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TWO GRAVE-SPHINXES
FROM THE RAKOWICKI CEMETERY
IN CRACOW

The Rakowicki Cemetery in Cracow used to be one of the first necropolis in Poland (founded in 1803), breaking the tradition of burying the dead on the central city's cemeteries such as graveyards, or churchyards, usually situated in the neighbourhood of hospitals. It has been used until the present, with the final administrative premises defined only in 1933, thus preventing from further expansion.

There have been various incentives influencing the shape of the tombs, beginning from existing law regulations (for instance the sanitary ones), through the prices and availability of materials, evolving aesthetic tastes (or simply current trends) to the characteristic in many cases, drive for symbolic reflection in terms of shape and details of a tomb. Finally the dead person's profession or a life passion was equally decisive. Undoubtedly, majority of the graves have gained it's principle form, due to pure acceptance of a "buried to be", meaning the founder, or the supervisor of the project, often original, nonetheless, sometimes being the modification of certain collection of "patterns", remaining in the gesture of the stonemasons, with a possibility of combining typical, though non-artistic elements.

The elements of Egyptian heritage implemented (copied, transformed) to modern art and architecture and culture, have been the case of high interest for years, those implementations are usually called *egyptianisms* deriving from Egyptian Revival style. In the European Art culture it is easy to point out (very much simplifying), a few stages of increasing interest in various aspects of Egyptian culture. Bearing in mind certain infusion into artistic circulation of particular egyptianisms, mostly due to derivation from Roman Antique tradition, it is commonly believed that, the climax point would be



Fig. 1. The sphinx from Talowski's tomb, present times, photo by the Author

Napoleon Bonaparte's great expedition (1798 -1801). Another significant stage was noticeable more or less, at the end of previous century, the Victorian trend for Egypt, caused by much more frequent travels to river Nile, but also fast growing in wealth of European museums and private collections in pharaonic antiques¹ taken away from Egypt. Despite the spectacular examples of using Egyptian elements in numerous architectural sites, private and public buildings, horticulture and occasional architecture, there is no doubt as to the fact that, there is a visible domination of sepulchral buildings, or of various eschatological origins. Those relations do not remain unjustified, the great

majority of remaining Egyptian constructions are tombs or temples, also perceived in terms of eternity².

Among the grave monuments on the Rakowicki Cemetery, we can easily find the same as in the southern European necropolis, also inspired to various degrees by transformed elements from ancient Egypt. Not mentioning, the pyramids and obelisks, the chief example is a monumental tomb (Section W-east) of the Talowski and Paszkowski families. The domineering element is a huge statue of a sphinx. In the iconographic sense, it is linked to both Greek and Egyptian sphinxes. It is depicted in the sedative position, with the left paw resting on a human skull wrapped around by a snake. (Fig. 1, 2). The

¹ J. S. Curl, *The Egyptian Revival* [in:] *Influences in Victorian Art and Architecture* (ed. by S. Macready, F. H. Thompson), London 1985.

² Contemporary architects have had relatively wide range of Egyptian architectonic symbols at the same time lacking the appropriate receptive skills, to put it bluntly, without recognition and comprehension of significant functions and meaning. The Egyptian details were selected and transformed carelessly, mainly on the basis of only one aesthetic criteria ideograms decorative scenario, freely and without comprehension playing with mixture of implementation of structure of different styles. The prospective Egyptian symbolism was used in the retrospective function (in extreme cases, purely ornamentative), close to visualizations of modern Europeans originated from Hellenic tradition. See also: J. S. Curl, *The Egyptian Revival. Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West*, London and New York 2005; *Chapter VIII: The Egyptian Revival in Funerary Architecture*, pp. 281-310.

head of the sphinx, distinctively of masculine type is ornamented with much stylized head cover – *nemes*, turning into a kind of a breastband and a necklace, suggesting the similarity to Egyptian ornaments *usekh*. The chin is placed on a volute, which is supposed to evoke the associations with the ceremonious pharaoh's beard. Above the forehead, in the place that we would expect to find king's *uræus*, we can see cross, slightly reminding the *Cross pattée* (*Tatzenkreuz*); it is not clear whether; it was a deliberate symbolic transformation or rather iconographic lack of perception of a sculptor.

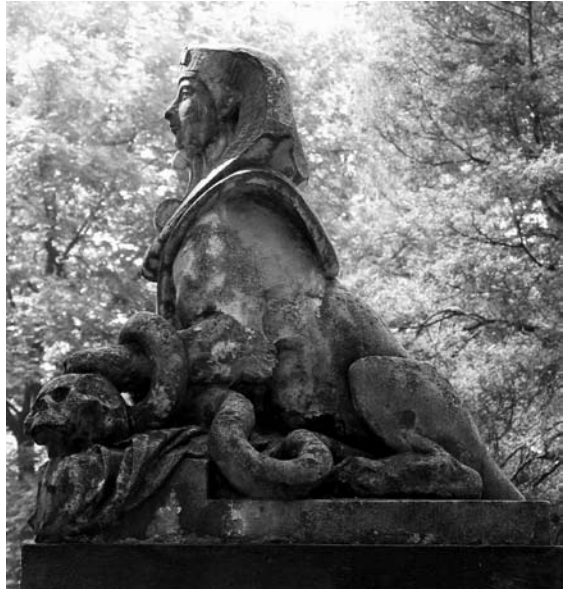


Fig. 2. The sphinx from Talowski's tomb, present times, photo by the Author

The design by an architect Teodor Talowski (1857 -1910), a graduate of Universities in Lvov and Vienna, the lecturer of drawing at the State Industry School in Cracow and a professor at Polytechnic in Lvov. The pioneer of neo – romanticism in architecture, the inventor of his own, distinctive style, he was a project manager of residential buildings, technical architecture (viaducts) and also sacral buildings on the Galicia territory.

What makes the project even more intriguing is the original idea, fixed in the project (the State Archives, Cracow, ABM Cm.Rak.6; 1888) presumably the realization of the sphinx had been much more closer to the Egyptian canon, in the laying position with a human head in *nemes* (Figs. 3, 4) its iconography is definitely closer to the sphinxes from New Kingdom period and the later ones, than the usually used in such contexts Great Sphinx from Gizeh³. The details of the designed Sphinx (beard, *nemes*) very closely reflect the Egyptian canon (however the design includes this mentioned above non-Egyptian motif of the scull and the snake⁴), that it is possible to exclude

³ References to modern transformations of Sphinx: W. Rösche-von der Hyde, *Das Sphinx-Bild im Wandel der Zeiten. Vorkommen und Bedeutung*, I-II, Rahden 1999; W. G. Regier, *Book of the Sphinx*, Univ. of Nebraska Press 2004; see also H. Demisch, *Die Sphinx: Geschichte ihrer Darstellung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Stuttgart 1977; *Sphinx*, LÄ vol. 5, cols. 1139–1147 (Ch. Zivie-Coche).

⁴ Implementing the allegorical objects under the front paw or paws of a sphinx was not an

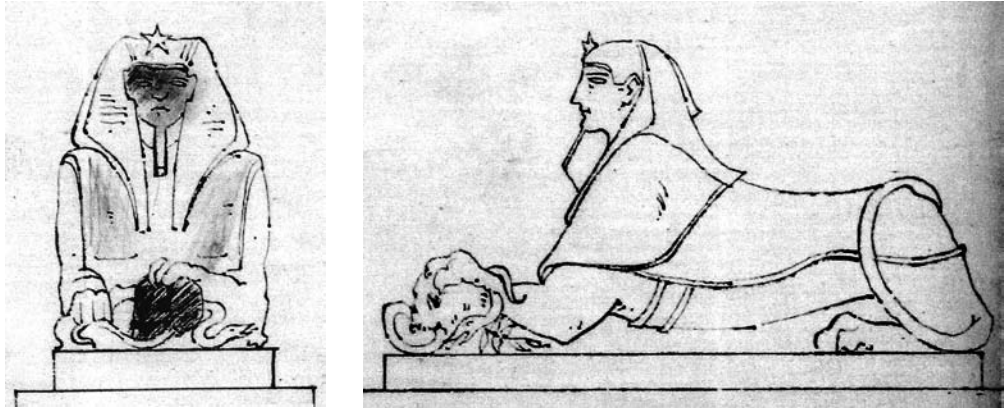


Fig. 3. Design of the sphinx from Talowski's tomb, State Archives, Cracow, ABM Cm. Rak. 6; 1888

that the transformation of the elements in the final version was as suggested earlier “egyptologic” lack of competence, but rather a deliberate artistic treatment. The only elements still causing confusion are: the mentioned above “ornament” of the sphinx’s forehead; in the draft drawing it is clearly emphasized by the drawer, in the place of a mentioned above star and marked in the draft a kind of tinselled cloak covering the figure of a statue.

It is worth mentioning a very significant iconographic association, however distant, though of a highly hazardous character, namely, among the ancient motives on gnostic intaglios, we can find relatively popular motif of a lion with its front paw resting on a skull, however not human, but a bull’s head (*bucranion*), surrounded by stars. The scientists are trying to prove certain kinsmen of similar portraying as well as with Mithraism but also with the symbol of victory over death. Those kinds of gems were also found in the nineteenth century collection from Cracow⁵.

A draft drawing of the remaining elements of multifigure postument, however differing from the final shape, does not bring any resemblance to the architectonical Egyptian elements. Talowski has not used any of the relatively popular Egyptian symbols, commonly used in decorative mode. For instance, a winged solar disc⁶, which he nevertheless used to ornament a portal of one of his most impressive buildings in Cracow at Karmelicka 35, the famous “Pod Pajakiem” (1889).

iconographic innovation, e.g. the sphinxes in front of Opera House in Budapest (around 1880) are resting on the theatrical masks. The classic symbol of vanitas on which the sphinx from Rakowice is resting, is then perfectly justified.

⁵ Cf J. Śliwa, *Egyptian Scarabs and Magical Gems from the Collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński*, Kraków 1989, Cat. Nos. 132–134.

⁶ *Flügelsonne*, LÄ vol. 2, cols. 277-279 (D. Wildung).

Until the time when a similar composition “a tomb for Guyski” (Section XII, Northeast corner; ABM Cm. Rak. 10) by Karol Zaremba was introduced in 1895, the sphinx by Talowski was supposed to be the only monument of that kind on Rakowicki Cemetery.

Marek Marcei Guyski (1830-1893) was a sculptor graduated from Warsaw and Rome Universities, since 1873 a lecturer of sculpture at Art Academy in Cracow.

The Sphinx crowning the tomb of Guyski, however, as a project it is just a rough draft, it has not got such an Egyptianizing character as the one by Talowski. The breast indicates female sex of a hybrid, the scarf on the head is far different from a shape of a *nemes*, and the overall shape of a figure resembles the rococo garden sphinxes, rather than orthodox modelled figure on ancient Egyptian canon. The design of a main board of a tomb and simultaneously the socle of a statue are in far better Egyptian style. There is a distinctive association with trapezoid *naos*, emphasized with a strong accent of torus and *cavetto* cornice⁷. Zaremba's design has never come to realization, instead a headstone realistic statue representing Zaremba himself, by his student Tadeusz Błotnicki was then, implemented, in such a form it has survived until the present times.

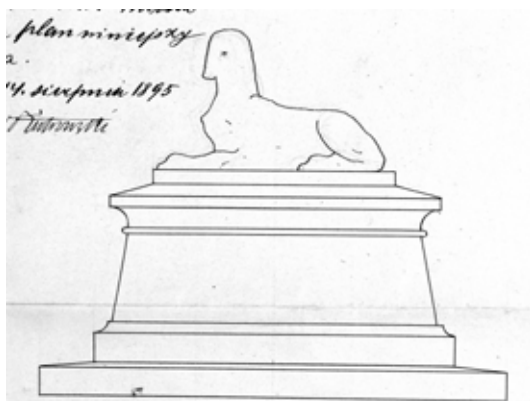


Fig. 5. Project of the sphinx from Guyski's tomb, State Archives, Cracow, ABM Cm. Rak. 10, 1895

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⁷ Cornice consisting of bulging moulding – a torus and a concave board (*cavetto*); was referring to the originally used for constructions moulding of tied up reed, covering the floor beams – those characteristic “ties” were also later engraved in stone toruses. In German literature they are used for those typical for ancient Egyptian building as well as modern motifs of Egyptianizing stylizations, descriptive terms: *Hohlkehle* (und) *Rundstab*; see D. Arnold, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Baukunst*, München 1994, p. 108.