

The History of Wawel Castle and Cathedral

Once upon a time, there was a huge, horrible dragon that lived in southern Poland. This fire breathing dragon would leave its cave on Wawel Hill, swoop down into the city and devour young girls, sheep, and cattle, leaving many burning houses and barns in its wake. The king didn't know how to stop the dragon, so he declared that anyone who could kill it would be rewarded with his daughter's hand in marriage. Many knights attempted to slay the dragon, but the dragon always burned them up before they could get close enough. One day, a young cobbler named Krakus got an idea. He bought a dead ram from the market, filled it with tar and sulfur, and fed it to the dragon. The dragon became extremely thirsty from this meal and he went to the Vistula River where he drank until his thirst was quenched. Krakus then jumped out from his hiding spot and teased the dragon. The dragon tried to blow fire at Krakus, but instead only filled up with smoke until he exploded. The King gave his daughter to Krakus in marriage, and a big castle was built on the dragon's hill called Wawel Castle. Krakus was a good ruler and the city took its name from him- Krakow (Pfeiffer, 72-73; Greene, 68).

While this is only one of many legends of Polish history, it is through such legends that historians have been able to know the earliest human inhabitants of Krakow. Krakow is the oldest city in Poland, and one of the oldest cities in Europe (Pfeiffer, 20). Archaeological findings place humans living in and around Krakow since at least 200,000BC. At the center of this ancient city is Wawel Hill, where 50,000 years ago a factory churning out stone tools prospered. Documents from 965 describe Krakow as a bustling trade center for Slavonic Europe. The kingdom of Poland was born in the 990's, when Krakow's northern neighbors of the Piasts' dynasty incorporated Krakow into its

principality. Krakow was the official capitol of Poland from 1038 until 1791, however from 1609 on, successive kings after the coronation in Krakow chose to live in Warsaw (The Wawel Cathedral..., 1).

In the center of Krakow is Wawel hill, where one can still see the dragon's lair today. In 1020, King Boleslaw the Brave built the Wawel Cathedral on top of the hill (Greene, 69). The Spear of Saint Maurice and later the royal insignia were deposited in the cathedral during the reign of Casimirus the Restorer (1039 – 1058) (Wawel 1000-2000, 1). The first castle and cathedral were destroyed, so in 1142 another Romanesque church was consecrated as the "second" Wawel cathedral (Magiczny Krakow, 1). After the remains of Saint Stanislaus, the patron saint of Poland, were transferred to the Cathedral, it became a pilgrimage site (Krakow's History, 1; Wawel 1000-2000). After the Tatars invaded and destroyed Krakow in 1241, Prince Boleslaw the Shy rebuilt the castle and cathedral in the 1360's in a Gothic style (The Wawel Cathedral...,1; Pfeiffer, 20; Magiczny Krakow, 1).

The cathedral, also known as the Royal Cathedral, served as the coronation church of Polish kings until the mid 18th century, and is the burial site of most Polish monarchs, as well as famous poets and heroes (Greene, 69). Wawel castle thrived under the Jagiellonian dynasty which ruled Poland for over 200 years (beginning with Wladyslaw Jagiello, Grand Duke of Lithuania, crowned King of Poland in 1386). This was a time of encouraging cultural and artistic talent and thought, with many scientists, artists, and humanists from Germany, Italy, and other countries traveling to Poland. Additional rebuilding of the Wawel Castle between 1499 and 1536 transformed it into a beautiful work of Renaissance architecture under the supervision of Master Eberhard

Rosemberger (building itself), Francesco the Florentine (decorative stone elements and arcaded galleries), and later Bartolemeo Berecci, to form “the most remarkable example of the influence of Florentine Renaissance outside Italy” (New Poland, 1). Disaster struck in 1702 when Krakow was seized by the Swedish army and Wawel Castle caught on fire. Deterioration was furthered by the partitioning of Poland in the late 18th century, when the interior was turned into an army barracks. Preservation efforts began in the 19th century, however World War II damaged the castle even further (Wawel 1000-2000, 1; Magiczny Karkow, 1).

Today, the castle (and cathedral) is a museum. In 1992, a major reconstructive effort began on the castle and cathedral, to be finished for the millennium celebration of 2000 (History, 1). Inside the castle, one can find Flemish tapestries, paintings and period furniture from the 16th century in the *State Rooms* (Destination Guide, 1). The *Royal Private Apartments* exhibits rooms where Polish royalty lived, with original art and period furniture. Jewelry, weapons, armors and caparisons, and regalia can be found in the *Crown Treasury and Armory* exhibit (The Wawel Cathedral..., 2). Part of the 2000 celebration included a new exhibit, *The Lost Wawel*. This exhibit displays the archaeological findings of the castle and cathedral, showcasing the excavated remains of the original buildings, including the foundations of the oldest known church in Poland. Following a spiral staircase, one can reach the cave where the Dragon was supposedly killed by Krakus known as the *Dragon’s Den* (The Wawel Cathedral..., 2; Destination Guide, 1-2).

The Wawel Cathedral also has many exhibits to view. Since almost all the royal families are entombed in the cathedral, there are many side chapels attached to fit them

all, allowing a unique view of Polish history through its architecture. Upon entering the cathedral is a bone collection, attributed to the dragon that Krak killed (GoPoland 1). In the center of the nave is the 1630 mausoleum of Saint Stanislav, and his silver coffin (circa 1670) contains twelve relief scenes of his life and posthumous miracles. To the right of the nave, between the pillars, is a red Hungarian marble sarcophagus done in the 15th century late-Gothic style of King Vladislav II Jagiello. The 14th century sandstone sarcophagus of King Vladislav I the Short can be found at the end of the north aisle. Queen-Saint Jadwiga (1384-1399) has one of the newest sarcophagus' in the cathedral, from 1902, "carved in white Carrara marble with her grave insignia, wooden scepter and orb" which can be found in the south aisle (The Wawel Cathedral..., 2). Many other works of art can be found in the surrounding chapels, including the Chapel of the Holy Cross with its 1470 Russian murals, and the black marble Vasa Chapel with its Baroque (The Wawel Cathedral..., 2). Above the cathedral hangs a huge bell, Sigismund, which was made from melted down enemy cannon in 1520 (Greene, 70). The cathedral was also the home of Pope John Paul II when he served there as archbishop prior to his election to the Holy See (Greene, 70; NewPoland, 1).

As the Pope stated of Wawel, "[it is] the sanctuary of the nation...[which] cannot be entered without an inner trembling, without an awe for here—as in few cathedrals of the world—is contained a vast greatness which speaks to us of the history of Poland, of all our past" (Gothic Cross..., 1). Wawel hill, the castle and cathedral certainly have a rich historic value to Poland and to the world. They have all been changed by history, and yet each time period has added its own special mark on these buildings.

Works Cited

- Destination Guide. Destination: Cracow. 2003. 20 April 2003.
<http://www.utell.travel-guides.com/data/Cracow/KeyAttractions.asp>
- Gothic Cross in Wawel Cathedral, Krakow. 20 April 2003.
<http://acweb.colum.edu/users/agunkel/homepage/easter/jadcruc.html>
- Greene, Carol. Enchantment of the World: Poland. Chicago: Children's Press, 1983.
- History. 20 April 2003. <http://www.wawel.krakow.pl/ehistori.htm>
- Magiczny Krakow: Our City: History. 20 April 2003.
<http://www.krakow.pl/en/miasto/dzieje/dzieje.php>
- NewPoland. Krakow: History. 2000. 20 April 2003.
http://www.newpoland.com/krakow_history.htm
- Pfeiffer, Christine. Poland: Land of Freedom Fighters. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Dillon Press, Inc., 1984.
- Strzala, Marek. Krakow's History. 2001. 20 April 2003. <http://www.krakow-info.com/history.htm>
- Strzala, Marek. The Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, Poland. 2002. 20 April 2003.
<http://www.krakow-info.com/katedra.htm>