

Challenges of the Cistercians in the Figurative Corbels from Padise

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The Cistercian monastery church located in Padise (Harju County) acquired its present shape in the fifteenth century. Apparently, parts of an earlier sanctuary were re-used here. The article focuses on two such corbels that are now located on the north wall. The corbels are covered with reliefs depicting animals, plants and human figures. Several adjustments to their iconography and its interpretation are proposed, and the circumstances of previous research discussed. The possible function of those images in the context of monastic life is also addressed.

The monastery of Padise was founded in 1305 by the Cistercians of Daugavgrīva. Only a few written sources pertaining to the architecture of the complex have been preserved: for example, a permit to erect a stone building from the Danish King Eric VI Menved in 1317, and consecration of the monastery church by Bishop Heinrich von Reval in 1448. Bartholomäus Hoeneker's 'Jüngere livländische Reimchronik' (as retold in the chronicles of Renner, Wartberge and Russow) mentions a fire in the monastery during the Saint George's Night uprising in 1343.

The development of the complex, exceptional in its castle-like appearance, has been outlined by researchers based on stylistic criteria, and remains controversial. A recent bibliography can be found in *Padise Monastery: History of the Building and Study* (2010) by Jaan Tamm. The buildings are grouped around a quadrangular courtyard, the north wing being formed by a single-nave church. After the Reformation and Livonian War, the monastery was secularised and has stood in ruins since the 18th century; archaeological research of the site started in the 1930s.

According to Kaur Althoa, the sanctuary was vaulted in the 1440s, but two of the six corbels supporting the ribbed vaults seem to originate from an earlier edifice. In addition to bearing clear marks of being fitted for their new location, the rich, figurative reliefs covering their trapezoid-shaped sides differ significantly from the remaining four corbels, which have a flatter and more schematic décor. The iconography and the sole presence of the reliefs in a Cistercian church have puzzled art historians for decades and several attempts to explain them have been made.

The iconography of the reliefs was first comprehensively treated by Armin

Tuulse in his *Die Spätmittelalterliche Steinskulptur in Estland und Lettland* (1948). Villem Raam had already written about the corbels in 1938; sadly, the unpublished manuscript has been lost, except for a short summary in *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*. Several publications in Estonian have appeared since. The descriptions and, hence, interpretations have relied on drawings that have turned out to be incorrect. New visual documentation is published along with the article.

Tuulse connected the reliefs to a manuscript now in the Tallinn City Archives, thought to have been in the provenance of the monastery. His proposition that the 'Tractatus moralis de oculi' contained there is the text the images are based on (repeated by later authors) has however proven to be unfounded – the MS never belonged to the Cistercians in Padise. Even though the monastery might have owned a collection of exempla or a bestiary as aids for preaching and a possible source for the animal symbolism of the reliefs, nothing has survived.

Along with the classical method of treating the images as illustrations for a specific text, and attempting to view the reliefs as a narration – they were frequently dubbed a 'pictorial sermon' – some presuppositions about the role of the Cistercians in Estonia, their spirituality as reflected in architecture, and the function of medieval art in general have influenced the interpretations. Since the Cistercian order was prominent in the Christianisation of Estonia, researchers have been inclined to read the symbols on the reliefs as baptismal imagery.

The place of honour given to the Virgin Mary by the Cistercians has caused the vegetative motifs on the corbels to be thought of as referring to her,

despite other meanings being possible. It has become customary to interpret the imagery on one of the corbels as illustrating and exemplifying the life of Saint Bernard, even though in this case the iconography is rather unusual. The décor of the two corbels has been characterised as a humorous moral sermon on the most common virtues and vices, personified as animals.

The statutes of the Cistercian order explicitly prohibited the use of imagery except for the cross and the statue of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the presence of figurative décor such as in Padise has been seen as an aberration in need of an explanation. Besides the decline in upholding the Rule, researchers have proposed that the imagery was included to educate the conversi. According to the liturgical practice of the Cistercians, however, the lay brothers would have stayed in the western half of the church, unable to view the imagery displayed in the eastern part.

It has also been suggested that, in concert with the missionary zeal of the Order, the imagery could have been meant for peasants. The locals however would not have been allowed to enter the monastery. In a letter from the 17th century, there is a mention of a 'church of the Estonians' dedicated to Saint Anthony in Padise. In 2009, archaeological excavations uncovered the foundations of an eastward-oriented stone building right outside the monastery walls. It was in use from the 14th to the 16th centuries and might have been the same chapel.

Apparently the targets of the reliefs were the choir monks themselves. Saint Bernard famously penned polemic criticism of the fantastic imagery in the monastic environment, complaining

about the exact same motifs as depicted in Padise as distractions for the monks in their meditations. Nevertheless, studies of the past few decades of Cistercian history have revealed that his position was far more nuanced, and even though the Order strove for simplicity, visual aids in the form of artefacts did play a role in the devotions of the monks.

The iconographic types used in Padise, and the grouping of motifs in pairs or triplets, can also be found in the marginal images or the 'primitive paintings' executed by the church builders. Nevertheless, the theme must have been determined by the Cistercians and the reliefs were certainly meant for their use. Since it is impossible to take into account the circumstances of the corbels' creation, the meaning of the symbols depicted and their purpose for the viewer will be interpreted based on the time and place of their re-use in the late 15th century Padise monastery.

In the central part of the easternmost corbel on the northern wall of the church, there is depicted a pair of lions locked in struggle. One of the lions has his tail ending in a cruciform pattern, while the other bears no distinguishing marks. The lion is ambivalent in biblical imagery, standing for the majestic resurrected Christ, as well as the roaring Devil seeking his prey. In addition to the confrontation of Good versus Evil, the antithetical beasts might also refer to the conflicting forces in the monk's soul or, indeed, the battle for his soul.

As a comment on the central image, it is flanked by a unicorn and a stag on either side of the corbel, symbolising purity and retirement into solitude. According to legend, the unicorn and stag triumph over poisonous snakes,

the embodiments of sin. The stag is trampling a pig underfoot, and the pig stands for the unclean and the sensual, being unrepentant and remaining in sin. The end of the tail of the unicorn is in the shape of a lily. This has been associated with the Virgin Mary, but it could also be a way to mark the animal as positive, instead of a symbol of destructive forces.

In the centre of the corbel second from the east, there is a head, with a forked beard, furrowed brow and bulgy eyes. He has been identified by researchers as Saint Bernard, and the oak branch with two leaves and three acorns next to him as a reference to the virginity of Mary. If the form around the face is indeed meant as a halo, then it could be a saint, perhaps with a Trinitarian symbol. The representation, however, is inconsistent with the established iconography of Bernard, and the scowl on his face points in another direction.

On the south wall, there are two corbels of a later date, with pairs of male heads carved on them. In addition, there is a corbel with a similar head placed above the portal of the nearby Harju-Risti church, where probably the same masters were active. The shape of the beard and the emphasis on the eyes are repeated there; instead of the oak branch, we find two triquetras in the upper corners. Could the original motif have been a mask with leaves sprouting from it – referring to the reformation of a sinful man – that was then modified and reinterpreted?

To the left of the head, there is a dog curving around the corner to the left side of the corbel, where an ape is seen gazing into a mirror. The dog has been interpreted as the puppy Saint Bernard's mother dreamed of. However, this does not account for his giant size, his back

being turned towards the saint, and the emphasised depiction of his male parts. There does not seem to be a connection between him and the mask in the centre, only to the ape he is turning towards. Yet, the dog is not holding the mirror by its handle, but a separate object in his jaws.

An ape with a circular mirror is a common symbol for Vanity, frequently considered female. The dog, a symbol of the wickedness of man easily tempted to sin, could stand for the adulterous male offering a gift. This could be an allegory of Fornication. As a further comment on the effects of The Fall, a wolf is in pursuit of a rabbit, the Wild Chase reminding the viewer of the impermanence of worldly pleasures, with death waiting at the end. *Superbia* and *Luxuria* above fit well with the 'memento mori' message of the small scene below.

On the right side of the corbel, there is a man in a short straight-cut tunic and knee-length pants holding a jug. This cannot be a deacon with holy water, as has been suggested. His clothing is more akin to that of peasants of the period. Could it be a unique depiction of a member of the local lower class? The corner of the corbel has been damaged but, from the thumbled base of the jug that is still discernible, the vessel can be identified as belonging to the northern German grayware used around that time, most likely for serving beer.

It has not previously been mentioned that the figure is in fact holding two vessels in hands crossed at the midsection of the body. The smaller vessel resembles a ceramic or glass beaker. The motif symbolises the vice of Gluttony, frequently depicted in the form of a drunken peasant. The crossed hands may signify the contradiction with the monastic way of life. The ceramic and clothing details

improve our knowledge of the period in Estonia, and one can only hope that the archaeological excavations that continue in the monastery will add to this.

In the triangular field on the base of the corbel, scholars have noted an eagle with a fish in his claws, referring to Christ as the 'fisher of men', who snatches the human soul from the stormy sea of life and carries it up to the heavens. The bird depicted here, however, might also be the *fulica*, allegorised in bestiaries as a person who follows the will of God instead of worldly pleasures. As a symbol for stability – staying in one place – the bird would fit well with reminders of Chastity and Temperance on the same corbel, as a third monastic virtue.

Art historians' analysis of the corbels has sometimes relied on secondary visual sources that may be misleading, and may have been limited by methodological approaches prevalent at the time. The imagery has previously been interpreted as a simple tale of the battle between good and evil for the edification of conversi or local peasants. In the present article, however, it is argued that the carved reliefs in Padise may have functioned as an aid for monastic contemplation, giving shape and form to the temptations of the cloistered life.