

Animo grato vovit.

Early Modern Epitaph Altars in Estonia

REET RAST

This article analyses Estonian ecclesiastical art in the period of transition from Roman Catholicism to Lutheranism. The role of the patronage of the landed nobility in furnishing churches and setting up altars between the late 16th century and the early 18th century is discussed. The noble family immortalised their name and memory by donating an altar, to which coats of arms and inscriptions were added, to a church. The portraits of the donors are featured on the altar of the Keila church; the existence of other portraits is not known. The main subject of the altarpieces under discussion in the Kärla, Keila, Vormsi, Märjamaa and Hanila churches is the Crucifixion. The layout of the altars was influenced by the work of Hans Vredeman de Vries and Cornelis Floris.

The Reformation in Estonia is often considered to have begun with the iconoclastic riots in towns in 1524–1525. But this was a single event, and the beliefs and practices of the evangelical church were adopted gradually, over a long period of time. Formally, Frederick II of Denmark implemented the Danish Church Law of 1537 on the island of Saaremaa in 1562, together with its privileges, but actually religion was not an issue between the Danish rulers and the local rulers in Saaremaa in the 16th century. The Estonian historian Enn Tarvel dates the beginning of the Danish rule in Saaremaa to 1573; this led to the strengthening of the economic and political positions of the local noblemen.

In Sweden, the 1571 Church Law stipulated that the focus should be on one (high) altar in the church building, although the law was implemented only after the 1593 Uppsala Church Council. However, the development of church organisation was hindered because of large-scale warfare until 1620. The Swedes retained their control of Estonia with the Truce of Altmärk in 1629, but the Swedish Church Law was put into practice only during the term of office of Bishop Joachim Jhering in 1638–1657.

The Catholic practice of making votive offerings is connected with the idea of purgatory: prayers and good deeds help to shorten the time spent in purgatory. In late medieval theology, great importance was placed on good deeds, and they were performed to earn the person God's grace. The Catholic epitaph altar had three functions: the gift of an altar was a pious act, it encouraged prayers for the dead and it was a monument to the donor. The epitaph had evolved during the Middle Ages and no big changes were made, although after the

Reformation it was often built in the form of an altar to enhance its impact.

In Estonian parish churches, church furnishings were donated as a result of necessity, but at the same time the motivation of the donors was the same as in the Middle Ages. The donors of altars usually made other donations as well. They were driven by the wish to perform 'a pious deed' and, in this way, to earn God's, as well as the congregation's, approval. Altars, pulpits, the sounding boards of the pulpits, choir screens, chandeliers and other church furnishings and fittings acquired the function of epitaphs through the act of donation. There was always an inscription on an item, although if it was later polychromed the text might have been destroyed. The inscription was usually recorded in a parish register. The altar was donated to honour God. The altar of the Keila church was called 'beautiful' for the first time in 1632, but the inscription *zu Gottes Ehren und der kirchen zierde* was first written down in the Lügänuuse parish register in 1672; this wording was retained to the end of the period under discussion.

On the eve of World War II, about 33 parish church altars which had been put up between the end of the 16th century and the first decades of the 18th century had more or less been preserved. The present article discusses the epitaph altars which, in their iconographic programme and commemorative elements, resemble those created in other major Lutheran regions.

The main subjects in Lutheran epitaphs were the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and this was in keeping with Lutheran theology, as its teaching on redemption was related to Christ's death on the Cross, and the Risen Christ embodied the hope for redemption.

In the 17th century, the Last Supper was the pervasive subject in altarpieces. If the Crucifixion scene was depicted in an epitaph altar, it was put up to commemorate the donors. Of the four parish altars, two have been proved by documents to be epitaphs; as far as the others are concerned, the inscriptions and the iconographic elements seem to suggest that this was the case.

Early modern memorial art in Estonia was influenced by the funerary monuments made by Cornelis Floris, which spread by way of printed pattern books. The memorials designed by Floris himself in the Baltic area also had an impact on the local art consciousness: the funerary monument to Christian III in Roskilde Cathedral and the funerary monument to Albert, the Margrave of Brandenburg, in Königsberg Cathedral (1570). Cornelis Floris decorated his funerary monuments with figures of virtues, putti and ancient warriors with shields. His architectonic motifs were quite popular. The woodcarver Christian Ackermann, who studied in Königsberg and was active in Tallinn for approximately forty years, used many of Floris's motifs in his altars and epitaph coats of arms.

The altar of the Kärä church – the proof of the widow's prayer

The altar that Anna Overläcker, the widow of Otto Buxhövdén, had put up in the choir of the Kärä church in Saaremaa in 1591 in memory of her late husband, who had passed away 14 years earlier, was a Catholic altar both in its form and in its iconography. The central panel featured the Crucifixion scene, with Mary and St John standing beside the cross and with Mary Magdalene standing under the cross. Mary Magdalene became a Counter-

Reformation symbol of piety in the 16th century. In archival sources, there is a repeated mention that the altar had wings on which the coats of arms were painted and that there was an inscription. In 1642 the altar was reconsecrated. There is a text on the back side of the altar stating that it was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. What other changes were made is not known. The wings of the altar were removed in 1843, when the medieval Kärla church was demolished and the altar was installed in the wall of the new Neoclassical church. The Kärla epitaph altar was built because there was a tradition of praying for the souls of the dead.

Reinhold Anrep, who donated an altar for the Kihelkonna church in Saaremaa in 1591, was a generous donor, and gave gifts to the church, as well as to secular authorities. In addition to the altar, he donated a chalice (1599) and a pulpit (1604); on the occasion of Christian IV of Denmark's coming of age (1596), Anrep and Johan Vietinghoff gave a cup which had been ordered from Christopher Jamnitzer, a famous Nuremberg goldsmith. Anrep was motivated by a wish to perform a good deed to please God, and the secular gift was to express gratitude to the king for privileges bestowed.

The altar of the Keila church – a monument built in the pride of a ruler

In 1632 Ber(n)hard von Scharenberg, the lord of the Saku and Saue manors, the Landrat of the Province of Estonia and a Marshal of Nobility, donated an altar for the Keila church. Its rhetorical structure contains all the elements of an epitaph. The retable was put up on a medieval altar table. The present site, against the east wall of the choir, was chosen in 1672.

The main subjects of the three-tiered aedicule altar were the Crucifixion, the Entombment and the Ascension. The altar has figures of virtues that resemble those on the funerary monuments by Cornelis Floris; it is possible that the influences of Floris reached the work of Heintze via his assistants, Christoph Achtschnicht and Joakim Erich from Königsberg. The coats of arms of the donors – Scharenberg and his wife Anna von Rosen – are integrated into the architectonic frame of the altar, and the entablature features their sculptural portraits. There are mascarons in the same place on the other side. In addition, the kneeling donors are painted on the panels on the sides. The portraits of the husband and wife are painted separately, but they look towards each other and towards Christ on the Cross, which reveals them to be a married couple. There are no other known portraits on Estonian altars or pulpits; apparently this custom did not spread throughout Estonia. Instead of individual coats of arms, the family was represented by a single coat of arms.

In funeral speeches in the 17th century, men were remembered as masters of households, noble and just rulers, or brave warriors, while with women the focus was on their virtuousness, and they were remembered as mistresses of households, good mothers and wives. This is shown by the inscriptions on the portraits and the altarpieces.

In funeral sermons, the belief in the eternal life that awaits the deceased is echoed. Prayers for eternal life were offered at the altar.

The altar of the Märjamaa church – beautiful Counter-Reformation art integrated into a Lutheran setting

In 1689 Anton Friedrich von Saltza, an infantry captain of His Majesty the King of Sweden, and his first wife Dorothea Taube donated an altar to the Märjamaa church. The altar was different from all the retables in Estonia. The inscription was written on a plaque on the screen. The frame of the oval retable was dominated by decorative foliage – acanthus, vines, sunflowers and roses. The old altarpiece was on vertical wooden boards; Christ on the Cross, Mary, St John and Mary Magdalene were depicted.

Martin Luther was not greatly concerned about art in churches, but the Catholics put great emphasis on art. Cardinal Frederigo Borromeo founded the Accademia del Disegno and Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan to create a basis for reforming Christian art. He and Jan Brueghel the Elder from the Netherlands developed the idea that God's grace is revealed through nature. The Jesuit Herman Hugo was the author of the *Pia desideria*, first printed in Antwerp in 1624; by 1670, 118 reprints had been made, 63 in different native languages. The popularity of the book is shown by the fact that a copy of the Latin-language edition, which was printed in 1709 in Cologne, is kept in the Estonian National Library. The ideas and iconography developed in the Catholic centres of art spread far beyond their borders and the periphery adopted them, regarding them as a fashionable form of art, and no attention was paid to their religious background. The inscriptions show that the altar was donated to the church for its adornment; in the church register, its beauty was praised.

The Märjamaa altar was carved by Christian Ackermann, in whose workshop

many epitaph coats of arms were made. The coinciding motifs on the altar and epitaph coats of arms are acanthus leaves and sunflowers, the latter symbolising God's love. In sepulchral art, flowers carry the message of the vanity of human life. This accounts for their association with funerary sculpture and epitaphs.

Coats of arms and epitaphs featured ancient warriors, shield bearers; the central panel of the altar was framed by Moses with the tablets of the Ten Commandments, St John the Baptist holding a book, and the Lamb of God and the Risen Christ on top of the altar. The structure and the motifs imitated the Catholic altar, but in their contents they embodied the Lutheran principle of Law and Grace, and mortality and resurrection. They expressed the belief in God and eternal Life through God's grace. The altar was destroyed during World War II.

The altar of the Hanila church – Christian consolation in the Great Northern War

Christina Eleonora Drackenhielm, the widow of Erich Appelpgren, the lord of the Vana-Virtsu manor, donated an altar with the inscription 'in honour of God' to the Hanila church, for the adornment of the church and in commemoration of her husband. In those days, noblemen were still buried inside the church, around the altar. The recommendation by Luther to mark graves with crosses, which would signify mortality and resurrection, found a pictorial solution in this altarpiece. The square-formed central panel is divided in two by a cross. Below the crucified Christ are the mourners: Mary on the left and St John on the right. They confront the viewer. By looking up to the crucified Christ, the viewer's eye is directed to the top, where

the Risen Christ is surrounded by putti with trumpets, in jubilation, and waving palm leaves. The altar was put up when the Swedes were suffering a defeat in the Great Northern War. A devastating plague reached Estonia at about the same time.

The furnishings of the Hanila church were exceptional because the altar and the pulpit donated by Drackenhielm were made by the same master, Dietrich Walther. The pulpit, located near the choir, and the altar, in the east wall of the choir, create a communicative whole: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On top of the sounding board is God the Father, on the altar His crucified Son and in the centre above the Cross there is a dove surrounded by golden rays, i.e. the Holy Spirit.

The coats of arms of the donors are also on the sounding board of the pulpit. The coats of arms are borne by angels, and they embody the spirits that bring children back to God.

The altar and the pulpit were decorated as stone monuments. They were designed to offer consolation and to inculcate belief in God in the members of the congregation who had lost their loved ones in the war.