MEDIEVAL KRAKOW AND ITS CHURCHES: STRUCTURE AND MEANINGS

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Abstract:

The first part of this paper aims to analyze the pattern of the network of Krakow town churches in the Romanesque and Gothic periods and studies the role of these individual components of urban landscape taking into account the significance of their dedications (patrocinia) in the symbolic space of the town.

The rocky (Wawel) Hill, rising among the meanders of the Vistula River, constitutes the centre of Krakow. Since the very end of the 10th century it was the seat of the bishops and the ducal residence, and later it became the main residence of the Polish kings. In the Romanesque period ten churches and chapels were built here: the cathedral complex consisted of the baptistery chapel and two basilicas, and seven other small churches and chapels according to the concept developed in the early Middle Ages following the exegesis of the apocalyptic vision of St John the Evangelist.

Beneath the castle, along the main trade routes, four churches were founded in modo cruces. Some historians have suggested that the idea of a cruciform layout came from Prince Kazimir, known as the Restorer. In the second half of the 11th century the prince intended to re-create in his capital the layout of the imperial seat in Aachen, an arrangement rich in powerful association.

At the end of the 12th century, three more churches dedicated to the Roman Martyrs were founded in Krakow simultaneously as an attempt to re-invent the city as a similitudo Romae in its Early Christian glory.

The second part of this paper explains the distinguishing features of the cathedral church and other churches in town and argues that iconographic analysis of their architecture helps to explain their unique character and appearance.

During the 14th century the cathedral church was quickly becoming one the most important in the Kingdom, the true Königskirche. The idea of Christian Kingship was an important part of their iconographic program. Also the monumental basilical churches in town can be seen as a manifestation of Kingdom and Kingship. In contrast to the importance of the monumental basilical churches, the meanings of the small hall churches concentrated more on the devotion aspects.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages the city space gradually took on new symbolic meanings connected with the cathedral church as the sanctuary of St Stanislaw, Pater Patriae – the primary political patron of Poland.

The city of Krakow is unique in that its many medieval monuments – ecclesiastical as well as secular – have been preserved and still dominate the townscape. The medieval agglomeration can be clearly discerned in the centre of the contemporary city. A lot has been written about the history of Krakow and its monuments but the meaning of the structure of the medieval town still awaits a proper study. Most important is an analysis of the network of Krakow town churches in the Romanesque and Gothic periods together with the role of these individual components of urban landscape and the significance of their dedications (*patrocinia*) in a symbolic space of the town. There are also some important architectural elements which help create the sacral space of these monumental dominant features.

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In the Romanesque period ten churches and chapels were built here: the cathedral complex consisted of the baptistery chapel and two basilicas, and seven other small churches and chapels according to the concept developed in the early Middle Ages following the exegesis of the apocalyptic vision of St John the Evangelist. Probably the tallest among these structures was the double storey *tetraconchos* – the palace chapel of St Mary placed in the middle of the hill (Pianowski 1995; Węcławowicz 2005b). (ill. 1)

Beneath the castle, along the main trade routes, four churches were founded *in modo crucis*: The Holy Saviour in the West, St Adalbert to the North,
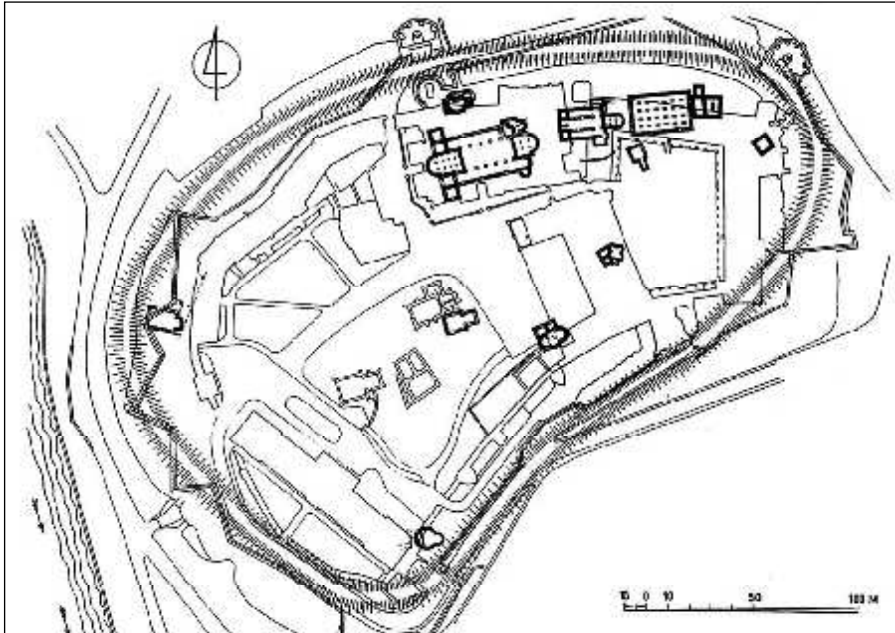
1. Krakow, Wawel Hill, ground-plan in the Romanesque age. In the middle the teraconchos – *the palace chapel of St Mary.* [after Pianowski 1998]

St Nicholas in the West and St Benedict on the South side. No sources shed any light on the circumstances of these four foundations, but their relics suggest that they were built in the second half of the 11th century. Some historians have suggested that the idea of a cruciform layout came from Prince Kazimir, known as the Restorer, but was realized only later by his son King Boleslaus. Prince Kazimir was related to the Emperor Otto III and spent his youth in Aachen and Cologne. In Aachen he might have seen the realisation of a similar imperial foundation – Otto III built three churches around the Carolingian palace complex with the chapel of St Mary. Just as in Krakow, these were dedicated to the Holy Saviour, St. Adalbert and St Nicholas (Michałowski 1989; Skwierczynski 1993, pp. 36ff). It is important to emphasise that the Christian name of Prince Kazimir was *Carolus*, and it was given to him to stress the relation between the young Piast dynasty and the rulers of the *Sacrum Romanum Imperium*. The Restorer was strongly supported by his uncle, the archbishop of Cologne, in his campaign to renovate the Church organization in Poland. All
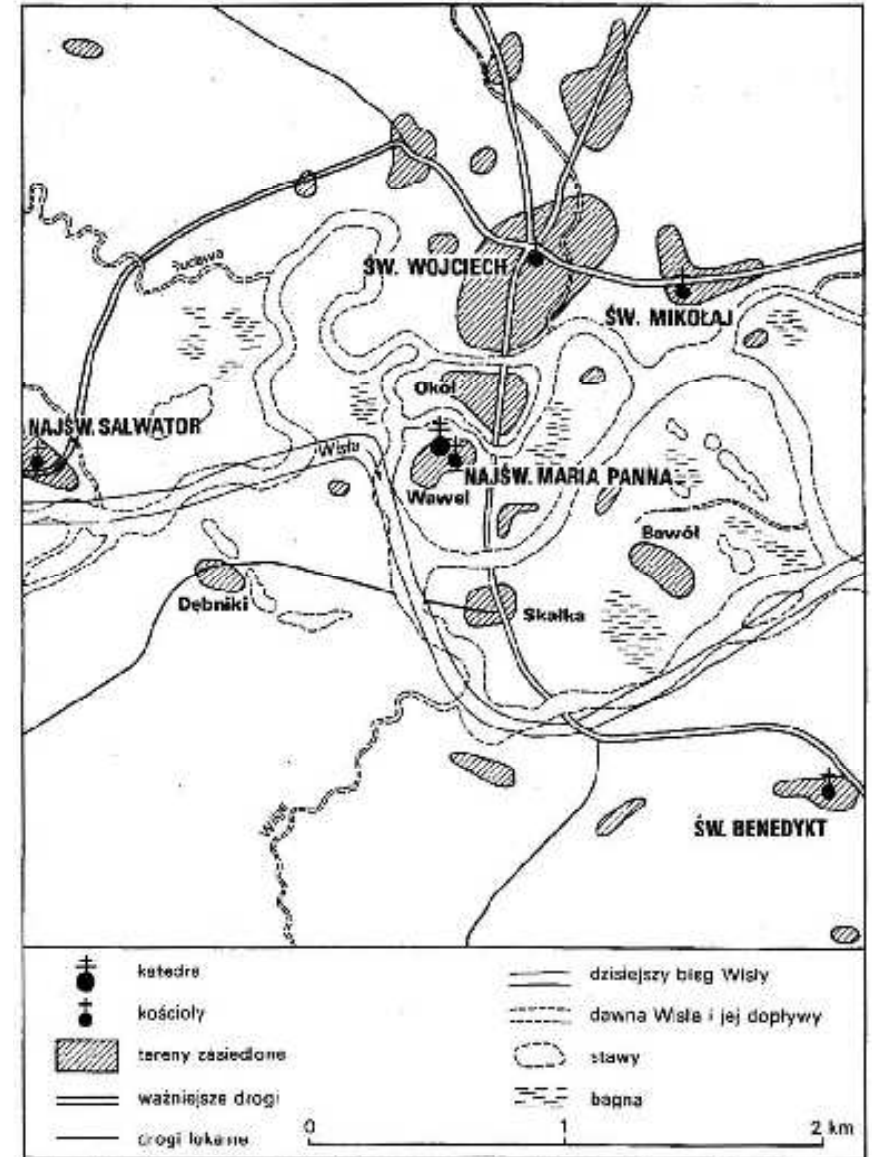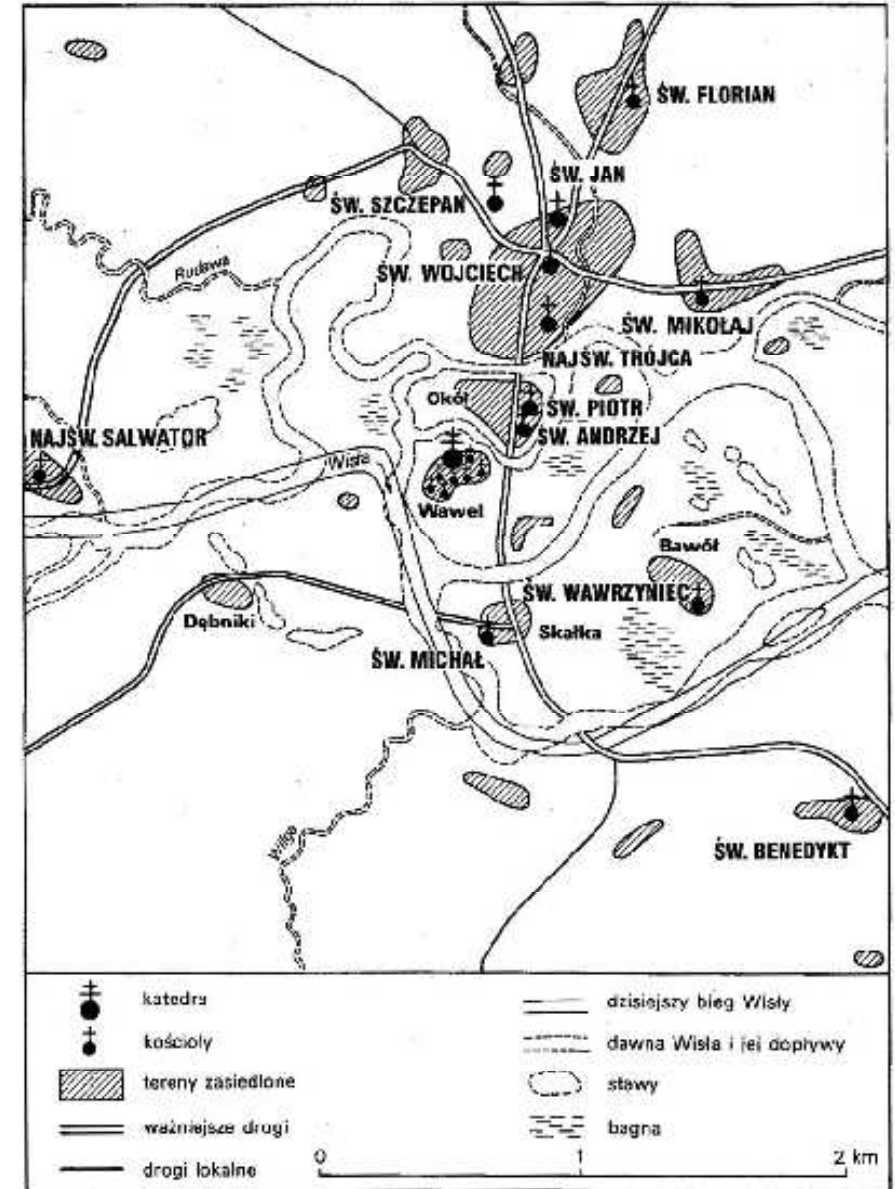

2. Krakow, agglomeration at the end of the 11th century with 'border churches' of The Holy Saviour (Najśw Salwator), of St Adalbert (Św. Wojciech), of St Nicholas (Św. Mikołaj) and of St Benedict (Św. Benedykt) round Wawel Hill with the palace chapel of St Mary (Najśw. Maria Panna). [after Węcławowicz 2005].
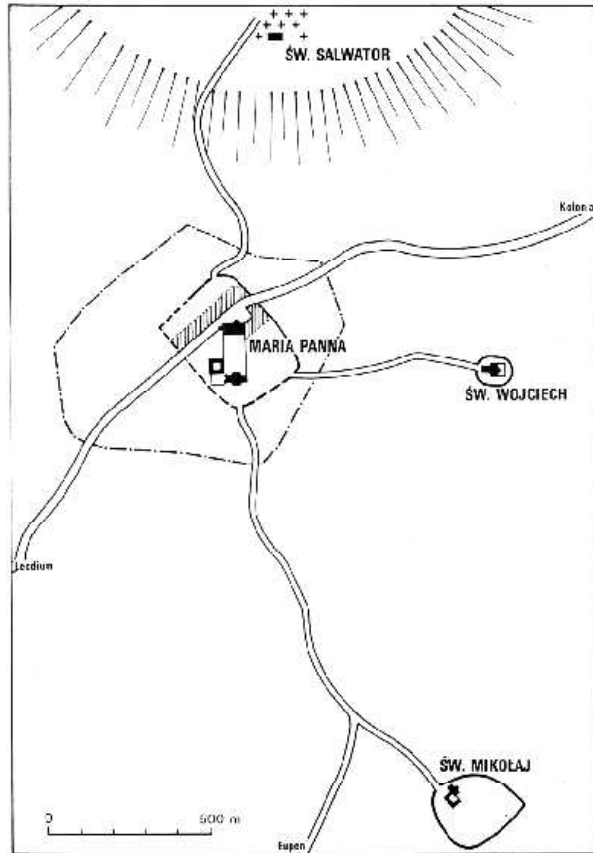
3. Aachen, the 'border churches' founded by Otto III round the Charlemagne Chapel. [after Michałowski 1989].

these links make it feasible for the prince to re-create in his Polish capital the layout of the Imperial seat in Aachen, an arrangement rich in powerful association. (ill. 2 and 3)

One hundred years later, at the end of the 12th century, three more churches were founded in Krakow simultaneously. These were St Florian, St Stephen and St Lawrence built on the western, southern and northern peripheries of the agglomeration. In 1186 Bishop Gideon transferred the relics of St Florian from Italy to Krakow in order to enhance the status of his cathedral. According to a medieval legend of this transfer [*Legenda translationis sancti Floriani Martyri*] the relics of St Florian rested in Roman catacombs together with those of St Stephen and St Laurence. In view of this "holy affinity" we may interpret the foundation of their three Krakow churches as an attempt to re-

4. Krakow, agglomeration at the end of the 12th century with the new 'border churches' of St Stephan (Św. Szczepan), of St Florien (Św. Florian) and of St Lawrence (Św. Wawrzyniec). [after Węcławowicz 2005].
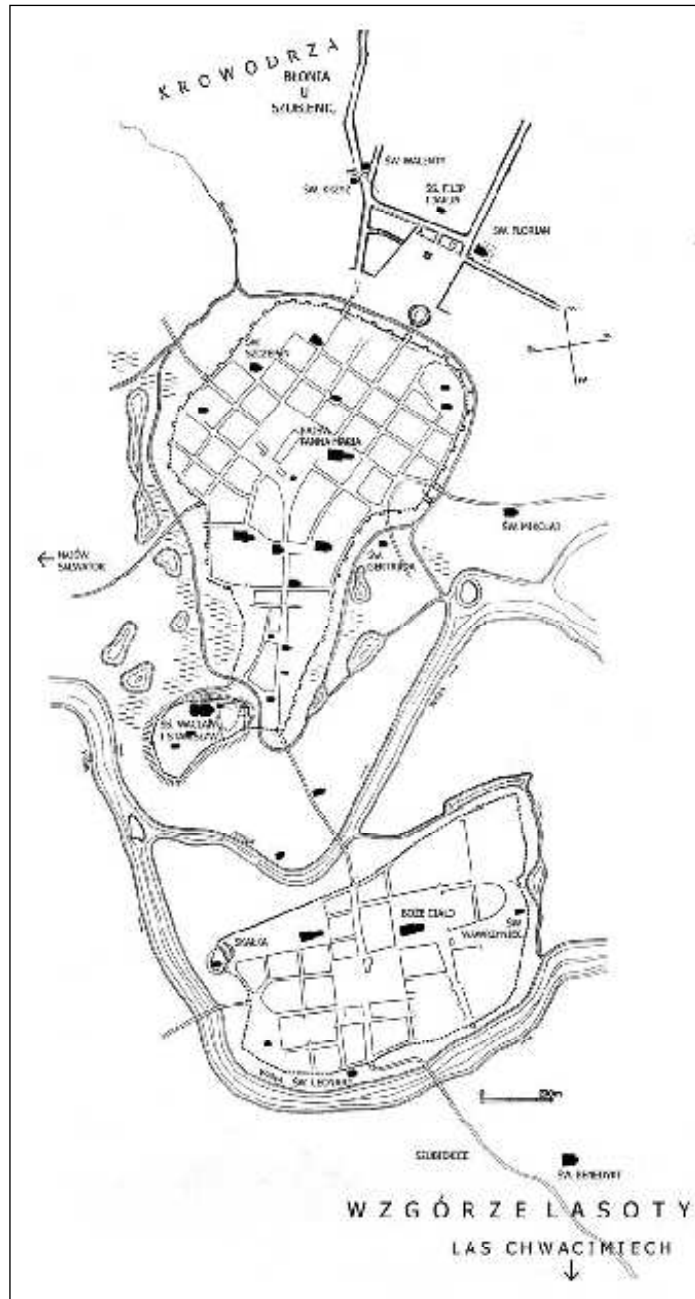
5. Krakow, agglomeration at the end of the 15th century. [after Węcławowicz 2005].
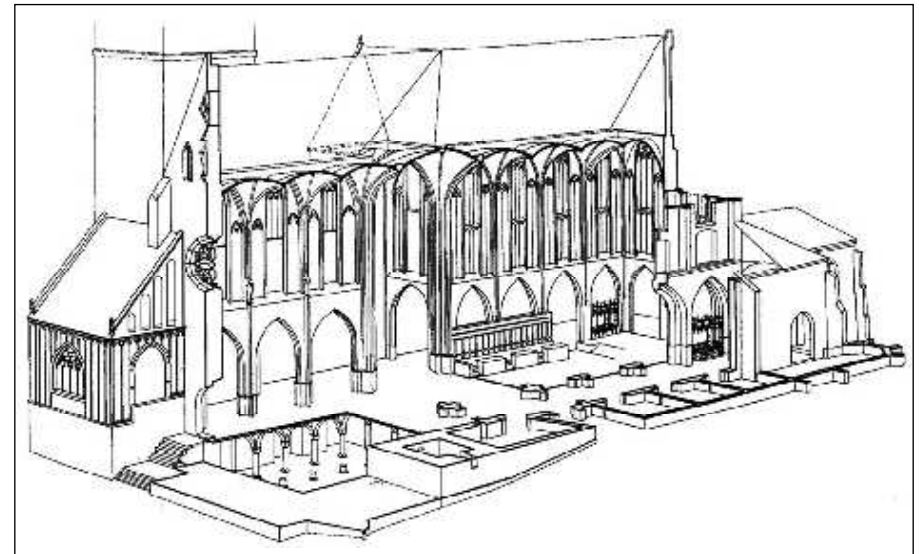

6. Krakow, cathedral church at the end of the 14th century. Longitude section. [after Węcławowicz 2005]

invent the city as a *similitude Rome* in its Early Christian glory (Translation 1888; Węcławowicz 2005a, pp. 134-136). Till the end of the Middle Ages the urban borders hardly transcended the approximate limits defined in ca 1200 by the churches of St Stephen, St Florian and St Laurence. (ill. 4 and 5)
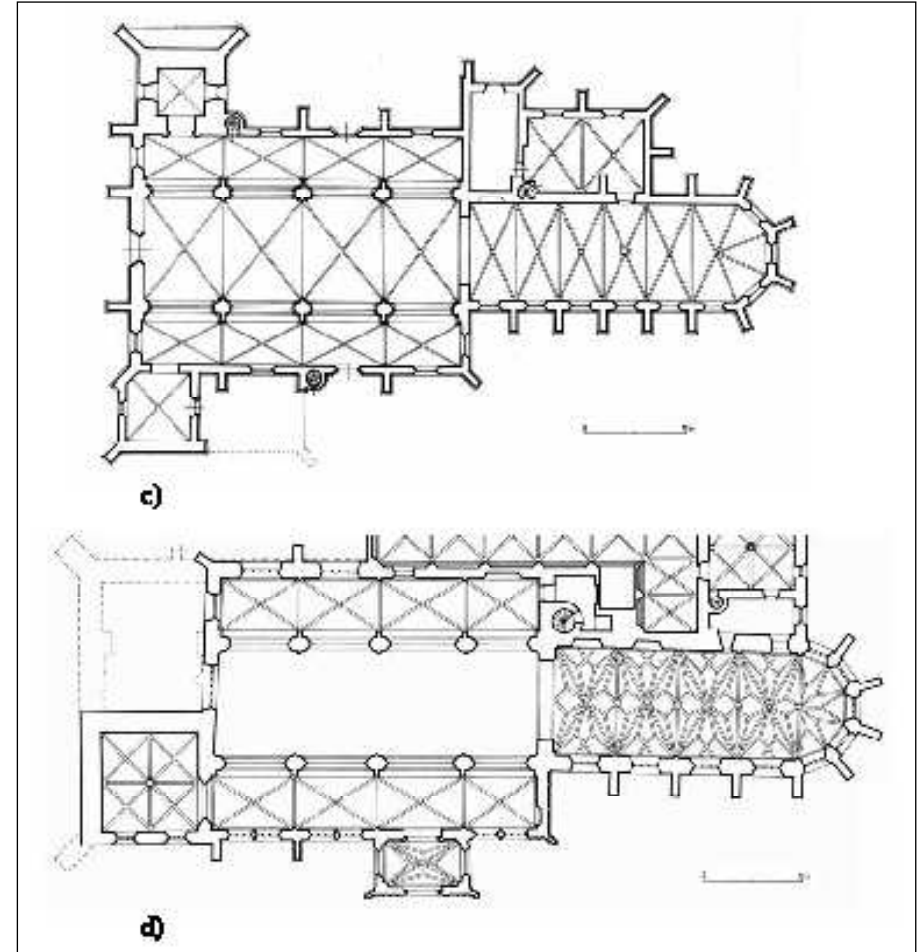
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In the mid-14th century, Central Europe experienced important political and economic changes. In Poland, the ancient and revered Piast dynasty returned to power with the coronation of King Ladislaw the Short in 1320, restoring political unity after two hundred years of political fragmentation. Krakow became the capital town of the new state. Under the royal and bishop's patronage old churches were rebuilt in the city itself as well as in the two new satellite towns outside the capital's defensive walls – called Kazimir (Casimirus) and Klepardia (Clepardia). (ill. 5 and 11)

The rebuilding of Krakow cathedral as a large Gothic basilica was the first of these modern foundations, and others soon followed suit – the main parish church of St. Mary, the Dominican church, and two large basilicas (the church
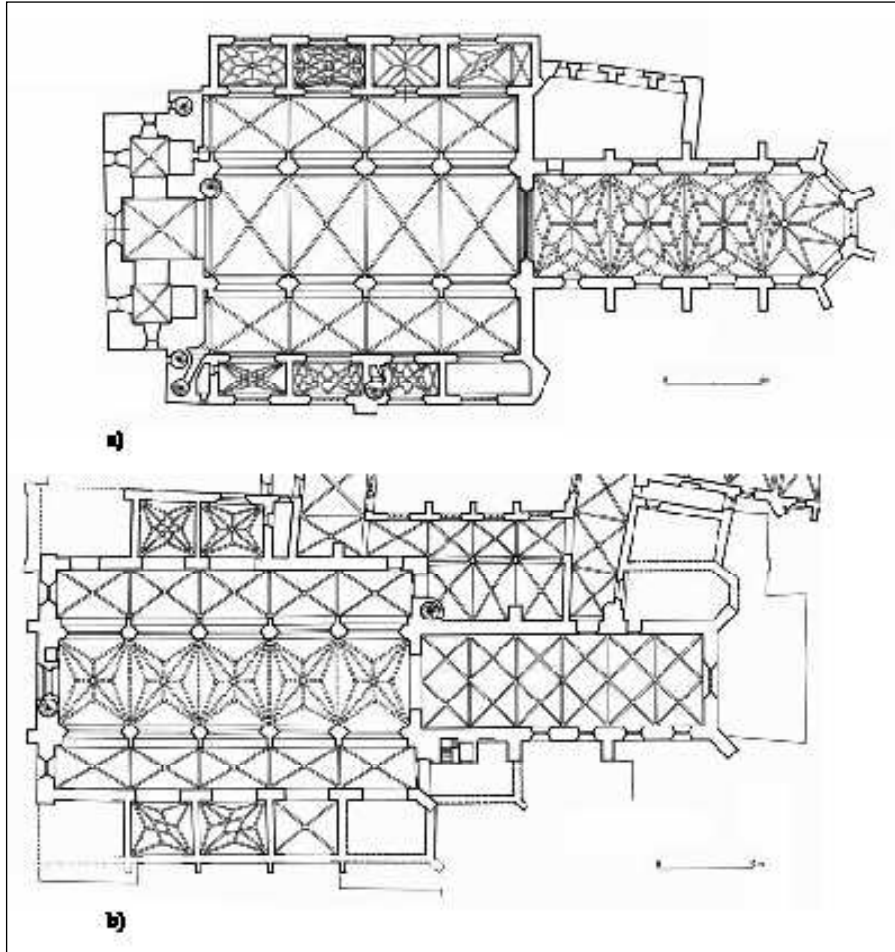
7 a, b. Krakow, Great basilical churches: parish church of St Mary and Dominican church of the Holy Trinity. [after Architektura gotycka *1995].*

7 c, d. Kazimir near Krakow, Great basilical churches: parish church of the Corpus Christi and the Austin Friars church of St Catherine. [after Architektura gotycka *1995].*

of the Austin Friars and the parish church of Corpus Christi), which were constructed in Kasimir. All these churches shared similar characteristics in their ground plan, construction and architectural detail pioneered by the cathedral workshop and have thus been treated in the literature as a one group, the so-called 'Krakow school of fourteenth century architecture'. (Crossley 1985, pp. 18-84; Crossley 1995; Węcławowicz 1993) (ill. 6 and 7a-d)
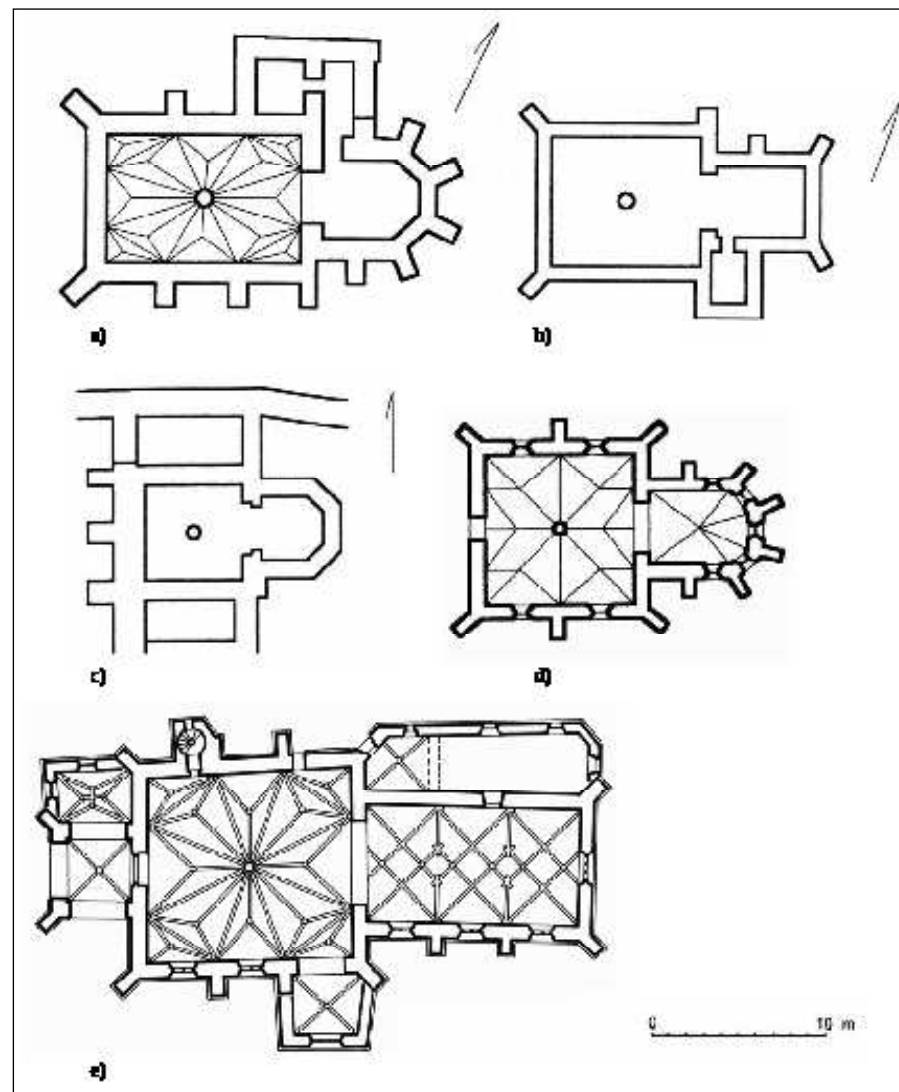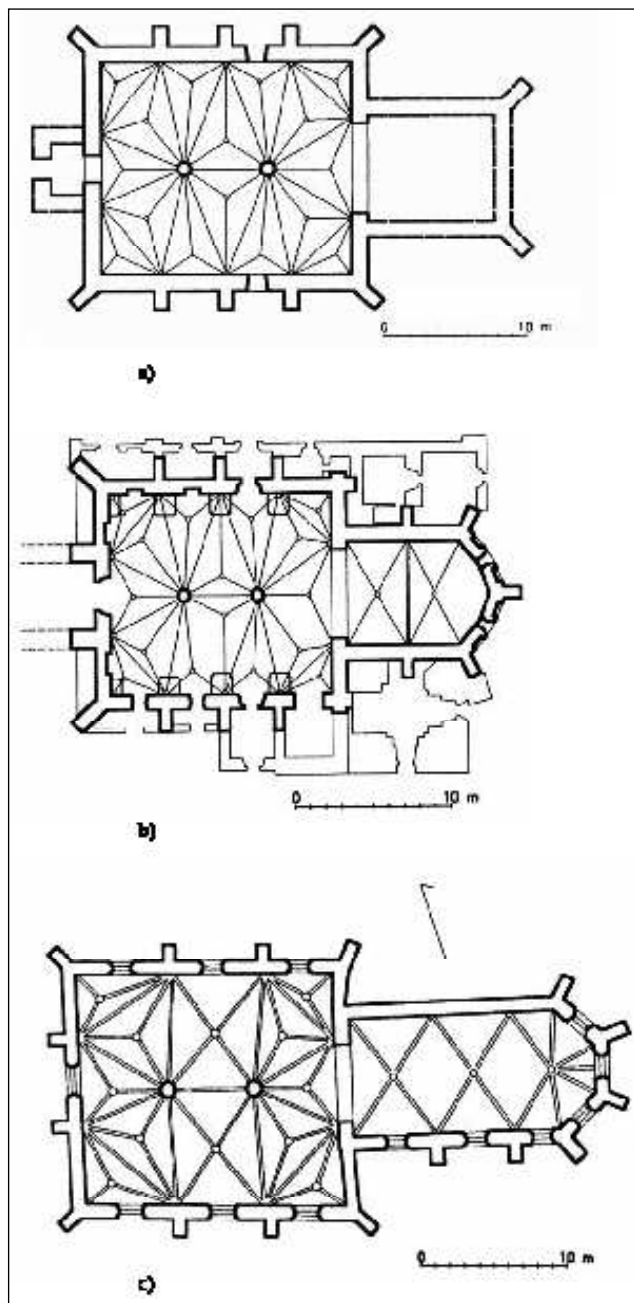
In the same period the second group of churches, among them some of the above-mentioned Romanesque churches, were reconstructed, again following a strikingly uniform model. (ill. 8a-c and 9a-e)

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8 a, b, c. Krakow, Double-pillar churches: parish churches of St. Steven and of the All Saints and the monastic church of St Marcus [after Goras 2003].

9 a, b, c, d, e. Krakow, Single-pillar churches: collegiate churches of St. Michael and St George, castle church of St Mary from Egypt, votive church of St Giles, parish church of the Holy Cross. [after Goras 2003].
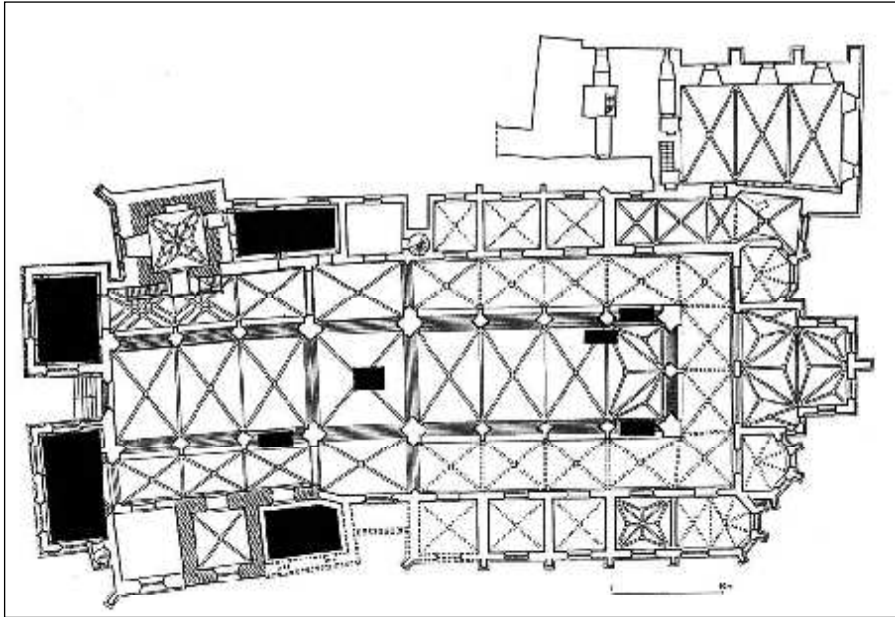
10. Krakow, cathedral church. Marked black: shrine of St Stanislaw in medio ecclesiae; the places of his cult in side chapels; the royal tombs round the main altar and in the south aisle; the royal burial chapels at the west [after Wecławowicz 2005].

It is important to explain the distinguishing features of the churches belonging to these two groups and to argue that iconographic analysis of their architecture helps to explain their unique character and appearance. Especially helpful in this can be an attempt to understand the intention of the founder. The four nearly identical basilicas, following one scheme and constructed over a short time, seem to have been conceived as a part of an artistic program for the rebuilding of the Polish capital town. Their naves were modelled on the nave of the cathedral and it is likely that it was their patrons' intention to convey some of the ideas of the cathedral church. In the middle of the 14th century the Krakow cathedral quickly became one the most important in the Kingdom, the true *Königskirche* – the coronation church, the royal mausoleum and the shrine of the national patron saint. The Gothic remodelling of the cathedral church treated the sacrosanct places connected to the saint with great respect. The location of his Romanesque tomb was unchanged and it became the geometrical and devotional focus of the new basilica

The arrangement of the royal tombs "in the orbit" of St Stanislaw's shrine – those of Ladislaw the Short and his son Kazimir the Great are placed in the eastern part of the ambulatory and those of Ladislaw the Jagiellon and his son Kazimir the Jagiellon in its western part – emphasizes the role of St Stanislaw as the patron saint of the Polish Kingdom and the meaning of the church space as a microcosm representing that kingdom in both the territorial and historical sense. Royal coronations took place in the centre of the cathedral church and thus in the centre of the Kingdom. (ill. 10)

The disposition of the cathedral interior and surviving fragments of the original cathedral decoration – e.g., the figure of St Stanislaw, the coat of arms with the Polish eagle – testify that the idea of Christian Kingship was an important part of their iconographic program. (Crossley 1995; Crossley 2001; Rożnowska-Sadraei 2003, Węcławowicz 2005, pp. 65-98)

In the above-mentioned basilical churches some elements of decorations refer to similar ideas: e.g., the coat of arms with the Polish eagle, and the coats of arms of the members of the Royal family. The King's name KA-ZY-MI-RUS was spelled out on the rib-vault bosses. These monumental churches can be seen as a manifestation of Kingdom and Kingship.

The remains of the small Romanesque churches from the second group have also been excavated and studied. Archaeological and historical research has shown that all these buildings were re-designed to have Gothic hall naves with a pair or a single pillar in the middle (Goras 2003). (ill. 8 and 9)

In contrast with the importance of the monumental basilical churches, the intentions of this group concentrated more on the devotion aspects. According to the biblical exegesis, the central stone pillar can be seen as an allegory of the True Cross, in moral or so-called tropological interpretation as the Tree of Paradise. Anagogical interpretation understands the pillar as the tree standing in the middle of Heavenly Jerusalem as seen by St. John in his vision of the Last Judgment.

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During the 15th century the city of Krakow itself came to be seen as being under the special protection of St Stanislaw – the primary political patron of Poland. The city space gradually took on new symbolic meanings connected with the cathedral church. In some of the 15th century descriptions the city space

11. Krakow at the end of the 15th century. *[after Hartmann Schedel Buch der Cronicken, Nürnberg 1493].*

gradually took on new symbolic meanings: towering above the town was the royal castle surrounded by "crown-shaped" walls – the seat of kings and the cathedral church, the resting place of the holy relics of St Stanislaw, the *Pater Patriae* (Dlugosz 1961, pp. 168-169).

Moreover Krakow also appears (contrary to geographical facts) to be situated in the very centre of Poland as well as in the very centre of Europe. The *topos* of the town "in the centre" goes back to Ezekiel's vision of Jerusalem existing amidst pagan states.

At the end of the Middle Ages Krakow's inhabitants had no doubt – the *omphalos* was placed inside the cathedral church, at St Stanislaw's shrine. (ill. 11)

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