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Descriptions for the Multisensory UNESCO project

***Blizne – Church of All Saints***

The church in Blizne may have already existed in the 14th century. In 1366, King Casimir III the Great granted the local forest for a village under Magdeburg Law, endowing the church with two *łans[[1]](#footnote-1)* of field. The village was sold in 1402 to the Bishop of Przemyśl, Maciej, and in 1406 Władysław II Jagiełło made it a village according to German law, while endowing the church with another two *łans* of field. The church building itself is mentioned in 1470; the current building is generally assumed to have been built in the 2nd half of the 15th century. The building has stone foundations and a log construction (it is a structure built with horizontal logs interlocked at the corners by notching). The ceilings of the nave and of the three-sided closed chancel are on the same level; the nave has *zaskrzynienia* (extended beams of the upper part of the side walls in the chancel, which is narrower than the nave, forming a support for the timber roof truss that covers the entire church). The original timber roof truss has survived until today and we can find carpenters’ marks on its trusses. The ceiling beams of the chancel are reinforced with hooks.

The windows in the chancel are closed with a late Gothic ogee arch; the portal leading to the sacristy has the same shape. Its doors have Gothic fittings, although the lock was built earlier, in the 17th century (the padlock bears the date: 1666). The rood arcade has the shape of a lancet arch.

In 1646, a belfry tower (a bell tower with an overhanging substructure that houses bells) was added to the church and this might have been the moment a ridge turret was built (it has not survived to this day; the present one comes from 1745). The western porch in the tower was separated around 1774; the southern porch may have been built even earlier, and the tower was later covered with a cupola.

In 1690, roofed arcades (Polish: *soboty*) were added to the church, but then demolished in 1811. The original stone floor was replaced at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries by a wooden floor.

In the 1960s, the outer southern wall of the nave revealed inscriptions partly covered by the southern porch and shingles, resembling chronicles about crucial events in the south-eastern Kingdom of Poland between 1495 and 1690.

In 2003, the church was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

**Church’s murals:**

Consecration crosses are the oldest of the decorations preserved inside the church; they are painted encircled Greek crosses showing where the church was anointed in order to be consecrated. In 1549, the entire interior was covered with polychrome; the late-Gothic and renaissance murals in the chancel have survived until today. The lower parts of the chancel's walls now show a later, ornamental polychrome (ca. 1700), which might be hiding the earlier murals (as evidenced by the uncovered fragments showing a woman's head). The polychrome was uncovered, renovated, and partially reconstructed in the years 1964-1971.

A 16th-century figural polychrome was used to cover the entire interior of the church; individual scenes were put in rectangular fields, separated by strips of Renaissance ornaments.

The decorations from 1549 include the Passion of Jesus cycle on the northern wall of the chancel (up to the scene of Harrowing of Hell, which is partially preserved), while the eastern wall shows the Resurrection of Jesus, surrounded by currently illegible scenes. The foundation inscription is illegible as well, with the only visible elements including the date ‘1549’ and some kneeling figures (possibly depictions of the donors). The scenes on the southern wall of the chancel have been mostly reconstructed; they include the Crucifixion, the Dormition of the Virgin, the Assumption and Coronation of Mary, Madonna with Child, the Transfiguration of Christ, and the Virgin and Jesus Child with Saint Anne.

The western wall of the chancel, or the rood wall, shows a representation of the Suicide of Judas, and probably the Suffering of Job.

The present decoration of the nave of the church in Blizne is one hundred years younger than the murals in the chancel, as the polychrome in the nave and on the balustrade of the matroneum was made in 1649. Interestingly, the individual elements of the decorations were funded by wealthy local farmers, as shown by the foundation inscriptions. The selection of saints depicted on the murals was largely based on the names of the donors: the southern wall of the nave shows the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (founded by Sebastian Pecherek), Saints Barbara, Adalbert and Martin (founded by a man named Marcin), and the western wall depicts the Martyrdom of Saint Peter (founded by Piotr Moniek). A man named Jakub ordered the presentation of the Martyrdom of Saint James the Greater; there is also a scene of the Martyrdom of Saint Paul, whose foundation inscription is covered by the matroneum. We can guess, however, that the scene was commissioned by someone named Paweł. The southern *zaskrzynienie* in the nave shows medallions with depictions of the Miracle of Saint Valentine, Saint Sophia and her daughters, the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew and the Martyrdom of Saint Simon, which were founded by Maciej and Dorota Skarbek.

The northern wall of the nave is decorated with a large representation of the Last Judgement, largely reconstructed. The *zaskrzynienie* above shows the Annunciation, Nativity of Jesus, Jesus at the Temple and the Entry into Jerusalem. The rood wall from the side of the nave shows Four Evangelists, while the western wall above the matroneum is decorated with images of King David from the Old Testament and Saint Cecilia.

The ceiling of the nave has a floral background and shows 15 busts of saints in circular medallions, fastened by strap-like buckles; most of the busts are, however, fully reconstructed. The depiction of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception is the newest addition and comes from 1970.

*Fun fact – why is the devil grotesque?*

The Final Judgement depictions are usually dominated by devils: both in medieval and modern art, the grotesque human-animal demons seem to be more amusing than frightening. The very image of Satan as a human-animal hybrid is rooted in ancient art: the horned and hoof-bearing devil with a tail has its source in mythological satyrs, a hideous half-human half-goat characters. In ancient culture, satyrs embodied unbridled, mainly sexual, drive, and it was that meaning that was transferred into the Christian representations of Satan. Moreover, medieval art would often show evil in the form of wild animals: Romanesque artists in particular would present evil powers in the form of aggressive beasts, real or fantastic. At the same time, however, we should not assume that the exaggerated images, which seem funny to us, were purely terrifying to the audience of the time. On the contrary, devils in the Middle Ages and in Early-Modern times were often consciously portrayed in grotesque shapes, since ridicule can be a form of condemnation. This depiction of the devil who is a laughing stock, the mechanism of stigmatizing evil through ridicule, would, in fact, be used in various types of public humiliation (e.g. in medieval legislation). By making fun of the devil, one distance oneself from him, being in opposition to him and, ultimately, condemn him. In addition, ugliness (including its exaggerated forms) was simply a symbol of evil; according to the ancient concept that beauty is the embodiment of good. For the same reason, the Passion scenes would portray the perpetrators of Christ as grotesque, even caricaturial, characters.

*Fun fact – Our Lady Full Of Grace in the side altar*

The side altar of the church in Blizne houses a late-Gothic sculpture that is a remnant of the Annunciation Group, possibly the middle part of the late medieval altarpiece which has not survived to our times. This is a representation of Mary, who is kneeling by the pulpit where an open book is lying and she is looking over her right shoulder, where there must have been the announcing angel. The term "Full of Grace" derives from the Hail Mary prayer, i.e. the words Archangel Gabriel directed to Mary when announcing to her that she would give birth to the Messiah ("Hail Mary, full of grace"). Above Mary’s head, we can see a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit. Judging by the characteristic pose of Mary, the whole scene was based on a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, published in “The Small Passion” series around 1509/1510. His version of the Annunciation showed Mary surprised by an angel when reading or praying, which was a very popular approach in late-medieval art, illustrating the belief that, before Archangel Gabriel's visit, Mary had devoted herself to reading the Old Testament, especially the prophetic passages about the coming of the Messiah. The Annunciation coincided with the Incarnation: it was the moment when the Child was conceived in the womb of Mary, hence the Feast of the Annunciation is celebrated on March 25, exactly nine months prior to Christmas. The Annunciation also tells us that the Word is made Flesh: the Incarnation of the Messiah becomes a reality, and the Old Testament is replaced by the New Testament. The sculpture from the church in Blizne was created around 1515-1520 and represents the late-Gothic expressive style characteristic of the Lesser Poland artists who were influenced by the creativity of Veit Stoss. However, it should not be attributed to Stoss himself.

In the 18th century, the figure was kept in the centre of the main altar of the church, but then it was moved to the chapel, where it was found in the 1960s.

*Fun fact – oriental perpetrators*

The scenes of martyrdom of saints in the nave of the church in Blizne, founded in the 17th century, draw our attention to the figures of the perpetrators: their costumes and features seem to be oriental. The depictions might be a reference to the Mongol (Tatar) attacks, especially to the invasion which ravaged these areas in 1624, i.e. 25 years before the local murals were made. The misfortune must have still been a vivid memory among the local residents, so it is not surprising that the perpetrators of the holy martyrs would be presented as Tatars bringing death and horror.

*Fun fact – biblical David and Saint Cecilia as patrons of music*

Above the matroneum of the church in Blizne, we can find images of characters traditionally associated with sacred music. As for the Old Testament King David, he was not only a ruler, but also a poet and a musician. Even before he became a king, young David had played the zither to ward off the evil spirit that tormented Saul (according to the Book of Samuel). The tradition, however, mainly associates David with writing the most poetic part of the Bible, the Book of Psalms. The Penitential Psalms were considered particularly significant and David was said to have written them to express his regret about the sin he had committed: the king had an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and then sent Uriah to his death so he could marry his widow. Admonished by a prophet, David realised that he had sinned, and when repenting he would compose and write part of the biblical Psalms. For this reason, the depiction of King David with a harp in his hand was often interpreted in a penitential context.

When it comes to female saints, the early Christian martyr Cecilia became a patron of music, although it must be said that her relationship with music seems to have been rather loose. Medieval legend does not say that Cecilia would compose herself or play any instrument, but only mentions that the saint had the gift of hearing the music of angelic choirs. This mention, however, was enough for Cecilia (according to legend, tortured in the 3rd century) to become the patron saint of church music.

*Fun fact – other monuments in Blizne*

The church in Blizne is located right next to a presbytery complex, which consists of a former presbytery, granary and parish school. The presbytery (now a vicar’s house) was erected in the 2nd half of the 17th century as a log building, and was transformed in 1811. The 1st half of the 19th century saw the addition of a presbytery granary, which today houses a parish museum. The former parish school, which now functions as an organist’s house, was built in 1866.

The Hill of Saint Michael, called "Michałek", is home to a chapel founded in 1877 by Józef Januszkiewicz. It stands on the site of previous buildings: a wooden chapel was erected here in 1624 and, according to local legend, it was a votive offering for rescuing the people from the Tartar invasion. Another chapel was built in 1674 (founded by Father Józef Nałogowski). In 1760, on the initiative of the Przemyśl Bishop, Wacław Hieronim Sierakowski, a Capuchin monastery and a church were built, but they were dissolved and demolished in 1788.

1. Old unit of field measurement used in Poland [translator’s comment]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)