

# VIENNA'S IMPERIAL PLAGUE MONUMENT: ITS SYMBOLISM AND FUNCTIONS. THE BUBONIC PLAGUE AS A POWER SYMBOL

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Vienna's prominent landmark, the Pestsäule (Plague Column), commemorates the devastating bubonic plague epidemic of 1679 that killed thousands of the city's inhabitants. The gigantic, three sided marble *pyramidis* covered with baroque clouds is dedicated to the Trinity and the Nine Choirs of Angels. (Fig. 1) Although pledged by Emperor Leopold I in the very year of the outbreak of the disease, the memorial could not be completed until 1694. Its imagery reflects some of the most tragic events but also some of Austria's greatest triumphs, because the invasion, siege, and repulsion of the Ottoman army in 1683 added new meaning to the monument's concept. Vienna's Pestsäule is now recognized as one of the most innovative and ambitious sculptural ensembles created anywhere in Europe in the Post-Bernini era.<sup>240</sup> The splendour of this imperial commission became synonymous

<sup>240</sup> The shape of the Pestsäule's core is not a "pyramidis" (as contemporary literature described the Egyptian derived shape), the proportions more resemble a three-sided obelisk.

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Figure 1: Vienna, Dreifaltigkeits- or Pestsäule (Trinity or Plague Column), engraving by Johann Ulrich Krauss, 1692.

with Austrian Baroque and the template for the countless plague monuments disseminated throughout the Habsburgs' territories. It is the schizophrenic existence between "ars sacra" and theatrical mundane beauty which developed in three distinct stages of design that gives the monument its unique character.

This article begins with a summary of the developmental phases of the memorial. It also highlights the most important topics of the multifunctional sculpture – the Trinity, pestilence, and war. Furthermore, the iconographic traditions are mentioned as well as the formal inventions. This essay includes an analysis of the international influences, mainly from Venice, Rome, and Naples. In the conclusion the function of Baroque votive art will be discussed in connection with modern clinical viewpoints.

Because unexpected outbreaks of pneumonic as well as bubonic plague were reported in both China and the United States in 2014, a brief medical explanation of the disease itself is in order. Plague is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be one of the deadliest bacterial infections caused by *Yersinia pestis*, frequently transmitted from animals to humans. And, let us not forget, bubonic plague has been used since the Middle Ages in biological (germ) warfare and plague was declared in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, "a weapon of mass destruction."<sup>241</sup>

<sup>241</sup> For a brief medical discussion with scholarly bibliography and illustrated with historic pictures as well as with photographic comparisons of modern plague patients from the collections of Doctors Henri Mollaret and Thomas Butler, see Christine M. BOECKL, *Images of Plague and Pestilence (=Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies Vol. 53)* (Kirksville MO USA 2000) 18–32. Recent cases of pneumonic plague were reported on July 21, 2014