
Benedictines in the Heart of Europe

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Recently I had the pleasure of visiting a temporary exhibition at the Wallenstein Riding School in Malá Strana, *Open the Gates of Paradise, The Benedictines in the Heart of Europe 800-1300*, prepared in collaboration with the [Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague](#). This fascinating exhibit gave an amazing insight into the growth of Benedictine monasteries from the 9th century onward in Central Europe.

Along with the incredibly detailed descriptions of every single item on display, there were some very interesting pieces of writing describing the everyday lives of the monks who lived in these monasteries. I found myself captivated as I walked around the enormous exhibit, stuck into reading the fascinatingly detailed descriptions of a monk's life.

There were some extremely interesting items on display. Along with incredible illuminated tapestries and books which the monks would have spent thousands of hours scrawling in the scriptorium, often losing a good deal of their sight in the process. It was truly incredible to look at these pieces of writing before my eyes and think about the hand that wrote them, a monk sat at a table almost a thousand years ago, laboriously and lovingly covering each page with a fierce dedication. One thing I took note of was the number of gold, silver, and even ebony items on display. Most of these items, such as the staves, belonged to the abbots of the monasteries. It seems that even among the humble lives of the monks, some grandiosity did exist.

There were two particularly intriguing, albeit slightly morbid, items on display, in my opinion. First was the so-called "Reliquary of the Five Holy Brothers", crafted in Bohemia in the 13th century. The Five Holy Brothers were a group of martyrs who came to Poland doing missionary work in 1001. They were attacked and killed by robbers in 1003. Their corpses were exhumed, with pieces stolen several times until the Church of St. Wenceslas was built, and four of the martyrs' arm bones were placed in this golden reliquary to be put on display.

Perhaps more fascinating for native Czechs is yet another reliquary, this time with the arm bone of St. Ludmila herself, grandmother of Czech national patron saint St. Wenceslas, on display, on loan from the Convent of St. George at Prague Castle. Embossed in gold and silver gilt and precious stones, it was truly a harrowing experience to stand before this legendary woman's hand, reaching upward into eternity in its glass case.

One last piece which intrigued me was yet another reliquary panel from the same convent. At first it looked the same as many of the other reliquaries on display; it was only when I stepped closer to read the inscription that I saw that it claimed to contain pieces of the True Cross (the purported cross that Christ was crucified on) under its central piece of glass, surrounded by beautiful gemstones and rock crystal. It was quite an experience to find myself standing in front of such a legendary piece.

All in all, the exhibit was truly fascinating. The way in which these pieces were displayed alongside the vivid, imagination-evoking descriptions of the day-to-day lives of these solitary monks was inspired. Along with learning a great deal, I had the chance to view such incredibly preserved pieces of the past, such priceless treasures, just feet away behind their protective glass. I was truly blown away.

International exhibition project entitled ***Open the Gates of Paradise. The Benedictines in the Heart of Europe 800–1300*** was being prepared and organised by the National Gallery of the Czech Republic in collaboration with the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague, The Centre for Medieval Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and Charles University and the National Library of the Czech Republic. The exhibition was held from November 7, 2014 to March 15, 2015 in two Prague galleries: the Wallenstein Riding School and the Klementinum Gallery.