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Gazing into the Tomb. A Research Project on the Burial of Emperor Frederick III in St Stephen's Cathedral

A collaboration between the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna and the Dombauhütte zu St. Stephan

Both robbers and historians have always been interested in the tombs of former rulers. Only one from the fourteen burial sites of late-mediaeval kings and emperors of the Holy Roman Empire was never looted, disturbed or altered: that of Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493) in St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna.

In 2013 a tiny camera was inserted through a small opening in the outer wall of this famous sarcophagus. These sensational photographs document the most elaborate interment of a medieval European ruler ever discovered. Three curators of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna – Katja Schmitz-von Ledebur, Heinz Winter and Franz Kirchweger - were invited to collaborate on the study of this first-ever documentation of the tomb's funerary equipment. Together with photographic material, most of which has never been published, the project's most important findings have been presented at the symposium *Nahaufnahme* hosted by the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna on November 8, 2019.

A comprehensive scholarly publication of the findings of this research project will be published in December 2019.

»in hoc precioso monumento«. **Die Bestattung Kaiser Friedrichs III. im Wiener Stephansdom**, edited by Franz Kirchweger, Katja Schmitz-von Ledebur, Heinz Winter and Franz Zehetner (Schriften des Kunsthistorischen Museums, vol. 20, ed. by Sabine Haag)

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THE PROJECT

Experts on the art and cultural history of Europe in the Middle Ages and the early modern era rarely get the chance to imagine what Howard Carter must have felt when he first discovered the treasures stashed in Tutankhamun's tomb. A few experts from the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, however, came close to experiencing something similar when they first saw the photographs commissioned in 2013 by the Dombauhütte zu St. Stephan, while discussing a collaboration to study and publish the extraordinary artefacts documented in these images. Of the fourteen burial sites of late-mediaeval kings and emperors of the Holy Roman Empire only that of Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493) was neither looted nor disturbed or altered, while its contents were documented in a way that allows us to make concrete assertions about it. In the twentieth century this gave rise to rumours that the monumental tomb in St Stephen's Cathedral was empty, and that the emperor was not actually buried there. To counter these speculations, a tiny opening was drilled into the walls of the sarcophagus in 1969 to view and document, with the help of lamps and mirrors, the interred body and a small part of the funerary goods placed in the tomb. It was, however, not possible to take photographs. They were first produced in 2013 when the small aperture was re-opened. These images form the centre of both our research project and the forthcoming publication, which will comprise essays by internationally-renowned experts exploring the tomb's historical context and discussing what we know so far about its content. Even typical elements of a royal burial such as the ruler's funerary insignia – crown, sceptre and orb – and the textiles covering the corpse bear witness to the extraordinary effort expended when the emperor was laid to rest. Unique are the large gilt metal plates inscribed with texts celebrating the achievements of both Frederick and his son Maximilian, who completed his father's tomb after the former's death and had him buried there in 1513, two decades after he had died. Unique too for the period is the use of a coffin made out of glazed ceramic tiles; they, and the coin-like coinage dating from the emperor's reburial in 1513, may consciously reference funerary practices from Roman antiquity.

A complete opening of the tomb was not possible in 2013 and remains unlikely in the foreseeable future. The huge weight of the different elements of this outstanding artwork, some of which weigh several tons, and the complexity of its structure means such an undertaking is likely to damage the tomb and its content. The findings and our knowledge of the situation inside the sarcophagus are therefore based almost exclusively on an analysis of the photographs taken in 2013. Only small pieces from the ceramic coffin and a tiny fragment of a textile were removed and scientifically analysed. This means that our research project was unable to provide a comprehensive answer to every question. We feel, however, that the photographic material and our findings based on them should be assembled and published, and that this unique documentation of the only extant unaltered burial of an emperor of the Holy Roman Empire should be made available for further research. The material offers – in the truest sense of the word – completely new insights that deserve the attention not only of (art-)historians studying Emperor Frederick III and his son and successor Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519), but also of the general public.

Among the most important findings and insights are:

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- for the first time ever, we have photographs of the only late-mediaeval burial of an emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of whose form and content practically nothing previously was known, and which was never disturbed and thus remains unaltered and authentic
- a new understanding of the dominant influence exerted by Maximilian I and the humanists in his circle on décor and appointment of the tomb in which he had his father reburied in 1513, and which saw Frederick III – in complete contrast to how Maximilian himself wanted to be interred – celebrated as “Emperor of the Romans” even in death
- new information on the first extant example of the mitre-crown - a type of crown closely associated with the House of Habsburg until the end of the Holy Roman Empire (1806) – which should formally be regarded as the precursor of the private crown commissioned by Emperor Rudolf II in 1602, which in 1804 became the crown of the Austrian Empire (today on display in the Imperial Treasury in Vienna)

PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

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The tomb of Emperor Frederick III, Niclaus Gerhaert with his workshop and successors, Vienna and Wiener Neustadt, between 1467 and 1513/1517, in the choir decani of St Stephan's Cathedral
© KHM-Museumsverband



The grave slab showing Emperor Frederick III, detail, Niclaus Gerhaert von Leyden, 1467-1473
© KHM-Museumsverband



View into the tomb looking west, showing the coffin made of glazed ceramic tiles, the inscribed tablets on the north and south walls, and the funerary crown that extends beyond the slabs comprising the lid
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View into the tomb looking north-west, showing the funerary crown that extends beyond the slabs comprising the lid, and the inscribed tablets on the north wall

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View facing west, showing the corpse of Emperor Frederick III in its shroud inside the ceramic coffin with tilted lid, the sword placed on the deceased's left, and the arm of the crucifix, which has fallen off and has come to lie here

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Complete view of the mitre-crown placed over a piece of fabric on the skull of the deceased emperor

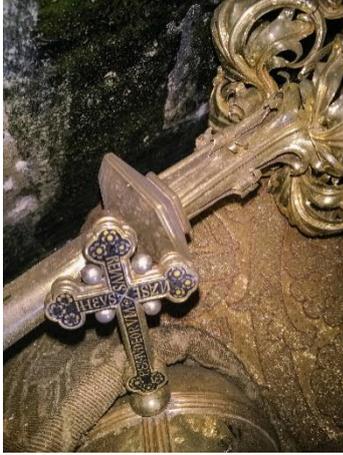
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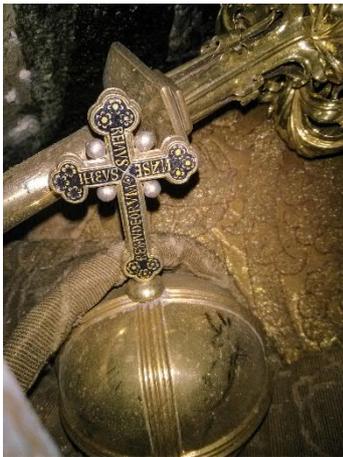
View of the mitre-crown on the emperor's skull, which has been wrapped in linen and covered with a piece of fabric, showing the enamel décor of the circlet and the surmounting floral wreath

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The funerary insignia, sceptre and imperial sword, placed on a piece of fabric and a pillow on the right of the deceased emperor
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The inscribed imperial orb surmounted by a cross, and a detail of the sceptre placed on the right of the corpse
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