³⁵. Such Christian traditions can also be seen depicted in the Sladka Gora frescoes.

The Virgin Mary is depicted as *the Baroque-type Pilgrim Mother of God* and as an apparition in the depicted miracles, while in the scenes representing her life she appears in a more «human» form.

The entire ceiling (the dome in the presbytery and the shallow dome in the nave, the half dome in the chapel, the ceiling under and above the organ loft), the triumphal arch in front of the presbytery and the organ loft fence are all decorated with frescoes based on the concept of *horror vacui*, and the central theme of the painting is Marian Year or *Annus Marianus*, the veneration of the Virgin Mary from Sladka Gora as well as her miracles.

More than 400 miracles are painted and numbered in the frescoes, suggesting that a miracle book once existed, however it is believed to have been destroyed in a fire together with the majority of other historical documents of this place of pilgrimage.

The frescoes also depict votive offerings (crutches, etc.) that were presented to the Virgin Mary of Sladka Gora. Unfortunately, however, such offerings have not been preserved. Furthermore, in the frescoes we can also find depicted the

33 NŠAM. *Dekanija Šmarje, Župnija Sladka Gora, Inventarium der Pfarrkirche Maria in Süsenberg im Jahre 1864*. XIV 24.

34 MENAŠE, 1994: 197.

35 ZUPANIČ SLAVEC, 2004: 120.



Fig. 5. The Miraculous Mother of God of Sladka Gora



Figs. 6 and 7. Fragments of the fresco painting depicting the present altar. The latter indicates that Jelovšek was familiar with the altar plan. It remains unknown whether he drew it himself

first pilgrimage holy card, which apparently existed even at the time the frescoes were made, which means that the creation of the miraculous image can be posited at the time before the work on the frescoes was begun. There is also a noticeable similarity between the holy card, which was printed on the 100th anniversary of the church and is still preserved, and the depiction itself.



Figs. 8 and 9. A fragment of the fresco painting presenting a miracle with a depiction of the original pilgrimage holy card

Gustav Gugitz mentioned three different versions of pilgrimage holy cards, which he dated to the 19th century. The first was published by Josef Martinz in Maribor, the second by Georg Fischer, while the origin of the third is unknown³⁶. In the large collection of later holy cards I have found five older and more important examples. The coloured one published by Josef Martinz is from the Maribor Archdiocesan Archives and is probably the same as the one Gugitz mentioned. From the National Museum of Slovenia are the coloured example which was made in Prague by Václav Morak in the 19th century and the uncoloured and unsigned one with an added poem which is connected to the 100th anniversary of the church³⁷. The last two examples are probably the oldest preserved: the coloured holy card, signed by Andreas Leykam from Graz is dated after 1781 and

³⁶ GUGITZ, 1956: 194.

³⁷ The same card though without the poem is also kept at the Maribor Archdiocesan Archives.

kept at the Maribor Archdiocesan Archives; I discovered the last example which is unfortunately not signed or dated in the collection of the collector Janez Mavrič from Gornji Grad³⁸.

Data on the number of pilgrims indicates that the propaganda of Marian pilgrimage site on Sladka Gora was hugely successful. The Congregation of the Immaculate Conception of Sladka Gora alone recorded more than 1,000 members each year (in 1741, the first year of its existence, there were more than 5,000)³⁹. It was a pilgrimage version of the congregation and a member's role only involved entering the congregation and making offerings. It is possible that it was precisely this influential congregation that took care of the propaganda for the pilgrimage site. Moreover, it is also possible the congregation commissioned the construction of the new church and the first pilgrimage holy card depicted in the frescoes.

Special processions, which took place until the last century, also attest to the popularity of this pilgrimage site. After confession, the believers took part in a pilgrimage penitential act in which they walked on their knees around the altar with the miraculous image. Among other things, a pilgrimage farewell procession, characteristic of Sladka Gora, is also connected to the miraculous image. After the last mass, the pilgrims one by one joined the procession directly from the pews. They would stare at the miraculous image and, while still singing, leave the church walking backwards, so that their view was constantly directed towards the Miraculous Virgin of Sladka Gora⁴⁰.

There was also another characteristic procession, which was performed the longest precisely in Sladka Gora, that is without interruption right up to the Second World War. Although the practice is considered defunct today, attempts have been made to revive this procession in recent years (especially in Sladka Gora). It is the so-called *pilgrim swirl* (Slo. *romarski vrtec*), a ritual pilgrimage dance or procession⁴¹, usually carried out the night before and in Sladka Gora on the eve of a main pilgrimage gathering on 13 August. It was also called *the Roman procession*, though only in Styria and Zaplaza in Lower Carniola. The procession is thought to have developed from an Old Slavic ritual dance, which was performed around pagan shrines or on top of graves. The oldest descriptions originate from pilgrimages by Slovenians to the Rhineland (Germany) in the 17th century⁴². The ritual seems to have spread from Styria to Lower Carniola⁴³. The name *swirl* (Slo. *vrtec*, *vrtimec*) probably originates from the word *spin*, since in this tradition the

³⁸ I would like to thank Mr Janez Mavrič for showing me his vast collection of holy cards.

³⁹ Parish archive Šmarje pri Jelšah. *Gedenkbuch der Pfarre Maria Sessenberg, 1334-1888*, 4.

⁴⁰ RAMOVŠ, 1975 [1977]: 69-70.

⁴¹ METLIČAR, ed., 2004: 143.

⁴² RAMOVŠ, 1975 [1977]: 48. See the work with all corresponding literature.

⁴³ KURET, 1970: 235-236.



Figs. 10-14. Holy cards by J. Martinz and by A. Leykam, a holy card with the poem, a holy card by W. Morak and a holy card without signature

Sources: Archdiocesan Archives Maribor, Collection Imago, box 3, Romarska središča, Sladka Gora; National Museum of Slovenia, Photographic documentation, Graphics Cabinet NMS, G-5583a and G-5584; personal collection of Mr Janez Mavrič, Gornji Grad

procession took the form of a swirl. However, it is not just an ordinary procession: some have also compared it to a game or a dance. The pilgrim swirl was led by an experienced pilgrim or leader who carried a cross with candles. They formed a procession at the church, usually arranged in pairs; girls would carry bouquets or garlands on their heads. While singing various Marian songs, the leader would then lead them in snakelike turns to a meadow near the church, where he led them in swirling turns until he reached the centre. Once in the centre, they stopped singing and the leader delivered a sermon. Afterwards they resumed the singing and returned to the church where they started reciting the litanies. The only two recorded deviations from this practice are the writer Prežihov Voranc's description of the swirl on Žalostna gora, where he noted that the leader of the procession

walked alongside the bearers of the image of the Virgin Mary⁴⁴, and my recent discovery that on Sladka Gora they formed a Marian monogram instead of a swirl⁴⁵. This specific Marian form of the procession, the pattern of Mariological liturgy and songs as well as the location of the practices in Marian pilgrimage sites highlight the markedly Marian character of the rituals. Later sketches of the swirl drawn based on oral tradition attest to the fact that the swirl occurred in almost the same manner on all pilgrimage routes.

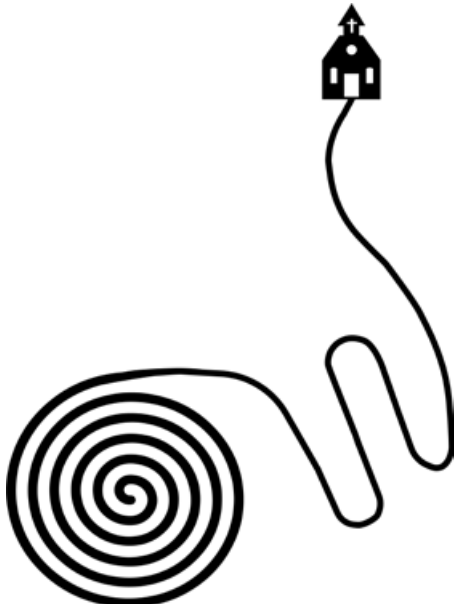


Fig. 15. A sketch of the course of the pilgrim swirl
Source: Personal archive of Christopher Koležnik, drawn after other sketches

It used to be a characteristic of pilgrimages that the pilgrims visited numerous churches. In Styria, a set pilgrimage gathering lasted several days, in which the pilgrims went from Ptujška Gora to Sladka Gora, then to Šmarje pri Jelšah and to Tinsko or Zagorje near Pilštanj⁴⁶.

1.2. PILGRIMAGE CHURCH OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS IN ZAGORJE NEAR PILŠTANJ

As in Sladka Gora, the legend of the origin of the pilgrimage church in Zagorje was also written down in the parish chronicle based on oral tradition. According to the legend, Mary appeared to the Count of Attems and his wife and ordered

⁴⁴ RAMOVŠ, 1975 [1977]: 48, 64.

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Ms Andreja Štunf for this information.

⁴⁶ The fact that the swirl tradition is linked to precisely these places (beside Brešanica and possibly also Izlake and St. Vid near Ptuj) in Styria seems interesting and worthy of further in-depth research.

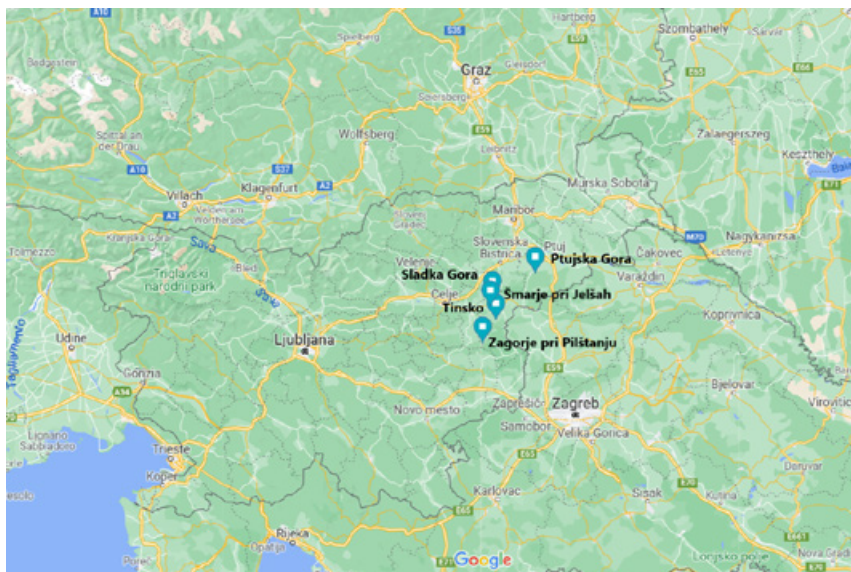


Fig. 16. A map of the aforementioned pilgrimage sites

them to build a church and dedicate it to her. Since the noblemen from Podčetrtek did not obey her, a year later she reappeared to them with the same order. Once again, they did not do anything, which is why she appeared to them again next year, this time with an order to build a church at the holy place in Zagorje, which was already known for numerous miracles. According to the legend, the count and the countess then finally built the church and dedicated it to the Virgin Mary of Zagorje⁴⁷.

The exact dating of the building of the church cannot be determined, however, according to research to date, it was first mentioned as early as 1458⁴⁸. Johann Weikhard von Valvasor wrote that the Gothic church was probably built as a donor church of the Counts of Cilli in the 14th or 15th century⁴⁹. There are clues as to the probable date of the church in the architecture itself: the room above the sacristy, which has a star vault with their coat-of-arms in the central boss, as well as the fragments of the fresco painting, can be dated to the middle of the 15th century; the nave of the church presumably originates from that time as well⁵⁰. In the 18th century the church was radically remodelled under one of the most important commissioners of art in Styria, Ignaz Maria Attems (1652-1732), as is evidenced by the presence of his coat-of-arms (on the triumphal arch

⁴⁷ Parish office Pištanj. *Gedenk-Buch der Kuratie Maria Sagorje*, 1872, 40, 49.

⁴⁸ BLAZNIK, 1988: 526.

⁴⁹ VALVASOR, 1877-1879: 360.

⁵⁰ NOVAK KLEMENČIČ, 2016: 52. See the work with all corresponding literature.



Figs. 17 and 18. Pilgrimage church of Mary Help of Christians in Zagorje near Pilštanj, exterior and interior



and on both side altars) as well as that of his first wife Maria Regina Countess of Wurmbrand (1659-1715; on the triumphal arch)⁵¹. Following this renovation, a legend emerged that he was the one who commissioned the construction of this church. He decorated it with high quality Baroque furnishings and commissioned one of his select painters, Matthias von Görz (1670-1731), to

⁵¹ ZRC SAZU, UIFS. *France Stele field notes. ZAGORJE pri Pilštanju* — ž. c. M. b. Notebook XXIVA, 27. 7. 1962: 4-5; CURK, 1967: 121, 126.

paint it between 1708-1709, while the walls in the nave were painted by Jožef Anton Lerchinger (ca 1720-after 1787) only in the 1770s⁵². The frescoes in the church in Zagorje also depict the glorification and veneration of the Virgin Mary, and the local miracles depicted, which first appear here on such a large scale and as part of a wider iconographic program, are of immense importance⁵³. As in Sladka Gora, the Virgin Mary is depicted in «human» form in the scenes from her life but as *the Baroque-type Pilgrim Mother of God* and as an apparition in the miracles depicted on the nave walls⁵⁴. The miracles painted on the ceiling of the presbytery do not show the Virgin Mary, but are arranged around the main fresco of Mary's Assumption.

The high altar and both side altars in the chapels were made during the time of Ignaz Maria Attems, after Görz had finished the frescoes sometime between 1711 and 1714. It is not known who designed the altars, however they have been attributed to the previously unknown marble sculptor Cristoph Lerschenberger. The stonemasonry was the work of Matija Pakh, while two other sculptors, Krištof Lente and a sculptor from Laško, probably Janez Gregor Božič (ca 1675-1724), also contributed. A peculiarity of the altars is that they are not made of wood, as is usual for the majority of other altars in Styria, but from stucco marble or *stuccolustro*. A miraculous wooden statue of the Madonna with Child is placed in the niche of the high altar; the form of the sculpture is reminiscent of the miraculous image from Maria Trost in Graz⁵⁵. The Child holds a grape in his hand, while both the Child and Madonna are surrounded by clouds, *putti*, angels and angel heads. As in Sladka Gora, this arrangement enhances the impression of divinity and makes the image seem like an apparition. The sculpture is older than the altar and judging by the posture, the hairstyle and the drapery, it probably originates from around 1500, while the coat and rays of light were added and the figures crowned during the Baroque period. The year 1741 is written on the crown, which probably attests to the time of coronation. According to some testimonies, the miraculous image became known for its miracles as early as the 13th century, which could indicate that an earlier miraculous image existed before this one⁵⁶.

⁵² NOVAK KLEMENČIČ, 2016: 70, 72, 87.

⁵³ MENAŠE, 1994: 293.

⁵⁴ These and depictions on holy cards suggest that on some occasion the miraculous statue was probably dressed as *the Baroque-type Pilgrim Mother of God*.

⁵⁵ NOVAK KLEMENČIČ, 2016: 99, 102, 105.

⁵⁶ ZRC SAZU, UIFS. *France Stele field notes. ZAGORJE pri Pilštanju* — ž. c. M. b. Notebook LXXVIII, 12. 8. 1933-XXIVA, 27. 7. 1962: 1, 3, 6, 14; CURK, 1967: 123-124.



Fig. 19. Mary Help of Christians from Zagorje near Pilštanj

The high altar reminds us at first glance of the high altar in Mariazell — Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723), 1692 —, however this is not the only similarity or connection to Mariazell that can be observed in churches in Slovenian Styria. In both of the churches discussed here it is possible to find depictions of miracles just as in Mariazell. Moreover, it is probable that in both places books or lists of these miracles once existed, which can also be found in the pilgrimage site in Mariazell. It is known that several miracle books were published in the latter, which points towards a methodical and especially highly successful propaganda strategy. Is it possible that much smaller pilgrimage sites in Slovenian Styria were modelled on it? This can be almost certainly confirmed to have been the case. The influence of Mariazell was so far-reaching that a town in Slovenia is named after it and in numerous churches copies of the miraculous statue from Mariazell were also venerated⁵⁷.

The art historians France Stele and Jože Curk mentioned the pilgrimage holy cards of the Virgin of Zagorje from 1738⁵⁸, while Gugitz knew of two holy cards from the 18th century: the first was not signed and the other was made by J. V. Kaupertz⁵⁹.

⁵⁷The example of Olimje shows the great importance that these copies had for Slovenian pilgrims — a preserved pilgrimage holy card of the aforementioned copy from Olimje does exist, which means that it was valued as an original miraculous image to which they made pilgrimages and which they venerated.

⁵⁸ZRC SAZU, UIFS. *France Stele field notes. ZAGORJE pri Pilštanju* — ž. c. M. b. Notebook XXIVA, 27. 7. 1962: 18; CURK, 1967: 126.

⁵⁹GUGITZ, 1956: 230. It is possible that Gugitz had mistaken Zagorje near Pilštanj for Sveta Planina above Zagorje. Two different holy cards made by Kaupertz are known for Sveta Planina (*vide* LOZAR ŠTAMCAR, 1986: 66).

Two rare holy cards and the original engraving plate are known today: the latter by Johann Peter Wurzer, made in Graz in 1769, which was used for printing more complex holy cards depicting local miracles around the depiction of the miraculous image; a holy card from the parish chronicle that replicates Wurzer's central scene with the miraculous image — the same print is kept next to the holy card by Josef Martinz in the National Museum of Slovenia. Wurzer's copper engraving plate is kept at the Celje Regional Museum, and was obtained through a purchase from Trubar's antique shop in Ljubljana in March 1972. A new print of this plate was released in 2008 for the purpose of the exhibition *Od škofije do škofije (From Diocese to Diocese)* and the associated catalogue⁶⁰.

Wurzer's holy card explicitly depicted the miracles, which can be seen in the frescoes as well. Since they included highly specific information, such as names, places and dates, it could be assumed that a list of miracles or a miracle book existed here as well, however, this can no longer be verified. Like Sladka Gora, this is a pilgrimage site that had a complex propaganda plan. This was complemented with various devotional rituals, which are also thought to have included the pilgrim swirl, according to Niko Kuret⁶¹. Despite this testimony, no other evidence, not even an oral tradition from elder residents, has been preserved. However, evidence of the popularity of the Virgin of Zagorje can still be seen on the walls, where some of the ex-votos are still exhibited.

CONCLUSION

Pilgrimages, especially Marian, present many points of research interest: historical and art historical, as well as anthropological, ethnological, sociological. In every pilgrimage practice it is possible to observe at least two common threads, a yearning to have contact with the divine and be touched by a supernatural power. Other important factors, identified in this article, which motivated pilgrimages and were key to their success were the popularity and prominence of a pilgrim centre as well as the associated potential to generate significant revenue. The latter was achieved in particular through the well-planned propaganda associated with a pilgrim route, and a perfect model for Slovenian churches was close at hand: Mariazell in Austrian Styria. Today, thanks to the propaganda strategies that were successfully introduced at that time, many artworks have been preserved, including folk art artefacts which are an extremely important source of knowledge about the time of our not-so-distant ancestors.

⁶⁰ I would like to thank Ms Gabrijela Kovačič from the Celje Regional Museum for the photographs of the engraving plate and the print of the holy card as well as the information on the provenance and the reprint.

⁶¹ KURET, 1970: 235.



Figs. 20-23. Johann Peter Wurzer, Coppery engraving plate, 1769 and its print, 2008; a holy card that is the same as the one in the chronicle; a holy card by J. Martinz
Source: Celje Regional Museum G/X-2 and G/X-2a; National Museum of Slovenia, Photographic documentation, Graphics Cabinet NMS, G-5572 and G-5573

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