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Czech Art Historian Adalbert Birnbaum and His Controversy with Strzygowski's Theories of the Origins of Early Christian Architecture

Abstract

The Czech art historian Adalbert (Vojtěch) Birnbaum (1877 - 1934) became famous as a leading expert in mediaeval architecture and conservation of cultural heritage. However he engaged in scholarly topics focused on Czech art history, the beginnings of his research career are associated with the Vienna School of Art History and with issues discussed by its main representatives Alois Riegl and Franz Wickhoff: reassessment of the Roman art and the art of late antiquity. The main goal of this contribution is to draw attention to the personality of A. Birnbaum and his role in „Orient-oder-Rom debatte“.

In his doctoral thesis *Der altchristliche Kirchenbau und sein Verhältnis zur römischen Baukunst* (1904), Birnbaum as a student of Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung applied Wickhoff's model of artistic development of Roman art in the field of architecture for the first time. Afterwards Birnbaum elaborated his own theory in several studies in German language (*Die Oktogone von Antiochia, Nazianz und Nyssa* - 1913, extensive review of the Bernhard Patzak's book *Palast und Villa in Toscana I* - 1912). But his most important contribution to the topic is a treatise on the architecture of Ravenna in late antiquity. The book was published in Czech as *Ravennská architektura. Její původ a vzory* (Architecture of Ravenna. Its origins and patterns, first part in 1916, second in 1921). This study has given the evidence of the continuous formal development of architectural forms in Italy, which was, in Birnbaum's opinion, independent of the Orient. In all of his papers Birnbaum held the judgments of his teachers, in stark opposition to the theories of Josef Strzygowski. Unfortunately, the book on Ravenna's architecture had never received a feedback in the international field due to the language barrier. In spite of the fact, that his colleagues and contemporaries (Max Dvořák, Hans Tietze, Karl Maria Swoboda, W. Sas Zaloziecki) were familiar with this study.

Comprehensive evaluation of Birnbaum's contribution to the Orient-oder-Rom controversy could be useful part of an overview of the impact of Strzygowski's work in art historiography.