

## Stone-Carvings of the Tree of Life? Some Considerations on Interpreting Medieval Visual Culture

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Summary

**Abstract:** This article discusses three stone reliefs from sixteenth-century Tallinn. The reliefs were previously treated by four eminent Estonian art historians – Sten Karling, Armin Tuulse, Mai Lumiste and Helmi Üprus. Their modes of seeing and describing the reliefs, evaluations of artistic quality and hypotheses concerning the meaning of the motifs depicted are compared. Clearly these are very different and even contradictory, depending on the researchers' personal tastes and methodological tools, as well as the historically determined ideological background at the time of publication. Contemporary ways of approaching the artifacts in question and interpreting their iconography are proposed by the author.

In the humanities, it is indispensable that the researcher's approach to subject matter is somewhat subjective. The scholar's preconceptions and prejudices necessarily affect the outcome of the study. In the case of texts written by art historians, one often notices that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. While the reader is usually aware of this in matters of taste, it is not so obvious when the meanings of motifs are uncovered. Interpreting the iconography of medieval artifacts depends not only on the literature available to the scholar, his skills and experience in using it, but also on his views on the Middle Ages, on the function of art and on the way

people might have acted, thought and felt at the time.

In this article, I aim to exemplify different art historical approaches that have been applied to a group of late medieval stone reliefs from the collections of the Tallinn City Museum. The slabs are of rectangular shape and quite large, up to two meters high, and covered with reliefs on one or both sides. None of the slabs have remained in their original locations, but we can assume that they were used as architectural elements, forming a part of the window construction of burghers' houses. Such slabs were placed in the center of a double window to support the lintel or were placed to the sides of the window opening.

The author of the present article approaches medieval artifacts, seeking to discover how these were perceived by their intended audience. Yet, while reading the previous studies of these stone slabs, a much more interesting topic emerged: how did the four art historians, Sten Karling, Armin Tuulse, Mai Lumiste and Helmi Üprus, look at the reliefs in question?<sup>1</sup> The scholars, while contextualizing and interpreting the images, displayed their personal aesthetic views and methodological approaches, complemented by the influence of the political-historical circumstances which varied so widely dur-

<sup>1</sup> S. Karling, Tallinn (Reval). En konsthistorisk översikt, 1937 (cf. S. Karling, Tallinn. Kunstiajalooline ülevaade. Tallinn: Kunst, 2006); A. Tuulse, Die spätmittelalterliche Steinskulptur in Estland und Lettland. Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistyksen aikakauskirja / Finska fornminnesföreningens tidskrift 49, 1. Helsinki, 1948; M. Lumiste, Tallinna raidkivikunstist. – Kunst 1965, no. 2/3, pp. 65–76; H. Üprus, Raidkivikunst Eestis XIII–XVII sajandini. Tallinn: Kunst, 1987 (manuscript in 1978).

ing the 20th century. Their ideological agenda may have been either conscious or unconscious, hidden as a subtext or openly propagated. There can also be discerned a fascinating interplay between the scholars – some ideas were picked up rather uncritically, while other hypotheses and statements provoked a strong adverse reaction.

The three reliefs presented in the article have as a common trait a motif that has been (or could be) interpreted as a tree of life. The Tree of Life, as a separate motif in Christian art, is not the one in the Garden of Eden, mentioned in Genesis. It is the new tree of life growing in the Heavenly Jerusalem, described in the Revelation of St. John. Its fruit brings health to people, and the water of life runs next to it; those who are allowed to eat and drink will have eternal life. From one of the parables of Jesus, the birds nesting on the branches were added to the motif. Later, the Tree of Life was combined with the Tree of the Cross and Christ as the True Vine, creating a composite symbol with the interconnected meanings of the Eucharist, redemption and eternal bliss. Besides complicated allegories, there can also be found very simple depictions of this motif.

On the first stone relief discussed, a vase with three roses is depicted, crowned by an architectural tracery. The original location of the slab is unknown, but in the 19th century it was engraved in the wall of a house at Olevimägi 14 in Tallinn, along with another, almost identical relief. It has been dated to ca 1520. Of all the reliefs from this group, this has been art historians' favorite because of its quality.

In 1948, Armin Tuulse evaluated the relief as 'quite decent'. He assumed that it must have been executed by a foreign master, because it lacks the characteristic flatness of the local school of stone carvers. A similar

slab in Pärnu, bearing the same motif in a more symmetrical and flat form was, according to Tuulse, 'pure folk art', a locally made imitation of the high-quality original masterpiece. In 1965, Mai Lumiste picked up on this modest praise, and connected the relief to a certain stone carver who was active in Tallinn at that time, Gert Koeningt. She compared the relief, in detail, with other known works by the master and explained away its lower level of quality by attributing it to his pupils. Unfortunately, there is no documentary evidence to back up the theory, but Lumiste was intent on seeing the image within the context of an author with a name, a biography, and an oeuvre. In a monograph written before 1978, but only published in 1987, Helmi Üprus simply noted this hypothesis.

As to the iconography of the vase of flowers, Tuulse conducted a very classical motif search, trying to trace the origin, spread and development of the vase with flowers motif. In northern Europe, the motif spread with the Renaissance. But what we see on the two slabs in Olevimägi is a medieval image, completely different in form. Tuulse proposed that the antique motif must have originated in Italy and traveled through Poland to Livonia through trade routes, skipping northern Germany, where we usually get our influences, and picking up a Gothic form on the way. Years later, the motif started its travels once again and this time it reached Estonia via Germany as Renaissance décor. As proof, we have several properly Renaissance-looking depictions of the motif in Tallinn.

As to the meaning of the vase with flowers, Tuulse explained it as a transcendent symbol, the apocalyptic Tree of Life, with the source of life. It is the folk imagination (or lack of imagination) that turned the imagery of the tree and the source into three roses and a vase. In the Renaissance, Baroque

and Rococo, it gradually became a purely decorative motif, and ended up in folk art. The connection with the tree of life forged by Tuulse stuck in later studies, but there were several reinterpretations, as to its perceived meaning, by medieval townsfolk. Lumiste claimed that by 1520 the motif had lost its symbolic meaning, becoming purely decorative. Üprus, to the contrary, wrote that it was definitely used consciously as a symbol – the tree of life – with possible magical connotations. Both of the latter two authors dwelt on how the motif was localized and adapted in Hanseatic Tallinn and how it gave rise to all of the Renaissance style reliefs with a vase of flowers that have survived here. Their agenda seemed to be to describe Estonians as not merely receiving and adapting, but as innovative in the realm of art.

Interpreting the vase of roses as the tree of life seems somewhat dubious, considering that the rose was widespread as a motif in stone-carving in medieval Tallinn, and it is commonly referred to (by the same scholars) as the Rose of Mary, evoking the Virgins' blessing on the object it bears. In medieval iconography, the motif of the vase with flowers appeared in the 13th century as an attribute of the Virgin Mary, symbolizing the Incarnation. The vase is Mary, the pure vessel, while the flowers are Jesus and his aspects. This imagery is based on Old Testament prophecies and the symbolism of the Song of Songs. The connection of the vase of flowers to the Annunciation was spelled out by Bernard of Clairvaux, and it was popularized by the Golden Legend, not to mention artworks which can also be found in Tallinn. When the local townspeople looked at these reliefs, I imagine that the thought that crossed their minds was 'the Mother of God', and not 'the Tree of Life'.

Next, a slab found in 1931 in a house at

Viru 11 is discussed. The slab has reliefs on both sides, depicting a dragon with a tendril of vine growing from its mouth. The dragon is winged, two-footed and has a serpent for a tail. On one side, he has one head, on the other, three heads. The image is heavily stylized and very flat. In 1937, Sten Karling characterized the artwork as 'very strange archaic ornament', and as 'rustic naturalism', dating it to 1400. Tuulse quoted this expression, describing the image as 'noticeably archaic', but because of the type of the framing, he dated it to 1500. Tuulse discussed the provenance of this 'archaic-byzantine' form and concluded that it was a continuation of a local tradition. Also, he proposed that works of applied arts might have served as examples for the depiction. Considering the Academic hierarchy of art (architecture, sculpture, historical painting...), this comparison can be seen as somewhat degrading to the relief in question.

In her monograph, Üprus repeated everything written previously, but added that it was not only the style, but also the motif of a fantastic animal that confused the earlier scholars in its dating, and called the slab 'interesting'. None of the three said a word about the meaning of the motif! Either they found it decorative and unimportant, or there was something about this slab, its style or content, that was off-putting to them.

Lumiste, in her article from 1965, did not mention the dragon relief at all, but there are some very enlightening passages there that could explain the reluctance of scholars to dwell on it. The author tried to disconnect the 16th century flowering of stone-carving in Tallinn from its religious context and present it as a result of the abandoning of medieval notions, in form as well as in content. Progress in the artistic realm is ascribed to enlightenment and secularization. Art was made for

burgers, not the church; its function was representational, not religious; its content decorative, not symbolic; its form Renaissance, not Gothic. She admitted, however, that some of the evidence pointed to the opposite, so the transition apparently took some time. Lumiste's theory stands in sharp contrast to Tuulse's explanation of the same progress as partly due to late medieval religious enthusiasm.

Lumiste also reacted to the previous researchers who had described the local school of stone carving as 'archaic ornament' in content and 'rustic naturalism' in form. Tuulse had exclaimed: 'Nowhere in the northern German Hanseatic towns are there such archaic forms as in Tallinn!'. Lumiste's answer was National-Romantic in content and Communist in form. She wrote that this 'rusticalization' of style – flatter, more stylized – was not degeneration, but folk art in its most positive sense. The reason for using primitive forms and archaic motifs was that most of the stone carvers were Estonians, down-trodden as a social class and discriminated against because of their nationality. Using forms and motifs of a pre-colonization and pre-Christianisation time, especially in symbols and ornament, was a means of protest.

One can't help but wonder: if the motif of the dragon had appeared in a more 'evolved' form, would it then have been worthy of interpretation? It is a perfectly normal subject throughout the Middle Ages, symbolizing the victory of Christ over evil, the vine as the Tree of Life, and the redemptive cross and the Eucharistic sacrifice victorious over the Ancient Snake – the devil and sin.

As a third example, a relief that was found in 1958 and brought to the Tallinn City Museum is presented. Almost half of the slab is missing, but one can see that it depicts a stylized oak tree with branches, leaves and very

prominent roots. This relief has not been treated before, hence the invaluable opportunity for a first try here. First of all, let us consider the possibility that the oak is just an oak. This is, however, unlikely. Even though in late medieval towns there was some nostalgia for nature, it was still thought of as loaded with additional meaning: as a manifestation of the goodness of God, as a foretaste of the heavenly gardens, as an allegory of the fruits of virtue, as symbols for aspects of Christ and the Virgin, along with occasional classical and folkloristic meanings.

The oak, just like the rose and the vine, has very ancient sacred associations. The Christian meaning is derived from a passage in Isaiah (6:13), describing an oak that spreads its branches and a holy seed that grows from it. The imagery was interpreted as a prophecy of the Incarnation. The oak was also considered a symbol of endurance, steadfastness in times of trial, and strength of faith. The bark of the oak tree was burned to make 'magic smoke', used to repel serpents and demons. Last but not least, the oak's pre-Christian Tree of Life association was remembered long into the Middle Ages. Images of trees were frequently used in medieval manuscripts as tools for remembrance and meditation. They functioned as schemata, either verbally described or visually depicted. Examples of such drawings have also survived from medieval Tallinn.

What could be the meaning of the oak tree on the stone relief? It is curiously plain and one is tempted to fill it with any or all of the above-mentioned meanings. Perhaps the plainness is intentional, the onlooker could have used it in any way he wanted to. We can assume that the relief was originally painted. It may be that the meaning of the tree was revealed by added images or texts that are now lost. In recent years, some later examples of painted reliefs with tree motifs have

been uncovered in Tallinn. In these reliefs, however, the paintings follow closely the carved lines.

It is difficult to narrow down the meaning of the motif on this artifact without any surviving data as to its original location, connected written sources or locally made similar objects for comparison. The question one might consider is: what was the original function of this stone relief? When, in all probability, it was placed next to a window of a secular house, who was to look at the slab and invest it with meaning?

The window is a liminal zone. According to the medieval world-view, it needs apothropaic images to ward off demons and the evil eye. All of the motifs discussed here – the vase with flowers, the dragon with the vine, and the oak tree – could have been used for this purpose, referring to Jesus and Mary, incarnation and redemption. But the slabs bearing these motifs could also have been placed by the window to impress the guests of the household, to recall virtues, to give focus for meditation, or simply to amuse and please the eye.

This is my interpretation, colored by my own knowledge and understanding of the medieval mind. Research into images as apothropaic signs, as devotional tools, as schemes to access the knowledge stored in memory, and as shorthand symbols for complicated theological concepts is relatively recent, and I have the advantage of being aware of those approaches. I also have access to literature that didn't exist or was inaccessible to previous scholars, and I am free of the kind of pressures that my predecessors had to cope with, such as the censorship of the Soviet time or the need to propagate national interests through academic writing. But does this make the interpretation given in the year 2008 closer to the truth (the actual meaning

perceived by medievals) than the ones proposed before?

The texts written by Sten Karling, Armin Tuulse, Mai Lumiste and Helmi Üprus have, embedded in them, the personal charm of these legendary art historians. Their studies are examples of their individual approaches to artworks, as well as reflections of contemporary trends in academic writing. This subjective and historical additional value remains, even if some of their ideas have not stood the test of time. Discovering the hidden agendas of 20th century researchers can be as fascinating as delving into the minds of medieval men, and an effort to understand those who came before us, and learn from them just might be the actual goal of the study of history.

*Summary by author*

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