

Who's Who on the Reredos of St Nicholas' Church

ANU MÄND

Summary

St Nicholas' Church was one of the two parish churches in medieval Tallinn (Reval), i.e. one of the most important and wealthiest churches in the town. The pictorial programme of the reredos of its high altar mirrors the saints' cults in the town, particularly the cult of those who commissioned this work of art. This article focuses on the sculptures and the under-drawings of the reredos, identifies the hitherto unidentified saints, and discusses what social groups might have influenced the selection of the saints to be depicted on this work of art.

A new, two-winged reredos was commissioned for the high altar of St Nicholas' Church from Lübeck. It was completed in the workshop of Hermen Rode during the years 1478–1481. Although this work of art has been studied by scholars for nearly 170 years, some saints depicted on it have remained unidentified or have been identified incorrectly. The aim of this article is to focus on the sculptures displayed on the fully open reredos (Fig 1), to identify the saints depicted there, and to discuss why exactly these saints were chosen by the commissioners to decorate the high altar of this particular church. In order to accomplish this, it is

not only relevant to rely on the pictorial evidence (as previous scholars have done), but also to take into account the social history of medieval Tallinn and the idiosyncrasies of the local saints' cult.

There are three types of sculptures on the reredos. First, the large (c. 70 cm high) figures of saints arranged in two rows. In the middle of the upper row, one can see the Coronation of the Virgin, more precisely, the scene in which Christ blesses the crowned Virgin. In the middle of the lower row, one recognizes St Anne with the Virgin and Child (in German, *Anna Selbdritt*). Both central scenes are flanked by standing figures of saints; there are a total of twenty-eight of them. The second type of sculpture consists of the eight half-figures (c. 45 cm high) in the predella, two of which are not medieval but were replaced in the eighteenth century. Finally, there are the tiny figures (c. 25 cm high) placed on the pillars that separate the large figures from one another. This article will predominantly focus on the large figures, but a new interpretation will also be provided for the half-figures in the predella.

What has caused major difficulty for scholars in identifying the saints is the fact that several figures have lost their attributes and some of them even their hands, the position of which could perhaps have indicated what they were holding. For instance, it was quite obvious to nineteenth-century scholars, who provided the first descriptions of this work of art, that the upper row begins with St Nicholas and ends with St Victor (the same saints whose legends are painted on the second position of the reredos), and between them stand the twelve Apostles. However, since only half of the Apostles still had their attributes, it was only possible to identify

with certainty Sts John, Andrew, Philip, and James the Greater. More attributes, including those of some Apostles, were lost or misplaced during World War II and during the restoration of the reredos in Moscow in the 1970/80s. All this has made it rather difficult to ascertain the identity of several saints, although almost every scholar who has dealt with the subject has made some useful observations.

Carl Rußwurm (1841), Wilhelm Neumann (1892), Sten Karling (1946) and Villem Raam (1976) relied on the attributes and sometimes also on the clothing of the figures. In Raam's book on Gothic wooden sculpture in Estonia (which largely summarizes Karling's monograph from 1946), the following list is provided. The upper row from left to right (from the viewer's perspective): St Nicholas, the apostles James the Lesser, Paul, Thomas, Andrew, John and Peter, and left from the Coronation scene, Sts Matthew, James the Greater, Philip, Bartholomew, Simon, Jude Thaddeus and Victor. The lower row: two unknown virgins (the attributes are missing), St Barbara, St Ursula, St Maurice, St Eleutherius and St John the Baptist, and left from the St Anne-group, St Cyriacus, St Lawrence, St George, St Hedvig of Silesia, St Gertrude, St Birgitta of Sweden and St Elisabeth of Thuringia.

New opportunities for the identification of the saints opened up during the restoration of the reredos in Moscow, when it was discovered that behind each of the twenty-eight standing sculptures there was a drawing (or rather a sketch) of his or her attribute. However, since the primary interest of the chief restorer, Nikolai Bregman, was not in iconography, he published only five under-drawings: those of St John the Baptist (who had always been identified

correctly because of his surviving attribute), and those of the four virgins in the lower row of the left wing.

The next scholar to study the reredos was Anja Rasche, who wrote her Master's thesis (1994) on this work of art. Based on the under-drawings published by Bregman, she identified the four virgins as St Apollonia, St Dorothy, St Barbara and St Catherine of Alexandria. Due to close observation of the figures, she was also able to correctly identify St Matthew (formerly thought to be St James the Lesser), St Bartholomew (formerly thought to be Philip) and St Matthias (formerly thought to be Jude Thaddeus). She also suggested that the Apostle on the right side of the Coronation scene (i.e. the 'twin' of St Peter who stands on the left) must be St Paul. Undoubtedly, she would also have recognised St Thomas with a spear, had the spear not been moved (by the restorers?) to accompany the alleged St Maurice in the lower row.

A systematic study and documentation of the under-drawings was carried out in 2006–2007 on my initiative. With regard to the Apostles in the upper row, it was possible to confirm Rasche's suggestions concerning St Bartholomew and St Paul (the drawings represent, respectively, a butcher's knife and a sword), and to finally identify St Thomas (a spear) on the left wing and St Simon (a saw) on the right wing. Behind the Apostle next to St Simon, a club is drawn. The saint in question may therefore be either St Jude Thaddeus or St James the Lesser, because both of them were, in the Hanseatic region, depicted with this particular attribute. One can perhaps find St Jude with a club more frequently than St James the Lesser, whose other well-known attribute was a fuller's staff (e.g., on the reredos of the

Aarhus cathedral, completed in 1479 in the workshop of Bernt Notke, a contemporary of Rode's in Lübeck). The position next to St Simon could also provide evidence of it being St Jude; however, one cannot be entirely certain which of the two Apostles is depicted there.

A jar of ointment drawn behind the female saint, formerly regarded as St Hedvig, allows us to identify her as St Mary Magdalene. In the late Middle Ages, there existed different traditions in depicting this ambivalent saint; here, the artist has chosen the type of the pious and repentant woman with her head covered with a veil (in contrast to the luxuriously dressed and turban-wearing princess-like Magdalene in Notke's triumphal cross in the Lübeck Cathedral). It is also relevant to note that Mary Magdalene was a well-known and deeply venerated saint in medieval Tallinn (e.g., there was an altar dedicated to her in St Olav's Church); whereas St Hedvig was practically unknown in Livonia.

A similar problem concerns two male saints in the lower row, formerly regarded as St Cyriacus and St Eleutherius. The first is grasping the Devil by the hair, the other is carrying a monstrance. Although the mentioned saints were indeed sometimes depicted with these attributes, the Devil and a monstrance were also characteristic of some other saints. And what is even more important: Sts Cyriacus and Eleutherius were very little, if at all, known in medieval Tallinn and therefore it would not have made sense to choose them to be depicted on the reredos. Moreover, the location of the alleged Cyriacus – he flanks the central group, having thus a position equally significant to St John the Baptist on the other side – indicates that the figure in question must have been someone very important to the congregation. The

under-drawing depicts the Devil and a sword, revealing the presently missing weapon that the saint had in his right hand. If we consider these attributes as well as some characteristic details of the saint's clothing and the diadem decorating his forehead, it is clear that the figure is St Michael the Archangel. The fact that he lacks wings is not important, because there exist several wingless Michaels in late medieval art. St Michael was enormously popular in medieval Tallinn, being, among others, venerated by the influential butchers' craft, which also had an altar dedicated to St Michael in the St Matthew's chapel of St Nicholas' Church.

The alleged Eleutherius (or, according to Gude Suckale-Redlefsen, St Norbert) with a monstrance is actually St Blasius, a very well-known saint in medieval Livonia. The cult of St Blasius in Tallinn was particularly promulgated by the Great Guild of the merchants: St Blasius was the main patron saint of the oldest and most important altar of this guild, mentioned in sources from the early fifteenth century onwards (the other patrons being St Victor and St George). It should be noted that the tradition of depicting St Blasius with a monstrance was limited to a very narrow region in northern Germany: the surviving examples can almost exclusively be found in the Cathedral of Lübeck. Elsewhere in Europe, St Blasius was depicted with a candle or an iron comb, but Hermen Rode's workshop naturally followed the local, i.e. the Lübeck, tradition (just as Bernt Notke did). However, since in saints' lexicons and other reference books, a monstrance is not listed among the attributes of St Blasius, it was difficult to identify him in the Tallinn reredos without knowing the pictorial traditions of Lübeck.

The last falsely identified saint in the lower row is the soldier saint standing next to St Blasius. Before the restoration in the 1970/80s, when all the figures had dark faces, he was unanimously regarded as St Maurice. Indeed, this opinion seems entirely logical if one considers the importance of St Maurice in Livonia. This saint was particularly popular among the Brotherhood of the Black Heads who, according to their coat of arms, seen in the first and the second position of the reredos, played an important part in commissioning this work of art. The identification was further supported by the fact that, at some point, the spear of St Thomas was placed with this soldier, and a spear, as is well known, is the main attribute of St Maurice. However, once the figure was cleaned, it turned out to be a man of fair complexion and blond hair. Although in many parts of Europe, St Maurice was depicted as white, in Livonia (as in the eastern German territories in general) he was portrayed as a black African with distinctly Negroid features.

The under-drawing shows that the true attributes of this saint are a sword and a crowned head (the latter was probably located at the feet of the soldier). On the wooden shield, cleaned during the restoration, one can see a raised lion on a red and greyish-blue background. All this leads to the conclusion that the figure in question is St Reinold, the patron saint of the city of Dortmund. According to a legend, he was Charlemagne's nephew. During one of his adventures, he beheaded the heathen King Saforet, and that explains his attribute – a crowned head attached to the point of a sword. The feast day of St Reinold was celebrated on 7 January. He was venerated and depicted in medieval Germany either as a knight

or a monk-stonemason. The oldest known representation of him is a nearly three-meter high wooden sculpture in St Reinold's Church in Dortmund, made in the first half of the fourteenth century. In this and some other works of art, he is dressed in armour and carries a shield with the lion of Flanders. The centres of the cult of St Reinold were Westphalia and Rhineland, and both of these regions had close connections to medieval Livonia.

Thus far, the earliest known reference to St Reinold in Livonian sources was from 1487, when the Brotherhood of the Black Heads in Riga founded a chantry in honour of Sts George, Maurice, Gertrude, Francis and Reinold in St Peter's Church. Bruiningk (1904) assumed that the cult of St Reinold reached Livonia from the Prussian *Artushöfe*, particularly from that in Danzig (Gdansk). In those Prussian elite confraternities, St Reinold was venerated as a knightly saint and depicted with the head of Saforet.

However, thus far I have found no evidence of the Black Heads in Tallinn venerating St Reinold. On the other hand, considering the close economic, social and family connections with Riga and Danzig, the saint could have hardly been unknown in the Tallinn brotherhood. Even so, there is no way to know if it was the Black Heads who requested the depiction of this saint on the reredos.

There is, however, evidence that St Reinold was the patron saint of the Tallinn stonemasons, an influential craft in the town. Moreover, the centre of his veneration was St Nicholas' Church. According to the medieval account book of the church wardens, the stonemasons annually celebrated St Reinold's Day on 7 January and paid for the ringing of the church bells, for organ music and the 'wine

and bread' (i.e. the Eucharistic elements for the celebration of the Mass). Regular entries of their payment survive from 1489 until the Reformation. However, since on the reredos of St Nicholas' Church St Reinold is depicted as a soldier and not as a monk-stonemason, it remains questionable if his representation was due to the influence of the stonemasons (or of the stonemasons exclusively). This sculpture is the earliest evidence for the cult of St Reinold in Livonian cities, even earlier than the foundation of the chantry in Riga. Compared to the other saints depicted on the reredos, St Reinold was a saint venerated in very few parts of Europe. Therefore, it deserves particular attention that he was preferred to some other saints well-known in medieval Tallinn, and that he was given such a prominent position in the central part of the reredos. The possible promoters of his cult in Tallinn should be investigated in more detail in the future, as well as the question of whether his cult reached Tallinn through the Prussian *Artushöfe* or directly from Westphalia (Dortmund and Soest) or Rhineland (Cologne).

The pictorial programme of this large reredos was probably fixed during the negotiations between Rode's workshop and the client(s). But who exactly was the client? As mentioned above, the visual evidence – the coats of arms of the Great Guild and the Brotherhood of the Black Heads – points to the important role of the merchants in this commission. The choice of the saints indicates the same: St Nicholas as one of the main patrons of the merchants and seafarers in the Baltic Sea region, St Victor as the patron saint of Tallinn, but also the Virgin Mary, St John the Baptist, St George, St Catherine, St Gertrude and St Dorothy – all of them were

particularly venerated by the mentioned merchants' associations. Liturgical objects and church furniture were usually ordered by church wardens, one of whom was a town councillor (*Ratsherr*), the other a representative of the community, meaning that both of them were actually merchants. It is, however, likely that the reredos of the high altar not only reflected the preferences of one particular, albeit very influential rank, but that the wishes of other social groups and corporations connected to this church were also taken into account. In St Nicholas' Church, the following groups had their own altar or altars: the town council, the Great Guild, St Canute's Guild of the artisans, the minters, the blacksmiths, the shoemakers, the furriers and the butchers. The goldsmiths, the stonemasons, the painters and the beer-carters paid for masses and services. Of the religious confraternities, the following were connected to this church: the confraternity of St Anthony, the confraternity of Job and the Corpus Christi Guild. Thus, the congregation consisted of people of various social statuses, occupations and ethnic groups. The preferences of the priests and other clerics connected to St Nicholas' Church must also have influenced the pictorial programme of the reredos. It cannot even be excluded that a wealthy individual, who donated a large sum for the acquisition of this work of art, requested his favourite saint to be depicted there. The possible range of donors must be studied more thoroughly in the future, for instance, by analysing the sums gathered for the altarpiece over several years.

A couple of remarks are necessary concerning the identity of the eight half-figures depicted in the predella (as mentioned above, only six of these are original). Thus far, scholars have regarded

them as Old Testament figures, or, more precisely, as prophets. Three of them wear oriental or Jewish headgear, which indeed seems to support this opinion. However, I believe that they are not prophets. First of all, on closer observation one notices that one of the six original figures (the second from the right) is a woman, although someone has painted a moustache on her face (probably in the eighteenth century) to make her look like a man. Secondly, it seems logical to me that the figures in the predella would be iconographically connected to the painted figures on the wings of the predella. There one can see four groups of people from the Holy Kinship, depicting Esmeria (the sister of St Anne) and her descendants. The sister of St Anne's line comparatively rarely turns up in art, and never without the main characters of the Holy Kinship. Therefore, I propose that the eight figures in the predella were originally the three husbands of St Anne (Joachim, Cleophas and Salome), Joseph, the spouse of Mary (the figure holding a hat in his hand), and the half-sisters of Mary with their husbands.

It also turned out that the original location of some of the half-figures had been changed. This probably happened in the eighteenth century, when two of the figures were replaced. Prior to the summer of 2008, the new figures were the third and the fourth from the left. However, in 2008, the sequence of some figures was changed, i.e. they were put back in their original places (which were discovered based on the gilding line and the fastening system). Consequently, the lost figures are not the third and the fourth, but the second and the fifth from the left (compare Fig 20 and 21). This means that the second figure from the left could have originally been a woman (just like her counterpart on the right side).

St Anne (and the Holy Kinship) was enormously popular in medieval Tallinn, particularly from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards: there were at least four altars dedicated to her, a confraternity in her name, and she was depicted on several works of art. It is quite probable that the commissioners of the reredos of St Nicholas' Church wished the Holy Kinship to be part of the pictorial programme of this work of art. However, since there were many saints to be depicted there, the artist found a clever solution: he placed St Anne with the Virgin and Child in the middle of the lower row of the central panel, and the less important members of the Holy Kinship in the predella. It has been difficult to discover if the children of Mary Cleophas and Mary Salome were also part of the programme.

I hope that this case study has demonstrated how important it is to take into account temporal and regional differences in art in identifying the saints. It is equally important to connect the results of art historical studies with social and religious history. For a medieval man, the saints did more than simply decorate an altar: through their painted or carved images, they were 'physically' present among the faithful during the Mass. The selection of the saints depicted in a commissioned work of art can, therefore, reveal a lot about the local preferences in the saints' cults and popular piety. The ordering of the reredos for the high altar of a parish church is inevitably a collective undertaking, reflecting the interests of several social groups, although certainly more those of the rich and powerful (such as, in our case, the merchants) than of the rest of the congregation.

*Summary by author
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