Premonstratensian Convent Complex in the Polish Lands: Imbramowice in the Past and Today

Joanna Gil-Mastalerzyk

Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Kielce University of Technology, Kielce, Poland
joanna.gil@onet.pl

Abstract. The historical architectural and urban complex of the Norbertine Sisters in Imbramowice near Kraków (Poland) is a valuable treasure trove of the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Premonstratensian Order in the Polish lands, spanning several centuries. This is a site of special religious and pilgrimage importance, and one of the oldest Norbertine convents, one of the two currently functioning Norbertine houses in Poland. Its history reflects the rich and painful history of Poland. The convent complex was funded in the 13th century by Bishop Iwo Odrowąż. Subsequently, after the fire, it was rebuilt in the 17th and the 18th century and has been functioning incessantly to this day. For over 780 years, it has been managed by the Norbertine Sisters and supported by benefactors and volunteers. Thanks to the numerous initiatives that are undertaken and the systematically performed construction work, the overall functionality of the complex has increased. The old monuments offer numerous possibilities of using their diverse wealth by all the interested persons.

1. Introduction
The convent complex of the Norbertine Sisters in Imbramowice, located in the vicinity of Kraków, is a valuable treasure trove of the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Premonstratensian Order in the Polish lands, spanning several centuries. It is one of the oldest Norbertine convents in Poland (1229) and also one of two Norbertine convents which are functioning today in the country, next to the convent in Zwierzyniec in Kraków (1164).

This paper presents the unique example of the architectural and urban convent and church complex, which demonstrates successful construction and modernisation activities performed in the course of the ages and which preserves the most significant values of monuments, along with the introduction of new artistic and aesthetic values. The analysis focuses on the issue of lost and regained values as a result of inevitable transformations, which the facilities underwent during ransacking attacks, fires, war-time destruction or hostile policy of the partitioners.

The complex of historical facilities in Imbramowice, rebuilt in the 18th century from destruction after the Tatar attacks and a great fire of 1710, has been functioning to this day as a memory site, as well as a very important spot on the map of Poland with religious and pilgrimage significance, and valuable historical, architectural and social assets.

2. Centuries-Old Heritage of the Convent and Order in Imbramowice: the Past and Present
The village of Imbramowice is located in the southern part of Poland, at a distance of over 30 km from Kraków. It lies by the Eagles’ Nests’ Trail and the Trail of Jurassic Strongholds, within the perimeter
of the Dłubnia Landscape Park over the historical Dłubnia River. The Imbramowice monuments and the values of their geographic location create numerous options of using their versatile wealth by all the interested parties. The Norbertine convent complex is primarily an exceptional religious site: the Regional Sanctuary of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ - religious worship of the Suffering Christ. The significance and the dimension of this unique and priceless site, even though still little known and not thoroughly investigated, is fully pictured in the words of Rev. Professor Tomasz Jelonek: \textit{in the past, this place was chosen by people who set the foundations of its existence; yet this is also a holy place, chosen by God, who gives special graces to people who pray in front of the painting of the Suffering Christ, known for its graces} [1].

Based on written sources, prepared by the historians of the Imbramowice convent\textsuperscript{1}, the architectural and urban complex of the sisters, commonly known as the Norbertines, was set up between 1222 and 1229. It was found by Iwo Odrowąż, Kraków Bishop and his uncle Imbram - the owner of the village of Dłubnia, since 1376 known as Imbramowice from his name [2, 3].

The first records related to the establishment of the convent and construction of the church of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul were documented by chronicler Jan Długosz [3, 4]. According to Długosz’s oldest records, it is known that at that time, the convent also received numerous land grants, privileges and tithes, which were meant to ensure its sustenance and proper functioning [3].

\textbf{Figure 1.} Outline of real properties in the Imbramowice convent after the confiscation of 1855, Imbramowice Estate, February 2019 [5]

The tumultuous and tragic history of the Polish monastery in Imbramowice was closely related to the difficult history of Poland. The history of the Polish state and its nation exerted impact on the existence and spiritual development of the Norbertine convent (figure 1, 2). In the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, the monastic community of the Norbertine Sisters experienced Tatar attacks. In 1260, the convent in Imbramowice was completely plundered and ruined by the Tatars. For the next two centuries, it struggled with the hardships of reconstruction. This history of the Imbramowice convent was also related to frequent attacks of the enemy armies and repression policies on the part of foreign powers.

\textsuperscript{1} They include Rev. Kraszewski, Rev. Knapiński, Rev. Zdanowski [3].
In 1710, the convent building and the Gothic church were completely destroyed by a fire. In the 19th century, the convent suffered repressions on the part of the tsarist government, confiscation of the library and the entire convent property and formal cessation of the convent made twice, in 1819 and in 1864. After WWII, the didactic and educational activities pursued by the sisters were halted and the school was closed by the communist government. In 1949, the school buildings and the convent lands were taken over by the state. It was only in 1992 pursuant to the resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland that the convent community regained a part of its property: lands and buildings, yet in a state of complete devastation.

The complex of convent buildings, after the reconstruction in the 17th – 18th century, has been functioning incessantly to this day. For over 780 years, it has been managed by the Norbertine Sisters and supported by benefactors and volunteers. In spite of numerous problems, primarily material ones, the nuns conducted systematic renovations using their own and collected funds. Thanks to various initiatives, the destruction made throughout the ages was largely repaired. The overall functionality of the complex was enhanced and the old monuments offer an array of possibilities for using their diverse wealth by all the interested persons.

Figure 2. Plan of a portion of lands of the estate parcelled out. Imbramowice in the Olkusz Poviat, Jangrot Commune located on a part of land separated for the Agricultural School by the Norbertine Convent, 1923, February 2019 [5]
2.1. Medieval, Late Renaissance and Baroque Architecture of Convent Facilities in Imbramowice

The original buildings of the convent and the church complex of 1229 were probably wooden. They encompassed the church of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, a monastery located near the church with the Premonstratensian parish and annexes and lodgings for the nuns [6, 7].

In the next centuries (13th century - 1780), the spatial and architectural layout of the complex was reconstructed, extended and re-built, as well as provided with new grants.

The present-day complex of buildings that dates back to 1780, i.e. a period when the reconstruction and extension of the convent after the destruction caused by the fire was definitely ended, is made up by: the church with the convent, the building of the former convent school - transformed into a retreat and pilgrimage house, the granary of St. Norbert, the gate – bell tower, the courtyard and the enclosed gardens [7].

![Figure 3. Historical view of the Norbertine Convent with the entrance gate and the bell tower of 1780, February 2019 [5].](image-url)
In the architecture of the facilities, preserved in an almost unchanged form to the modern times, the Medieval traces of development of the convent and its church, documented in sources, still remain visible. The stages of Romanesque (1229 - 1416) and Gothic (from approx. 1485) development are distinguished by the preserved fragments of the church walls, the ogival window openings at the attic of the church, a small round window made of a single block of sandstone in the western façade made of stone or the “buttress of the western aisle, brick at the bottom and stone at the top” [3, 6]. The stage of late Renaissance development is testified by the elements of the interior space of the church. They include marble columns with Doric chapters supporting the convent choir and the lavatory in the church’s sacristy. These elements were made of the black Dębniki marble, as a result of “renovation and modernisation work” carried out at the end of the 16th/ beginning of the 17th century in the convent and the church² [3, 8].

The next period of transformations of the convent and church buildings took place in later-Baroque times (1710-785) [3]. The present-day architecture of the entire complex derives from this period; it was created on the rubble of the earlier 16th century development, completely destroyed by a fire.

Thanks to the engagement of the abbess of the Imbramowice convent, Mother Zofia Grochówna in the reconstruction work, it was already at the beginning of the 18th century that a design for the church and convent in Imbramowice was prepared. The author of the design was the Polish architect Kacper Bażanka, who also supervised the construction and designed the interior of the church, along with its original décor and elements of interior design. Through the agency of Rev. Lochman, Kacper Bażanka submitted a “drawing for the construction of the church and the convent” in February 1711 [6]. Under

² According to the entries made in the book of bishop’s visits at the Imbramowice convent, at the end of the 17th / beginning of the 18th century, renovation and modernisation work was carried out here, yet its scope was not exactly determined [9]. The results of initial conservation studies were prepared by Halina Pińkowska in 1971 [5]. Leszek Sobol, in his brief monographic study, synthetically described and analysed the history of the convent in the period of almost eight centuries [3].
the management of Marcin Pellegrini, a convent and a single-aisle church with a tower were erected in the spirit and style of late Roman Baroque in the place of prior buildings. The present-day appearance of the buildings dates back to this period and was recreated predominantly on the basis of monastic chronicles written down from 1703, which constitute the main source of knowledge about the convent [9, 10] (Figure 3, 4, 5).

![Figure 5. Present-day view of the interior of the church in Imbramowice. Perspective view onto: the presbytery with the altar, the choir, the space under the choir (photo by the author, February 2019).](image)

The church of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul was created on the remnants of external walls of an older temple. Remnants of the brick section were also used during the construction of the convent [6]. The new church was built on a rectangular layout and faces east. There are cellars under some sections of it. From the east, at the end of the aisle, a slightly narrower and elongated presbytery with a semi-circular altar apsis is located. The choir was designed opposite to the presbytery, on the western side. Its back wall adjoins a square tower, forming a stand-alone structure. The main entrance to the church is located in the side wall of the temple, on the northern side. The church is covered with a gable roof and the presbytery with a slightly lowered roof transforming into a multi-sided roof. A high angular tower covered with a cupola dominates the entire structure.

The architecture of the external church façades is very simple and modest, deprived of details. Slender buttresses, flat lesenes and a profiled cordonned cornice attract attention on the external walls. The windows on side walls have a rectangular shape with an arch and on the presbytery wall, they are round.

From the southern side of the presbytery, three two-storey residential annexes for sisters were designed. In the middle, there is a square patio. At the northern side, a single-storey chapel was designed next to the church, which dates back to the mid 18th century.

The entire complex, in the shape of an irregular polygon with a surface area of over 4 hectares, is surrounded by a stone wall with a representative gate with a bell tower. The bell tower, erected in the second half of the 18th century in the Rococo style, simultaneously plays the function of the entrance.
gate to the convent complex. (figure 6). In the layout of the entire spatial complex, Kacper Bażanka also designed two Baroque enclosed gardens, located on the southern and western side of the buildings. Only the Baroque alley along the north-south axis has survived to the modern times.

Figure 6. The Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice. Present-day view of the convent buildings: gate - bell tower; Church of St. Peter and St. Paul; retreat house; granary; chapel building (photo by the author, February 2019)
As opposed to the austere and modest external architecture of the temple, its Baroque interior hides impressive wealth (figure 5). It was designed in a very creative manner and amazes the visitors both with the scale of architecture and the splendour. The architectural late-Baroque structure, with paintings, sculptural decorations and pieces of furniture features special artistic values. The single-aisle space of the church is covered with a richly-decorated barrel vault (with lunettes) and a polychrome painting by an Italian artist William known as the Italian. Equally rich paintings decorate the western wall of the convent choir. The interior, apart from the main altar, features six richly decorated side altars, three on every side of the aisle, opposite one another. Special attention should be paid to the presbytery section with a semi-circular apsis with two pairs of fluted columns in a composite order. Their heads support a massive architrave with an oval cartouche and the image of the Suffering Christ placed inside.

The architect made a phenomenal use of light inside the church. The play of light and shadow has been enhanced by the use of mirrors and effects produced by sun rays.

The painting of the Suffering Christ, famous for its graces, which probably dates back to the 17th century and which attracts throngs of believers, is worthy of attention. The painting of an unknown artist was made with oil paint on canvass with dimensions of 89 - 106 cm and presents the figure of the Suffering Christ against a dark background, his face depicting the immensity of suffering, with his right side naked, showing a deep open wound and a scarlet cloth falling off his left shoulders. The background of the painting features an inscription: BEHOLD, O SINNER, THE WOUND OF LOVE OPENED BY YOUR SINS. The painting was hanging on the walls of the convent corridor already at the end of the 19th century.

The new architectural and urban complex of the Norbertine Sisters in Imbramowice was a great construction and investment enterprise. In spite of the fact that the construction work lasted for several dozen years and was continued long after Kacper Bażanka’s death, the designer’s ideas were faithfully implemented. Nowadays, all historical facilities which have been preserved to the modern times are covered by conservation protection and entered in the register of monuments of the Province Conservator of Monuments in Kraków (A-322), (figure 6).

3. Conclusions
Summing up, it is to be concluded that the convent complex of the Premonstratensian Order in Imbramowice is an outstanding and innovative work. It constitutes valuable centuries-old cultural and religious heritage in the Polish lands.

The convent, in spite of very difficult moments and heavy losses sustained throughout the ages, has survived and continues to function. The community of the Norbertine sisters and the material condition of the convent have been continually improving.

The complex of facilities is admired and considered the gem of the Polish Baroque School, modelled on the Roman Baroque. The church, erected in the Polish lands, testifies to close relations of its designer with the art of Rome at the end of the 17th/ beginning of the 18th century. The entire architectural and urban complex was excellently thought-through and positioned in a masterly manner: both with respect to the directions of the world, the surrounding landscape and the specific location of facilities. The Baroque urban principle consisting in designing and development of space in a manner resulting in the creation of long and short view perspectives, offering outlook onto the surrounding landscape, or partially hidden by the development or landscape was implemented by the designer in a very interesting manner [3]. What is more, the concept of the interior architecture of the church was organically linked to the entire original design of the church and is the first example of the excellent late-Baroque architecture in the Republic of Poland [11].
The convent resources hide priceless treasures. Impressive liturgical manuscripts are stored here, along with the convent chronicles, valuable book collections, as well as awe-inspiring 17th century works of painters, sculptors, woodcarvers and goldsmiths.

By way of conclusion, it must be stated that the convent complex in Imbramowice remains an important heritage of the religious culture of the Order, the Church and the entire Nation. Consorting with historical facilities and elements of cultural landscape allows the recipients to set the site in time and space. The cultural heritage of the place plays an important role in building the attraction of the area: a small and beautifully located village of Imbramowice in the vicinity of Kraków.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank the Norbertine Sisters from the Imbramowice Convent, and in particular Sister Teresa, Sub-Prioress and Steward of the Convent, for sharing a wealth of valuable information and making all the preserved archival documents and iconography available for the analyses.

References
[1] T. Jelonek, Słowo wprowadzające I [Introductory Word I], in: Kultura Klasztoru SS. Norbertanek w Imbramowicach [Culture of the Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice], the 3rd edition printed in Austria, Imbramowice, p. 5, 2010 (In Polish).
[2] Imbramowice, norbertanki. Monastery of Norbertine sisters sanctuary of the passion of our lord Jesus Christ in Imbramowice [Online] 2010 [Accessed February 2019] Available at: <www.imbramowice.norbertanki.org>.
[3] L. Sobol, Kultura Klasztoru SS. Norbertanek w Imbramowicach [Culture of the Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice], the 3rd edition printed in Austria, Imbramowice, pp. 13-67, 2010 (In Polish).
[4] J. Długosz, Liber Beneficiorum Diaecesis Cracoviensis, vol. 3, Kraków, leaf 104-112, 1864.
[5] Archives of the Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice, February, 2019.
[6] H. Pieńkowska, Fabryka Kościoła i Klasztoru SS Norbertanek w Imbramowicach [Factory of Norbertine Church and Convent in Imbramowice] (typescript), pp. 3-28, 1975. In: Archives of the Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice, February, 2019 (In Polish).
[7] The author’s interview with Sister Theresa, Sub-Prioress and Steward of the Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice, February 2019.
[8] Księga wizyt biskupich [Book of Bishops’ Visits], In: Archives of the Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice, p. 12. February, 2019 (In Polish).
[9] M. Dębowska, Klasztor Norbertanek w Imbramowicach, Studia i materiały [Norbertine Convent in Imbramowice, Studies and Materials], Lublin: Miejska i Powiatowa Biblioteka Publiczna [Lublin: Municipal and Poviat Public Library], pp. 5-18, 2012 (In Polish).
[10] Z. Grothówna, Kronika Klasztorna Sióstr Norbertanek w Imbramowicach 1703-1741 [Convent Chronicle of the Norbertine Sisters in Imbramowice 1703 - 1741], published by Włodzimierz Bielak & Waldemar W. Źurek SDB, Jednościę, Kielce, 2011 (In Polish).
[11] K. Gombin, Kościół Norbertanek w Imbramowicach. Dzieje budowy i wartości artystyczne, Norbertine Church in Imbramowice. History of Construction and Artistic Values, in: Trzeci Setlecie konsekracji kościoła klasztornego Świętych Apostołów Piotra i Pawła Sióstr Norbertanek w Imbramowicach 1717-2017 [Three Hundredth Anniversary of the Consecration of the Convent Church of the Apostles St. Peter and Paul of the Norbertine Sisters in Imbramowice 1717 - 2017], ed. B. Skrzydlewska, W. Źurek SDB, published by Jednościę, Lublin, p. 162, 2017 (In Polish).