

**АД РЫМА ДА МЯДЗЕЛА ДА МОСАРА: КОРПУС СВЯТОГА ЮСТЫНІЯНА  
І КУЛЬТ КАТАКОМБНЫХ РЭЛІКВІЙ У БЕЛАРУСІ, XVIII-XXI СТАГОДДЗІ  
FROM ROME TO MYADZYEL TO MOSAR: THE CORPOSANTO OF ST.  
JUSTINIAN AND THE CULT OF CATACOMB RELICS IN BELARUS,  
18TH-21ST CENTURIES**

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Ключавыя словы: рэліквіі, сакральная культурная спадчына, паломніцтва,  
гісторыя мастацтва

Рэзюмэ. Гэты нарыс на адным узроўні акрэслівае гісторыю культу  
катакомбных рэліквій святога Юстыніяна з XVIII стагоддзя да нашых дзён у

кантэксце беларускай этнакультурнай спадчыны. На іншым узроўні гэты даклад пераглядае асаблівую гісторыю Юстыніяна ў параўнанні з больш шырокай гісторыяй рэліктавых скульптур рымскай катакомбы *corpisanti*, каб падкрэсліць унікальнае значэнне па прычынах датавання і выжывання гэтага беларускага прыкладу сакральнай культурнай спадчыны ў больш шырокіх міжкультурных рамках.

Keywords: relics, sacral cultural heritage, pilgrimage, art history

Summary: This essay on one level outlines the history of the cult of the catacomb relics of St. Justinian from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the present day, within the context of Belarusian ethno-cultural heritage. On another level, this report reframes Justinian's particular history against the broader history of the Roman catacomb *corpisanti* relic-sculptures, to highlight the unique significance for reasons of dating and survival of this Belarusian example of sacral cultural heritage within a broader cross-cultural framework.

In 1752 a squad of *cavatori* (quarry-men) under the Vatican's remit descended into the Roman catacombs of Praetextatus and Callixtus on the Via Appia. Guided by a Church-appointed agent charged with verifying martyrial remains, they excavated skeletal fragments to satisfy a petition for prestigious catacomb relics from Antoni Tadeusz Koszczyc (b. 1720), Starost of Zarzecze and a noble scion in the eastern lands of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania.<sup>6</sup> Church agents authenticated the bones and 'baptized' them with the name and identity of 4<sup>th</sup>-century adolescent soldier and Christian martyr St. Justinian (or Justin), who then was most likely transported out of Rome's port in Trastevere by ship from the Italian peninsula to the Baltic coastal seaport of Riga, and then travelled over land to Koszczyc's territorial holdings in Myadzyel (Belarusian: Мядзел; Russian: Мядель; Polish: Miadzioł).<sup>7</sup>

However, when Justinian was translated in 1754 to the newly-consecrated Myadzyel church of the Discalced Carmelites, what was installed beneath the altar was not the first-class relic of an intact saintly body, but rather a so-called *corposanto* (Italian: "holy body," pl. *corpisanti*) catacomb relic-sculpture.<sup>8</sup> A distinct class of multimedia object produced for global export, *corpisanti* incorporated friable bones mined from the Roman catacombs within a life-size anthropomorphic assemblage imitating an integral beatific corpse. These numinous sculptures eliding relic and reliquary, and evincing a mode of re-contextualizing fragmentary originals within a spectacular montage related to the past in form, style and language, thematised the temporal passage between venerable and modern in a way that reanimated the grandeur of the past in honour of Rome, the papacy, and the Catholic Church, as well as elite patrons like Koszczyc who solicited these relics.

Today, Myadzyel is located in the center of Myadzyel District within the Minsk Region of Belarus. By the late 17th century Myadzyel had been acquired by the Koszczyc clan (from Vitebsk) and was under the aegis of the Vilnius Voivodeship; circa 1736 the Koszczyc had obtained town privileges from Polish-Lithuanian King Augustus III. Around the middle of the century Antoni Koszczyc undertook development of the town, including its religious landscape, and specifically promotion of Roman Catholicism, founding in

<sup>6</sup> The precise location of this starosta remains to be identified.

<sup>7</sup> For aspects of this history see Katarzyna Kolendo, "Woskowe figury z relikwiami Św. Klemensa biskupa męczennika z kościoła w Kiemliszkach i Justyna męczennika z kościoła w Mosarzu," *Sztuka kresów wschodnich* 5 (2003):163-176.

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to *corpisanti* see Massimiliano Ghilardi, "Antonio Magnani and the invention of *corpisanti* in ceroplastics," in Owen Burke, Francesco Maria Galassi, eds. *Ceroplastics: The art of wax*. Rome: L'erna di Bretschneider, 2019, 59-66. For other examples of *corpisanti* imported to the Baltic region see Ruth Sargent Noyes et al., "'Baltic catacombs.' Translating *corpisanti* catacomb relic sculptures between Rome, Polish Livonia, and the Lithuanian Grand Duchy circa 1750-1800" [version 1; peer review: 5 approved]. *Open Research Europe* 1, no. 18 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.12688/openresearch.13259.1>

1754 (circa) a community of Discalced Carmelites. Koszczyc's activities should be viewed against period self-fashioning by Polish-Lithuanian magnates in this period as mediators of the geopolitical, spiritual and cultural crossroads at the interstices of Eastern and Western Europe, at a historical moment when emerging divisions of European conceptual geography gave rise to the notion of an "Eastern Europe."<sup>9</sup> Koszczyc erected a monastery that included the masonry church of Our Lady of the Scapular, an exceptional example of the apogee of the Belarusian Baroque in the Grand Duchy staged as a particular renovation of *Romanitas* that inflected late baroque and rococo Italianate prototypes through central and north-eastern European iterative models, and largely propagated by architects from the Italian peninsula.<sup>10</sup> The Myadzyel church is rare for its central cruciform plan composed as an octagon within a quadrangle, appearing from the outside as a cube framed by three porticos (on the west, south and north sides), its entrance marked by a dramatic broken pediment. Inside, the structure was organized around an octagonal nucleus, surmounted by a massive dome pierced by lunettes and arched openings, crowned with an octagonal lantern. This configuration, atypical for the region during this period, share some similarities with the central-plan domed Church of the Heart of Jesus (Vilnius) built around the mid-18th-century and attributed to members of the Fontana family of architects.<sup>11</sup> Notably, around the mid-18th century immigrant Italian architects and masons with family ties to the Fontana were moving north and eastward from Warsaw through Vilnius and into the territories of Livonia and Vitebsk.<sup>12</sup>

Koszczyc could himself be the source for the idea of the distinctive central plan of the church he sponsored. He journeyed to Rome in 1752-53 for the Holy See's sanction by Pope Benedict XIV for the religious foundation in Myadzyel. In the papal city he may have seen and learned about the symbolic importance of the *martyrium*, a church or shrine traditionally built over the tomb of a Christian martyr with a centuries-long history in the *urbe*. The *martyrium* was associated with a specific architectural form, centered on a central element (usually the burial site of a holy martyr or altar safeguarding their relics) and thus built on a central circular, octagonal or cruciform plan. That the pattern of the martyrion church in the Western tradition was established by Constantine's foundations in Rome imbued this architectural form with distinctly Roman imperial resonances.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Catholic Church historians researched and even restored *martyria* in Rome, enshrining this architectural form in Catholic historiography as a unique sign and proof of the veracity of the cult of saints and relics.<sup>14</sup>

During his Roman visit Koszczyc also obtained the catacomb relics of St. Justinian from Benedict XIV, a pontiff perhaps best remembered today (together with his successor Pius VI) for presiding over the dissolution of the territory of the Papal States. In the face of a centuries-long Papal dominion under threat, under his purview the Apostolic Chamber mounted an Enlightenment counter-reform campaign to renovate the papal image, reaffirm

<sup>9</sup> For a comparable contemporary case in the nearby region of Polish Livonia, see my forthcoming essay, "Translatio reliquiae and translatio imperii between Italy and north-eastern Europe in the Age of Partition (c. 1750-1800): the case of the Plater in Polish Livonia," in *The Migration of Artists and Architects in Central and Northern Europe 1560-1900*, ed. Anna Ancāne. Riga: Art Academy of Latvia, forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> For a recent review of historiography on these artists see Rūstis Kamuntavičius and Ruth Sargent Noyes, "Lugano lake artists in the northernmost heart of eighteenth-century Catholic baroque art," *Review of Institute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania* 1 (2021): 25-44.

<sup>11</sup> Тамара Габрусь, *Мураваныя харалы: сакральная архітэктура беларускага барока*. Мінск: Ураджай, 2001, [Tamara Gabrus, *Masonry choirs. Sacred architecture of the Belarusian Baroque*. Minsk: Harvest, 2001, 226-27 (in Belarusian)]. Other comparanda include 17<sup>th</sup>-century sacral architecture, e.g. the Chapel of St. Casimir at Vilnius Cathedral, Church of the Visitation at Pažaislis Monastery (Kaunas), and Church of the Holy Sacrament (St. Kazimierz Church) in Warsaw.

<sup>12</sup> See the forthcoming essay by Rūstis Kamuntavičius and Ruth Sargent Noyes, "'An innovation in this territory': the Paracca family of architects in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish Livonia during the Age of Partition," in *Interpreting Italians Abroad*, ed. Sarah Lynch. Milan: Officina Libraria, forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar. *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999, 376. See further discussion in J. B. Ward-Perkins, "Memoria, Martyrs' Tomb and Martyr's Church," *The Journal of Theological Studies* XVII, no. 1 (1966):20-37.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandra Herz, "Cardinal Cesare Baronio's Restoration of SS. Nereo Ed Achilleo and S. Cesare De'Appia," *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 4 (1988): 590-620.

the illusion of integral empire, and refill depleted coffers, to this end exploiting to an unprecedented degree the fragments of ancient Roman martyrs in the catacombs.<sup>15</sup> *Corpisanți* relic-sculptures were a part of this phenomenon, serially produced as luxury artworks under the Church's purview c. 1750-1850. They were fabricated in as-yet unidentified workshops in Rome that employed multilayered techniques, utilized many different textiles often combined with wax and glue, fitted over a "skeleton" consisting of a wire and paper or wooden armature. Within this multimedia framework were inserted fragmentary bones, teeth and other catacomb remains.<sup>16</sup> *Corpisanți* were part of a larger period catacomb relic 'boom': from 1657-1791 cases of authentications of catacomb relics totalled over 35,000; for 1814-50 they reached 2,000. Though the precise number of *corpisanți* manufactured remains unknown, they totalled in the thousands and were globally distributed across over 20 countries on 5 continents, constituting a veritable global invasion or 'catacombization.'<sup>17</sup>

To ratify their genuineness and ensure the chain of custody, Justinian's relics were furnished with a so-called Authentic, a printed notarized certificate that baptized the sacred remnants with a name and identity, usually indicated by the supplicant (in this case Koszczyc).<sup>18</sup> This was according to period custom stemming from the fact that cases of so-called *nomine proprio* catacomb relics, where traces of a name were found in situ in the burial *loculus*, were exceedingly rare, and in the majority of cases of unidentified remains the requesting party could christen the bones themselves.<sup>19</sup> Thus Koszczyc might have envisioned his church as a re-imagining of an ancient paleochristian sacred structure to mark the site of his prestigious martyrial relics' new place of burial in Myadzyel, thereby re-making his homeland into a new Holy Land. Reinforcing the notion of Roman proto-archaeological inspiration are the circumstances of Justinian's installation beneath the altar *mensa*, which reflected a widespread practice throughout the Commonwealth for displaying whole-body relics within a *confessio* altar design with origins in the papal city, with the relics behind or beneath the altar table.<sup>20</sup> Catholic historians maintained the *confessio* was an ancient Christian liturgical architectural arrangement first initiated in the *urbe* to mark the site where the first saints "confessed" and died for their faith.<sup>21</sup>

Amongst the large numbers of *corpisanți* produced in Rome for global export, Justinian is not the only example imported to the Baltic region.<sup>22</sup> Justinian does, however, occupy a unique place, because this relic-sculpture can be confidently dated to 1752-54.

<sup>15</sup> Studies on the various aspects of these efforts include Hanns Gross, *Rome in the Age of Enlightenment. The Post-Tridentine Syndrome and the Ancien Regime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Jeffrey Collins, *Papacy and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Rome: Pius VI and the Arts*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Rebecca Messbarger, Christopher M.S. Johns, and Philip Gavitt, eds. *Benedict XIV and the Enlightenment: Art, Science, and Spirituality*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> See photos in Massimiliano Ghilardi, *Il Santo Con Due Piedi Sinistri: Appunti Sulla Genesi dei Corpisanți in Ceroplastica*. Città Di Castello: LuoghInteriori, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> See studies in Stéphane Baciocchi and Christophe Duhamelle, eds. *Reliques Romaines: Invention et Circulation des Corps Saints des Catacombes à L'époque Moderne*. Rome: École Française De Rome, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> On the Authentic see Landucci, "Pratica per estrarre li Corpi de' Santi Martiri da Sagri Cimiteri di Roma," in Ghilardi, *Saeculum Sanctorum: Catacombe, Reliquie E Devozione Nella Roma Del Seicento*. Città Di Castello: LuoghInteriori, 2020, 188-89. It is not known to the present author if the Authentic for Justinian survives today.

<sup>19</sup> On this practice see Philippe Boutry, "Les saints des catacombes: Itinéraires français d'une piété ultramontaine (1880-1881)," *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome, Moyen-Âge, Temps Modernes* 91, no. 2 (1979): 875-930.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Wieland, *Mensa und Confessio: Studien über den Altar der Altchristlichen Liturgie*, 2 vols. Munich: J.J. Lentner, 1906. On the *confessio* altar type in Poland in this period, see especially studies by Ryszard Mączyński, e.g. *Nowożytnie konfesje polskie. Artystyczne formy gloryfikacji grobów świętych i błogosławionych w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 2003; Idem., "Konfesje – ziemskie groby niebiańskich orędowników," *Spotkania z Zabytkami* XXIX, no. 10 (2005):8-11.

<sup>21</sup> Herz, "Cardinal Cesare Baronio's Restoration"; Steven Ostrow, "The 'Confessio' in Post-Tridentine Rome," in *Arte e committenza nel Lazio nell'età di Cesare Baronio*, ed. P. Tosini. Rome: Gangemi, 2009, 19-32.

<sup>22</sup> For examples of *corpisanți* in the Crown territories, a topic beyond the purview of the present study, see Marek Machowski, "Bardzo krótka historia relikwiarza św. Kandyda z kościoła w Choroszczy" and Helena Hryszko, „Analiza techniki wykonania figury św. Kandyda z kościoła w Choroszczy,” both in *Biuletyn Konserwatorski Województwa Podlaskiego* 10. Białystok: Wojewódzki Urząd Ochrony Zabytków w Białymstoku, 2004, 45-94 and 95-110, respectively.

This fact is important, because prior research on such relic-sculptures has fixed the year 1772 as a *terminus post quem* for their earliest possible date of manufacture.<sup>23</sup> Thus this Belarusian example importantly resets the chronology for *corpisanți* to some decades earlier. Evidence shows that after Justinian's translation to the new church in Myadzyel, under Koszczyc the saint's cult grew over the decades: in April 1773 Pius VI issued a papal brief establishing a brotherhood of St. Justinian.<sup>24</sup> In 1780 the hagiographic devotional booklet *Nabozenstwo Do S. Justyna Męczennika (Devotion to St. Justin Martyr)* published in Vilnius sets a brief *vita* of the relatively obscure martyr, an adolescent killed under Emperor Diocletian, against an account of the heroic and saintly Koszczyc's pilgrimage to procure the relics.<sup>25</sup>

The survival of this exceptional example of sacral cultural heritage is due in large part to its 'afterlife' in Belarusian history over the course of the centuries since Justinian's transfer from Italy to the Grand Duchy through the present day. Following the late-18<sup>th</sup>-century Partitions of Poland-Lithuania that resulted in the annexation of Myadzyel by the Russian Empire, and in the wake of the failure of the November Uprising in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic monasteries were closed and the Discalced Carmelites expelled from Myadzyel in 1834. In these circumstances the granddaughter of the original noble patron, Countess Barbara Brzostowska née Hrebicka, had the Justinian relics transferred to the church built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century on her husband's family's estate in the private town of Mosar (Bel. & Rus. Mocap; Pol. Mosarz), today in the Hlybokaje district of the Vitebsk region of north-western Belarus.<sup>26</sup> To this day, Justinian in Mosar remains a center of pilgrimage activity in the region.<sup>27</sup> That Justinian may also be the oldest surviving specimen of *corpisanți* relic-sculptures in the world today, makes further research and analysis of this particular relic-sculpture of particular importance.

<sup>23</sup> Massimiliano Ghilardi, "Le Simulacre Du Martyre: Fabrication, diffusion et dévotion des corps saints en céroplastie," *Archives De Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 183 (2018): 167-87.

<sup>24</sup> Kolendo, "Woskowe figury z relikwiami," 167.

<sup>25</sup> *Nabozenstwo Do S. Justyna Męczennika Chrystusowego Codziennemi Łaskami Y Cudami Słynacego Od W. Jmć Pana Antoniego De Kosein Koszczycza Starosty Zarzyckiego Do Kosciola Staro-Miadziolskiego Ww. Oo. Karmelitow Bosych Dla Rady Y Pomocy Wiernych Chrystusowych Panską Hoynoscia Wprowadzonego Ku Większej Czci Y Chwale S. Cudotworcy Y Naboznego Ludu Wygody Wydane.* Vilnius: w Typografii J. K. M. przy Akademij, 1780. Consultable online at [https://kolekcijos.biblioteka.vu.lt/islandora/object/kolekcijos:VUB01\\_000501479#00001](https://kolekcijos.biblioteka.vu.lt/islandora/object/kolekcijos:VUB01_000501479#00001) (accessed 23 June 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Documents related to Old Myadzyel and Mosar can be found in Vilnius, Cultural Heritage Center Archives of the Cultural Heritage Department of the Ministry of Culture of Lithuania (Lietuvos Kultūros Paveldo Mosklinio Centro Archyvas), F. 22, "Vilniaus vaivadijos valdyba," Ap. 1, B. 86. On this archive see Д.В. Морозов, "Материалы по охране памятников в Западной Беларуси (1921–1939 гг.) в архивах Литвы и Польши," *Вестн. Брэсцкага ўн-та. Сер. 2. Гісторыя. Эканоміка. Права* № 2. (2017): 5–15 [Dzmitry Marozau, "Materials about Cultural Objects Protection in Western Belarus (1921–1939) in the Collections of Archives of Lithuania and Poland," *Journal of Brest University. Ser. 2, History. Economy. Law* 2 (2017): 5-15 (in Russian)].

<sup>27</sup> On the tradition of catholic pilgrimages in the territory of current-day Belarus, with an emphasis on the north-western region, see Dzianis Filipchuk, "Асноўныя сацыялагічныя характарыстыкі ўдзельнікаў каталіцкіх пешых пілігрымак на Беларусі на прыкладзе пілігрымкі Барысаў-Росіца 2011," *Романовские чтения-9: сб. статей Международной науч. конференции.* Могилёв: УО «МГУ им. А.А. Кулешова», 2013, 180-181 ["The main sociological characteristics of the participants of Catholic walking pilgrimages in Belarus on the example of the pilgrimage Borisov-Rositsa 2011," *Romanov readings-9: Sat. articles of the International scientific. conference.* Mogilev: UO "MSU. A.A. Kuleshova", 2013, 180-181 (in Belarusian)].