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“Look, You Machame You Dog”: The Story of an Anti-Islamic Inscription on St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna

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Abstract

After the 1683 Siege of Vienna, an anti-Islamic inscription and sculpture – possibly representing the head of Muhammad – were affixed onto the tower of St. Stephen’s cathedral in Vienna. In the 21st century, this story highlights the difficulties that arise when the collective memory of the former Catholic empire or nation collides with human rights norms of the modern constitutional republic as well with the norms of religious dialogue in the Catholic Church.

Keywords: *Siege of Vienna 1683; St. Stephen’s Cathedral; anti-Islamic traditions.*

Introduction

In 1683, Vienna, the capital city of the Habsburg Empire, was besieged by the Ottoman army. The second Turkish Siege, as it is known, was from July to September 1683, when the Ottoman army was forced to withdraw.¹ The historical date is an important element of the identity and imagination of Europe, and Austria in particular, and at the same time it is a central point of reference for different political movements in the last 300 years (Mitterauer 1983; Bittmann 2008; Rauscher 2010; Feichtinger/ Heiss 2013a, 2013b). The anthropologist André Gingrich coined the term “frontier orientalism” to mean a set of local myths and narratives regarding the frontier between the Islamic and the Christian world which are deeply rooted in the public and folk culture of nations which have had encounters with the Ottomans (Gingrich 2015). In the case of Austria, the national myth of the siege of 1683 is fixed in the collective memory of the nation in manifold ways: national commemorative events on the anniversary of the liberation of Vienna, names of places, monuments and sculptures in the public space, a special memorial service held by the Catholic Church to mark the date of the victory over the Ottoman army,²

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¹ Overview: Scheutz 2010; political context: Kurz et al. 2005; Parvez 2003.

² The memorial of the “Most Holy Name of Mary” (in German: *Mariä Namen*), celebrated on 12 September, was introduced for the entire Catholic Church by Pope Innocent XI in 1684. The memorial was expunged from the general liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church (*Calendarium Romanum Generale*) in its revised version of 1970, and re-introduced by Pope John Paul II in 2002 as an optional memorial.



works of art, school books, etc. (Krasa 1982; Csendes 1983; Vocelka 1983).



This element of the identity of the imagined community of Austria is still celebrated and instrumentalized, especially by the “Freedom Party Austria”.³

In this paper, I will deal with a particular element of this “memory of the Turks” (*Türkengedächtnis*) which is connected with St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna, the central focus of collective memory in the Danube monarchy and modern national Austrian history.

“Turk’s Head” and Inscription on the Southern Tower of St. Stephen’s Cathedral

During the battle of 1683, the Gothic cathedral of St. Stephen’s in Vienna was also damaged. Probably in the course of the restoration of the church in 1686,⁴ a stone sculpture of the head of a bearded man with a turban was affixed to the high Southern tower. Below it is an inscription which reads: “*Schau du Machame du Hund*” (“Look, you Machame, you dog”) in letters 11 centimetres high (see the Photo on the left⁵). Close to the inscription, and

approximately at the same height, is a ball made of red marble, representing the cannonballs of the Ottoman army which hit the tower during the siege, and the date 1683 is engraved into the wall of the tower. Like “Mahomet” or “Machometus”, “Machame” is a variant of the Latin names of the prophet of Islam. Head and inscription were positioned in a prominent place on the western side of the high tower, at a height of 33 meters. The symbol of the victory over the archenemy was intended to be visible from the main areas in front of the cathedral. In the literature, the sculpture of the head is usually

³ For example, during the campaign for the city elections in Vienna in 2010, the FPÖ distributed a brochure with comics under the title “*Sagen aus Wien*” (Legends from Vienna) which compares the so-called Turkish siege in 1683 to the present political and social situation in the city. On 12th September 2016, the party celebrated the 333rd anniversary of the end of the Turkish siege with an event in the Palais Ferstel in Vienna called “*Abendland beschützen. Damals wie heute*” (Protecting the Occident - then and now).

⁴ Interview with the present master-builder of St. Stephen’s cathedral, DI Wolfgang Zehetner, 11 February, 2016, office of the building authorities of the cathedral, Vienna.

⁵ Photo credits: Ernst Fuerlinger, 2016.

referred to as “Turk’s head” (e.g. Feichtinger/ Heiss 2012, p. 54).⁶ In my opinion, the sculpture and the inscription should be perceived in a combined way, as a whole, and the head could be interpreted as a representation of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad. This would be in line with a long tradition of anti-Islamic Roman sculptures on European cathedrals, including depictions of Muhammad (Lange 2004).

The main insult in this short text is “dog”. It is not entirely clear why this particular term was used. In Patristic and medieval literature, the word “dog” was used as a metaphor for both positive and negative. In its dark, negative meaning, “dog” was introduced to mean the evil, the heretic and the impure (Ferreiro 2005, p. 162ff). It was used for such groups which were seen as enemies of the church, especially the Jews. This use of the word “dog” was based on the New Testament, especially the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 7, Verse 6 “Give not that which is holy to the dogs”, and the end of the revelation to John which talks about the new Jerusalem: “But outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Revelation 22,15).

What could be the source of the inscription? In 1686, the year of the restoration of St. Stephen’s, a text was published entitled “You bloodhound Mahomet, how do you feel?”⁷ The title and its linguistic form seem to be close to the text of the inscription. This text – one of many about the victory over the Ottomans – could have been the source of the inscription.

In the 1870s, during another restoration of the cathedral, the Turk’s Head and the stones with the inscription were removed and replaced by copies.⁸ Obviously these objects were seen as an important part of the collective memory – almost 200 years after the so-called Turkish siege.

A Turnabout in the 1970s

Things changed in the 1970s, a hundred years later. According to ‘general opinion’, the Turkish embassy in Vienna made a complaint to the Archdiocese of Vienna regarding the head and the hostile inscription on the tower of St. Stephen’s.⁹ In the 1970s, especially between 1969 and 1973, tens of thousands of labour migrants recruited by Austrian companies came from Turkey and Yugoslavia to Vienna and other parts of the country. The then archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Franz König, considered the situation and ordered appropriate steps to be taken in this matter. The person in charge of carrying

⁶ See also Stephan Hadler: „Stephansdom, Türkenkopf und Spottinschrift „Schau, Mahumed, du Hund 1683“: Website “Türkengedächtnis”, source: <http://www.tuerkengedaechtnis.oeaw.ac.at/ort/stephansdom-tuerkenkopf-und-spottinschrift-%E2%80%99Eschau-mahumed-du-hund-1683/>.

⁷ Original title: Du Blut-Hund Mahomet, wie ist dir zu Muthe? Oder des Türkischen Reiche Anfang, Wachsthumb und Untergang. Franckfurt/ Leipzig: Christian Weidmann, 1686.

⁸ Interview with DI Wolfgang Zehetner, 11 February, 2016.

⁹ Personal information (email of 23 September 2015) from Dr. Annemarie Fenzl, formerly Secretary to Cardinal Franz König, who was Archbishop of Vienna at the time. In response to a request from the author, the Turkish Embassy in Vienna stated that there was no record of any such letter in its archives.

out the work was the master-builder of St. Stephen's, Kurt Stögerer, who decided to leave the Turk's head on the tower, but to cover over the inscription by plastering over it with tile grout. This was done so as to avoid a public debate on the matter, debate within the diocese and a conflict with the agency for monument conservation.¹⁰ Thus, the work was done almost secretly, which is the reason why it is difficult to find any documents relating to it in the cathedral archives today.

The readiness of the cardinal to react to the complaint of the Turkish embassy – if indeed there was a complaint – should be considered within the context of the Second Vatican Council in Rome (1962-1965), which brought around a change in the Catholic Church's relations with other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam. The church ceased its dark tradition of contempt, especially towards the Jews. In its declaration "Nostra Aetate" (1965), the Catholic Church confirmed the rootedness of Christianity in the Jewish tradition, its esteem for Jews and Muslims and its condemnation of any form of anti-Semitism. The social, economic and political context for this change of approach was the pluralization of the Austrian society due to large numbers of immigrants from Yugoslavia, North Africa and Turkey, migrant workers with a Muslim affiliation. The result was a situation of ambiguity: the traditional "other" was no longer outside, but inside the boundaries of the territory. For many people, it was a disturbing experience of strangeness which dissolved their earlier spatial perception of "inside" and "outside", those characteristics of the stranger according to Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 1993). And for many people, the presence of the "stranger", "Turks" or "Muslims" is still disturbing – more than 50 years after the arrival of the new citizens in Austria. With the new demographic situation which began in the 1970s, the old traditions of demarcation and contempt towards the "Turks" couldn't be maintained, and the church covered over the inscription.

The Covered Inscription on St. Stephen's as a Symbol

The covered-over anti-Islamic inscription on the high tower of St. Stephen's has become a symbol for the attitude towards Islam, Muslims and Austrians with Turkish origins today. Although the inscription is covered over, it is not completely hidden, and is still visible through the plaster, so it is still present. There is no open discussion about this part of history, – no active, determined cleansing of the collective memory. Similarly, although the old traditional role of the Muslims as archenemies of Europe is contained or tamed by modern human rights culture and by constitutional democracy, yet it is still present, alive, and the old patterns and stereotypes can easily be (re)activated and exploited, especially in times of crisis and global conflict.

¹⁰ Interview with DI Wolfgang Zehetner, 11 February 2016.

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