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HELGONSKÅP

Medieval Tabernacle Shrines
in Sweden and Europe

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Cover photo: Sankt Olof (Sk), interior looking east with two tabernacle shrines, one holding the Throne of Grace (right; figure *c.* 1440, shrine, now without wings, *c.* 1520) and a Marian shrine (in the corner left, 1430–1440). The shrines are overpainted but largely remain in their original location. Winged altarpiece in the chancel, 1425–1450 (photo: Justin Kroesen). Back cover: Sorunda (Sö), Marian shrine, *c.* 1480 (photo: Peter Tångeberg).

Frontispiece: Hilleshög (Up), interior of the church looking east toward the Romanesque apse with a Marian shrine from *c.* 1200 (right), altered in the fifteenth century (photo: Justin Kroesen).

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while Mojmír Frinta, in a pioneering article from 1967, used the term ‘closing tabernacle’. ‘Tabernakelschrein’ and ‘Baldachinretabel’ are both current in German, while ‘Turmretabel’ (‘tower retable’) has also been proposed.⁸ French usually uses the term ‘retable à baldaquin’, while ‘retablo-tabernáculo’ is most common in Spanish. In Italian, they are commonly described as ‘tabernacolo (a sportelli)’ (‘[winged] tabernacles’). Most Scandinavian authors use the short but accurate terms ‘helgonskåp’ (in Swedish) or ‘helgenskap’ (Norwegian, Danish), meaning ‘saint’s cupboard’. Despite the title chosen for the present book, for the sake of clarity, and in keeping with the majority of English literature on the subject, in this study we use the most widespread term ‘tabernacle shrine’.

In medieval texts, the object type is equally difficult to retrieve, partly because of the mentioned polysemy of the word *tabernaculum*. The medieval Icelandic description of sculptures standing “in husi oc hurðum” (“in a little house with doors”), as found in several fifteenth-century ‘máldagar’ (church inventories), is just as clear as it is exceptional.⁹ Over the centuries, shrines were certainly less interesting than their holy contents. This has undoubtedly influenced the survival of tabernacle shrines in a negative way: most medieval enclosures survive in a severely damaged, or even fragmentary state. Many wings are lost, together with their carved or painted decorations. Numerous crowning baldachins are now missing, and figures and shrines have often been moved or overpainted. In addition, hardly any medieval tabernacle shrines are preserved entirely *in situ* inside a medieval church anywhere in Europe. By far the most tabernacle shrines are decontextualised as a result of them having been moved around, hidden and rediscovered. For all these reasons, tabernacle shrines are much more difficult to grasp than other types of medieval altar decorations, including polyptychs and winged altarpieces.

Another aspect that has caused the oblivion of this category of altar decorations is their uneven spread of examples across the continent. Most early tabernacle shrines have survived in Central Italy (Tuscany, Umbria, Marches, Abruzzo), Northern Spain (Castile, La Rioja, the Basque Country, and Catalonia)

and Scandinavia (particularly Southern Norway, Sweden and Finland). The relative rarity of extant tabernacle shrines in the countries where academic art history was largely written – Germany, France and Britain – has undoubtedly contributed to the research bias of largely ignoring tabernacle shrines as medieval altar decorations.¹⁰ The Nordic countries together possess almost half (49 per cent) of the total European stock of surviving medieval tabernacle shrines, while the greatest wealth in a single country (35 per cent) is found in Sweden. It was thus clearly in the ‘periphery’ of the continent that tabernacle shrines had the best chances of surviving, often sheltered by mountainous or isolated environments. The seclusion of places that are remote and hard to access, a certain degree of chronic poverty, and the consequent low turnover of artistic renewal have, together, resulted in the above-average survival of tabernacles in the mentioned regions.

Research on Tabernacle Shrines

While there is abundant literature on medieval altarpieces, for example, comparatively little has been written about medieval tabernacle shrines. The Nordic countries can boast of the longest research tradition, which was undoubtedly favoured by the wide survival of examples. In 1875, the Swedish historian Hans Hildebrand may have been the first scholar in Europe to highlight “smaller cupboards”, besides winged altarpieces (‘altarskåp’), “that stood on the side altars and contain only one figure, which may, however, sometimes be life-sized. Such altar cupboards are sometimes triangular, while the square base is the most common”.¹¹ Unlike other pioneers on the topic, he did not principally distinguish between winged altarpieces and tabernacle shrines, but classified them all together according to their size and number of figures. Hildebrand was an evolutionist who was keen on typologies and saw the evolution of art as the result of a struggle between types.¹² He believed that tabernacle shrines were most common in rural churches, where space for large winged altarpieces was lacking. In his monumental three-volume *Sveriges medeltid* (1879–1903), Hildebrand discussed several



Vansö (Sö), interior looking east with two tabernacle shrines, holding the Virgin and Child (left) and St Olaf (right), 1450–1500 (St Olaf figure fourteenth century). Winged altarpiece in the chancel from the workshop of Hermen Rode, 1475–1500 (photo: Justin Kroesen).

examples in the Statens Historiska Museum in Stockholm, of which he had become the director in 1878.¹³

Hildebrand’s studies resulted in tabernacle shrines being considered in Scandinavian medieval art history from the outset and laid a solid basis for others to build on. In his 1908 book on medieval altarpieces in Finland, the art historian Karl Meinander studied early tabernacle shrines in relationship to other object types including reliquary shrines, small ivory triptychs and baldachins.¹⁴ Meinander’s comparisons to other art forms in Germany and France led him to conclude that the tabernacle shrines in Kumlinge and from Urjala, both of which

can be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, were probably imported works.¹⁵ Although this is not explicitly stated by the author, this would imply that they were a European phenomenon. Meinander characterised the tabernacle shrine as one of two main types of medieval altar decoration: “Of the two mentioned altar cupboard types, the proper altarpiece (‘altarskåp’) was the most prominent, and this was generally applied to the high altar. The tabernacle shrine (‘helgonskåp’) was used at pillars and on altars along the walls”.¹⁶ According to Meinander, the tabernacle shrine clearly originated first, and the old style was maintained here during a longer period.¹⁷

⁸ Steinmetz, in *Das Altarretabel*. The alternative term ‘Heiligen-schrein’ (saint’s shrine) inevitably leads to confusion regarding the boundary with reliquary shrines, while ‘Einfigurenschrein’ (one figure shrine) would also include wingless shrines.

⁹ Mentioned in Wallem, *De islandske kirkers udstyr*, p. 44.

¹⁰ Kroesen and Tångeberg, ‘Tabernacle Shrines (1180–1400)’, p. 22. On their survival in the north and south, see Sureda i Jubany, ‘The Sculptural Image and the Altar’, pp. 53–55.

¹¹ Hildebrand, *Den kyrkliga konsten*, p. 103: “Allenast mindre skåp, sådana som skulle hafva plats på ett sidoaltare, rymma blott en figur, men denna har då ock understundom hel eller nästan hel mensklig storlek. Sådana altarskåp äro ibland trekantiga, under det en fyrkantig grundplan är den vanliga”.

¹² In an essay on typology in 1873, Hildebrand even called for a Charles Darwin of comparative archaeology, Liepe, *A Case for the Middle Ages*, p. 66.

¹³ Mention is made of Haga (Up) Mary, Skederid (Up) Pietà, and Västra Ed (Sm) St Michael. Hildebrand, *Sveriges medeltid*, vol. 3, pp. 303–306.

¹⁴ Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp*, p. 99.

¹⁵ Shrines analysed in Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp*, pp. 7–22, leading to the conclusion, on p. 22: “Sannolikast är, att helgonskåpen äro importerade”.

¹⁶ Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp*, p. 102: “Av de två nämnda altarskåpsformerna var det egentliga altarskåpet den förnämligare och den som i regeln kom till användning för högaltaret. Helgonskåpen fästes på pelare, framför sidoaltaren längs väggarna”.

¹⁷ Meinander, *Medeltida altarskåp*, p. 133: “Det nämndes redan, att helgonskåpet är en form, som kan påvisas tidigare än det egentliga altarskåpet. I helgonskåpen bevarades också den äldre stilen längre än i altarskåpen”.



1.17 Florence (IT), Museo Stefano Bardini, remnants of a Marian shrine: figure and dossal, c. 1300 (photo: Flickr, Ernesto Franco).

Krüger cat. 53), and Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Krüger cat. 68).⁵⁹

As noted earlier, the Romanesque Appuna type continued to be produced in Central Italy until the first half of the fourteenth century. The Museo Stefano Bardini in Florence possesses an enthroned Madonna of Umbrian origins dating from c. 1300, with the Christ child sitting frontally of the Virgin's lap [1.17].⁶⁰ Behind the Madonna sits a rectangular



1.18 Los Angeles (USA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, remnants of a Marian shrine: figure and dossal, 1300–1350 (photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

dossal (h. 118 cm) that is painted with intricate geometrical patterns with a fringed board at the top. Small consoles on both sides can be interpreted as the supports of a vanished flat-topped baldachin. The pedestal under the Virgin's feet is new; a throne bench is suggested by a horizontal rabbit resting on consoles with small painted figurines below. The shrine in Roio (Abruzzo) can be dated to the early fourteenth century but still corresponds to the Appuna type in every re-

⁵⁹ Fragmented tabernacle shrines of unknown origins whose whereabouts are also unknown include: Krüger cat. 71 (h. 120 cm), and Krüger cat. 72 (h. 91 cm).

⁶⁰ Florence, Museo Stefano Bardini, inv. nr. 1014. Krüger, *Der frühe Bildkult*, p. 223 (cat. 24); Neri Lusanna and Faedo, *Il museo Bardini*, p. 236; Marta Vizzini, 'Maestro di San Ponziano', in Garibaldi and Delpriori (eds), *Capolavori del Trecento*, pp. 320–321.

spect, even though the Virgin is no longer sitting on a throne but rather standing upright with the child on her arm.⁶¹ This announces later developments epitomised by the Kil type.⁶² Of this shrine, besides the dossal, which ends in a low pointed gable, the base is also preserved. The back panel is decorated with a pattern of painted crosses and, at the pointed gable, traces of metal clamps clearly recall the presence of a baldachin.

Krüger mentioned another nineteen similar Marian shrines from the early fourteenth century in or from Abruzzo: Ari (now L'Aquila, Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Krüger cat. 5), Castel Castagna (S. Maria di Ronzano, Krüger cat. 15), Penne (S. Andrea, Krüger cat. 46), Pescara (S. Maria delle Grazie, h. 133 cm, Krüger cat. 48), Teramo (Duomo, h. 105 cm, Krüger cat. 62); from Lazio: Rieti (Museo del Duomo, h. 130 cm, Krüger cat. 55); from the Marche: Camerino (Museo Diocesano, h. 86 cm, Krüger cat. 12); from Tuscany: Florence (private collection, Krüger cat. 27), Florence (private collection, Krüger cat. 30); and from Umbria: Belfiore (S. Maria Assunta, h. 115 cm, Krüger cat. 31), Logna di Cascia (S. Giovenale, Krüger cat. 35), Los Angeles USA (now Los Angeles County Museum of Art, h. 90 cm, Krüger cat. 36) [1.18], Naples (Monastero di S. Gregorio Armeno, h. 114 cm, Krüger cat. 40), Norcia (Museo Castellina, Krüger cat. 42), Norcia (Museo Castellina, Krüger cat. 43)⁶³ [1.19], Perugia (Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, h. 123 cm, Krüger cat. 47), Spoleto (Pinacoteca Comunale, h. 82 cm, Krüger cat. 61), Turin (private collection, h. 52 cm, Krüger cat. 64), Worcester USA (Art Museum, h. 130 cm, Krüger cat. 69), and private collection (h. 108 cm, Krüger cat. 73).

Conclusions

The earliest known tabernacle shrines, which date from the second half of the twelfth century, already possessed all the object type's essential characteristics: they consist of a fixed enclosure composed of a base, back panel and baldachin whose contents could be shown and hidden by means of movable wings. In this study, the earliest tabernacle shrines are called the 'Appuna type' after the Marian shrine from Swedish Appuna dating from c. 1180–1200. In Scandinavia, another six shrines from the same period prior to 1230 have survived to some extent. By far the largest number of Appuna shrines are preserved in Central Italy, albeit generally in a fragmented

⁶¹ Krüger, *Der frühe Bildkult*, p. 227 (cat. 51). This Madonna is currently preserved in the local Istituto Suore Serve di Maria Riparatri.



1.19 Norcia (IT), Museo Castellina, remnants of a Marian shrine: figure and dossal, c. 1320 (photo: Flickr, Ernesto Franco).

state. Here, the type continued to be in vogue until well into the fourteenth century. The shrines from the North and South possess roughly the same size and feature a strong resemblance regarding the square ground plan, style characteristics, the original presence of four doors hinging at the back of the dossal that usually ends in a pointed gable. Shrines of a similar model must have been common in all intermediate countries. Several aspects of the Appuna type remain uncertain, including the design of baldachins (saddle or crossed roof?) and the decoration of the wings (paintings or reliefs?).

⁶² See Chapter 3.

⁶³ Giulia Massari, 'Scultore spoletino', in Garibaldi and Delpriori (eds), *Capolavori del Trecento*, p. 248.



2.19 Kumlinge (FI), remnants of a Marian shrine: dossal and wings, c. 1250 (photo: Kjell Söderlund).

filled with knob-shaped motifs between stylised foliage.⁵⁵ The back walls of all niches are decorated with incised rhombs, as is the dossal, and the frames carry oval- and quatrefoil-shaped incisions that suggest precious stones. Approximately half of the reliefs that filled the niches are preserved.⁵⁶ In the upper left is the Annunciation, divided between the narrow outer door (Gabriel) and the wider inner door (Mary), and to the right of Mary was the Visitation, now lost. In the lower left are two of the Three Magi, one of whom is standing, while the other one kneels. In the single preserved



2.20 Copenhagen (DK), Nationalmuseum, Marian shrine from Múli (IS), c. 1250 (photo: Nationalmuseum Copenhagen).



2.21 Hedalen (NO), elements from a Marian shrine: Virgin and Child (left), dossal and wings (centre) and church model (right), 1250–1275 (photo: Justin Kroesen).

wing on the right St Joseph appears above, as the only preserved figure from a Presentation in the Temple scene, while below there is an angel who announces the Birth of Christ to a sitting shepherd.⁵⁷ Busts of angels once filled the low trefoil-shaped lunettes at the top, as can be inferred from the contours they left behind. The outsides of the wings have a coarse finish, which makes it improbable that these ever carried paintings.⁵⁸

Important remnants of a second tabernacle shrine of the Fröskog type in present-day Finland are found in the church at Kumlinge on Åland [2.19].⁵⁹ This shrine can be dated to the middle of the thirteenth century and suffered important

changes afterwards. Remaining parts of the original shrine are the dossal and the four wings (h. 116–119 cm) with all reliefs preserved. The dossal carries a decorative pattern of incised rhombs with a halo behind the Virgin's head and a trefoil arch at the top. The reliefs on the insides of the wings (h. 30–32 cm) are all crowned by trefoils and depict five scenes: the Annunciation, Visitation, Annunciation to the Shepherds, Adoration of the Magi, and the Presentation in the Temple.⁶⁰ The sections on the wider inner doors are divided into two by central columns.⁶¹ All frames are decorated with round and rhombic incisions. During the late Middle Ages the shrine was altered and the enthroned Vir-

⁵⁵ Nordman spoke of “klumpigt skurna bladmotiv” (“clumsily sculpted leaf motifs”); see Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*, p. 71.

⁵⁶ These figures vary in height from 23–29 cm; see Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*, p. 73.

⁵⁷ Judging from comparable shrines, the Annunciation to the Shepherds was probably located above and the Presentation in the Temple below. The sitting figure of a shepherd in the lower right is almost identical to the above-mentioned relief figure from Fänneslunda (Vg).

⁵⁸ Meinander believed that the outsides were painted black, see *Medeltida altarskåp*, p. 8. The preserved outer door on the left

shows a coarsely painted chequered pattern on the outside, possibly secondary.

⁵⁹ Nordman, *Medeltida skulptur i Finland*, pp. 74–75; Andersen, ‘Madonna Tabernacles’, p. 182; Ringbom, *The Voice of the Åland Churches*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ The crowning lunettes certainly had angel busts. Only the Three Magi have remained in their original location; all other figures have been moved.

⁶¹ The only figures that stand together under one arch are the Virgin Mary and Elisabeth in the Visitation scene.

are lost, but, as in Hedalen, the crowning church model (h. 128 cm) [2.27] survived, which enables the shrine to be largely reconstructed [2.28].⁸⁰ In shape and painted decorations, the Reinli church model is comparable to Hedalen, although it is significantly lower and the ‘nave’ and ‘transepts’ are not equipped with ‘side aisles’.

As mentioned earlier, it was Bernt Lange who showed that the painted church models from Hedalen and Reinli, as with the example in Swedish Norra Ny (Vr) discussed above, served as crownings to tabernacle shrines.⁸¹ All three of the mentioned shrines belong to the Fröskog type and date from the middle or second half of the thirteenth century.⁸² A church model on top of a Marian shrine is depicted in a scene



2.29 Bergen (NO), Universitetsmuseum, frontal from Dale (NO) ('Dale II'), c. 1300, detail showing a Marian shrine (photo: Justin Kroesen).

shown on the altar frontal from Dale (II), dating from c. 1300, which is now preserved in the Universitetsmuseum of Bergen [2.29].⁸³ Here, the Virgin and Child are shown inside an opened tabernacle shrine while they protect the city of Constantinople against an attack by the Saracens. Accordingly, in churches from which church models survive separately today, the presence of a Fröskog shrine may be assumed.⁸⁴ The thirteenth-century examples from Kinsarvik (Vestland) (h. 96 cm) [2.30], now preserved in the Universitetsmuseum of Bergen, and Tuft (Buskerud) (h. 130 cm),



2.30 Bergen (NO), Universitetsmuseum, church model from Kinsarvik (NO), thirteenth century (photo: Justin Kroesen).

⁸⁰ Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, inv. nr. C 7279. Kollandsrud and Kroesen, 'A Miniature Church'. In 1869, Nicolay Nicolaysen noted the presence of the baldachin, and in 1885 he described the dossal of the shrine (85 x 70 cm) that was decorated with incised rhombs and rosettes; see Stein, 'Madonnaskapene i Hedalen og Reinli', pp. 82–83; Andersen, 'Remodelled and Reused', p. 8.

⁸¹ Lange, 'Madonnaskap med kirkemodell'.

⁸² Thus, Lange corrected the traditional interpretation of these remarkable objects as relic shrines or receptacles to store the Eucharist, as expressed by Fett, *Norges kirker*, p. 106; Bang, *Den Norske kirkes historie*; Bugge, 'Kirkerne i Valdres', p. 53.

⁸³ Bergen, Universitetsmuseum, inv. nr. MA 9. This frontal may have originally belonged to the church at Vanylven. Lange, 'Madonnaskap med kirkemodell', p. 28; Hohler, Morgan and Wichstrøm (eds), *Painted Altar Frontals*, vol. 1, p. 96.

⁸⁴ Andersen, 'Madonna Tabernacles', p. 170.



2.31 Bergen (NO), Universitetsmuseum, Marian shrine from Hove/Vik (NO), now without wings, c. 1240 (photo: Universitetsmuseum i Bergen, Adnan Ićagić)



2.32 Saint-Omer (FR), Virgin and Child, c. 1230 (photo: Musées de Saint-Omer, E. Windemann).

now in the Kulturhistorisk Museum at the University of Oslo, show strong similarity with the model from Reinli.⁸⁵ The shape of the church model from the stave church at Borgund (Vestland) (h. 86 cm) is wider and its execution is much coarser.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Kinsarvik: Bergen, Universitetsmuseum, inv. nr. MA 161; Tuft: Oslo, Kulturhistorisk Museum, inv. nr. C 10470.

⁸⁶ Bergen, Universitetsmuseum, inv. nr. MA 288.

The Universitetsmuseum of Bergen possesses a partially preserved Marian shrine from Hove/Vik (Vestland) dating from c. 1240 [2.31]; the lower part of figure and baldachin were coarsely sawn off.⁸⁷ Although the Madonna and Child and the baldachin came to the Bergens Museum (now Uni-

⁸⁷ Bergen, Universitetsmuseum, inv. nr. MA 27. Kaland, *Baldakin fra Hopperstad*; Blindheim, *Gothic*, pp. 48–49; Kroesen, 'The Diva from the Sognefjord'.