



## TABERNACLE-ALTARPIECES IN CENTRAL EUROPE: EXAMPLES, TYPES, ICONOGRAPHY

### RETABLOS-TABERNÁCULO EN EUROPA CENTRAL: EJEMPLOS, TIPOS, ICONOGRAFÍA

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#### Abstract

A first survey of tabernacle-altarpieces in the German-speaking countries reveals that probably less than 20 specimens can be traced from the time before *c.* 1450; most of them are only preserved in fragments. They can be found in the north (Stralsund) as well as in middle and southern Germany and the Alpine region. Among them are large, sumptuous works like the former high altar retable of Stams monastery in Tyrol or the life-size 'Madonna with the Stags' in Erfurt, both from around 1370–80. The only coherent group in the corpus, however, is formed by four smaller tabernacles that probably were made for the Nuremberg convent of the Poor Clares around 1360–70. In terms of iconography, the Virgin as the Apocalyptic Woman appears remarkably often at the centre of tabernacle-altarpieces, starting with the Erfurt Madonna. A later example of this type is the large Virgin in the Sun on a pier of St Sebaldus church in Nuremberg, donated by the Imhoff-family around 1440. Originally the centre of a tabernacle with wings, it stood next to and above an altar with a painted retable; thus the two works must have formed a kind of ensemble. Most of the known tabernacle-altarpieces were designed as a kind of vertical cabinet or as a tower; in the latter case, ground-plans vary between rectangle, pentagon and T-shape. Starting around mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, there are also some retables with scenic arrangements of sculptures in broad shrines that basically follow the construction of tabernacle-altarpieces.

### Keywords

Tabernacle-altarpieces, Germany c. 1300–1440, St Clare altarpieces of Nuremberg, Apocalyptic Woman, construction of altarpieces, placement of altarpieces, retable.

### Resumen

Una primera valoración de los retablos-tabernáculo en los territorios de lengua alemana revela que probablemente solo se pueden rastrear menos de veinte ejemplares anteriores a 1450, la mayoría de ellos conservados de manera fragmentaria. Se pueden encontrar en el norte (Stralsund), así como en el centro y sur de Alemania y en la región alpina. Entre ellos hay obras grandes y suntuosas, como el antiguo retablo mayor del monasterio de Stams, en el Tirol, o la Virgen de los Ciervos de Erfurt, de tamaño natural (ambos se fechan hacia 1370–80). En cualquier caso, el único grupo coherente dentro de este *corpus* es el formado por cuatro retablos-tabernáculos de menor tamaño que probablemente fueron hechos para el convento de las clarisas de Núremberg hacia 1360–70. Desde el punto de vista iconográfico, resulta significativa la frecuente aparición de la Virgen como mujer apocalíptica en el centro de los retablos-tabernáculo, empezando por la mencionada Virgen de Erfurt. Un ejemplo posterior de este tipo es la gran Virgen ceñida por el sol que se encuentra en un pilar de la iglesia de San Sebald de Núremberg, donada por la familia Imhoff hacia 1440. En origen fue la imagen titular de un tabernáculo con alas que se situó cerca y por encima de un altar con un retablo pintado, de manera que ambas obras pudieron haber formado una especie de conjunto. La mayor parte de los retablos-tabernáculo conocidos fueron diseñados como a modo de cajón vertical o de torre (en este último caso, la forma de la planta varía entre el rectángulo, el pentágono y la forma de T). A partir de mediados del siglo XIV, también hay algunos retablos con figuras formando escenas dentro de amplios tabernáculos que siguen básicamente la estructura de los retablos-tabernáculo.

### Palabras clave

Retablos-tabernáculo, Alemania c. 1300–1400, retablos de Santa Clara de Núremberg, mujer apocalíptica, construcción de retablos, emplazamiento de retablos, retablo.

All over Europe, the number of tabernacle-altarpieces that have come down to us from the later middle ages is limited, and their distribution among different regions is extremely uneven. The majority of the material can be found in Scandi-

navia, and numerous works are known from the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, there are also some specimens preserved from Central Europe. The works that will be mentioned here were created in the regions between the south coast of the Baltic Sea in the North and Tyrol in the South, between the Rhineland in the West and Franconia, Bohemia and the former Prussian territories in the East – in short, from the German-speaking or partly German-speaking countries of the Holy Roman Empire. Just a few tabernacle-altarpieces from these regions are preserved completely, while the majority only survived in fragments, sometimes small ones. In all probability, there are remains of more, maybe even many more tabernacle-altarpieces preserved, but if so, they cannot be identified: It is impossible to tell if a carved sculpture of a standing or sitting saint was originally placed in a tabernacle with foldable wings. The following essay will discuss undisputable tabernacle-altarpieces (or their fragments) from Central Europe. This is a first survey, and an attempt to list all relevant works from the regions defined above from the time before 1450. Even if some works have in all likelihood been overlooked, the modest number of only 17 specimens presented here could probably not be raised significantly. Furthermore, this essay will discuss the different types of constructions encountered as well as the possible original placements of the works.

## I. RECTANGULAR SHRINES

Besides a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Madonna, originally housed in a tabernacle, in Humptrup in Schleswig-Holstein which is closely related to Scandinavian works (Albrecht, ed., 2020, pp. 293–296) the arguably oldest surviving example of a tabernacle with foldable wings from Germany is a construction of c. 175 cm height, made around 1300 in Saxony (Fig. 1; Kunz, 2014, cat. 62). Shown today in the Bode-Museum in Berlin, it once stood on the main altar of St Pancras' church in Steinkirchen (Lausitz, Brandenburg), and presents a figure of the titular saint; the wings are unfortunately lost. It consists of a cabinet-like construction above a rectangular ground plan, with a closed back side and two thin columns at the front edges. This type continued to be used for a long time; more than a century and a half later, around 1470, pretty much the same construction was used for an altarpiece in Darsberg near Heidelberg (Figs 9–10 Ralcheva, in this volume; Stange, 1970, no 459). It is smaller than the one from Steinkirchen, the shrine being 125 cm high, and there is a standing Virgin and Child at its centre, surrounded by four saints, each one painted on the inside of one of the wings; the outsides of the

outermost wings show an Annunciation. We do not know where the Darsberg tabernacle stood originally, yet in all probability it also was a retable, placed on an altar. The same seems to be true for a tabernacle of very similar dimensions, made around 1420/30 (Figs 7–8 Ralcheva, in this volume), that comes from Our Lady's Church in Friedberg, Hesse (Woelk, 1999, cat. 16; Foerster, 2018, pp. 252–253). In this case, the figure of the seated Madonna is markedly older than the shrine and its wings, on whose insides scenes from the life of the Virgin are painted. The sculpture was made and polychromed around 1330/50, and it seems that it was first kept and venerated in the chapel of Friedberg Castle. Probably only after a number of relics had been inserted in the corpus of the sculpture and its veneration grew, it was transferred to the church and installed in a tabernacle. This would have served both to underline the dignity of the work, and to keep the relics safe.

A similar kind of tabernacle-altarpiece from around 1410–20 has survived in Stralsund, a Hanse city on the border of the Baltic Sea. It belonged to the altar of the *Bergenfahrer*, merchants travelling to Bergen in Norway, in the major parish church of the town, St Nicholas (Weitzel, 2011, pp. 195–196 and 204–206). The shrine of the altarpiece houses a seated figure of St Olaf, while the inner sides of the wings are adorned with painted scenes from the life of the holy Norwegian king (Fig. 2). On the exterior are standing saints, Olaf, Bridget of Sweden, and Sunniva, a saintly princess widely venerated in Norway; the iconography thus clearly reflects the patronage of the *Bergenfahrer*. The original shrine of the ensemble was destroyed in World War II, but it was reconstructed in a stylized modern form in 1999/2000. Unfortunately, the original placement of the tabernacle is not known, for the altar of the Bergen merchants itself has disappeared. However, the original tabernacle rested on a kind of corbel pointing downwards, and thus it could not have stood on the mensa of an altar in the way the Steinkirchen and Darsberg shrines did. Instead the St Olaf tabernacle might have been attached above the mensa to a wall or a pier. As the work did not show any image of Christ or the Virgin, which we should expect on an early 15<sup>th</sup>-century altarpiece, it might be that there was a rectangular retable with such representations placed on the altar of the *Bergenfahrer*, with the tabernacle hanging on the wall or pier above it. If this assumption is correct, it would have been an ensemble not unlike those that are often shown in early Netherlandish paintings, where flat altarpieces, with or without wings, are often crowned by a tabernacle with the sculpture of a saint and wings showing scenes from the life of that saint: good examples are for instance the high altar with retable and tabernacle depicted in Rogier van der Weyden's *Exhumation of St Hubert* of c. 1440 – where the figure



in the tabernacle represents St Peter, the patron saint of the cathedral where the event depicted took place – or in a painting by the Brussels Master of Sopetrán of c. 1470 (Fig. 3).<sup>1</sup> If the *Bergenfahrer* altar in St Nicholas in Stralsund was dedicated to St Olaf, as it is likely, its tabernacle would have presented the patron saint just as in Rogier's picture.

## 2. TOWER-LIKE CONSTRUCTIONS

A different type of tabernacle-altarpiece, with a pentagon-shaped ground plan, and resembling a tower rather than a cabinet, can be traced in the Germanic countries from the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward. An obviously tall construction of that kind once existed in the Cistercian monastery of Stams in Tyrol (Fig. 4), but is lost since a long time and only known through a drawing in the monastery's chronicle by pater Wolfgang Lebersorg from around 1630 (Oberhammer, 1948, pp. 28–31; Egg, 1985, pp. 53 and 57; Wolf, 2002, p. 296). According to his notes, the tabernacle stood on the main altar of the monastery church. It was probably made in 1376, as indicated on the drawing,<sup>2</sup> and although the latter is a somewhat amateurish work, it gives a fairly good idea of the structure and appearance of the lost altarpiece. Basically, it followed the same design as the one painted by the Master of Sopetrán a hundred years later, yet with one remarkable difference: The central section of the work in Stams had two storeys, united by a solid back panel. The lower storey consisted of the high, pentagonal foot, and the upper one of the likewise pentagonal shrine for the statue of the Virgin and Child. This shrine sported a canopy with gothic tracery around its four gables; two thin columns were supporting the canopy. The wings too were divided horizontally in two sections, and it seems that the upper and the lower ones could be moved separately. Thus the lower set of wings, containing images of St Peter and St Paul and a considerable number of small niches for relics, could for example stay close while the upper register, showing a standing saint on each of its panels, could be opened or vice versa. The construction thus offered the possibility to show three different stages of opening, i.e. three different levels of splendour. The

<sup>1</sup> Rogier's work in London, National Gallery, see Campbell, 1998, pp. 407–427. The Sopetrán panels in Madrid, Prado, see Jover/Alba/Gayo, 2016. A survey in Kroesen, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> However, at the same time Lebersorg quoted an inscription that purportedly was located on the back of the work, according to which it was made by the then abbot Heinrich Grussit himself between 1386 and 1388. We are ignorant whether this inscription was reliable or not.

centre section, finally, was crowned by a tower, a gothic spire of the same height as the tabernacle including its foot. With respect to its structure as well as its individual forms, the lost work from Stams has been rightly compared to a retable with a rectangular central section from the chapel of Tyrol Castle (Innsbruck, Landesmuseum; Wolf, 2002, pp. 152–165) that was made slightly earlier, in or around 1370; when open, it is about 278 cm wide and 249 cm high including its central tower (Fig. 5). This work too has two storeys, and it also comprises a large compartment for relics. However, this compartment is located in the lower section of the central panel while the wings contain only flat paintings.

A most unusual element in the long-lost Stams tabernacle was certainly its function as a container for a large quantity of relics – at least 92, if the 17<sup>th</sup>-century drawing is correct. Actually, the lower set of wings was in the first place a kind of reliquary, and this was in all probability the reason for the likewise very unusual design with two storeys. Allegedly, Emperor Charles IV had given a number of important relics to Stams after 1360, and if that is true, there can be no doubt that the tabernacle-altarpiece was made especially for them. Unfortunately, we do not know why the patrons at Stams opted for the complicated form of a tabernacle instead of a more common construction for the safekeeping of relics, namely an altarpiece like the one from Tyrol Castle with a rectangular shrine. In all probability, both altarpieces were made in the same workshop, and the craftsmen might have followed the two-storey structure of the Tyrol Castle retable when designing the tabernacle. However, the decision for such a structure and for the insertion of the relics in the lower set of wings had certainly been taken by the patrons. At any rate, the fully-opened tabernacle-altarpiece would have given a general aspect not so very different from that of the altarpiece from Tyrol Castle: A wide, golden panel with a sculpture of the Virgin in the centre, painted wings, ending in gables, and on top of it a spire as high as the shrine itself.

Another high and slender tabernacle on a pentagonal base comes from the hospital church in Erfurt (Fig. 6), and is today kept in the city's Angermuseum (Legner, ed., 1978, vol. 2, p. 565). It was made around 1370 and contains a first-class sculpture of the Virgin and Child, carved in lime wood and c. 1.5 m high. Other than in the Stams or Sopetrán specimens, the shrine is closed at the top by a heavy, protruding canopy instead of a spire. The wings are lost without a trace, but it is obvious that their inner sides would have shown the golden rays emanating from the sun behind the Virgin, and little else – at most some flying angels at the outer edges. The Erfurt Virgin is wearing a precious white cloak, ornamented with golden stags – hence its common name 'Madonna with the Stags'. She is standing on the Moon and clad with the Sun, and she might have

had a crown with twelve stars originally: We are dealing with one of the earliest known examples of a sculpture of the Apocalyptic Woman. This iconography, based on chapter 12 of the Revelation of St John, became popular in northern Europe from the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century on; with its cosmic associations, it underlined the role of the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven.

At the same time, the Erfurt Virgin was at the front of a remarkable series of tabernacle-altarpieces of similar iconography. Indeed, the Apocalyptic Woman seems to have been a preferred iconography for such constructions, at least in the German-speaking regions. Besides the 'Madonna with the Stags' there is a Virgin and Child from around 1410 in Danzig (Gdańsk) that might or might not be the work of a Netherlandish sculptor (Geelen, 2017, pp. 69–71); around 1500 it was placed in a tabernacle whose inner side is covered with the sun rays of the Apocalyptic Woman – it is again unclear if this iconography repeats an earlier one. In a tabernacle-altarpiece from Raron (Valais, Switzerland) that was probably made around 1420 in Swabia, the Virgin in the central shrine is encircled by the rays of the sun and standing on the moon, while the wings are occupied by flat reliefs of the Three Magi in adoration and St Romanus, the patron saint of the church it was destined for.<sup>3</sup> The well-known Virgin in the Sun of c. 1440 in St Sebaldus in Nuremberg, to which we will come back below, was also at the centre of a large folding tabernacle (Fig. 13). In the already mentioned altarpiece at Darsberg, the central Virgin is likewise conceived as the Apocalyptic Woman as the rays emanating from behind her reveal, and the same applies to some comparatively late tabernacle-altarpieces like the high altar retable of Velden near Nuremberg of c. 1470 (Strieder, 1993, cat. 29) where the insides of the wings are again completely filled with rays and some angels, or a tabernacle of 302 cm high and 287 cm wide when open that was made around 1477 for Weissenburg church in Franconia (today Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum).<sup>4</sup> Thus it becomes obvious that tabernacles were considered to be perfect surroundings for images of the Virgin as Apocalyptic Woman. The reasons for this predilection are obvious: Tabernacles offered the best possibility to show a single sculpture in an architectural setting – and Apocalyptic Women are frequently conceived as single figures, both in sculpture and painting; furthermore, the interior of the wings provided plenty of space for a large, impressive halo of rays around a Virgin in the Sun.

<sup>3</sup> Height 185 cm; Zurich, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum; Lapaire, 1969, pp. 171–172.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.bayerisches-nationalmuseum.de/webgbs/bnm\\_online.php?seite=5&fld\\_o=00212341](http://www.bayerisches-nationalmuseum.de/webgbs/bnm_online.php?seite=5&fld_o=00212341).

## 3. A GROUP OF NUREMBERG TABERNACLES FOR THE CONVENT OF ST CLARE

While all the works discussed so far are more or less isolated objects from different places, an outstanding group of four tabernacle-altarpieces was created around 1360 in Nuremberg, all of which were obviously destined for the local convent of the Poor Clares. All of them were dismantled 200 or more years ago, and nothing but fragments of their wings survived. Therefore, they have only recently been recognized as remnants of tabernacle-altarpieces. Of the most elaborate work among them, five fragments of the wings have come down to us, dispersed between different collections.<sup>5</sup> One of those fragments, today in the Gemäldegalerie Berlin, was in the collection of Edward Solly already before 1819 and thus gives a *terminus ante quem* for the destruction of the original ensemble. In 2002, four of the fragments could be re-united in an exhibition at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt (Kemperdick, 2002). They once formed the wider, inner set of wings that was attached to the central shrine. The original construction must have been based on a rectangular ground plan not unlike, for instance, the Steinkirchen shrine, but it was of slender proportions, and in all probability its wings ended in gables at the top (Fig. 7); there might also have been a spire above the central shrine. Its height would have been about 1–1.2 m (without a possible spire), and its width when open around 1 m. On the inside of the inner pair of wings, two scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary are combined with two scenes from the lives of St Francis and St Clare (Fig. 8), and it is of course the parallel between the major Franciscan saints on the one hand, and the Virgin and Christ on the other that is intended. From this we can conclude that a carved statue of the standing Virgin with Child was at the centre of the tabernacle. Of the smaller outer set of wings, only one fragment survives; it shows two standing saints, the two SS Johns, on the inside, and a partially cropped Crucifixion on the outside. On the former outsides of the larger wings there are images of the Man of Sorrows and Christ Carrying the Cross, each accompanied by the small kneeling figure of a Poor Clare nun in prayer (Fig. 9). Stylistically, the work can be closely linked to Nuremberg paintings of around 1360, and thus the place for which this altarpiece was destined was in all probability the church of the St Clare's convent

<sup>5</sup> The individual scenes of the inner sides of the wings had been cut out; one is in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, one in the Gemäldegalerie Berlin, one in a British private collection, one in the Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin, and one, showing the two SS Johns, was in the Harry Fuld collection in Berlin before World War II; it recently surfaced on the art market. See Brinkmann/Kemperdick, 2002, pp. 33–54; Kemperdick, 2010, pp. 88–97.

of that city – it is not completely ruled out, however, that it was destined for the house of the same order in neighbouring Bamberg.

Ten other preserved fragments of wing panels are artistically close to the ones just mentioned, although they reveal a somewhat less refined style with doll-like faces for the figures (Strieder, 1993, cat. 4–5; Kemperdick, 2002). This style recurs identically in the illumination of a charter from St Clare's convent in Nuremberg, dated August 1362, which gives a firm ground for dating and locating the fragmented wings. These ten fragments must have belonged to three tabernacle-altarpieces of more or less the same design and size as the one just discussed. Six scenes from the life of St Clare were obviously once on the inside of two pairs of wings (Fig. 10); the narrow ones formed, according to the chronological sequence of the scenes, the outer pair of wings, while the wider ones were attached to the back of the central shrine as the inner pair. The structure was exactly the same as in the specimen reconstructed above. As all the scenes are centred on St Clare, the lost sculpture in the middle, i.e. in the tabernacle itself, was probably a standing figure of that holy founder of the female Franciscan order. Here the outsides of the wings were adorned with ornaments instead of figural images. Of another similar construction, only fragments of the two left wings are preserved (Fig. 11): They present three scenes from the life of Mary Magdalene on the inside; the Magdalene and Christ in the *Noli me tangere* are painted on the outside of the smaller wing, and wine leaves and birds on the outside of the wider one. As the Magdalene was especially venerated in the Nuremberg St Clare convent, which was first dedicated to the repentant sinner herself, it seems highly likely that this work was also destined for that institution. The same applies to the fourth tabernacle of which only one small fragment has survived: Its inside depicts the appearance of the Christ Child to St Clare in the presence of St Francis; its outside shows the lower half of a Man of Sorrows (Kemperdick, 2002, p. 32). Thus the iconography corresponds to images in two of the other works just discussed, and the presence of both St Clare and St Francis makes it clear that this almost completely lost tabernacle-altarpiece must also have been installed in a church of one of the Franciscan orders – probably likewise in the Nuremberg church of St Clare.

All four tabernacle-altarpieces reconstructed here were of approximately the same size, with a height of not much more than one meter. Assuming that they do indeed all come from St Clare's church in Nuremberg, we can conclude that they stood on four different altars, and, as none of the tabernacles is significantly larger than the others, that the main altar was not among them. It has to remain an open question whether these tabernacles were part of an ensemble, with a

rectangular retable below as in the Netherlandish examples mentioned above. However, as there are no remnants of other altarpieces of around 1360 known from the Nuremberg convent, it seems more likely that the tabernacles served as the sole decorations of the altars.

#### 4. A LARGE VIRGIN IN THE SUN, ITS TABERNACLE AND AN ALTARPIECE

Contrary to these works, the exact location of another, much larger tabernacle in Nuremberg is known to us: The famous Madonna as the Apocalyptic Woman in St Sebaldus (Fig. 12), the most important parish church of the city, is still in its original place where it was installed around 1440 (Weilandt, 2007, pp. 196–205 and 682–687). We are dealing with a life-size figure of the Virgin, measuring 185 cm in height including its plinth; the tabernacle is formed of a heavy base and a likewise heavy canopy, both adorned with gothic tracery and made of stone. The ground plan of this tabernacle has a T-shape – like the one in the above-mentioned painting by Rogier van der Weyden (Fig. 3). This type of construction requires four separate wings on each side, i.e. double the number that is found in tabernacles with a square or a pentagonal base. The T-shaped base thus meant a more complicated and more elaborate structure, it provided more space for images on its eight wings and was, no doubt, more expensive than a common four-wing-construction. Thus it might not be pure chance that the tabernacle above the retable in Rogier's painting is meant to adorn the high altar of a cathedral (that of Liège): It is a sumptuous type of tabernacle for the most important altar. In Nuremberg, the Imhoff family might have intended to demonstrate their importance and their generosity not only by an exceptionally large tabernacle of the Virgin, but also by its elaborate construction. Today, the Nuremberg Virgin has lost the wings, but in 1450 there is mention of a gilding of the original wings which in turn were replaced in 1517 by a new set of panels, painted by Hans Süß von Kulmbach with angels on the inside and the Annunciation and the Visitation on the outside.<sup>6</sup>

The impressive tabernacle was a donation of the wealthy Imhoff family. It is fixed to the northern pier at the former entrance to the liturgical choir of the church, and is set, at about 2 m height, slantwise into the pier so that the

<sup>6</sup> Remnants are preserved in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum at Nuremberg, see Weilandt, 2007, pp. 683–687.

figure is turned halfway towards the main altar. Originally, an altar stood at the foot of the pier on the southern side, below and just a little bit more eastwards than the tabernacle. On this altar, dedicated to the Twelve Apostles, an altarpiece had been erected already around 1415 by the same Imhoff family. The triptych is still preserved; it presents the Coronation of the Virgin on its centre panel, and apostles with small donor figures on its wings (Weilandt, 2007, pp. 189–196 and 671–677). Thus, the tabernacle and the triptych formed a kind of ensemble which placed the triumphant Apocalyptic Woman above the humble Virgin of the Coronation, as if the latter had ascended (Fig. 13). This structure clearly resembles what we can see in the Netherlandish paintings already cited: a tabernacle with a single figure is placed above a flat retable. However, the differences are likewise obvious: the tabernacle is neither standing on top of the retable itself nor are the two works arranged on the same axis. Obviously, the Netherlandish way of combining these elements was not common in Franconia. Instead, it seems that the superposition of retable and tabernacle was a possibility there – and maybe also in other parts of Germany –, but not an established tradition which would have provided standard solutions.

##### 5. SCENIC RETABLES OF TABERNACLE-LIKE CONSTRUCTION

To close this essay, a distinct kind of tabernacle-altarpiece should be discussed briefly. It is represented in a monumental form by the former high altarpiece of Brandenburg cathedral (Fig. 14), a carved and painted import from Bohemia that was erected at its destination in the year 1375 (Wolf, 2002, pp. 166–177; Fajt, 2008, pp. 214–218). Although it looks at first sight like a large winged retable of the usual type, with a central shrine and carved reliefs and paintings on the inside of the wings, it is in fact a tabernacle construction for there are two sets of wings (in two storeys) that can be folded around the shrine – the much narrower inner wings are attached to the back of the shrine and would close it at the sides. In this work, the lower wings would cover a special compartment for relics and could be moved separately, just as it can be assumed of the lost Stams altarpiece (Fig. 4). However, the aspect of the Brandenburg retable is very different from that of the Stams tabernacle or the Steinkirchen (Fig. 1) and Darsberg type. In contrast to what we normally perceive as a tabernacle-altarpiece, the work in Brandenburg is extremely wide, and its shrine contains a scene and several figures instead of one dominating sculpture.

More or less the same is true for some other works. The so-called *Kleiner Dom*, i.e. ‘Little Cathedral’ (Figs 1–2 Ralcheva, in this volume), is a Cologne

work from the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and shows the Annunciation on a small stage in its centre. Due to its double spire and the resulting vertical proportions, it has more resemblance to the typical tabernacles, but at the same time it is very close to the more conventional triptychs of the time which feature a shrine closed on three sides. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, we find similar constructions in the middle Rhine region used by a workshop that was specialized in sculptures made from clay. At least two works of the group were originally set into shrines that are rectangular at their back but protrude in a trapezoid shape at the front. One of these works is in the church at Kronberg near Frankfurt, and presents the Death of the Virgin with the apostles, angels, Christ, and a pair of kneeling donors (now lost) as on a theatre stage (Fig. 15); its four wings, whose insides were completely overpainted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, show the Madonna of Mercy with the donor family on the outside (Schütte *et alii*, eds, 2019, vol. 1, pp. 182–187). The corbel under the shrine and many other details seem to be modern additions, and it is not clear whether this work was a retable placed on an altar. From the same workshop comes another, famous work, the Bearing of the Cross from Lorch on the Rhine (today Berlin, Bode-Museum), which originally was placed in a shrine of a similar ground plan as in the Kronberg work (Buczyński/von Fircks, 2015). We are ignorant, however, if it had wings or not: It may have been an epitaph fixed to the wall without wings, or an epitaph that served at the same time as an altarpiece, and that might have had wings, or as a simple retable with wings. Again, in both cases it is not obvious that the tabernacle-construction does make a substantial difference to a work with a rectangular shrine with closed side walls. Such a work is also preserved from the same artistic circle, where the figures are also executed in clay and are more or less of the same scale as in the two works just mentioned; it shows the Annunciation in a chamber (Cologne, Kolumba Museum). Basically, the whole object looks very similar to the Kronberg Death of the Virgin, including the (likewise renewed) painted curtains on the inside of the wings. The distinguishing factor of the Kronberg and Lorch works, the tabernacle construction, seems to serve primarily aesthetic aspects: the open sides of the shrine allow different, interesting looks at the figures, and indeed some of their faces can only be fully seen in a view from the side.

To conclude: In Central Europe, tabernacle-altarpieces were known at least since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They could reach impressive dimensions, and such large constructions could serve as sole altarpieces, even for main altars. A placement of tabernacles above painted or sculpted retables, as can regularly be seen in early Netherlandish paintings, was unusual in German-speaking countries, although



partially comparable combinations of tabernacle and retable can be found here and there. Three major types of tabernacles – and some mixed forms – might be distinguished among the German examples: simple, cabinet-like shrine on a rectangular ground plan, slender, tower-like constructions, and broad cases with scenic representations.

## 6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Fig. 1. Tabernacle from St Pancras, Steinkirchen, c. 1300;  
Berlin, Bodemuseum, Skulpturensammlung SMB.



Fig. 2. St Olaf tabernacle, c. 1420  
(pre-war photo of original shrine, and reconstruction made in 1999-2000);  
Stralsund, St Nicholas.



Fig. 3. Details from Rogier van der Weyden, *Exhumation of St Hubert*, c. 1440, London, National Gallery, and Master of Sopetrán, *Donor before an Altar*, c. 1470, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.





Fig. 4. The lost tabernacle-altarpiece at Stams, *c.* 1376;  
 drawing by Wolfgang Lebersorg, *c.* 1630;  
 Stams (Tyrol), Stiftsarchiv.



Fig. 5. Altarpiece from Tyrol Castle, *c.* 1370;  
Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum.



Fig. 6. 'Madonna with the Stags', c. 1370;  
Erfurt, Angermuseum.





Fig. 7. Reconstruction of a Nuremberg tabernacle-altarpiece of c. 1360.



Fig. 8. Reconstructed set of wings of a Nuremberg tabernacle-altarpiece, c. 1360, inside;  
 left: a) Berlin, Gemäldegalerie SMB, b) Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum;  
 right: c) Frankfurt, Städel Museum, d) private collection UK.





Fig. 9. Reconstructed set of wings of a Nuremberg tabernacle-altarpiece, c. 1360, outside; left: a) Berlin, Gemäldegalerie SMB, b) Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum; right: c) Frankfurt, Städel Museum, d) private collection UK.



Fig. 10. Reconstructed inside of a St Clare's tabernacle, c. 1360;  
Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

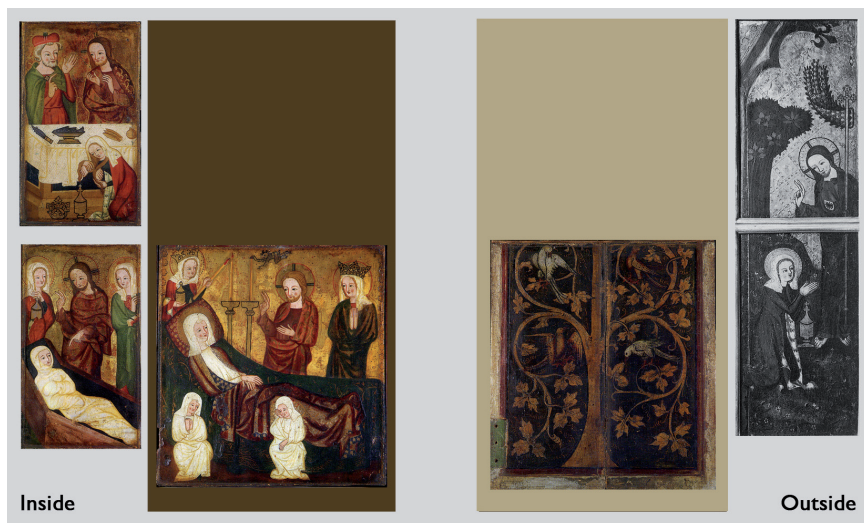


Fig. 11. Reconstructed wing, inside and outside,  
of a Mary Magdalene tabernacle, c. 1360;  
Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum.





Fig. 12. Madonna clad with the Sun of the Imhoff family, c. 1440;  
Nuremberg, St Sebaldus.



Fig. 13. Reconstruction of ensemble of the Imhoff Madonna and the Imhoff altar in St Sebaldus, Nuremberg.





Fig. 14. Former high altarpiece, Bohemia, c. 1375; Brandenburg, cathedral.



Fig. 15. Tabernacle with the Death of the Virgin, c. 1430/40; Kronberg im Taunus, parish church.

