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### *The Diffusion and Use of Emblem Books in Gotland, Pomerania and Denmark around 1700*

**Abstract:** With its more than 90 mediaeval churches, the island of Gotland bears witness to its former wealth due to its position as the nave of maritime trade in the Baltic Sea. The city of Visby was an early and independent member of the German Hanse, but in 1361, it was captured and plundered by the Danish King Valdemar IV Atterdag. The Danes never obtained total control of the island and in 1645 it was ceded to Sweden. After another brief period under Danish reign (1676–1679), Gotland was finally conceded to Sweden in 1679. The wars had left the island ravaged and impoverished, but it nevertheless maintained its trade contacts with the Hanseatic cities – and with the ports and towns of southern Jutland in Denmark and the duchy of Schleswig. During the 17th and 18th centuries a number of Gotland's churches were furnished with emblem decorations and the article highlights two of them. In the church of Burs an emblem book by the German Heinrich Müller (1631–1675) served as a model, and there the painter may even have used a Danish edition of the German original. The church of Västerhejde boasts an exquisite western gallery from c. 1700 with an emblem decoration deriving from a recently published devotional book by Johannes Lassenius of Copenhagen. The article is about the dissemination and use of German language emblem books by artists in Sweden and Pomerania around the year 1700.

**Keywords:** Applied emblematics, Church decorations, Gotland, Emblem books, Heinrich Müller, Johannes Lassenius, Cultural transfer, Baltic Sea

# The Diffusion and Use of Emblem Books in Gotland, Pomerania and Denmark around 1700<sup>1</sup>

Carsten Bach-Nielsen



Fig. 1. Titlepage, copper engraving of Thomas Kingo, *Gullands Indtagelse den 1. Maji med en Berskrivelse* / hvorledis samme Land allerførst er besat og Folke-plantet af vore berømlige gamle Cimbrer; og hvorledis det tilforne/men nu endelig ved Hans Majest. Seyer-Sværd er igeinhent, *Copenhagen 1677*.

The island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea was more or less in Danish hands between 1361 and 1645. Until 1361, Visby was a member of the Hanseatic League but left without support from the German Hansa, the Danish King Valdemar IV Atterdag could seize the island, incorporate it into his realm, and add to his title “King of the Goths”. During the Reformation, the island remained independent for a few years, but the Danish king regained power and held it until the peace of Brömsebro in 1645. Sweden was then the emerging power in the region but still challenged by Denmark. King Christian V recaptured and held Gotland for three years, between 1676 and 1679. In 1677, the Danish baroque poet Thomas Kingo wrote a eulogy with an emblematic copper plate as title page of the book praising the victorious king who managed to find and secure the long lost lamb – the lamb being the heraldic animal of Gotland’s coat of arms. As Gotland means the land of the Goths, Kingo was alluding to the lamb *and* the lion in the engraving on the title page: “Sometimes lamb, sometimes lion”, it says (fig. 1). The heraldic lion of the Goths was represented in the Danish national coat of arms. Kingo, alluding to Isaiah 65, claims that the lion will protect the lamb and that it was God himself who ultimately demanded the Danish military “rescue operation”. The large obelisque, symbol of eternity



prominently placed in the middle of the sea, carries the inscription: “Af Gud er dette ævigt” (Of the Lord this is eternal).

Notwithstanding the Danish loss of Gotland in 1679, the relations between the island and particularly the towns of the Duchy of Schleswig remained. The merchants and captains of Sønderborg and other towns in southern Denmark and Schleswig established commercial bases on Gotland.<sup>2</sup> In a number of its churches, we find material evidence of their presence during the 18th century: pews and closed chairs are marked with their names and donor inscriptions in Swedish. To the seafaring tradesmen of Jutland and the king’s duchies, Gotland was not far away, and it seems to have been a proliferate market as shown in Louis E. Grandjean’s monograph, *De danske Gotlandsfarere* (1950). To his view the relations between Denmark and Swedish Gotland remained more or less undisturbed by political changes and national enmities. The Baltic Sea trade was still connecting rather than separating neighboring countries and cities. Denmark did not succeed in recapturing Gotland but instead occupied Swedish Pomerania, with the cities of Stralsund, Greifswald, Wollin, and Cammin, during the Great Nordic War and held them for a few years until the peace of Fredensborg in 1720. However, during the whole period the Baltic Sea region remained an area of intense cultural transfer as suggested in the important anthology *Migration und Kulturtransfer im Osteseeraum während der Frühen Neuzeit*, published in 2013. Some emblem programs from the 18th century on Gotland and in Pomerania seem to indicate a certain mobility of German and Danish books and painters across the Baltic Sea.

### *Emblem motifs in churches on Gotland*

Emblems and emblem motifs are painted in a handful of churches on Gotland. In the church of Buttle there is a single mural with an emblematic picture showing a skull being sprinkled, purified, and cleansed from sin by the hand of God.<sup>3</sup> In Hejnum Church, there is a closed choir stall with a series of beautifully painted emblems depicting the sufferings of the heart.<sup>4</sup> However, here I will concentrate on the two lavish decorations in the churches of Burs and Västerhejde.

### *Burs Church*

The medieval church of Burs is large, with a huge 13th century rood of a type typical for Gotland, in Scandinavia usually named “ringkors” (ring-cross) (fig.



Fig. 2. Burs Church, Gotland, Sweden. The nave seen from the western organ gallery. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2015.

2). The 15th century altarpiece is of German origin; the pulpit and baptismal font are post reformation additions. The doors of the pews were decorated with images of the apostles around 1700 and the wooden ceiling was extravagantly decorated with flowers and emblems in 1706. The pews at the southern entrance were also supplied with emblem paintings, all copied from one and the same book, namely Heinrich Müller’s *Geistlicher Dank-Altar* (Spiritual altar of thanksgiving), written in 1669 and published in Frankfurt am Main in 1670. Müller was a professor of Lutheran theology and superintendent of the Marienkirche in Rostock until his death in 1675. He was one of the most influential theologians of Lutheran orthodoxy and his books were widely published. Johann Anselm Steiger has given examples of the dissemination in Northern Germany of emblems copied from Müller’s books.<sup>5</sup> In 1683, Peter Möller published





Fig. 3a–b. Emblem decoration on the wooden vault of Burs Church, dated 1706, and its model in Heinrich Müller's devotional book *Aandeligt Tack-Altare*, the Danish edition from 1683. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.

his translation of Müller's *Geistlicher Danck-Altar* into Danish: *D. Henric Müllers Aandeligt Tack-Altare Til et hvert GUDs Barns Daglige Lof-Offer at aflegge/oprettet og forklaret ... Fordansket af P. Möller. Med XXX Tanckebilleder udprydet*. The engraved emblems of the translation were copies of the early German edition. Only a close study of details reveals the technical differences. We know that Müller's book was reissued in Frankfurt am Main in 1673, but the emblems in that edition are simpler and they present the original motives in reverse, as mirror images. Therefore, it is easy to differentiate between the original emblems and later copies. Müllers book was never published in a Swedish translation.



Fig. 4a–b. Emblem decoration on the wooden vault of Burs Church, dated 1706, and its model in Heinrich Müller's *Aandeligt Tack-Altare*, 1683. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.

Eleven of the fifteen framed paintings in the ceiling of the nave of Burs Church depict biblical scenes.<sup>6</sup> Four have emblems and at least two of them are loans from Müller's book (figs. 3b, 4b). One of the latter shows a winged heart hovering over a landscape. Seven musicians occupy the interior of the heart and under it the inscription reads "Semper laus tendit ad astra. Anno 1706" (The praise continuously rises towards the stars; fig. 3a)<sup>7</sup> and the other has a flying eagle carrying its offspring ("Alis portamur ab illo" – We are being carried by him on wings; fig. 4a).<sup>8</sup> The inscriptions are longer than the ones in Müller's book and thus suggest the assistance of a learned person, probably a local pastor. The remaining two paintings feature the sun over a landscape: "Splendet



haud clarior ullus” (No one shines brighter than that one) and the pelican feeding its children: “En charitas, charitas in hac reviviscimus omnes” (See the love, the love through which we all gain new life). The painter may have been Christian Lorenz Numens from Holstein, who lived and worked in Visby between 1700 and 1711 and may have brought a copy of Müller’s book – perhaps a Danish translation – to Gotland, or he may have borrowed it from some member of the local clergy.<sup>9</sup>

Close to the southern entrance, the back of the pews display a series of emblem paintings, three of them also deriving from Müller’s book but seemingly painted with lesser skill (figs. 5a, 5b).<sup>10</sup> The one with an angel holding an open book is only partly visible but obviously depicts Müller’s emblem “Sunt verbae salutis” (These are the words of greeting). In the angel’s book, we read the word

“Venite”. In the Swedish painted version it is replaced by the words: ”Kommer, kommer hijt Syndare” (Come, come You Sinner).

The next emblem depicted is Müller’s “Dulce assonat echo” (The echo resonates sweetly; figs. 6a, 6b). In the German emblem, a head from below says “Erbarm dich mein”, and the Lord answers from above “Erbarm mich dein” (Have mercy upon me, and My mercy is upon you). The two utterings collide in flames among dark clouds. The Swedish text however reads: “Ach: Herre du mig / Nädig / Ja: syndare jagh dig”, i.e. the plea: “Oh Lord show me mercy”, and the answer: “Yes sinner I show you mercy”. In the picture the word “mercy” becomes the visible meeting point between the sinner and the Lord – mercy manifests itself as an echo in the sky. The details of the motif may have a closer resemblance to the printed emblem in the Danish than the German original



Fig. 5 a–b. Emblem painting of an angel on the back of the southern pews in Burs Church (1700–1711), and its model in Heinrich Müller’s Aandeligt Tack-Altare. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.



Fig. 6 a–b. Emblem painting on the back of the southern pews in Burs Church (1700–1711), with its copperplate model from Heinrich Müller’s Aandeligt Tack-Altare. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.





Fig. 7 a–b. Painting on the back of the southern pews of Burs Church and the corresponding copperplate in Heinrich Müller's *Aandeligt Tack-Altare*. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.

– though it is hard to draw conclusions from such sparse evidence. The last emblem: “En! Cor tibi dono”, is simply a heart with the image of Christ given to you, as it reads in Swedish “Tÿ där har tu mitt Hierta” (There you have my heart; figs. 7a, 7b).

### *Heinrich Müller in Pomerania*

The pulpit in the Cathedral of Cammin, now Kamień Pomorsky in Poland, then part of Swedish Pomerania (1648–1679), is a sumptuous baroque work by Johann Grundmann from 1682 (figs. 8a, 8b, 9). It is adorned with emblem paintings after Müller's *Geistlicher Danck-Altar* and of a considerably higher artistic quality than those in Burs.<sup>11</sup> As Johann Anselm Steiger has observed,



Fig. 8 a–b. Johann Grundmann, pulpit from 1682 in the Cathedral of Kamień Pomorsky, Poland (Cammin in Pomerania), decorated with emblems modelled from Heinrich Müller's *Heiliger Danck-Altar*, 1670. Detail of the door. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.





Fig. 9. Emblem paintings on the pulpit in Kamień Pomorsky. Photo C. Bach-Nielsen 2020.

the artist here must have been using another edition as his model, probably the 1673 edition of Frankfurt am Main with its mirror images. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the same person is responsible for the paintings in the cathedral of Cammin as well as those in the church of Burs. All we can conclude is that artists at different shores of the Baltic shared the same emblems – and also depended on the same original source, although transmitted through different translations, editions or prints (fig. 9).

### *Back to Burs*

In Burs Church yet another emblem is placed in a way that might surprise the viewer of today. After the reformation, most of the baptismal fonts were moved from the western to the eastern part of the churches. As mentioned above, a huge rood separates the choir from the nave. In Burs, a new baptismal font was placed on an old Danish tomb slab close to the choir. During the new baptismal liturgy, the pastor would turn his back to the altar when baptizing an infant, thus facing the congregation standing in their pews. As a kind of memento to him and the family carrying the child to the font, an emblem from Müller's



Fig. 10 a–b. The rood of the church of Burs, seen from a position at the baptismal font, with an emblem derived from Heinrich Müller's *Aandeligt Tack-Altare*. Photo C. Bach-Nielsen 2020.

*Heiliger Danck-Altar* was painted on the back of the medieval rood – i.e. facing the baptismal zone (figs. 10a, 10b). Here, God's hand is depicted pouring water onto the head of the infant child. The accompanying text directly addresses the pastor in Latin: "Hæc abluit unda" (These waves can wash away). It is an original and direct use of an emblem in a liturgical context.

It should be admitted that it is not possible to conclude with any certainty that the emblem book used by the painter in Burs was Peter Möller's Danish translation of Müller's *Danck-Altar*, or a German edition with the engravings of the Frankfurt original. The next example however does not leave us with any uncertainty as to the used models.





Fig. 11. The donor's inscription on the western gallery of Västerhejde Church, Gotland, Sweden, 1696: "Güdi Till ähro och Kyrkian Till Prjdnat Hafwer Befalningzmannen her Axell Assarson Denna Lechtares målning Bekosta Låtit." – "Loffsiunger Herran 1696". (To the glory of the Lord and to adorn the church the governor Axel Assarson has paid for the painting of this gallery – Praise the Lord 1696). Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2015.

### Västerhejde

In Västerhejde Church, a few miles north of Burs, the fine series of emblems on the front railing of the western organ gallery certainly have models of Danish origin (figs. 11, 12a, 12b). The governor Axel Assarson commissioned the paintings, executed in 1696. Lagerlöf and Svahnström assume that they were made by Johan Bartsch the younger (c. 1645–1703) and his son Rasmus (1671–c. 1711), who both had their workshops in Visby.<sup>12</sup> Johan Bartsch was trained on Gotland by his father, Johan Bartsch the elder (d. 1666), but he had most likely also studied elsewhere. Rasmus Bartsch received his training as a painter in Stockholm, and returned to Gotland at the latest in 1694. Roosval and Söderberg, however, attributes the emblem decoration to the German painter Abraham Beck, who came to Gotland, probably from Stockholm, at the end of the 17th century. His earliest signed work there is from 1693, his latest from 1708.<sup>13</sup> The inscription in honour of the donor is in Swedish and by the same hand as the inscriptions in German, in and under the emblems.



Fig. 12 a–b. The western organ gallery in Västerhejde Church: seven emblem paintings beginning with the trial of Job and ending with Death liberating the soul (see also p. 56). All the emblematic scenes derive from Lassenius' Heiliger Perlen-Schatz, 1687–89. Photo Carsten Bach-Nielsen 2020.







Fig. 13a–b. Two of the copperplate models for the emblem paintings in Västerhejde Church from Lassenius' *Heiliger Perlen-Schatz*, 1687–89. To the left, the wise ducks deceiving the fox: “List wird mit List gefangen, Und bleibt im Anschlag hängen.” To the right, the ruining of strings by stretching them too hard: “Durch allzu streng und allzu hart, Daß gantze Spiel verderbet ward.”

The seven emblems are based on emblems in a book published in Copenhagen by the pastor of the German Lutheran congregation, Johannes Lassenius (1636–1692), who was bilingual and wrote, published, spoke, and preached in both German and Danish. He was a well-known character of the city, and his sermons were accused of “Emblematismus”, since they were structured like emblems. His work *Heiliger Perlen-Schatz* comprises four volumes of 800 pages each, and consists of devotional commentaries to all the months and days of the year. The four volumes were printed with engraved emblems in Copenhagen between 1687 and 1689. The work was reissued in Ulm (1695), in Leipzig (1701, 1712, 1737), and later in Culmbach (1739, 1743).

The models for the emblems in Västerhejde Church are taken from different volumes of Lassenius' publication. The emblems are painted with great skill

and accompanied by German inscriptions in elaborate calligraphy (figs. 12a, 12b). The themes are, from left to right: 1) the haunted Job struck with pocks; 2) the wise ducks deceiving the fox (cf. fig. 13a); 3) the ruining of strings by stretching them too hard (cf. fig. 13b); 4) the soul hoping and waiting; 5) carnal temptation through the eyes; 6) *homo bulla* – the vanity of life; and 7) Death ending all worldly misery (cf. fig. 15).

My aim here is not to elaborate on the single emblems, but only to point to the fact, that local painters and donors (on Gotland and the island of Usedom, in Pomerania) would be able to pick a series of emblems from the same book that might form some kind of program suitable for the purpose at hand.

### *Sister decoration on Usedom*

The paintings in Västerhejde are strikingly similar to those of the organ gallery in the church of Mellenthin on the island of Usedom in Pomerania (fig. 14),<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 14. The Church of Mellenthin in Usedom, Pomerania, Germany. The western gallery decorated with emblem paintings copied from models in Johannes Lassenius' *Heiliger Perlen-Schatz*, 1687–89. Photo Wikipedia.





Fig. 15. Death liberating the soul: "Zur rechten Freyheit bringt der Todt, Und rettet uns aus aller noht." This emblem from Lassenius' *Heiliger Perlen-Schatz* (1687–89) was used in the Church of Västerhejde, Gotland, as well as in Mellenthin, Pomerania.

that features eight emblems copied from Lassenius' *Heiliger Perlen-Schatz*. All but one are different from the ones in Västerhejde; the skeleton liberating the bird is the only one shared by the two series (fig. 15). The paintings in Mellenthin are not dated but were probably executed around 1700. Their quality is excellent, but the artist is probably not the same as on Gotland. At least the calligraphy is different in the two decorations.

It is remarkable that the emblem of a skeleton liberating a bird from its cage, i.e. the human soul, appears in both decorations. It points to an overall theme: the imagery of vanity of the Baroque age. Ulrich Schöntube suggests that the program of the Mellenthin decoration was based on the text of Lassenius' publication.<sup>15</sup> Of course, ordinary members of the congregation did not have access to its four thick volumes, they were only presented with the emblems, consisting of images and short inscriptions. On the one hand, I hold that each of the emblems have to speak for themselves, in a kind of performance. On the other

hand, the series of emblems in Västerhejde begins with the plagued Job and proceeds with human life, its tribulations and vanities until death liberates the soul from its terrestrial cage. As such, the decoration may be perceived as an allegory of, or a sermon on human life with its physical and spiritual struggles.

#### *The use of emblem books in Denmark, Gotland and Pomerania*

Emblems from Lassenius' *Heiliger Perlen-Schatz* are found in Danish church decorations. Some of them can be recognized among the hundreds of emblems in the Black Friars Church in Viborg,<sup>16</sup> one panel of an extensive church decoration remains in the Ringkøbing Museum in Jutland, and three of Lassenius' emblems survive from a larger decoration in Hvorup Church, north of Aalborg.<sup>16</sup> They all date from the 1730s. Panels with emblems from Müller's *Geistlicher Dank-Altar* are sparse in Danish churches, where Daniel Cramer's *Emblemata Sacra* (1624) and Arndt's *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christenthumb* (1605/1610) and a few other early 17th Century emblem books were dominant for about 100 years.

The decorations in the churches of Gotland and Pomerania were executed earlier and were more up-to-date than any painted emblem programs in Denmark, where emblem painting did not start until around 1705. It seems that Danish artisans did not use the latest and most modern books, i.e. those printed in Copenhagen and used by painters on the international market. The existence of a modern, painted series of emblems on Gotland may be linked to trade and shipping which entailed a cultural influx from the European continent, not least from Denmark, her duchies, and Northern Germany. According to Jürgen Beyer, half of the cargo leaving Gotland in 1703 was loaded on Danish ships.<sup>17</sup> At the time, Gotland was not a culturally unimportant province but it was obviously in contact with commercial and cultural centers around the Baltic Sea.



## Notes

- 1 This article is based on a paper presented at the 12th International Conference of the Society for Emblem Studies, “Muta Poesis, Pictura loquens”, at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, in July 2022.
- 2 Jürgen Beyer 2010, 366–372.
- 3 Andersen 2014, 54; cf. Nielsen 2018, 369.
- 4 Andersen 2014, 140.
- 5 Steiger 2023, 33, 413–421, 489, 732–733.
- 6 *Sveriges Kyrkor, Gotland, Burs kyrka* 1967, 32.
- 7 A similar though more detailed emblem in Heinrich Müller, *Himmelscher Liebes-Kuss* 1723, 759.
- 8 Nielsen 2018, 151.
- 9 *Sveriges Kyrkor, Gotland, Burs kyrka* 1967, 32. Numens executed paintings for a number of churches on Gotland, including Visby Cathedral. He was born in Tønder, Schleswig-Holstein, in 1671, came to Gotland in 1700, married in 1701 and became burgher of Visby in 1702. The couple died of the plague in 1711. See Svahnström 1989, 148f.
- 10 *Sveriges Kyrkor, Gotland, Burs kyrka* 1967, 54–55.
- 11 Steiger 2016, 413–421. Grundmann also made sculptures for the organ in the same church, among other artists/sculptors, until 1684 (<https://wirtualnedziedzictwo.pl/en/kolekcje/the-organ-3/>).
- 12 Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991a, 262; Lagerlöf & Svahnström 1991b, 268; Gunnar & Karin Svahnström 1989, 122, 127f.
- 13 *Sveriges Kyrkor, Gotland, Västerhejde kyrka*, 1942, 58; about A. Beck, see Gunnar & Karin Svahnström 1989, 137ff.
- 14 Schöntube 2022, passim; Steiger 2016, 262–264.
- 15 Schöntube 2022, 25–26.
- 16 Steiger 2023, 74; Nielsen 2018, 240, 249 and figure on page 125: a painting of the sheep being snatched by God’s hand in the Black Friars Church in Viborg, after Lassenius’ *Perlenschatz* – which is also used in Mellenthin.
- 17 Steiger 2023, 67–78; Nielsen 2018, 364.

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