



**MARIAN TABERNACLES ON MAIN ALTARS:
NORWEGIAN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ALTAR DECORATIONS
IN THEIR EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

RETABLOS-TABERNÁCULO MARIANOS
EN LOS ALTARES MAYORES:
LAS DECORACIONES DE ALTAR NORUEGAS DEL SIGLO XIII
EN SU CONTEXTO EUROPEO

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Received: 29/10/2019 – Accepted: 14/12/2019

Abstract

Art historical research often assumes that sculptures of the Virgin Mary originally stood on the northern nave altar in Scandinavian parish churches. However, evidence suggests that several enshrined Marian sculptures actually had their place on the main altar in the chancel. This claim can be reconstructed with regard to the surviving tabernacle shrines in (and from) the small Norwegian parish churches of Hedalen, Reinli, and Hove. In addition to the shrines, a number of altar frontals with Marian imagery also probably belonged to main altars. Seen in their wider European context, these Norwegian altar decorations follow a homogenous pattern, common to large parts of Western Europe, that may be explained by the rise of a unified religious culture in aspects such as liturgy and theology. On the main altar, the Virgin and Child constituted the focal point of the church interior. This prominent position reflects the central role of the Mother of God in the history of salvation as an instrument of the Incarnation. On the main altar, Mary refers to this Christian mystery through her image as well as in the narrative scenes shown on the inside of the wings that surrounded the sculpture.

Keywords

Norway, medieval art, altar decorations, saints' sculptures, Marian sculptures, tabernacle shrines, altar frontals.

Resumen

La investigación histórico-artística asume a menudo que en las iglesias parroquiales escandinavas las esculturas de la Virgen María se encontraban originalmente en el altar norte de la nave. Sin embargo, las evidencias sugieren que varias esculturas marianas dotadas de un tabernáculo se localizaban en realidad en el altar mayor del presbiterio. Esta hipótesis puede ser reconstituída si miramos los retablos-tabernáculo que han sobrevivido en (o proceden de) las pequeñas parroquias noruegas de Hedalen, Reinli y Hove. Además de estos retablos, un cierto número de frontales de altar con imaginería mariana probablemente también pertenecieron a los altares mayores. Vistas en un contexto europeo más amplio, estas decoraciones de altar noruegas siguen un patrón homogéneo, común a amplias zonas de Europa Occidental, que pueden ser explicado por el surgimiento de una cultura religiosa unificada en aspectos tales como la liturgia y la teología. En el altar mayor, la Virgen y el Niño constituían el punto focal del interior del templo. Esta prominente posición refleja el papel central de la Madre de Dios en la historia de la salvación en tanto que instrumento de la Encarnación. En el altar mayor, María remite a este misterio cristiano a través de su imagen, al igual que lo hace en las escenas narrativas mostradas en el interior de los paneles que rodean la escultura.

Palabras clave

Noruega, arte medieval, decoraciones de altar, esculturas de santos, esculturas marianas, retablos-tabernáculo, frontales de altar.

I. INTRODUCTION

Several scholars have highlighted the presence of sculptures and panel paintings of the Virgin and Child on main altars throughout Europe and in all kinds of medieval churches around 1300. Few authors seem to be aware that their appearance on the high altar did not occur suddenly, but rather followed an existing tradition. There is indication that sculptures of the Virgin with Child set in tabernacle shrines were located on the main altar as early as the thirteenth century, in parish churches in Norway as well as elsewhere in Europe. In research history

this is often ignored in favor of the prevailing assumption that images of the Virgin and Child in medieval parish churches in Scandinavia stood on one of the side altars, while the main altar only had a frontal, cross, and chandeliers.¹ It is generally believed that images of Mary were located on the northern side altar, while images of Saint Olav or other saints stood on the southern side altar (Anker, 1981, p. 205).

The present paper challenges this assumption by discussing several Norwegian tabernacle shrines and frontals with images of the Virgin and Child, dating from around the middle of the thirteenth century, that can be directly or indirectly connected to main altars. The paper also addresses the importance of tabernacle shrines for our understanding of the early development of Marian altarpieces. I discuss the different locations of Marian imagery inside the medieval church, followed by an account of the central role of Mary in medieval theology. I will depart from the assumption that Norwegian medieval altar decorations followed a general Western-European pattern. Contrary to many parts of Europe, where high medieval altar decorations are now very rare, the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, can boast a considerable number of surviving examples. This rich Norwegian material provides a good impression of how altars were decorated in all parts of Europe during the high middle ages.

2. THE LOCATION OF MARIAN IMAGES IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

There is no doubt that sculptures of the Virgin Mary stood on one of the side altars in many Scandinavian churches. A great deal of evidence for this can be found in Danish country churches, such as wall paintings that served as a permanent form of altar decoration. It can be inferred from Marian imagery where

¹ With regard to Norway, for example, Peter Anker stated that the altar of Mary had 'sin faste plass i alle kirker, til venstre for koråpningen. Av og til var det en egen alternisje i skipets østmur, som i Værnes kirke, eller til og med et eget kapell for Maria-alteret, som i Gamle Aker kirke, på nordsiden av koret. Men i de aller fleste kirker har Maria-alteret stått rett inn mot østmuren eller østveggen, med bildet stående oppå, ofte med en baldakin over, eller senere, plassert i et alterskap der dørene bare ble åpnet på de særlige Mariafestdager' (Mary has a permanent place in all churches to the left in front of the chancel opening. Occasionally there was an altar niche in the nave's east wall, for example in Værnes, or even a separate chapel for the Marian altar, as in Gamle Aker church on the north side of the chancel. But in most churches, the altar of Mary has stood directly in front of the east wall [of the nave], with the image standing on top, often with a canopy above, or later, placed in a shrine where the doors were only opened on the special Marian feast days). See: Anker, 1981, p. 205.

Marian veneration took place inside the church interior. The Danish art historian Ebbe Nyborg was among the first to point out that wall paintings depicting the Madonna are commonly located on the north side of the triumphal arch in Danish parish churches (Nyborg, 1977, pp. 165–166); for example, in Måløv church on Zealand. Here we find niches on either side of the arch containing paintings that can be dated to 1150–1175. The northern niche depicts the Virgin Mary and Child in the Byzantine scheme of *Hodegetria* ('showing the way'), while the southern niche features a bishop (Kunz, 2007, p. 266). In the churches of Råsted and Bindslev, both in northern Jutland, mural paintings preserved on the place of the former northern side altar show Mary as the enthroned Mother of God.

The same pattern can be observed in several Swedish parish churches, such as in Hall on the island of Gotland. Here, above the vanished northern side altar, we find a protruding console that probably held an image of Mary and Child. The fourteenth-century wall painting under the console shows the coronation of the Virgin between two angels swinging censers between Peter (left) and Paul (right). Three saints are depicted on the northern wall; these can be identified as St Catherine, a holy bishop, and St Olav (Kroesen, 2019, pp. 20–21). In Mästerby (Gotland) a painted image of Mary from the twelfth century is preserved in a niche in the northeast corner of the nave (Fig. 1). Compared to Denmark and Sweden, the survival rate of wall paintings in Norway is generally low. Here, however, we sometimes find other forms of altar decorations that indicate the place of a former altar dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In Hopperstad stave church on the Sognefjord, a baldachin from the twelfth or thirteenth century standing in the northeast corner is reminiscent of a vanished Marian altar that once stood below (Fig. 2). The roof of the baldachin holds a painted Marian cycle and a sculpture of the Virgin most probably stood on the altar.

In churches where two sculptures survive as a pair, art historians have traditionally relocated these on the side altars standing on both sides of the triumphal arch. In some cases, such as in the church of Dädesjö (Småland, Sweden) (Fig. 3), there are convincing arguments for doing this. This twelfth-century church was abandoned in 1794 when it was converted into a storage facility and the chancel was demolished. However, a description written by the vicar Sven Laurén in 1758 mentions the images of St Olav in a tabernacle shrine and a Madonna, both standing on top of a side altar (Ullén, 1969, p. 210). After the church was abandoned, the sculptures were kept in the tower of the new church building and returned to the side altars in 1922 (Ullén, 1969, p. 216), where they had probably stood since the thirteenth century. The church of Östra Vram (Skåne, Sweden) possesses two tabernacle shrines containing sculptures of the Virgin and Child

and St Olav, both dating from *c.* 1300 and probably made as a pair. The side altars themselves have not survived and the tabernacle shrines are now placed on pedestals before the side walls of the nave after their return from the University Museum in Lund. Based on their relatively small dimensions, the images of Mary and a holy bishop in the church of Näsby (Småland, Sweden) can also be supposed to have belonged to side altars.

Norwegian examples of churches where more than one altar sculpture is preserved include Røldal, where both a Virgin and Child and a St Olav survive from the same stave church; both are now kept at the University Museum in Bergen (UM MA 295; MA 294). Both sculptures were probably made in the same workshop, as a pair. Belonging to the Marian sculpture is a carved wing, the only surviving element of a tabernacle shrine (UM MA 297a). St Olav stands before a back panel on a plinth that is surrounded by narrow slats that served to support the now lost doors – indicating that this figure also stood in a tabernacle shrine. Although the area between chancel and nave of Røldal church was modified during a refurbishment in the seventeenth century, traces on the wooden chancel arch allow for a reconstruction of a much narrower entrance to the chancel.² The sections on either side would have provided enough space for two altars, with the enshrined images standing on top.

3. THE TABERNACLE SHRINE ON THE MAIN ALTAR

Some Norwegian tabernacle shrines are of such monumental dimensions that a placement on a side altar is hard to imagine, especially in smaller parish churches, which leaves the main altar as the only possible location. However, this raises the question of whether it is theologically and liturgically conceivable that at least some of these tabernacle shrines were located on the high altar in the chancel rather than a side altar in the nave. A case in point is the stave church of Hedalen (Valdres, Norway) where the wings and the back panel of a tabernacle shrine from the mid-thirteenth century now form a retable on the main altar, together with a medieval cross that stands in front of it (Fig. 4). These elements originally belonged to a Marian tabernacle shrine that contained the Virgin and Child still kept in the church and for which a painted church model preserved in the same

² The wooden planks were reused after the arch was enlarged. Fragments of an arch survived and, based on its measurement, it is possible to reconstruct the original opening.

church served as a crowning. The relief figures from the inner side of the wings are lost and their backgrounds were painted with floral ornaments in the mid-eighteenth century.³ Bernt C. Lange proposed a reconstruction of the medieval tabernacle shrine at Hedalen (Lange, 1994, p. 23–36). When opened, the shrine possessed a size of no less than 320 cm by 235 cm. The medieval stave church of Hedalen was dendrochronologically dated to the middle of the twelfth century. The church was expanded and heavily renovated during the seventeenth century, but traces and a reconstruction drawing published by Lorentz Dietrichson in 1892 made it possible to reconstruct the church as a small single nave building with a chancel that was narrower than the nave, providing space for two side altars in the eastern corners of the nave (Dietrichson, 1892, p. 355). All this leaves the main altar as the only convincing location for the Marian shrine. Elisabeth Andersen pointed out that if it would be placed on one of the side altars in the nave, one wing would lean against the side wall, meaning that the shrine could not be fully opened (Andersen/Stein, 2008, p. 59). It cannot be fully ruled out that an arrangement where the tabernacle shrine could not be fully opened existed in the middle ages. However, the richly decorated tabernacle shrine may be considered as the main devotional object in the small parish church. A position of the shrine without the space to unfold all four wings can be considered as an unsatisfactory solution. On the main altar, however, the shrine dominated the chancel and served as the central focus of the entire church interior (Fig. 5).

A parallel situation is found in the stave church of nearby Reinli, where the wings of a tabernacle shrine dating from the late thirteenth century survive. These were reused as a fixed altarpiece and placed on the main altar in 1885. The half wings that once together covered the front of the shrine were assembled to form the central part, while the wider side wings now serve as side sections. The figure, probably a Virgin and Child, are now lost. The Cultural History Museum of the University of Oslo possesses a painted church model that probably served to crown the Reinli shrine (KHM C7292). Regarding its size and architectural shape, this shrine can be compared with the one from Hedalen; just as that one, it must have dominated the interior of the stave church, a single-nave building with a chancel of the same width as the nave (Fig. 6).⁴ Originally, there was a chancel screen separating the nave and the chancel, fragments of which were discovered in storage near the church in 1853. A reconstruction by the architect

³ The cross on the main altar probably served as a triumphal cross originally. On Hedalen, see: Andersen/Stein, 2008.

⁴ On the shrine in Reinli see: Stein, 2010.

Georg Andreas Bull shows a screen with a narrow entrance and small arcades that provided a view of the chancel interior.⁵ When opened, the monumental shrine on the main altar must have had an overwhelming effect for the believers who looked at it through the openings in the screen.

A third Norwegian Marian shrine from roughly the same period of which the Virgin and Child, back panel and canopy survive, is the one from the church at Hove on the Sognefjord, now preserved in the University Museum of Bergen (Fig. 7). The small but carefully built stone church holds two medieval altars: one in the chancel and a side altar in the northeastern corner on the nave. While the main altar is freestanding, the northern side altar is backed by a round-arched wall niche. If we ask ourselves where the Marian shrine could have been placed in the church interior, the only convincing answer is the main altar in the chancel (Fig. 8).

The above-mentioned examples from Hedalen, Reinli, and Hove seem to suggest that main altars decorated with monumental Marian shrines were quite common during the thirteenth century in Norway. However, this can hardly be substantiated by contemporary written sources, which are quite contradictory regarding the pictorial decoration of main altars in Western Europe. The *Liber ritualis* of the diocese of Magdeburg, which originally dates to the thirteenth century, but has only survived in a copy from the fifteenth century, mentions that only a cross, precious books, and chandeliers are allowed to be placed there (Braun, 1924, vol. 2, pp. 280–281). However, the rejection of painted and carved decorations strengthens the assumption that such decorations on main altars were not unknown at the time and may even have been quite common. Durandus, on the other hand, writes explicitly about the benefits of altar decorations in his *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* written for the diocese of Mende (France). However, material survivals that could provide insights into the nature of altar decorations during the thirteenth century are scarce, especially outside the Nordic countries. All this leads to the question of the extent to which it was usual for main altars to have been permanently decorated with sculptures as early as the thirteenth century. Possible answers to this question should be considered in the light of the often ambivalent and restrictive stance towards images in theological writings of the twelfth century. How can we explain a decoration of the main altar with an image of Mary, both liturgically and theologically? Are there other examples of a Marian iconography in the context of main altar decorations in Scandinavia?

⁵ The fragments are now lost. A reconstruction is published in Dietrichson, 1892, p. 402.

A complicating factor is that, in written sources, altar decorations are usually referred to without mentioning their imagery.

A further complicating factor is the fact that medieval sculptures have mostly survived without their original context, such as tabernacle shrines, which means it is often uncertain where they were located inside the church. The oldest preserved sculptures of the Virgin Mary and other saints date back to the ninth century. These wooden images were clad with precious gold, such as the Madonna from Essen Minster (Germany) or the St Fides in Conques (France). Due to their material value – in addition to the fear of idolatry, which is often expressed in theological writings – art historical research has traditionally assumed that such images were not permanently displayed on altars.⁶ They would have been set up on the main altar on special occasions only, while usually being kept in the treasury (Pawlik, 2013, pp. 139–140).⁷ The *Liber miracolorum sancte Fidis*, written by Bernhard of Angers mentions that the image of Fides was displayed in a separate space inside the church, which was usually closed and was only opened on special occasions: ‘Quibus monasterium intramibus forte fortuna accidit, ut locus ille secrebus in quo venerabilis imago servatur, fuerit patefactus’ (Bouillet, 1897, pp. 47–48). (When we had entered the monastery, fate brought it about, quite by chance, that the separate place where the revered image is preserved had been opened up (Sheingorn, 1995, p. 78). It is uncertain whether this separate place was a crypt, as Ilene H. Forsyth has assumed, or a chapel (Forsyth, 1972, p. 39).

In her study on wooden Madonnas from the twelfth century in France, Forsyth mentions damage on the throne and feet of several seated wooden Madonnas, which she explains as consequences of their use and location. She concludes that the Madonnas were not displayed permanently on the main altar and were therefore mobile elements of altar decoration. Moreover, the images were often kept in the crypt, where moisture caused damage to them (Forsyth 1972, p. 39). Some French sculptures may be assumed to have stood in a crypt. According to the writings of Hugh of Poitiers, for example, the Madonna from Ste Madeleine in Vézelay was displayed on an altar in the crypt. The sculpture survived a great fire between 1161 and 1165 and was then temporarily displayed on the main altar before it was moved back to the crypt (Forsyth, 1972, pp. 32–35). Likewise, in Châtillon-sur-Loire, sources attest to the location of the Madonna in the crypt during the twelfth century, a location that is also recorded for figures in Chartres,

⁶ Recently: Pawlik, 2013.

⁷ This can be assumed for example for the sculptures from Essen and Paderborn. See: Pawlik, 2013, pp. 139–140.

Cambrai, Coutances and Le Puy (Forsyth, 1972, p. 39). In his *Dialogus miracolorum*, Caesarius of Heisterbach mentions a sculpture of Mary standing in the crypt of the church in Münstereifel (Germany) (Wolf, 2002, p. 371).

In Mont-devant-Sassey (Meuse, France) a tabernacle shrine (now without wings) with a Marian sculpture from the thirteenth century can still be found on top of the altar in the crypt (Fig. 1 Kroesen/Tängeberg, in this volume).⁸ This is probably its original location given that the socle fits perfectly behind the *ara* in the altar mensa and that the shrine fits naturally in the space under the vaults. In addition to such (enshrined) sculptures, mention can also be made of stone retables with Marian iconography dating from the same period. In the case of the example from Carrières-sur-Seine, now kept in the Musée du Louvre in Paris (Inv. R.F.1612), any reference to its former location is missing (Le Pogam, 2009, p. 173). However, for two early retables with Marian iconography preserved in the German Rhineland, a location in the crypt may be assumed (Kunz, 2007, pp. 276–280). The retable in the abbey church of Brauweiler was located on the altar in the crypt until the nineteenth century, when it was transferred to the main altar (Budde, 1979, p. 68; Legner, 1982, p. 169; Wolf, 2002, p. 277); while Bernd Rieden assumed a location of the retable from Oberpleis on the main altar, Tobias Kunz suggested a position on an altar in the crypt. A similar location has also been assumed for the retable from Echternach, now in the National Museum of History and Art in Luxembourg (Rieden, 1995, p. 107; Kunz, 2007, p. 278).

Iconological interpretations of crypts often refer to these spaces as the true foundations of churches and as the preferred place of Marian devotion. In the light of St Peter Damian's sermons, Günter Bandmann interpreted the Marian altar in the crypt as the womb of Mary from which Christ ascended to the main altar,⁹ the altar of the cross where Christ's sacrificial death is repeated during Eucharist. Thus, the crypt altar can be interpreted as the true foundation of the main altar, which is reinforced by the fact that it was often located directly beneath. Crypts were not always accessible, which meant that these spaces could adopt a function similar to that of the tabernacle shrine: by closing of the crypt the image could be withdrawn from the views of the faithful. Although records such as those already mentioned clearly refer to a location of Marian images in crypts, this was not

⁸ The Virgin and Child are a copy of the original now kept in the Musée de la Prinerie in nearby Verdun.

⁹ 'De hoc altari (utero Mariae) ad aram crucis ascendes, proprio cruore tamquam alterius generis oleo perfusus, iam non solus consecratus totum, corpus machinae mundialis largiori ligamine copulavit'. Sermon by St Peter Damian, quoted after Bandmann, 1962, pp. 401–402.

necessarily the preferred place of Marian devotion everywhere. As Almuth Klein pointed out, the crypt was rather the traditional place of devotion for local saints (Klein, 2011, p. 66). All of the above-mentioned churches where a position of the Marian image on crypt altars is assumed are cathedrals, monasteries, or important pilgrims' churches. However, the tabernacle shrines that survive in Norway are or were all located in rural parish churches without crypts.

Several sources explicitly mention Marian sculptures standing on main altars during the thirteenth century. The testament of Abbot Theobald from the monastery of Chiesi (Italy) mentions an ivory image of the Virgin Mary surrounded by two saints that was placed on the main altar as early as 1019 (Braun, 1924, vol. 2, p. 279). However, it is not certain whether this ivory panel was permanently displayed on the altar or only on feast days. Reading the text, one naturally thinks of several preserved examples of ivory panels with the images of the Virgin that came from Byzantium to the West. However, the relatively small dimensions of these panels, as well as the precious material they were made of, suggests that they were not permanently displayed on the altar.

William, the Earl of Sussex, and his wife Gundrada are known to have knelt before an image of St Peter standing on the main altar of the abbey church of Cluny (France); and in the church of Clermont-Ferrand, the Madonna allegedly stood on a socle behind the main altar (Forsyth, 1972, pp. 38–40). Forsyth concluded that the Romanesque Madonnas of France were generally placed in an altar context from as early as the twelfth century. In some cases, there seems to be indication that the altar in question was the main altar. However, it remains uncertain if the display was permanent or temporary. Apart from the above-mentioned records, church inventories also yield important details about the location of images and how main altars were decorated in Norway and Scandinavia during the thirteenth century. In Norway, however, only two medieval inventories are preserved, both from the first quarter of the fourteenth century and thus after the period under scrutiny here. The inventory from Hålandsdalen (Holdhus) from 1306 mentions a Marian sculpture (Bing, 1909, pp. 3–5; *Diplomatorium Norvegicum* XXI, p. 6). In addition, a large cross with Saint Mary and John is mentioned, probably a triumphal cross. The second preserved inventory, from Ylmheim and dated to 1320–1321, mentions sculptures of the Virgin Mary and Olav, a frontal and a cross with silver decorations (*Diplomatorium Norvegicum* XV, p. 10). Both inventories are silent about the location of these objects in church space.

Additional indications can be gleaned from written sources from places that had strong cultural and ecclesiastical ties with medieval Norway, primarily Iceland and Britain. In Iceland, which formed a union with the Norwegian king-

dom in 1262, more than 1200 church inventories (the so-called *máldagar*) are preserved from between the thirteenth until the sixteenth centuries, mostly from small parish churches. Fredrik Wallem analyzed these inventories in his thesis from 1909 and made these extraordinary sources accessible for research. Sculptures of the Virgin and other saints sometimes described as standing in a tabernacle are mentioned frequently, but the location in the church remains uncertain (Wallem, 1910). Panel paintings are mostly mentioned in the inventories in an altar context simply with the terms *tabulum*, *tabula*, or the Icelandic words *skript*, *blað*, *bilet*, or *brik* (Wallem, 1910, pp. 40 and 52). It is not possible to establish with certainty whether this refers to altar frontals or retables. Another aspect not mentioned in the inventories, as mentioned above, is the iconography of these panels. It was not until 1318 that a panel in the church of *Ás í Kelduhverfi* in northern Iceland was described in detail as *toflu yfir alltare* – ‘a panel above the altar’ (Morgan, 2004, p. 9).

In England, a panel on the main altar is mentioned in Oxney in Northamptonshire (Lehmann-Brockhaus, 1956, nr. 3425). This chapel, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, belonged to a cell under the Benedictine monastery of Peterborough and no more than six monks lived here permanently. It is mentioned that Robert de Lindesey, abbot of Peterborough, ordered the chancel of the chapel to be built around 1214–1222, and that a panel with the image of the Virgin was placed *on* the altar (Lehmann-Brockhaus, 1956, nr. 3425). Both the chapel and the image are now lost.¹⁰

It is in England, which had strong ties with Norway during the high Middle Ages that one finds indication for the location of sculptures in the context of the main altar. Roman regulations required a dedication of every altar. The patron of the altar had to be visible either on written or visual manner in the direct environment of the altar. This led – according to Paul Binski – to a visual representation of the saint or the Virgin Mary on the altar by the late thirteenth century. The synodal statutes of Exeter from 1287 require an image of the patron saint in the respective church, and – according to Binski – the preferred place for display was the chancel altar (Binski, 1995, p. 53). This regulation was repeated during the Synod of Trier in 1310 and in the fourteenth-century statutes of the bishop of Exeter for the collegiate church of St Mary in Devon (Binski, 1995, p. 53). A location of a Marian image in context of the main altar preserved in the St Mary’s Church of Great Canfield in Essex (Marks, 2004, p. 44). A mid-thirteenth century mu-

¹⁰ No traces of the chapel were found in 1845: Dugdale, 1846, p. 663.

ral painting of the *Maria Lactans* is placed above the chancel altar between two windows. The Virgin Mary was by far the most popular patron of English parish churches (Marks, 2004, p. 64) which makes it possible that an image on or in the environment of the main altar was quite common. Although records on church dedications in Norway are scarce there are several churches where the dedication is known. From the 364 church dedications known in Norway in total sixty referring to the Virgin Mary (Dietrichson, 1888, pp. 130–133), which in turn, indicate a consecration of the main altar to her, that was marked by a written or figural notation. If one can draw some results of the scarce records, Mary was the most popular patron of Norwegian churches. A comparable pattern can be observed in church dedications on Iceland and in Denmark (Wallem, 1910, p. 15). Likewise, it has been common in other parts of Europe to mark the altar with an image of the patron. This can be observed by a rare example from the church of Steinkirchen in Brandenburg (Germany). Here, a shrine with the image of Saint Pancrate, the patron saint of the church, survived and is now on display in the Bodemuseum in Berlin (c. 1300, inv. 3198). The shrine from around 1300 lost its wings but originally had a width of approximate two meters, which corresponds exactly with the dimension of the main altar. The shrine with the image of the patron saint was most probably located on the main altar (Kunz, 2014, p. 226).

A record from the Cistercian monastery of Walkenried in northern Germany refers to a sculpture of the Virgin Mary displayed on the main altar. This is a legal act between the Counts of Scharzfeld, Burchard and Sigebodo, and the knight Thudo dating from 1265. The source mentions an image of Mary on an altar: '[...] Walkenride monachorum in altari et super ymaginem beatae Mariae virginis' (Hettling, 1852–55, pp. 245–246). Since such legal oaths were usually sworn before the main altar, Bernd Nicolai assumed that there was an image of the Virgin Mary standing on the main altar of this monastery church. He connected this Madonna with one of the two extant sculptures from Walkenried dated c. 1250 (Nicolai, 1994, pp. 33–34). The material (limestone) and the dimension suggest that the sculpture was permanently located on the main altar. This would imply that in Walkenried we have proof of a permanent image of the Virgin Mary on the high altar of a Cistercian church as early as 1250.

However, it is not always certain if sculptures were placed direct on or behind the altar. According to an English document from around 1250, a Marian image in a tabernacle was placed in the chancel of Aldbury church in Herfordshire without mentioning explicitly the altar (Marks, 2004, p. 62). Traces in several chancels of English churches indicate a display of such sculptures and shrines in niches and on consoles on the walls in the environment of the altar

(Marks, 2004, pp. 73–76). Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that sculptures and tabernacle shrines were displayed in parish churches without a direct altar connection.

It may be concluded that written sources from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are generally scarce with regard to the iconography or location of objects inside churches. The few written sources that survive from medieval Norway do not explicitly mention the location of Marian images on main altars. However, indication may be drawn from important material survivals, including the tabernacle shrines from Reinli, Hedalen, and Hove, in relation to the spatial context from which they originate, in addition to other indications found here and there in other parts of Europe. All these indications make it highly plausible that sculptures of the Virgin Mary were placed on and in the environment of main altars from at least as early as the middle of the thirteenth century.

4. MARIAN FRONTALS

Beside the tabernacle shrines discussed above, another element of altar decoration common with Marian iconography that should also be taken into account is that of altar frontals. In Norway, thirty-one altar frontals have survived, fifteen of which show the seated Madonna with the Christ Child in the center, surrounded by narrative scenes from the birth of Christ or scenes from Marian miracles. These panels resemble the aspect of contemporary Norwegian tabernacle shrines when opened, as observed by Bernt C. Lange (1957, pp. 194–196). The strong similarities in form and content lead one to assume that there was no principal difference between choosing a painted or a carved image, nor between its position at the front or on top of an altar, which makes these Norwegian painted altar frontals highly relevant to our discussion of Marian sculptures in altar contexts.

The frontal in Skaun (Trøndelag) is one of the few medieval frontals that is still located in the original position for which it was made around the middle of the thirteenth century (Fig. 9). It perfectly matches the dimensions of the front of the medieval main altar in the chancel (height 97 cm, width 166 cm). From Tingelstad (Oppland), three frontals are preserved that now all belong to the collection of the Cultural History Museum at the University of Oslo. The church of Tingelstad was built during the thirteenth century and preserves its medieval main altar block; here, too, the frontal showing Mary and Child fits perfectly to its front (height 98.5 cm, width 160 cm). Both Marian frontals from Skaun and

Tingelstad have a similar width of about 160–166 cm, which is also the case with three other frontals with Mariological iconography preserved in Norway – the frontals from Dale II (165 cm), Hamre (167 cm), and Odda (165.5 cm) – and it is most likely that these frontals have also served as frontals of main altars.

In the wider European context, I should mention the small village church of Saint-Fructueux in Iravals/Yravals in French Catalonia (Pyénées-Orientales), which contains a painted frontal with a central depiction of the Virgin Mary that is still located on the front of the altar in the apse.¹¹ From the monastery from Santa Maria de Lluçà in Spanish Catalonia originates a frontal with Marian iconography now preserved in the Museu Episcopal at Vic (inv. MEV 4). It belonged to the main altar of the church of the Augustinian convent in Lluçà (Trullén, 2007, p. 103) where the front of the high altar is now adorned with a painted copy. Similarly, the provenance of four Marian frontals preserved in the Museu Nacional d'Art Catalunya in Barcelona is also known. The frontals from Avià (inv. 1578), Mosoll (inv. 15788), Alós d'Isil (inv. 15834) and Rigatell (inv. 35701) probably belonged to the decorations of the main altars in the respective churches.¹²

Most of the cases discussed are small rural parishes that were hardly at the forefront of artistic developments and where radical innovations are not likely to have occurred. The rare material survivals, of which the original spatial context is known, together with scarce written sources where the iconography of altar decorations is precisely mentioned, allow us to conclude that images of the Virgin and Child, either as sculptures or as panel paintings, must have been considerably widespread as decorations of main altars throughout Western Europe during the thirteenth century.

5. THE VIRGIN MARY IN MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

Placing the Virgin and Child on the main altar puts the Mother of God in the center of the church building as a focal point of liturgy and devotion. The central role of the Virgin Mary in the history of salvation is directly related to her role as an instrument in the Incarnation of the Savior. During the twelfth century especially, an increase in Mariological piety and veneration can be observed in texts

¹¹ Géraldine Mallet assumed an origin of the frontal from the neighboring church of Saint-Étienne de Latour-de-Carol, see: Mallet, 2003, p. 246.

¹² I thank Gemma Ylla-Català for kindly providing me with this information.

from all parts of Europe. It is often assumed that the Cistercians functioned as catalyzers in the spreading of Marian piety. All Cistercian churches were dedicated to the Virgin, and a special attitude towards Mary can be observed in Cistercian texts from the thirteenth century, such as the mentioned miracle collection written by Caesarius of Heisterbach. Mary also played an extraordinary role in other monastic orders, and a strong Marian veneration certainly did not remain constrained to monastic congregations in medieval Europe (Kupferschmied, 2017, pp. 19–31; Kjesrud, 2015, p. 103).

The most important sources for the study of Marian veneration in thirteenth-century Scandinavia are written in Old Norse. Two important collections of texts survive: the *Gammelnorsk Homiliebok*, a collection of sermons, and the so-called *Mariu Saga*, a saga text on the Virgin including a collection of Marian miracles. In the *Mariu Saga*, which is preserved in forty-two editions from the twelfth century until the sixteenth century, the Virgin plays an important role as an intermediary between Christ and humankind. Irene Kupferschmied, who analyzed the sources of the saga and the miracle texts, has been able to identify the Latin sources for nearly all miracles; only three texts seem to have an Old Norse origin. Based on the common source texts of Central European origin, Kupferschmied assumed that the Mariological piety in medieval Iceland and Norway followed the common European pattern (Kupferschmied, 2017, p. 29). In these texts, Mary is directly involved in the faith of ordinary believers.

The outstanding position of the Virgin in the salvation of humankind is even more explicitly expressed in the Marian sermon of the Old Norse *Homiliebok*:

En þo er ein hennar iartæin hægare oc øðre en allar iartæinir hælagra manna, su er hon bar droten várn, þann er allar irtæinir oc alla miscum vætir hægum maonnum. Oc þat allt er guð hefir os væit til miscunnar í hingatqvaomo sonar síns, þa haofum vér af henne þvi at hon gerðisc væið at høyra ængils orð oc boðan, sva sem í dag er, at hon scyldi bera þann í hæim, er ós løysti með sinu bloðe fra hælvitis qvaolum (Unger, 1864, p. 170).

(And yet Her only prophecy is more holy and exalted than all the prophecies of the Saints; for she bore our Lord, the One who grants grace to all Saints to perform these prophecies. And all mercy that we experience through the Son of God, which we have received through Her. She made herself worthy to hear the voice of the angel. She bear him into the world, which he shall salvage from the torment of hell by his blood).¹³

¹³ Translation by author with help from Zuzana Stankovitsová.

This quote makes a direct reference to the Incarnation of Christ through Mary and his ensuing sacrificial death as an act of salvation to humankind. According to the doctrine of Transubstantiation, Christ's redeeming death was repeated every time the sacrament of the Eucharist was performed – not just symbolically, but in reality. The sermon explains that it was only through Mary who gave birth to the savior that humankind could receive salvation. Thus, this source attributes an outstanding position in salvation history to Mary and placed her far above all other saints. The veneration of the Virgin was always inextricably connected to the Incarnation of the Savior, an event to which the Marian type of the Throne of Wisdom (*Sedes sapientiae*) makes explicit reference. The narrative scenes found on the inside of the wings of tabernacle shrines embed the Mother of God into a narrative context surrounding the Birth of Christ. The extraordinary position granted to Mary, which is reflected in Old Norse and Icelandic texts, follows an overall European pattern.

6. CONCLUSION

The Norwegian tabernacle shrines from Hedalen, Reinli, and Hove, as well as a number of Norwegian painted altar frontals, make it clear that Mariological iconography must have been quite common on high altars, at least from the second half of the thirteenth century onward. The close stylistic and iconographic similarities between these Norwegian medieval art works and objects found elsewhere in Europe make it likely that the same was true for all of Western Europe. Moreover, the fact that most examples originated from remote churches in the Norwegian mountains shows that sculpted and painted depictions of the Virgin Mary did not remain restricted to the context of certain religious orders, but also spread to modest parish churches. Thus, it is no great surprise that several of the earliest preserved winged altarpieces, including for example those in Doberan (c. 1300) and Altenberg (c. 1330), both in Germany, should hold the figure of Mary prominently in the center. This feature was by no means a Cistercian invention, as has been suggested, but rather seems to carry forward an existing tradition of displaying images of saints, and particularly of the Mother of God, on the main altar. The study of early tabernacle shrines is fundamental to our understanding of these developments. Furthermore, these hitherto largely ignored art works from the North of Europe invite to rethink the precise relationship between tabernacle shrines, on one hand, and winged altarpieces, on the other.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Fig. 1. Niche serving as a background to the former northern side altar, with a depiction of the enthroned Virgin and Child, in the church of Mästerby, Gotland, Sweden, c. 1150–1175 (photo Justin Kroesen).



Fig. 2. Canopy above the northern side altar in the stave church of Hopperstad, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway, thirteenth century (photo Stephan Kuhn).



Fig. 3. The interior of the church
in Dädesjö, Småland, Sweden, twelfth century
(photo Justin Kroesen).



Fig. 4. The chancel of the stave church at Hedalen, Valdres, Norway, with several elements from a tabernacle shrine (sculpture, back panel and wings, crowning church model), thirteenth century (photo Justin Kroesen).

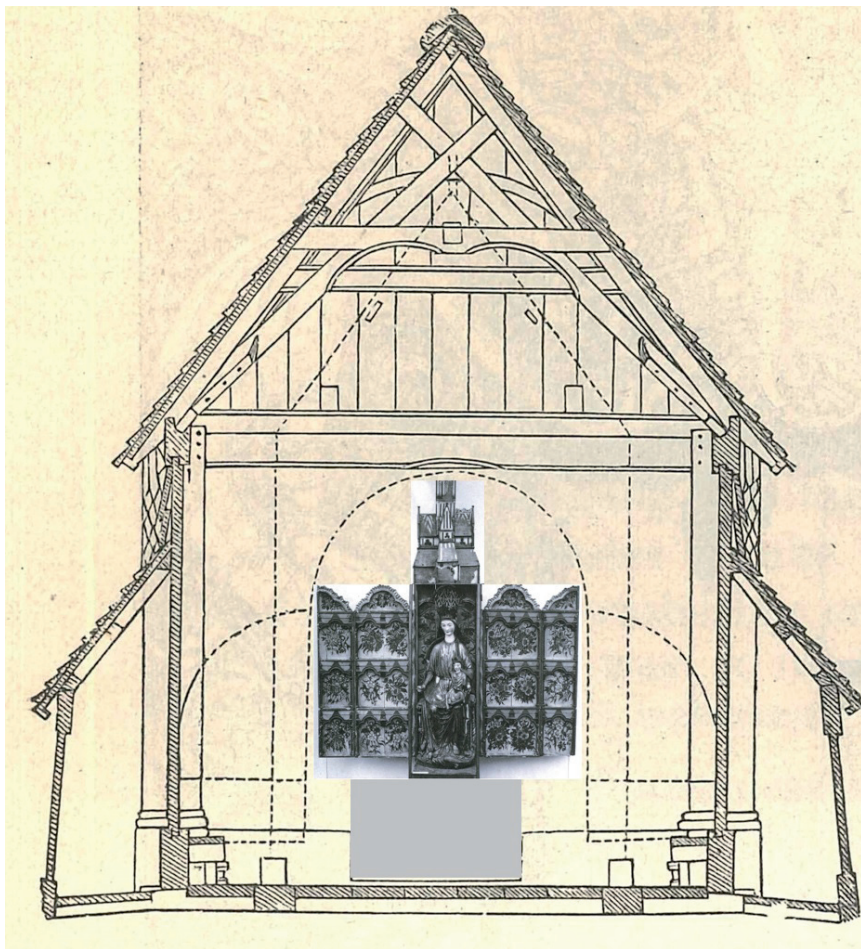


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the tabernacle shrine in the medieval stave church of Hedalen, Valdres, Norway (reconstruction Stephan Kuhn).



Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the tabernacle shrine in the stave church of Reinli, Valdres, Norway (reconstruction by Stephan Kuhn).



Fig. 7. Madonna with back panel and canopy from Hove, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway, c. 1230–1240, now University Museum of Bergen, MA 27 (photo Svein Skare, University Museum of Bergen).



Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the canopy of the tabernacle shrine from Hove, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway, located on the main altar in the church at Hove 2016 (photo Justin Kroesen).



Fig. 9. Main altar with a Marian altar frontal from *c.* 1250, Skaun, Trøndelag, Norway (photo Justin Kroesen).