



Anu Mänd

Keskaegsed altarid ja retaablid

Eesti kirikute sisustus IV

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Toimetaja Anneli Randla
Keeletoimetaja Sirje Ratso
Inglisekeelse kokkuvõtte korrektor Richard Adang
Kujundaja ja küljendaja Sirje Ratso
Fotograaf Stanislav Stepaško

Lisafotod:

Kaur Alttoa, lk 251 (alumine), 252, 253
Villu Kadakas, lk 147
Juhan Kilumets, lk 146
Anu Mänd, lk 23, 27 (ill 16, 18a), 143
Kaisa-Piia Pedajas, lk 237 (ülemine)
Viljar Talimaa, lk 246
Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, lk 204, 214, 284, 285
Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, EKLA, lk 52 (ill 38), 53 (ill 40)
Eesti Kunstimuuseum, lk 222 (all paremal), 230, 232, 233 (röntgenogramm), 234, 236
Haapsalu ja Läänemaa Muuseumid, lk 274
Muinsuskaitseameti arhiiv ja fotokogu, lk 108, 109, 137, 245, 250 (alumine), 251 (ülemine)
Muzeum Archidiecezjalne w Poznaniu, lk 294
Rīgas vēstures un kuģniecības muzejs, lk 286, 291, 292, 293
Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, lk 258
Tartu Ülikooli kunstiajalooline fotokogu, lk 110, 179, 239, 251 (keskmine), 257, 259, 260, 263, 265, 270, 280

Kaanel: Püha Elisabeth põlvitamas altari ees, mida kaunistavad krutsifiks ja Madonna kujutisega retaabel. Detail Tallinna Püha Vaimu kiriku pealtari retaablilt. Bernt Notke töökoda, 1483. Stanislav Stepaško foto

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Sisukord

Saateks	7	17. Kaarma kiriku lõunapoolne kõrvalaltar	84
Sissejuhatus		18. Kadrina kiriku altar	86
Altar ja retaabel	9	19. Karja kiriku altar	88
Allikad ja uurimisvõimalused	16	20. Karuse kiriku mensa	90
Altarid		21. Keila kiriku altar	91
Altarite ja vikaariate rajamine	18	22. Kihelkonna kiriku altar	93
Altarite arv, asukoht ja pühitsemine	21	23. Kihelkonna kiriku mensa	95
Säilinud altarid ja mensad	30	24. Kihelkonna kiriku mensa	96
Hauaplaadist mensaks ja vastupidi	32	25. Koeru kiriku mensa	97
Kaunistamine retaablite ja pühakujudega	34	26. Kuressaare linnusekabeli altar	98
Retaablid		27. Lüganuse kiriku altar	100
Retaablite tellimine ja rahastamine	36	28. Martna kiriku altar	102
Piltide mõjuvõim	41	29. Muhu kiriku altar	103
Mõju kohalikule kunstiloomingule	45	30. Nõo kiriku mensa	105
Epiloog: kõrvalaltarite saatus pärast reformatsiooni	49	31. Palamuse kiriku mensa	106
Viited	54	32. Pirita kloostrikiriku kõrvalaltari mensa	108
		33. Pirita kloostrikiriku Birgitta altari mensa	109
		34. Puhja kiriku mensa	110
Kataloog		35. Põide kiriku altar	111
A. Altarid ja mensad Eestis ja Lätis		36. Pühalepa kiriku mensa	113
1. Ambla kiriku altar	62	37. Ridala kiriku altar	115
2. Haapsalu Jaani kiriku mensa	64	38. Riia toomkiriku mensa	117
3. Haapsalu toomkiriku mensa	65	39. Riia toomkiriku mensa	118
4. Haapsalu toomkiriku mensa	66	40. Risti kiriku mensa	119
5. Haljala kiriku altar	67	41. Risti kiriku mensa	120
6. Haljala kiriku mensa	69	42. Risti kiriku mensa	121
7. Hanila kiriku altar	70	43. Risti kiriku mensa-hauaplaat	122
8. Hanila kiriku mensa	72	44. Saha kabeli altar	123
9. Hanila kiriku mensa	73	45. Tallinna Niguliste kiriku peaaltari mensa	125
10. Harju-Madise kiriku altar	74	46. Tallinna Niguliste kiriku mensa	126
11. Harju-Madise kiriku mensa	76	47. Tallinna Niguliste kiriku mensa	127
12. Harju-Madise kiriku mensa	77	48. Tallinna Niguliste kiriku mensa-hauaplaat	128
13. Järva-Jaani kiriku mensa	78	49. Tallinna Püha Vaimu kiriku peaaltari mensa	130
14. Järva-Madise kiriku altar	79	50. Tallinna toomkiriku mensa	131
15. Kaarma kiriku pealtar	80	51. Tallinna toomkiriku mensa	132
16. Kaarma kiriku põhjapoolne kõrvalaltar	82		

52. Tallinna kirik (teadmata) – reljeeftahvel, endine mensa	133	11. Kaks ratsanikku Kolgata-stseenist	275
53. Türi kiriku altar	134	12. Püha Olav ja tundmatu pühak	277
54. Vormsi kiriku altar	136	13. Püha Nikolaus Käina kiriku retaablist	280
55. Võnnu (Cēsise) Jaani kiriku mensa-hauaplaat	138	14. Püha Dorothea	281
56. Võnnu (Cēsise) Jaani kiriku mensa-hauaplaat	139	15. Neitsi Maarja, apostlid Peetrus ja Paulus	282
57. Võnnu (Cēsise) linnuse mensa	140	16. Retaabli tiib Kaitsemantlimadonnaga	284
58. Võnnu (Cēsise) linnuse mensa	142	17. Riia Suurgildi retaabli reljeef „Neitsi Maarja surm“	286
59. Väike-Maarja kiriku mensa	143	18. Riia mustpeade retaabli skulptuurid	290
60. Väike-Maarja kiriku mensa	145		
61. Väike-Pakri kabeli mensa	146	Lisad	
B. Retaablid Eestis ja Lätis		Lisa 1. Toomkirikute altarid ja vikaariad	297
1. Tallinna Niguliste kiriku peaaltari retaabel	150	Lisa 2. Tallinna ja Riia kogudusekirikute altarid ja vikaariad	299
2. Tallinna Püha Vaimu kiriku peaaltari retaabel	180	Lisa 3. Maakirikute altarid ja vikaariad	308
3. Tallinna mustpeade Maarja altari retaabel	198	Lisa 4. Püha Anna altari rajamine Niguliste kirikusse 1476	310
4. Retaabel püha hõimkonnaga	205		
5. Retaabel Kristuse kannatuslooga	221	Medieval Altars and Altarpieces.	
6. Kaarma kiriku reljeef „Neitsi Maarja kroonimine“	240	Summary	317
7. Kaarma kiriku retaabel	246	Allikad ja kirjandus	321
8. Lääne-Nigula kiriku retaabel	260	Lühendid	334
9. Pühalepa kiriku retaabel	267	Koharegister	335
10. Haapsalu toomkiriku retaabli fragmendid	271		

Medieval Altars and Altarpieces.

Summary

This book examines the altars and altarpieces in medieval Livonia (a historical region which approximately corresponds to present-day Estonia and Latvia). Although the altar is the most important sacred object in the church and the focal point of Christian liturgy, it has thus far received little attention from Estonian and Latvian scholars. The reasons for this are that these territories became Lutheran after the Reformation, and that only a few medieval altars or their fragments have been preserved. Medieval altarpieces, in contrast, have been a focus of local and international research for more than a century, in particular those which were produced in great art centres of the time, such as Lübeck and the cities in the southern Netherlands. In this book, the altars and altarpieces are considered from the perspective of social history and art history, combining the information gained from archive materials, the analysis of extant objects and church archaeology. The book includes a comprehensive and richly illustrated catalogue.

The first part, “The Altars”, deals with how the number of side altars and chantries (Lat. *vicaria*) grew in the course of the centuries, who founded the altars in different types of churches (e.g. cathedrals, monasteries, urban and rural parish churches) and in which part of the church (e.g. chancel, ambulatory, nave, chapel or space under the tower). The earliest surviving information on side altars in Livonian cathedrals is from the end of the 13th century and their founders were members of the nobility. Side altars were also founded by the high clergy, especially by bishops and canons. In urban parish churches of Tallinn and Riga, the town council as a corporate body was among the first to establish its own altar and pews, as did some individual council members. In about 1400, the merchants’ associations – the Great Guild and the Brotherhood of the Black Heads – began to found their altars. The first altars of the craft guilds and religious confraternities are known

from the mid-15th century, but they became more frequent towards the end of the century. In general, wealthy and powerful organisations, such as the town council, the merchants’ guilds and the goldsmiths, had their altars in several churches in order to demonstrate their social standing, to gain social prestige, and to guarantee as many intercessory prayers for their members as possible.

The altar was usually a part of a complex liturgical and spatial setting, which included the pews, an individual or a corporate grave slab, a stained-glass window with the emblem of the donor, and so on. Each new side altar influenced the interior of the church and the liturgy. By the first quarter of the 16th century, there were so many side altars in some churches that there was no space for new foundations. Therefore it is not surprising that, for example, in the cathedrals of Riga and Haapsalu, many side altars had more than one chantry attached to them.

In earlier studies, beginning with those by Baltic-German scholars of the late 19th century, one can sometimes find “statistics” on how many side altars there were in the main churches of medieval Riga and Tallinn. None of these figures is correct. First, they ignored the fact that the number of altars grew gradually and that the situation in about 1500 was not valid for the earlier centuries. For example, there are excellent archival sources for Tallinn, which had two parish churches. In the church of St Nicholas, only six side altars are mentioned in the 14th century, and in the church of St Olaf there were five or six (Appendix 2). The sources indicate that the majority of side altars were founded in the last quarter of the 15th and the first decades of the 16th century. By the 1520s (i.e. prior to the Reformation) there were about 25 side altars in the two churches, but the exact number cannot be ascertained, because some altars appear in the sources under two (or even more) names – that of the patron saint and that of the founder – and some have been recorded

by mistake (e.g. the scribe indicated the wrong church or patron saint). Usually, a side altar was decorated with an altarpiece or a statue depicting the patron saint(s) of the altar, but there were also instances where this was not the case. For example, in St Nicholas's church, the altar of St Knud (Canute), belonging to the craft guild of the same name, was decorated with the figure of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, the altar, which is usually referred to in the sources as the altar of St Knud, is occasionally recorded as the altar of St Mary. In some other instances, a double name was caused by the fact that the confraternity and its altar had different names. For example, the altar of the Tallinn butchers, which was founded in 1489 by their confraternity of St Michael, and consecrated in honour of Sts Severin, John the Apostle and Catherine of Alexandria, appears in the sources either as the altar of St Severin or the altar of St Michael, and sometimes also as that of the butchers (Low German *knokenhower altar*). Let me emphasise once again: there is not a single church in Tallinn or Riga where the exact number of the side altars in the 1520s can be determined.

The next chapter discusses the location of the side altars within the church, based on written sources, architectural details (various niches in the walls) and archaeological evidence. Then, the extant altars and mensas are studied: their size, material, consecration crosses, niches and so on. There are mensas which have been used as grave slabs. Some of them were turned into grave slabs after the Reformation when the side altars were demolished, but others were first used as grave slabs (mainly in the 14th or early 15th century), then turned into mensas, and later again into grave slabs. The first change in function probably took place in the late 15th century, when the lack of space in the churches became acute due to the growing number of side altars, and when burial places with no living owners were sold to new clients, who founded their altars there and used the ready-made grave slabs as mensas by having the consecration crosses added to their surfaces.

The following chapter considers the decorations of the side altars. Wealthy donors, such as merchants, tended to commission their altarpieces from well-known art centres in northern Germany (e.g. Lübeck or Hamburg)

and the southern Netherlands (e.g. Bruges or Brussels). Altarpieces and statues were also made by local craftsmen in Livonian towns. The decorations of an altar did not remain unchanged for centuries: there is evidence that wealthy associations, e.g. the Black Heads, purchased new statues, altarpieces and reliquaries for their altars during the 15th and early 16th centuries, replacing the old ones or adding new ones. It is also important to remember not every side altar had decorations, and that an altarpiece was not always a carved or painted artefact but could also be a painting on a wall or on a pillar.

The second part of the book is titled "The Altarpieces". First, the prices of late medieval Livonian altarpieces are discussed, as well as the process of the commissioning of an altarpiece from abroad. A large and expensive altarpiece (especially that of a high altar) was not only a decoration and a devotional object, but also an embodiment of pride and prestige for the community. Its pictorial programme was negotiated between the customers and the artist, and represented the saints and other holy figures who were of particular importance to the given community, whether a parish church or a hospital.

The next chapter deals with the power of images by asking what kinds of religious and didactic messages were conveyed by the visual representations of the Passion and the legends of the saints, how the images acted as mnemonic aids and stimuli to meditation, and what emotions they were supposed to evoke. The analysis of the iconography also includes such topics as the visual means of contrasting positive and negative characters, and the perpetuation of the donors through their names, coats of arms or portraits. For example, the two groups of praying donors on the wings of the Black Heads' altarpiece in Tallinn symbolise all the members of the brotherhood, the living and the dead, who were seeking the salvation of their souls and who had the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist as powerful intercessors to smooth their way to Paradise. The altarpieces also functioned as objects of commemoration. By gathering in front of their altarpieces, taking part in the Holy Mass and praying for the souls of the deceased, late medieval people regularly renewed and strengthened the bond between the living and the dead.

The next chapter discusses the influence of magnificent altarpieces acquired from abroad on the local art production. The motifs and scenes from the altarpieces were copied and modified in different forms of craftsmanship. A figure of St Victor, the patron saint of Tallinn, painted on the outer wing of the altarpiece of St Nicholas's church (1481), was used as a model for the embroidered table cloth of the town council of Tallinn beginning in about 1500. The coats of arms of Tallinn painted in the scenes of the second view of the Bernt Notke altarpiece (1483) influenced the composition of the dolomite cenotaph of Hans Pawels, which is attached to the outer wall of St Mary's chapel of St Olaf's church (1513–16). An early modern epitaph, painted in memory of ten Black Heads (1561), includes motifs borrowed from the Black Heads' altarpiece (1492–93) and the Passion altarpiece (c 1515).

The last chapter discusses the fate of the side altars after the Reformation. The removal of the side altars was a gradual process which took place at different rates in the large urban centres, smaller towns and rural churches. Although there are no sources verifying the exact time of dismantling the altars in Tallinn, indirect evidence suggests that in the parish churches the naves were emptied by the 1550s in order to provide space for added pews. In some of the side chapels, the altars may have remained in place until renovations at the beginning of the 17th century. The cathedrals remained Catholic for decades after the Reformation, meaning that the side altars there were not demolished before the dissolving of the Catholic bishoprics during the Livonian War (mainly in 1558–61) and the subsequent delivery of these churches to Lutheran congregations. In some rural parish churches, the side altars are still mentioned in mid-17th century visitation protocols. Usually they included the demand to demolish the side altars as soon as possible: they were objects of "papist" idolatry by the peasants (revealing the survival of Catholic practices) and space was needed for new furniture, such as pews. The mensas of dismantled altars were not thrown away but used as floor slabs, or re-made into tombstones or reliefs. There is no information on what happened

to the relics which were removed from the altars: were they set aside, buried (where?) or sold to Catholic institutions?

The fate of medieval altarpieces differed as well. Some of them were demolished during the iconoclastic violence in 1524–25, and others were removed from the churches and taken to the homes of the owners or to the houses of the guilds and brotherhoods. Some were later sold by the town council to rural parish churches. In Tallinn, at least two magnificent altarpieces made for the high altar of St Nicholas's church and the Holy Spirit church remained in place until the second half of the 19th century (and, after a while, were returned there). The reasons behind their preservation were pragmatic as well as emotional: they were expensive and high quality objects, closely tied to the history of the church and markers of group identity for the community. An interesting topic is the re-making of medieval altarpieces and their adaptation for the Lutheran context. For instance, the Passion altarpiece, which first stood on a family altar in the Dominican friary, in about 1550 was turned into an epitaph and set up in St Nicholas's church. In the following centuries, the object was re-made three more times, and each time something was added to it or covered up. Details from dismantled medieval altarpieces were sometimes incorporated into Lutheran altarpieces, such as a 17th century dolomite altarpiece in the town church of Haapsalu.

The book ends with a comprehensive catalogue, which is divided into two parts. Part A describes the surviving altars and mensas in Estonia and Latvia, providing information on their measurements, materials, decorations and locations in churches (or, in some instances, museums). Each entry also includes comments on the spatial context of altars, such as the existence of a sacrament niche, piscina, sedilia, hagioscope and sepulchre of Christ. The churches are listed in alphabetical order.

Part B includes entries on 18 altarpieces or their fragments, some of which were destroyed in World War II. The actual number of fragments may sometimes be larger because in the case of many surviving sculptures it is difficult to determine if they originally stood on an altarpiece or not. The entries include not only a detailed

description of the objects but also their iconographic analysis, and information on re-making, restoration and changing locations. In one case (B-18), the fragments of an altarpiece were found in two countries, in Latvia and Poland: the figures of St George and St Gertrude from the corpus of the Black Heads altarpiece in Riga (c 1431) belong to the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation, whereas the figure of St Maurice was taken

out of the country during World War II and is currently in the Archdiocese Museum in Poznan. The fate of medieval altarpieces in the early modern and modern periods, their changing spatial and liturgical contexts, and their movements from one church to another, from one country to another, or from a church to a museum are fascinating subjects which unfortunately fall outside of the scope of this study.