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The Late Gothic Altarpiece in the Cathedral of Oviedo
A Spanish Retablo *and its Atlantic Context*

Abstract: The altarpiece on the main altar of Oviedo Cathedral is one of the largest and best preserved of Spain's giant late Gothic *retablos*. It was erected between 1511 and 1531 by several carpenters and woodcarvers from Spain, the Low Countries and perhaps northern France. Whereas the style of the carved scenes, figures and baldachins is clearly rooted in the Netherlandish tradition, retables of such a vast size and with such an architecturally-designed structure remained exclusive to the Iberian Peninsula. The traditional term *hispanoflamenco* (Spanish-Flemish) fails to do justice to the altarpiece's hybrid character, as it is more complex than just a Flemish import. Its appearance and message must be understood in the light of late medieval Oviedo's cultural and economic networks that extended from the Peninsula along Europe's Atlantic rim. Additional circumstances of a distinctly local character also influenced the design and iconography of the altarpiece. These include its location in a short chancel behind a transparent trellis screen which made it clearly visible to all those present, and an intriguing local tradition surrounding a late Antique marble jar that was venerated as one of the vessels said to have been present at the Wedding at Cana.

Keywords: Medieval art, Altarpieces, Late Gothic, Church interiors, Flemish art, Atlantic networks

Fig. 1. Oviedo (Spain), cathedral, interior looking east with the high altarpiece. Photo Justin Kroesen 2022.

The Late Gothic Altarpiece in the Cathedral of Oviedo

A Spanish *Retablo* and its Atlantic Context*

Justin Kroesen & Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena

Visitors to the cathedral of Oviedo, the capital of Asturias in northwestern Spain, cannot help but be impressed by the enormous late Gothic altarpiece or "retable" that presides over the high altar (fig. 1). The creation of this artwork, which took place in several phases between 1511 and 1531, is relatively well documented. Measuring c. 14 x 16 m[1] and filling most of the apse with a total of 227 carved and polychromed figures,[2] the Oviedo altarpiece is one of the largest and best preserved representatives of the country's range of large late Gothic *retablos*. However, arthistorical research on the retable remains limited. In 1933, Manuel Gómez Moreno characterized it as "the third in rank among the retables of its kind, with [only] those of Seville and Toledo coming ahead of it in importance and date".[3] José Cuesta Fernández, in his guide to the cathedral of 1957, praised the retable's "surprising and charming effect".[4] Despite these statements, the retable has remained virtually overlooked in international scholarship. In 1984, Francisco de Caso described the Oviedo retable compellingly as "a work of art that has been more praised than studied".[5] Five years later, Julia Barroso Villar argued that, rather than stimulating study of the retable, its well-published documentation seems to have slowed it down by creating a sort of taboo for further research.[6]

The altarpiece was crafted by several joiners, woodcarvers and painters, some of whose names are known through historical records. While some came from different parts of Spain, others seem to have migrated south from the Low Countries and northern France, alongside many other artists at the time. The flamboyant late Gothic style brought by the northerners found fertile ground in the Iberian Peninsula and inspired many new artworks of impressive scale and with a hybrid character. In this article, we will consider the Oviedo altarpiece as a *glocal* artwork and analyze it, both in its own spatial setting as part of the furnished late medieval church interior and as the product of the collaboration between artists who came overseas from the north and overland from the south. We will relate the altarpiece's style, size, format and iconography to the visibility and accessibility of the high altar and explain these aspects in the light of Oviedo's cultural-economical networks, which extended mostly between Castile and the Low Countries. These connections are reflected in the names of the artists, both Spanish and foreign, which usually referred to the artists' or their families' places of origin.[7] In this way, the Oviedo altarpiece will come to the fore as an artwork that is not only situated at the Atlantic but was also shaped by it.

The high altar and its spatial setting

The cathedral of Oviedo, which is dedicated to Christ the Saviour (*San Salvador*), has traditionally been popularly known as *Sancta Ovetensis*, due to its wealth of relics preserved in its treasury, called the *Cámara Santa* (Holy Chamber). This space, dating from the ninth century, is the only surviving part of an early medieval basilical complex that was gradually replaced by the present building between the fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[8] The first part of the church to be finished was the eastern apse, known in Spanish as the *capilla mayor*, which was erected between 1382 and 1412 on a five-sided groundplan.[9] Its elevation was composed of two superimposed rows of Gothic windows with an arcaded blind triforium in between, following a common model in churches of the mendicant orders.[10] The apse vaulting has been related to French High Gothic architecture, which may be explained by the presence in Oviedo of the Frenchman Guillén de Verdemonte (Guillaume de Vermont) as bishop from 1389 to 1412.[11] Around 1500, the clerestory zone was filled with stained-glass windows made by Diego de Santillana from Burgos

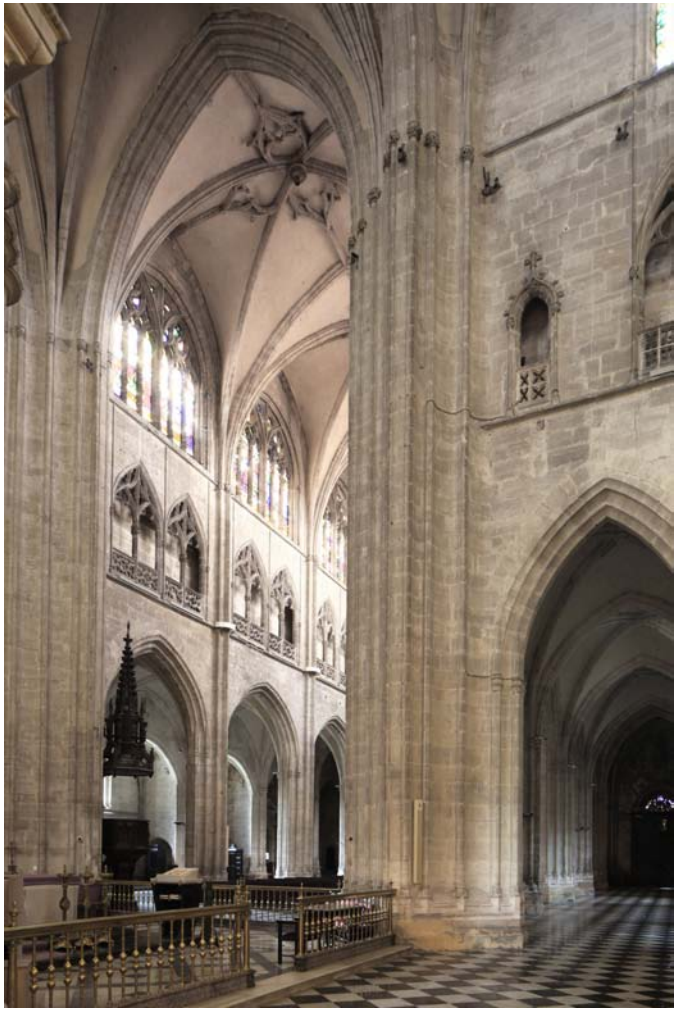

Fig. 2. Oviedo Cathedral, view of the north transept and the nave. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

and Artuño de Flandes (Arthur of Flanders), with the latter probably being an artist of Netherlandish origin.[12]

The long building process saw the introduction, around 1450, of the flamboyant late Gothic style in the architecture and decoration of the nave and transepts (fig. 2).[13] Its adoption from the Low Countries and northern France can be largely related to the immigrant architects who led the building project, including the Brabantine Nicolás de Bruselas (Nicholas of Brussels) and the

Fig. 3. Oviedo Cathedral, the western façade and tower. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

Lorrainer Nicolás de Bar (Nicholas of Bar [=Bar-le-Duc]). In the late fifteenth century, Spanish masters took over the supervision of the construction project, in the persons of the Asturian Juan de Candamo (from 1458 to 1489) and the Cantabrian Bartolomé de Solórzano (from 1492 to 1498).[14] The erection of the west portals, porch and tower was begun by the architect Juan de Badajoz el Viejo (=the Elder), who originated from Extremadura in southwestern Spain (fig. 3). Rather than bringing in architectural and sculptural styles from their Iberian homelands, however, these Spanish masters continued in the manner of their northern colleagues and predecessors, keeping the building at the fore-

Fig. 4. Oviedo Cathedral, stone retable, 1490–1500, now in the chapter house. Photo Justin Kroesen 2022.

front of European architectural development. Illustrative of this is the fine stone retable, known as the *Retablo de Las Lamentaciones*, erected to the memory of mentioned architect Juan de Candamo and his wife Catalina González de Nava, which was clearly commissioned with a sculptor of northern French or Flemish origin around the last decade of the fifteenth century (fig. 4).[15]

By 1530, most of the present church, together with its basic furnishings such as chapels, altarpieces, choirstalls, partitions and trellises, had been completed.[16] However, the visual experience of the church interior was very different from its appearance today. While the modern visitor has an uniterrupted *vista*

Fig. 5. Oviedo Cathedral, interior of the nave looking east. Photo Justin Kroesen 2022.

from the church entrance in the western façade all the way to the high altar (fig. 5), this was not the case in the sixteenth century. At that time, the eastward view was blocked by the choir (*coro*), where the clergy gathered daily for the singing of the Hours (*Officium Divinum*). This walled enclosure occupied the two eastern bays of the central aisle adjacent to the crossing (fig. 6). The shallow groundplan of the apse makes it clear that the choirstalls were planned to be located in this position from the outset: the apse merely consists of a half bay and a semicircular ending, which could never have contained a choir large enough to accommodate the entire cathedral chapter. This explains why the east arm of the building, as in all Spanish medieval churches, is known as the *capilla mayor* (main chapel) and not, as in other European languages, as the "Chor" or "chœur", etc.

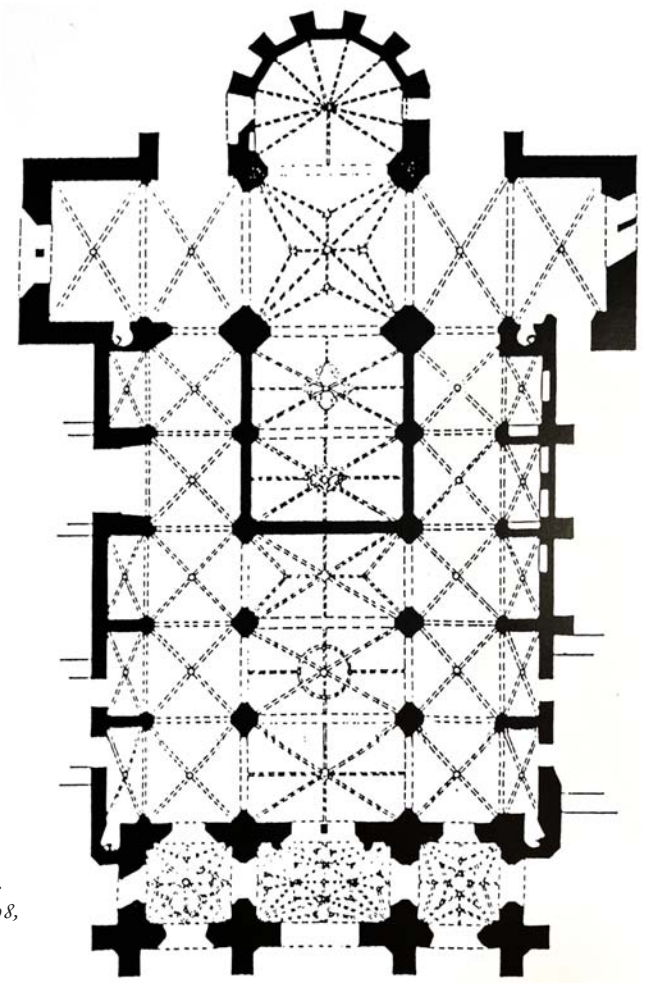

Fig. 6. Oviedo Cathedral, groundplan of the Gothic church showing the location of the choir. After Teijeira Pablos 1998, p. 140.

The appearance of the choir's decorated rear wall, known in Spanish as the *trascoro*, is well known through an engraving by Francisco Javier Parcerisa from c. 1850, which shows a large crowd gathered in front of it during high Mass (fig. 7).[17] The late Gothic stone screen manifests itself like a second façade in the interior of the church. Its densely sculpted central section is preserved and is now placed at the west wall of the south transept, where it was reused in the early twentieth century as a frame around the door to the stairway that leads up-

ward to the *Cámara Santa* (fig. 8).[18] Designed by the aforementioned architect Juan de Badajoz around 1510, the arch is a striking example of Flemish-inspired flamboyant late Gothic, which is characterized by virtuous designs including complex arches and fine foliage. It consists of a wide niche that originally contained an altar under a segmental arch which is crowned with an ogee-shaped tympanum ending in a finial between two coats of arms of Bishop Valeriano Ordóñez de Villaquirán (1508–1512). To the sides and over the niche are several late Gothic figures standing under filigrane pinnacles.

Like the architecture of Oviedo Cathedral and the *trascoro*, the late Gothic wooden choirstalls also testify to overseas connections to the Low Countries (fig. 9). These furnishings were crafted between 1489 and 1497 by a group of

Fig. 7. La misa de doce, *engraving by Francisco Javier Parcerisa showing the choir screen in Oviedo Cathedral, c. 1850. After Quadrado,* Recuerdos y bellezas de España *1855.*

woodcarvers composed of "many foreign masters", as mentioned in a written record dating from 1492.[19] The strong resemblance to the late Gothic choir stalls in several other cathedrals of northwestern Iberia indicates that these artists must have migrated from the Low Countries, or at least had been trained there. Of great influence in Spain were the choirstalls of León Cathedral, which had been largely carried out between 1464 and 1475 by several

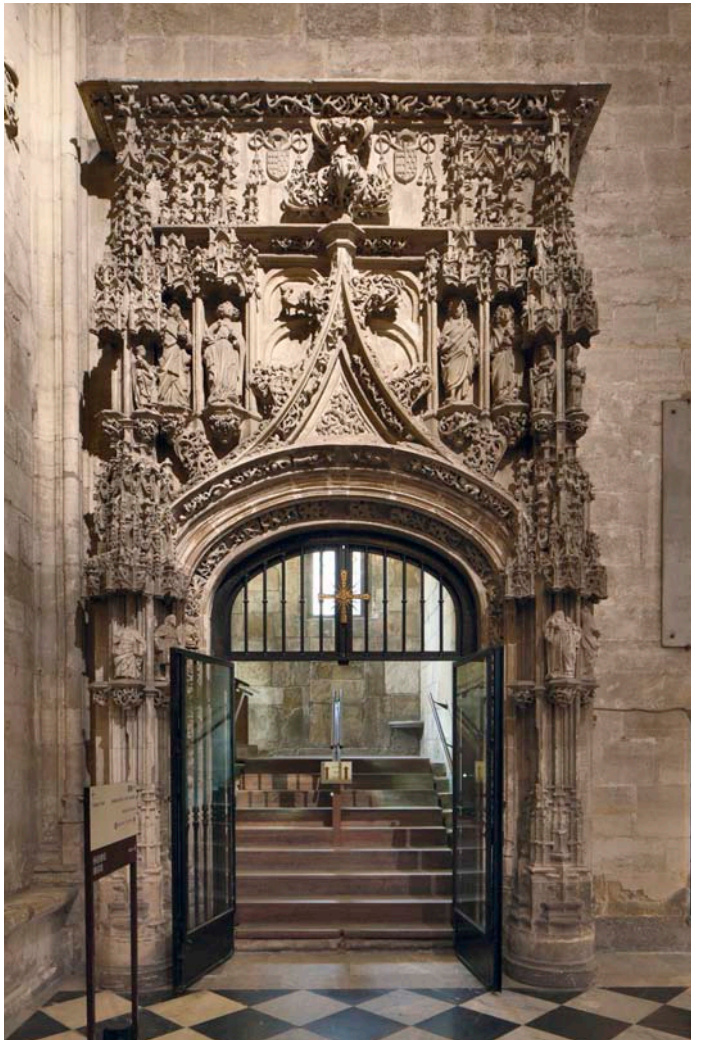

Fig. 8. Oviedo Cathedral, the central section of the choir screen reused as a portal in the south transept. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

Fig. 9. Oviedo Cathedral, the late Gothic choirstalls, now in the chapter house. Photo Justin Kroesen 2022.

masters including Juan de Malinas (John of Mechelen), Copín de Holanda (Copijn of Holland) and probably Jusquín de Utrecht (Joosken of Utrecht).[20] An artist named Juan de Bruselas (John of Brussels) carved most of the choirstalls in the cathedral of Zamora, and those in Astorga were largely executed by Juan and Nicolás de Colonia (John and Nicholas of Cologne), whose background may be sought in the German Rhineland. Installing choirstalls carved in the "northern" style clearly became fashionable among Castilian bishops and cathedral chapters during the late fifteenth century.

María Dolores Teijeira Pablos, who published several studies on late Gothic choirstalls in northwestern Spain, considered the Oviedo stalls to be less refined than those of León and Zamora. She discarded Gómez-Moreno's assumption that Juan de Malinas had also intervened in Oviedo, but the stalls certainly stand in the same, northern-inspired, tradition.[21] A common feature of all sets is a rich iconography comprising Biblical figures and allegorical and moralizing

Fig. 10. Oviedo Cathedral, carved divisions between the choirstalls showing two copulating pigs and a third playing a bagpipe. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

scenes from daily life distributed over the backrests, divisions and misericords, offering a kaleidoscope of religious and daily life in the late Middle Ages. In particular, the misericords under the seats and the divisions between them display a rich array of satirical imagery meant to denounce and combat the vices (fig. 10). The choirstalls were removed from the nave, together with the surrounding walls, in 1901–1902 on the orders of Bishop Ramón Martínez Vigil (1884–1904) using the historically false argument that this way, the original appearance of the cathedral's interior space would be restored. While forty-seven stalls were, rather awkwardly, installed behind the high altar under the altarpiece, where they conceal the retable's carved and painted stone socle, the remaining ones were moved to the chapter house adjacent to the cloister.[22]

The spatial configuration with the choirstalls located in the eastern bays of the nave is reminiscent of monastery churches, where the monks' choir usually occupied most of the central aisle. However, an important difference is that in

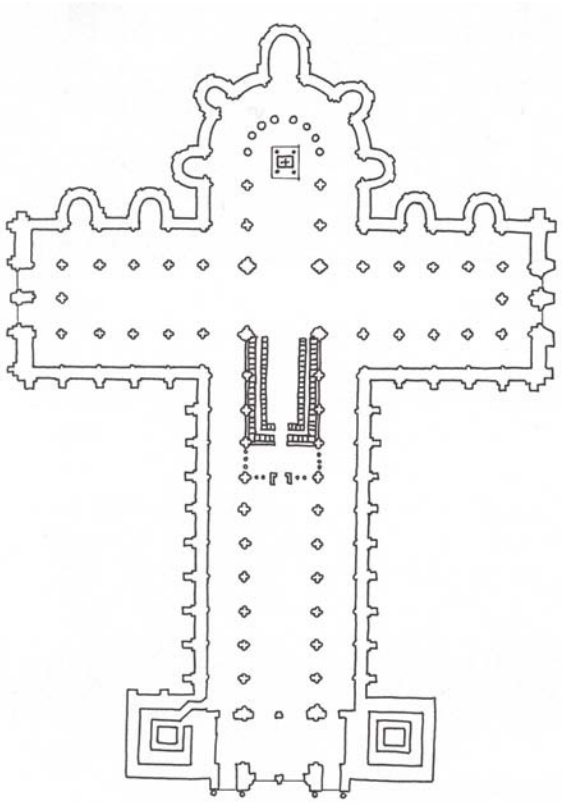

Fig. 11. Santiago de Compostela (Spain), cathedral, ground-plan of the Romanesque church showing the location of the choir and the high altar. Drawing Justin Kroesen.

Oviedo, the crossing bay, which was situated between the choir and the high altar, could be accessed freely by the laity via the aisles on the sides of the choir and through the transepts. This spatial arrangement seems to have originated in the Romanesque cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. There, pilgrims, upon arriving after their long journey, would traditionally pay devotion to the apostle St James in the transept, in front of his tomb, which was situated under the high altar.[23] In Santiago, the monumental stone choir sculpted by Maestro Mateo around 1200 was situated in the three easternmost bays of the nave, detached from the high altar which occupied the apse on the east side of the crossing (fig. 11).[24] In the following centuries, the model of Compostela would be adopted in most Spanish cathedrals, from Seville in the southwest to Girona in the northeast and from Pamplona in the north to Murcia in the south.[25] José Cuesta Fernández believed that in Oviedo Cathedral, the choir was located in

the nave at least since the early thirteenth century.[26] Based on the ubiquity of this solution in the Spanish world, it has been called "el modo español" (the Spanish mode).[27]

Consequently, the high altar in the apse was visible to both the canons in the choir and the people in the crossing, turning the latter into a true crossroads where believers gathered to attend the liturgy, pay devotion and to hear public announcements.[28] Both the choir and the high altar were screened off from the crossing by means of monumental trellises. Parts of the Oviedo choir trellis are now kept in an annex to the cloister (fig. 12). Known as *rejas*, such metal screens are a characteristic feature of Spanish medieval and early modern church interiors. Often laden with images and ornaments and defining the accessibility of building parts, *rejas* constitute one of the country's most original artistic expressions.[29] The cathedrals of Murcia and Zamora today still offer an impression of

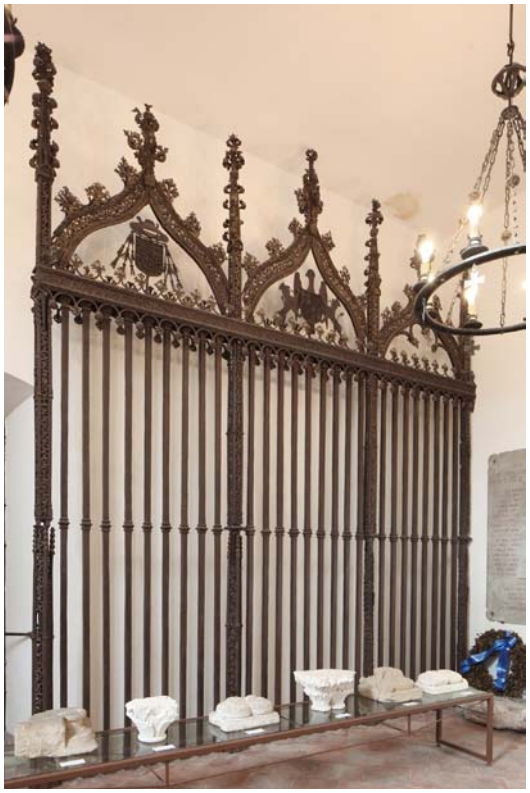

Fig. 12. Oviedo Cathedral, part of the trellis of the choir, c. 1490. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

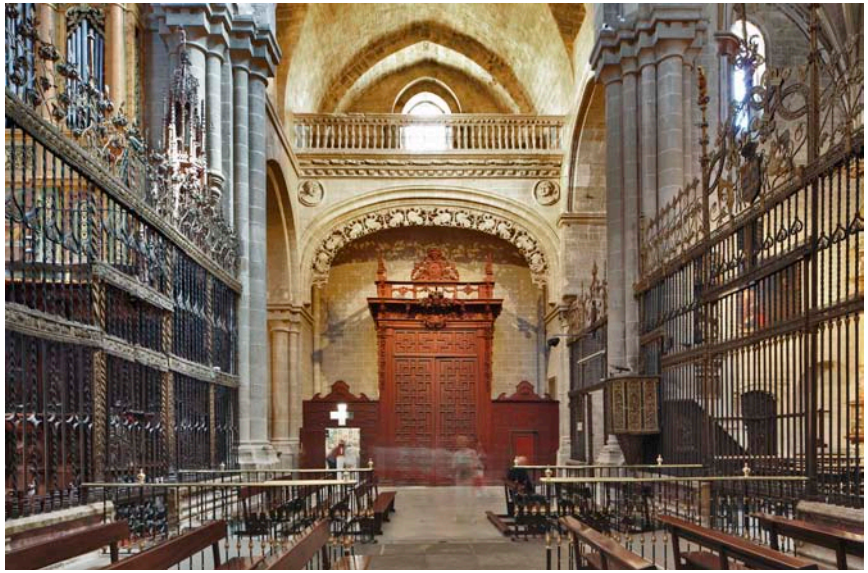

Fig. 13. Zamora (Spain), cathedral, view of the space between the late Gothic trellises of the choir (left) and the main apse (right). Photo Justin Kroesen 2016.

what a crossing bay with trellis screens on both sides looked like (fig. 13). While the trellises impeded physical access, they enabled and even invited, through their mesmerizing filtering effect, churchgoers to visually access the spaces behind them, stimulating their pious imagination. All this differed vastly from most churches of comparable size in France, the Low Countries and elsewhere in central and northern Europe, where the high altar remained invisible to the lay people behind a closed choirscreen in a deep chancel that also accommodated the choirstalls, constituting an isolated clerical *Sancta Sanctorum*.[30]

From the above, one may conclude that, in Oviedo Cathedral, like in most other Spanish medieval cathedrals, the high altar was meant to be seen by all present in the church, clerics and layfolk alike, and that it could be closely approached. In Spain, more than elsewhere in Europe, the high altar thus played a primordial role as the focal point of the entire church interior, which prompted elaborate sets of decorations to distinguish and dignify it. These usually consisted of a large carved or painted retable and an equally large *reja* that served as a filter or veil in front of it; both always went together and must be understood as a visual and artistic *ensemble*. In Oviedo, however, there are indica-

tions that the first decoration of the high altar, which was erected after the apse was finished around 1412 under the episcopate of Diego Ramírez de Guzmán (1412–1442), had the shape of a *ciborium* – a freestanding canopy, supported by columns. Such an openwork fitting, which evoked the Biblical tabernacle, the tent covering the Ark of the Covenant, would seem to relate best to the aforementioned presence of two superimposed rows of windows in the apse wall: other than a large altarpiece, a freestanding canopy did not impede the influx of morning light into the apse but rather utilize it, making liturgical celebrations into light-imbued spectacles.

Although altar ciboria are rare today in medieval churches outside Italy and its Mediterranean area of influence, they were more widespread than is com-

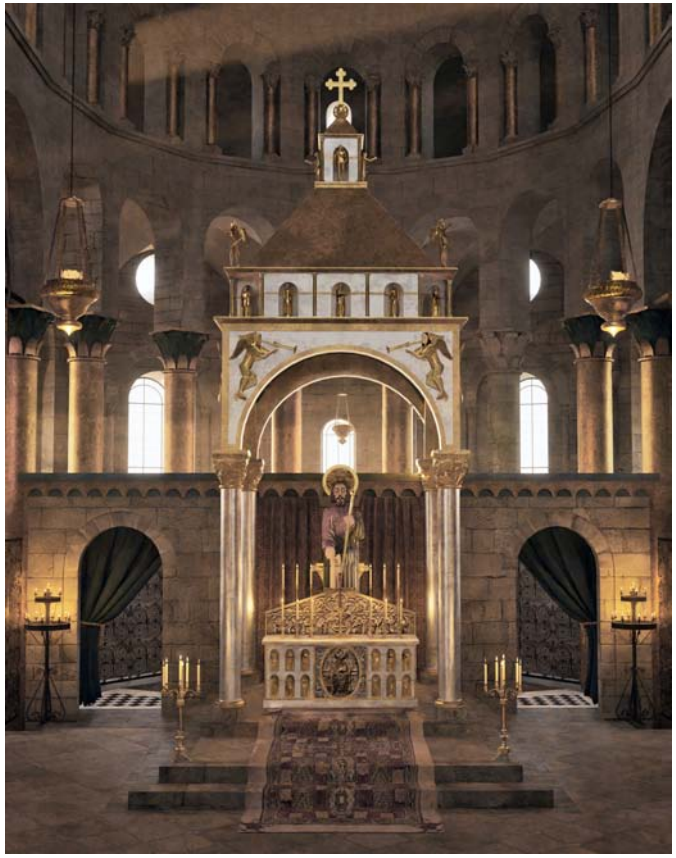

Fig. 14. Santiago de Compostela (Spain), cathedral, hypothetical reconstruction of the high altar in the chancel with its altar baldachin, retable and frontal from the 11th and 12th centuries. Digital model by Anxo Miján Maroño/Trasancos 3D.

monly assumed.[31] Particularly in northwestern Spain, the ciborium seems to have enjoyed considerable popularity, again influenced by the Romanesque cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Around 1110, the city's first archbishop, Diego Gelmírez (1100–1139), had a monumental example erected over the high altar after he returned from a journey to Rome. Consisting of a tented roof resting on round columns, it featured trumpeting angels in the spandrels and around the canopy, and a cross at the top (fig. 14).[32] Ciboria would continue to be erected in Galician churches during the late Middle Ages; during the late fifteenth century, Gelmírez's Romanesque ciborium in Compostela was replaced with a late Gothic example.[33] The only freestanding medieval ciborium that survives today in the region is found in the church of Vilar de Donas (prov.

Fig. 15. Vilar de Donas (Spain), monastery church, late Gothic altar baldachin, 15th century. Photo Justin Kroesen 2016.

Lugo) (fig. 15); it largely follows the model of the ciborium of Compostela, the main difference being the now ogee-shaped arches.[34] In the apse of Oviedo Cathedral, no vestiges of any ciborium are visible today; the space would be transformed after 1511, when the current, gigantic altarpiece was erected behind the main altar in the apse.

Spanish and Flemish altarpieces

The main beneficiary of the spatial configuration of detached *coros* and *capillas mayores* in Spanish churches would be the Gothic altarpiece, which acquired a level of monumentality that was unparallelled elsewhere in Europe.[35] In Oviedo, the altarpiece's vast size and narrative thrust astonish visitors who are not acquainted with Spanish cathedrals and evoke the question of where to search for the prototype(s); where could its crafters possibly have drawn their inspiration from? The answer must be sought in the Iberian Peninsula itself, where the giant late Gothic retable had long been in the making with altarpieces having steadily grown in size since the second half of the fourteenth century.[36] In this section, we will reflect on the styles and structures of altarpieces and see how the two could sometimes be apparently unrelated, rooted in different traditions: while the style of retable imagery may be imported from overseas, it was sometimes applied in a format that was very much home-grown. Such hybrid solutions, which always impulse new forms and styles in art, reflect the desires and requirements of commissioners who knew what was available on the international "art market" without ignoring their own traditions.

The process of growing retable sizes had started in Catalonia where, during the 1360s, painted and sculpted altarpieces started acquiring measurements that had never been seen before and remained unparallelled in Europe. Among painted retables, those by the brothers Pere and Jaume Serra in Barcelona were the first to adopt predominantly vertical models. Their compartments were mostly filled with narrative scenes distributed systematically over various vertical sections and horizontal tiers, which provided altarpieces with an internal architecture. The retable of the Holy Spirit in the collegiate church of Manresa, which was finished in 1394 by Pere Serra, measures a considerable 5.8 m in height and displays seventeen scenes. By the early fifteenth century, retables commonly reached heights of over six meters, as exemplified by the retable of St George from Valencia, which was commisssioned by the local archers'

Fig. 16. London (UK), Victoria and Albert Museum, retable of St George, c. 1410. Photo Victoria and Albert Museum.

militia (*Centenar de la Ploma*) and is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 16). Altarpieces of this height and with such extensive iconographical programmes – here comprising no fewer than twenty-nine scenes – exceeded anything that was crafted at the time in any of Europe's art-producing centres.[37]

In sculpture, a similar development led to retables becoming continuously higher and, particularly, also more architectural in appearance. During the last decades of the fourteenth century, in and around the city of Lleida in western Catalonia, Bartomeu de Robio started building stone altarpieces of a size that surpassed anything seen so far. His altarpiece on the high altar of the church of

St Lawrence in the abovementioned city, created around 1390–1400, reaches a height of almost 4 m and displays twelve senes in addition to around twenty individual figures. Around 1425, the stone altarpiece by the Catalan sculptor Pere Joan de Vallfogona in the cathedral of Tarragona set a new standard in size and monumentality (fig. 17). While the retable proper has a square format measuring approximately 6 x 6 m showing twelve populated scenes from the life of the church patron, St Thecla, above an equally narrative predella, its central spire reaches a height of no less than c. 15 m. With its lateral arched portals,

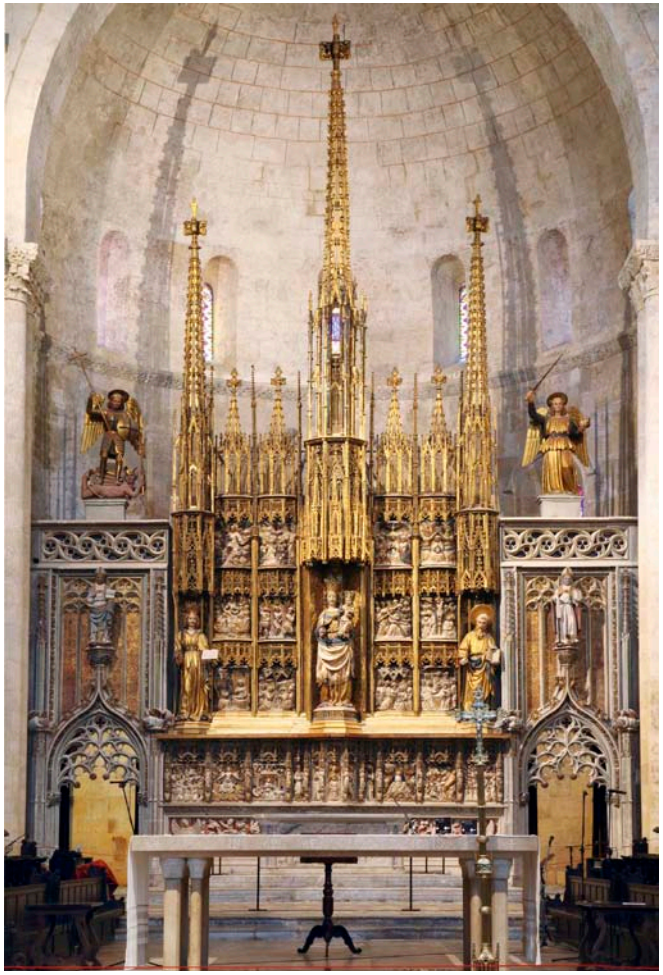

Fig. 17. Tarragona (Spain), cathedral, high altarpiece, c. 1430. Photo Justin Kroesen 2014.

Fig. 18. Burgos (Spain), Carthusian monastery of Miraflores, high altarpiece, 1496–1499. Photo Justin Kroesen 2021.

moreover, this screen-altarpiece fills the entire eleven-metre-wide arch located at the entrance to the apse, which converts the semicircular space behind it into a sacristy and provides access to the Eucharistic tabernacle from the rear.

The model of the large, vertical altarpiece was also adopted and even reinforced further west on the Iberian Peninsula, in the kingdoms of Castile and Portugal. A painted retable of monumental proportions in Castile measuring c. 8.5 m in height and comprising fifty-three scenes was created in Salamanca's Old Cathedral in 1445–1450, but it had minimal impact on the development

Fig. 19. Toledo (Spain), cathedral, high altarpiece, 1498–1503. Photo Justin Kroesen 2021.

of Castilian retable making in the following decades. In 1496–1499, a monumental carved retable of c. 10 x 10 m with a highly original design organized around a circle surrounding the crucified Christ was crafted in the church of the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores, located on the outskirts of Burgos (fig. 18). Further south, in the cathedral of Toledo, between 1498 and 1503, a huge altarpiece of c. 20 x 13 m was erected that fills most of the east wall of the apse (fig. 19). The retable is adapted to its five-sided groundplan and comprises nineteen sections filled with an equal number of elaborate sculpture groups that narrate

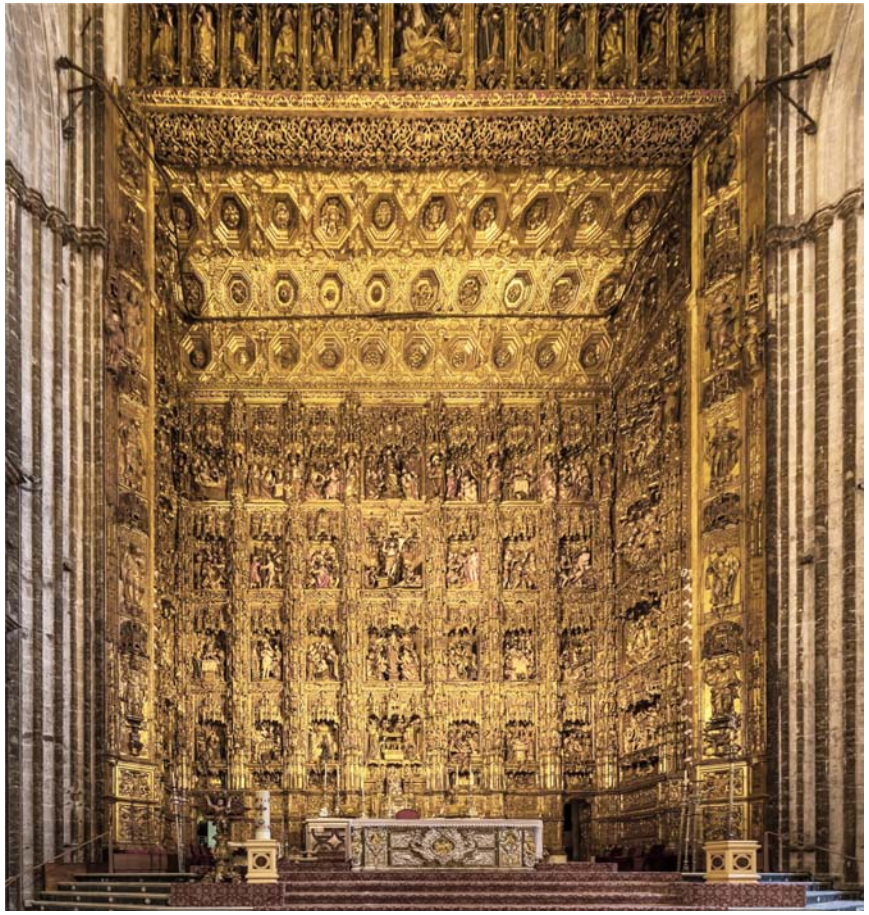

Fig. 20. Seville Cathedral, Spain, the high altarpiece, largely 1509–1511. Photo José María Arboleda.

the Life of Christ, with a main role for the Virgin Mary. The crowning has a stepped structure, ascending towards the centre and culminating in a Calvary group. The central sections obscure part of the clerestory windows, so that the altarpiece is no longer "only" an interior furnishing but even leaves its mark on the very architecture of the church.

Spanish late Gothic retable making reached its zenith in the cathedral of Seville where, largely between 1509 and 1511, a giant partitioning wall was erected to divide the *capilla mayor* from the royal burial chapel located behind it. The

west side of this wall, which measures c. 13 x 13 m, is symmetrically divided into twenty-eight compartments distributed over seven vertical sections and four horizontal tiers, all filled with Gospel scenes, to which were added another 189 individual figures populating the framework (fig. 20).[38] This giant retable by far surpassed all other contemporary European altarpieces in size, even the tallest winged altarpieces of Central Europe.[39] Propelled by a sense of prestige and emulation, around the same time, the model of the large wall

Fig. 21. Gumiel de Izán (Spain), parish church, high altarpiece, c. 1510. Photo Justin Kroesen 2021.

retable filling the entire apse and reaching up to the vaults was also adopted in cathedrals elsewhere on the Iberian Peninsula, including Coimbra in Portugal, between 1498 and 1501, and Galician Ourense, in 1516–1520 (fig. 29).[40] Meanwhile, altarpieces of a similar model were also erected in churches of a lower rank, such as the parish churches at Gumiel de Izán, south of Burgos (fig. 21), and Lekeitio on the Biscay coast in the Basque Country, both around 1500. The imposing Toledo model with the crowning Calvary group projecting between the vaults of the apse was followed, around 1520, in the sanctuary of Our Lady of La Encina in the mountains of the Basque province of Álava (fig. 22).

As unparallelled and typically Spanish or Iberian as all these large retables may be, many, if not most, of the sculptors who crafted them were foreigners.[41] The aforementioned St George retable from Valencia is believed to have been painted by Andreu Marçal de Sax (Andrew Marcel of Sas or Saxony), an artist whose origins have been sought between Flanders and Germany.[42] The altarpiece in Salamanca Cathedral was created by three artists from Florence: the painters Niccolò (*alias* Nicolás Florentino: Nicholas the Florentine), Daniello and Sansone Delli. The first design for a late Gothic altarpiece in the cathedral of Seville was made in 1482 by Pieter Dancaert, an artist from the southern Low Countries (Mechelen or Ghent?).[43] Gil de Siloé (*alias* Gil de Emberres, Giles of Antwerp), who made the retable in the *cartuja* of Miraflores, is believed to have originated from that Brabant city. The altarpiece in the cathedral of Toledo was crafted by Peti Juan (Petit Jean), a Frenchman (most probably from northern France), and other artists including Rodrigo Alemán (Roderick the German), Felipe y Juan de Borgoña (Philip and John of Burgundy), Diego Copín and Cristiano de Holanda (Dirk Copijn and Christian of Holland) and Francisco de Amberes (Francis of Antwerp). In Ourense Cathedral, the altarpiece was erected by Cornielles de Holanda (Cornelis of Holland). Finally, in Coimbra Cathedral, the sculptors responsible for the creation of the retable were named João d'Ypres (John of Ieper) and Oliveiro de Gante (Oliver of Ghent).

Names indicating geographical origins were an important trademark for the artists, as it would also be for certain products, such as tapestries from Arras, Tournai and Brussels, cloths from Oudenaarde and Leiden, and brass from Dinant. Since such names could be inherited and might therefore indicate the origin of families rather than of individuals, one cannot assume that all of the aforementioned artists had personally migrated from the Low Countries.

Fig. 22. Artziniega (Spain), church of Nuestra Señora de la Encina, high altarpiece and sacrament tower, 1510–1520. Photo Justin Kroesen 2020.

Fig. 23. Strängnäs (Sweden), cathedral, high altarpiece, c. 1490. Photo Justin Kroesen 2021.

What is certain is that carrying names that referred to a northern origin reflected the fashion, widespread at the time, of installing Netherlandish artworks in Spanish churches and chapels.[44] "Flemish" late Gothic, the "house style" of the Dukes of Burgundy, the most opulent rulers of fifteenth-century Europe, became a point of reference and the object of emulation and prestige among the nobility all over the Continent.[45] Burgundy and Spain became politically united when Duke Philip the Handsome married Joanna, the *infanta* of Castile, in 1496. In addition to its social prestige, Netherlandish art was highly valued for the pious realism that was attributed to it: artists from the Low Countries were alone in mastering the art of depicting the details and nuances of lived reality and evoking inward-looking devotion in the figures represented.

Around the mid-fifteenth century, as is well known, Netherlandish artworks, including winged altarpieces, became highly demanded export commodities across Western Europe. The role of Bruges as the leading production centre gradually shifted to Brussels and, especially towards the end of the fifteenth century,

Antwerp. Other centres where an exporting retable industry developed were Mechelen and Utrecht, alongside various smaller towns on the Lower Rhine and along the River IJssel, including Kalkar and Zwolle. Between 1480 and 1530, Netherlandish altarpieces found their way to churches all over Europe, particularly along the Atlantic rim. Brussels altarpieces reached Finnish Vehmaa/Vemo and Swedish Strängnäs (fig. 23) as well as Pamplona in Navarre; Utrecht altarpieces have been identified between Hadsel in northern Norway and Segovia in central Castile; and altarpieces from Antwerp were shipped to churches all over the Latin West, from Nederluleå-Gammelstad in northern Sweden and Gdańsk/Danzig on the Baltic coast down to the monastery of Staffarda in Italian Piemonte, San Juan de Telde on Gran Canaria and Estreito da Calheta on Madeira.[46] Soon after, Netherlandish and German prints even crossed the Atlantic to influence retable-making in New Spain, present-day Mexico.

Fig. 24. Bergen (Norway), University Museum, altarpiece from Austevoll (Norway), c. 1510. Photo University Museum of Bergen/Svein Skare 2011.

According to Lynn Jacobs, around 1500, Netherlandish carved altarpieces became an export success when they started being produced using quasi-industrialized workshop methods and sold on the open market.[47] However, producers never adopted a "one-size-fits-all policy", since they often responded to the specific desires of their customers. Netherlandish altarpieces in Scandinavia, for example, contrary to those found "at home" in Belgium, are commonly filled with individual figures instead of narrative scenes, in keeping with retable making in northern Germany, which had catered to the same market during most of the fifteenth century.[48] Moreover, some exported retables feature representations of local Scandinavian saints including St Eskil and St Botvid in Sweden and St Sunniva in Norway (fig. 24).[49] Similarly, many of the Netherlandish altarpieces that were made for the Spanish market were also adjusted to the desires of their customers.[50] An example that can still be seen in its original context is the retable in the chapel of St John the Baptist at the church of Christ the Saviour in Valladolid, which was commissioned around 1500 by the Spanish royal chancellor Gonzalo González de Illescas and his wife Marina de Estrada (fig. 25). Compared to contemporary altarpieces preserved in Scandinavia and in the Southern Netherlands, the Valladolid retable is remarkably large and vertical, and the representation of the patron saint as an individual standing figure in the central section is rather unusual.[51]

A striking difference between North and South concerns the treatment of high and side altars. In Scandinavia, Netherlandish winged altarpieces were installed on high and side altars alike; in the Iberian world, however, they were almost exclusively installed on altars in side chapels and private oratories. For their high altars, as described above, Spaniards desired artworks of a wholly different visual impact, which should fill most of the apse with a panoply of scenes and individual figures (figs. 1, 17–22).[52] The differences in size between the winged altarpieces in the north and the architecturally structured wall retables in the south are stark, as a comparison between the retables in the church of St Peter in Dortmund (Germany) and the cathedrals of Oviedo and Toledo clearly shows. The Dortmund altarpiece, which originally belonged to the local Franciscans' church and dates from 1521, is the largest of all preserved late Gothic retables produced in Antwerp (fig. 26). Its compartmentalized structure filled with multi-figured scenes corresponds to the Oviedo and Toledo altarpieces, but its height of 5.65 m is not even half of that of the Oviedo altar-

Fig. 25. Valladolid (Spain), church of El Salvador, altarpiece in a side chapel, c. 1500. Photo Justin Kroesen 2024.

piece and only around a quarter of that in Toledo.[53] Contrary to Netherlandish altarpieces, Spanish high altarpieces were generally not equipped with wings, meaning that on weekdays their shimmering imagery was not hidden behind closed doors but permanently visible to the churchgoers.[54]

The large Spanish late Gothic retables, like most of the country's painted and sculpted artworks from that period, are traditionally labeled as *hispanoflamenco* (Spanish-Flemish), in recognition of the fact that most were created by artists of northern origin.[55] This term, which was coined by the Spanish art historian José María de Azcárate Ristori (1919–2001), has increasingly fallen into disuse in scholarship over recent decades. *Hispanoflamenco* seems to suggest unidirectional transfers without taking into account the creative force of hybridization unleashed by the encounter itself between northern and south-

ern artistic traditions. Moreover, the exclusive focus on Flanders through the term *-flamenco* – which would also include the Duchy of Brabant, following the modern Belgian concept of Flanders (Vlaanderen) – has tended to obscure connections to other adjacent territories, including the northern Netherlands (Utrecht, the IJssel towns), western Germany (the Lower Rhine, Westphalia) and northern France (Hainaut, Picardy, Normandy, Champagne and Lorraine).[56] In other words, calling late Gothic retables *hispanoflamenco* fails to clarify what exactly is "Flemish" in these works of art, obscures what is "Spanish" about them, and ignores what happened when the two came together.

A helpful way to gain more clarity on the defining characteristics of Spain's large, late Gothic altarpieces with Flemish connections is to make a clear distinction between style and structure. Whereas Spaniards enthusiastically embraced the style of Netherlandish altarpieces, including their narrative thrust, they did not do the same with their size (since they wished them to be much larger) and format (as they were usually wingless). This phenomenon in late Gothic altarpiece making led to a disparity, or perhaps, more positively expressed, to a *symbiosis*, between a style that was imported from overseas and a structure that was ultimately indigenous.[57] In size and format, the altarpieces of Miraflores, Coimbra, Toledo, Seville and Ourense differed vastly from the work their Netherlandish creators would have known from their homelands. They were not produced in workhops and installed on altars once they were ready, but would rather be built at their destination, inside the apses of the respective churches.[58] Woodcarvers producing the main *corpus* of the retable would not collaborate with panel painters producing painted wings in the same way as they would have done in the Low Countries. Above all, the scale of the Spanish altarpieces exceeded anything they would have worked on or could ever have seen in the north.[59]

The vast size of these Spanish retable projects must have been an important point of attraction for the artists, as many churches in the country during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, fueled by the economic bonanza of the period, invested heavily in renewing their interiors and furnishings. High altarpieces were the most prestigious commissions to be granted by Spanish churches, even more than choirstalls and tombs, as they expressed and symbolized the identity and pride of commissioners and communities. The outstanding status of the Spanish *retablo* has particularly been noted by scholars out-

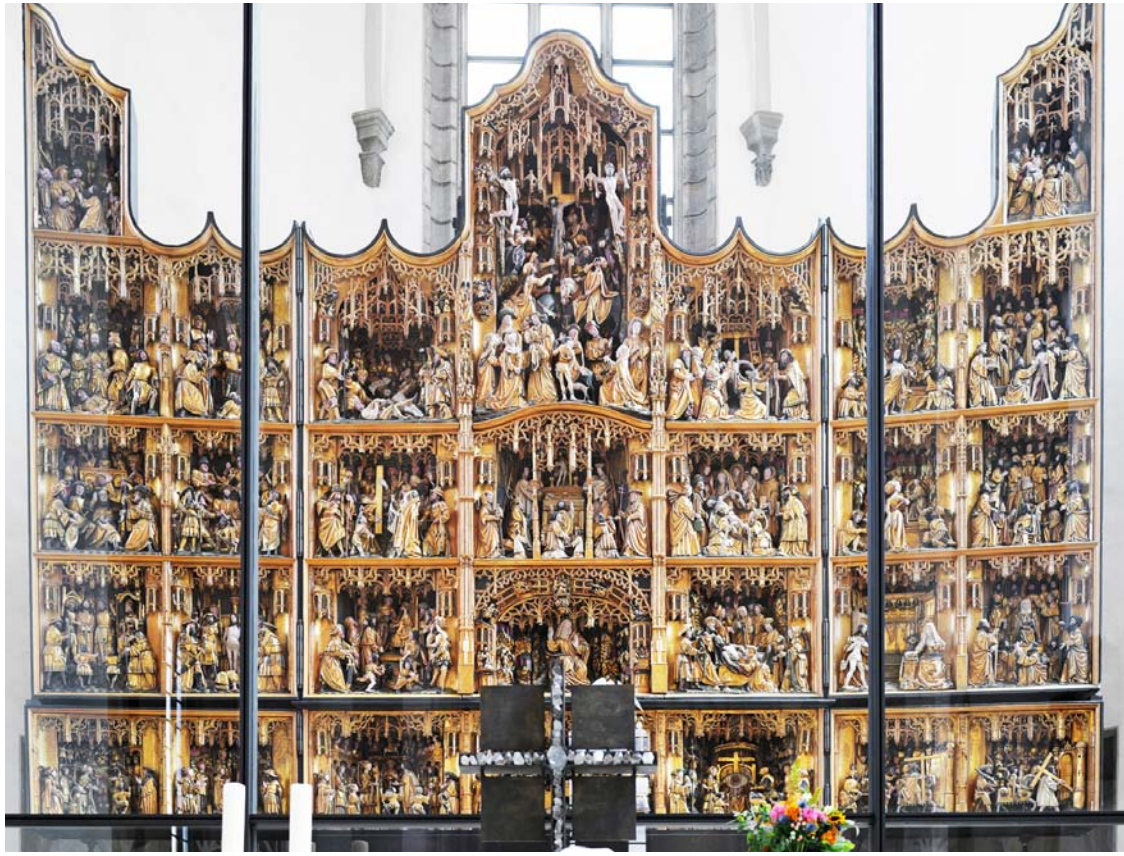

Fig. 26. Dortmund (Germany), church of St Peter, high altarpiece, 1521. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

side of Spain. In 1865, the English architect George Edmund Street celebrated Spanish altarpieces as: "the great glory of the country – rich in sculpture, colour, and in paintings of no mean merit, and lofty and imposing beyond anything of the kind ever seen elsewhere".[60] In 1927, the German Georg Weise characterized "the image wall rising up to the vaults filled with uncountable figures and scenes" as a "Spanish national form of altarpiece".[61] Netherlandish artists, once they had arrived in the Iberian Peninsula, seem to have been more than happy to meet the desires of their Spanish commissioners. Their quick assimilation made the English architectural historian John Harvey remark, in 1957, that the

foreign creators of Spain's largest altarpieces "seem[ed] almost more Spanish than the Spaniards themselves".[62]

The making of the Oviedo altarpiece

On 30 August 1511, the aforementioned bishop Villaquirán closed a contract in Burgos with the artist Giralte de Bruselas (Gerard of Brussels) to erect a new altarpiece behind the high altar of the cathedral (fig. 27).[63] The bishop's considerable personal donation of 300 golden ducates for the project may be related to his desire to reform the diocese and combat abuses; the altarpiece should manifest the glory of the cathedral, celebrate the church patron and uplift and educate the laity in their faith.[64] Giralte is mentioned as a *vecino* (inhabitant) of Zamora, where he had probably been involved in the carving of the cathedral's choirstalls.[65] However, his name suggests Netherlandish origins; the artist was likely born and/or trained in Brussels, which at that time was the political and cultural capital of the Burgundian Netherlands. Given Oviedo's geographical location and Atlantic outlook, the choice for a foreign artist was unsurprising, also because the chapter had made good experiences with the foreign carvers of the choirstalls. Moreover, with the new retable the Asturians followed the Castilian fashion of the period, discussed in the previous section, with Netherlandish artists having previously erected prestigious retables in Toledo, Seville and Coimbra.

The design of the Oviedo altarpiece was clearly inspired by the retable in Toledo: both artworks are divided into five vertical sections and follow the polygonal groundplan of their corresponding apses. The compartments in the central section are higher than those in the flanking ones, which creates an ascending visual effect emphasizing the axis. Other than the stepped model of the Toledo altarpiece, however, the retable in Oviedo has a flat cornice and does not block the clerestory windows, which might be explained by the weather conditions in this cloudy and rainy part of Spain; the retable already blocked the lower row of windows in the apse, which meant a halving of light incidence.[66] The iconographic programmes of the two altarpieces run roughly parallel: while in both cases the side sections and the predella narrate a comprehensive Christological cycle, the central lanes of both retables feature – from

Fig. 27. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531. Photo Justin Kroesen 2022.

the bottom up – an image of the church patron, the Assumption of the Virgin, and a Calvary group.[67] The present aspect of the Oviedo altarpiece largely resulted from an encompassing renovation in 1721 and a regrettable repainting in 1878–1879, which resulted in the loss of the original polychromy.[68]

It was agreed that Giralte, who is called "maestro del retablo" (master of the retable), should start the work at Easter of the following year, 1512, in collaboration with other artists of his choice, which seems to suggest that he was a designer/architect and a joiner rather than a sculptor.[69] Several houses in the present Magdalen street (*Calle de la Magdalena*) were rented to serve as a workshop for the carving of the wooden sculptures.[70] Intriguingly, in the contract, Giralte is asked to reuse several wooden elements from a "ciborium" in the new retable: "The mentioned Giralte should use for the retable all the wood and the figures he can use that are now on the *ciborio* and that all he will use will be taken into account in the work, to be considered by the officials who will judge it".[71] As argued above, the ciborium mentioned in this passage is likely to have been a freestanding altar canopy that may have been erected around 1420–1430, although further details are lacking. A written record dating from 1487 mentions a painter from León named Pedro de Mayorga who is working "especially on the high altar", which may indicate some repair work.[72] Did the altar canopy perhaps carry images, or does this source refer to a retable on the altar that may have stood under it?

The latter seems most likely, based on a record dated 25 August 1497 that mentions the handing over to the chapter of a cameo set in silver "removed from the retable that was taken down from the high altar".[73] This suggests the presence of an altarpiece of costly execution using precious metals and stones, possibly in conjuction with the altar ciborium.[74] Such a configuration is reminiscent of the earlier mentioned Romanesque altar ensemble commissioned by Archbishop Diego Gelmírez in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (fig. 14). In 1135, Gelmírez had an altarpiece covered in gilded silver installed under the canopy that he had erected over the high altar around twenty-five years earlier.[75] Another possibility is that the term *ciborio* did not refer to an altar canopy but to a tabernacle for the storage of the Eucharist. This furnishing is sometimes also referred to as a ciborium in medieval sources, in the manner of a *pars pro toto*, after the metal vessel holding the consecrated hosts that was placed in it.[76] However, given that the elements to be reused from the mentioned *ciborio* were wooden pieces and figures, an altar baldachin of monumental proportions would seem more likely.[77]

In the same year that the work on the retable started, Bishop Villaquirán died, and he was succeeded by Diego de Muros (1512–1525). Several records dated to 1514–1515 reveal the identity of the woodcarvers who were recruited by Giralte as his collaborators. Their names suggest a mix of Flemish and Spanish hands: we read about a sculptor named Enrique, who is called "master of the queen's works"[78] and who has been identified as Enrique Egas (Hendrik Egas), the son of the sculptor Egas Cueman *alias* Egas de Bruselas (Egas of Brussels); Guillén de Gelanda (William of Gelanda), whose second name should perhaps be read as Celanda (=Zealand?), while others have read Holanda (=Holland);[79] and Esteban de Anver (Stephen of Antwerp), whose name points to an origin from that Brabant city.[80] In 1515, Giralte appears to have become involved in a financial dispute. He threatened to stop the work unless he was paid and the chapter, in turn, refused to give him any money until the work was carried out to perfection.[81] Nevertheless, the project progressed and by December 1516 the altarpiece was sufficiently finished to be evaluated by the Leonese masters Bernardo de Ferreres and Juan Álvarez, who ordered some changes, which were made in 1517. By May of that year, Giralte received a considerable payment "as a support for the road", which suggests that at that point he left Oviedo for good.[82]

The retable that Giralte erected in the cathedral of Oviedo was of a scale unseen in his Brabant homeland. While the design of the microarchitectures and the composition and narrative expression of the scenes may be considered "Flemish", everything else about the retable – its size, format, location and visual impact – must certainly be called "Spanish". In Flanders and Brabant, late Gothic high altarpieces were virtually always equipped with movable wings and an overall height of more than 5 m was a great exception. With a view to better understanding of the contrast between northern and southern preferences, it is interesting to compare the Oviedo altarpiece with the aforementioned winged retable on the high altar of the cathedral in Swedish Strängnäs, which is known to have been commissioned in Brussels by Bishop Cordt Rogge in 1490 (fig. 23). As was observed before, Scandinavians mostly accepted the size and format of Flemish altarpieces as they were dispatched from the workshops there. With a height of little over 2.5 m and an opened width of almost 7 m, the Strängnäs altarpiece makes a very horizontal appearance, measuring less than 1/6 in height

and a little over half in width compared to the Oviedo retable. When opened, the Swedish altarpiece displays only seven narrative scenes, sixteen fewer than the Spanish one.

In 1516, a new artist appeared on the scene, namely Juan de Balmaseda (or Valmaseda), who is mentioned as a *vecino* of Burgos in the contract he signed with Bishop De Muros. His name suggests an origin from the town of Balmaseda in Biscay in the Basque Country.[83] Juan de Balmaseda was one of the leading figures in Spanish early Renaissance sculpture. While only the scene of the Doubting Thomas in the Oviedo retable is documented as his,[84] the *Ecce Homo*, the Flagellation, the Crowning with Thorns and the Virgin and St John in the Calvary group have been attributed to the same sculptor based on stylistic features.[85] On 23 July 1522, another prestigious Spanish artist, the sculptor and painter Alonso Berruguete, signed a contract in Vitoria-Gasteiz for the painting and gilding of the Oviedo retable, but it is unclear whether he ever took up the work.[86] Bishop De Muros died in 1525 and was succeeded by Francisco de Mendoza (1526–1528), who would become bishop of Zamora only one and a half year later. Despite his short time in office, he pushed for the completion of the retable, which illustrates the importance that was attached to such artworks; in a letter written in July 1526, the bishop called on the clergy of the diocese to spend all donations for the painting of the retable, which indicates that the polychromy was still largely lacking at that point.[87]

His successor Diego de Acuña (1529–1532) took the project further by searching another artist to finish the painting and gilding of the retable. The choice fell on León Picardo (Leon the Picard), whose name suggests an origin from northern France.[88] In the contract he signed on 22 May 1529, Picardo is called "maestro del retablo", as the successor of Giralte de Bruselas. He collaborated with Machin de Plazencia, who seems to have been of Castilian origin (from the town of Plasencia?), and a certain Miguel (de) Bingueles, whose background is unknown.[89] The contract specifies that the pigments used on the retable, which is described as "one of the best and most noble existing in all of Spain",[90] should all be "very fine" and that the blues should be imported from Flanders and from Germany and the reds from Florence, while all the gold was to be extracted from Portuguese or Castilian coins.[91] Picardo promises to carry out the work "just as good, or even better" than on the three retables of the prestigious *Capilla del Condestable* (the chapel of the royal chancellor) at the

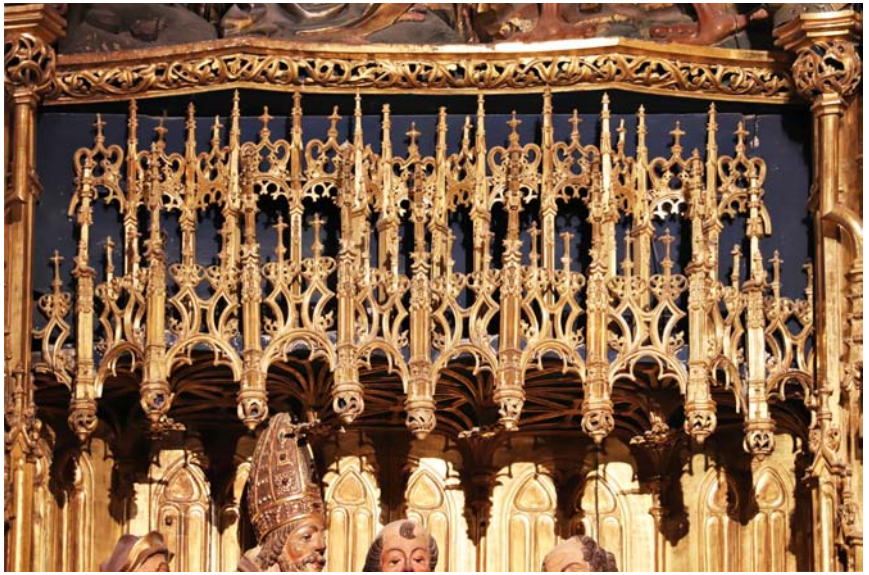

Fig. 28. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: baldachin over one of the scenes. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

cathedral of Burgos, on which he had worked before, adding that he still had some material left and that more might be ordered from Florence.[92] The retable finally reached completion in August 1531.[93]

Manuel Gómez-Moreno compared the style of Giralte de Bruselas's carvings to that of his contemporary Felipe Bigarny (*alias* Felipe Vigarny, Biguerny), who was sometimes also referred to as Felipe de Borgoña (Philip of Burgundy) or briefly as "el Borgoñón" (the Burgundian).[94] This sculptor, who was born in Langres on the border between Burgundy and Champagne around 1470, was mostly active in the city of Burgos and is considered one of the leading artists of the early Renaissance in Spain.[95] Gómez-Moreno noted a difference between the scenes in the predella, which represent various scenes from the Infancy cycle, and the individual figures that appear between them, representing the Church Fathers. The allegedly stiffer and less expressive characteristics of the latter carvings led him to assume that while the scenes had been carved by Giralte, these figures were probably somewhat older. He conjectured that they were reused from the predecessor-altar decoration, possibly the postulated ciborium, that was taken down before 1497.[96] José Cuesta Fernández also believed that the

carved statues of the Church Fathers and St Peter and St Paul had belonged to this earlier furnishing.[97]

Together, the figures that appear in the Oviedo retable illustrate the gradual transition between late Gothic and early Renaissance in Spanish art. Several of the altarpiece's features, including the microarchitectures of the wooden framework, distance themselves from the late-Gothic-style idiom of the retables in Toledo and Sevilla in that they are somewhat less overladen with openwork filligranes. In addition, the decorations in the baldachins are generally slightly less pointed and vertical and more undulating and round than in the two mentioned altarpieces found further south (fig. 28). These characteristics bring the Oviedo altarpiece very close to the retable on the earlier mentioned high altar of the cathedral of Galician Ourense, which was erected in 1516–1520 by several woodcarvers, led by Cornielles de Holanda (Cornelis of Holland) (fig. 29). A shared aspect of both retables is the combination of a late Gothic structure with some elements announcing the early Renaissance. The protracted development from a Gothic to a Renaissance style idiom, with many aspects of imaginative hybridization, is a characteristic common to all the lands referred to in the previous section: the "laatgotiek" or "flamboyant Gothic" in the Low Countries and northern France, western Spain's "estilo isabelino" or "estilo de los Reyes Católicos" and Portugal's "manuelino style".[98]

Some reflections on the iconography of the retable

The Oviedo altarpiece displays twenty-three sculpture groups representing a chronological sequence of events described in the Gospels. In terms of structure, this mode differs from the Flemish custom of simultaneous narration in multi figured-stages including various sub-scenes.[99] The predella narrates Christ's Infancy cycle, from the Annunciation and Visitation left of the centre to the Nativity and the Adoration of Christ on the right. At the Nativity, the ass looks away from the Christ child, perhaps in an allusion to the bad murderer on Golgotha, while a shepherd in the background ludically fills his mouth with wine from a leather bag (fig. 30).[100] Such anecdotic details may have been inspired by the tradition of mystery plays and liturgical drama. All scenes are divided from each other by individual figures representing the four Church Fathers, while St Sebastian and St Roch, the protectors against the Plague, appear at both ends. The central section of the predella, which is now empty, is

Fig. 29. Ourense (Spain), cathedral, high altarpiece, 1516–1520. Photo ourense.gal/turismo.

Fig. 30. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: the Nativity of Christ. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

flanked by St Peter and St Paul (fig. 31). The fact that these two prominent apostles, who represent the Church as an institution (Peter) and its doctrine (Paul), belong to the traditional iconography of the tabernacle suggests that the Eucharist was stored here.[101] The original presence of a tabernacle in the altarpiece may also be inferred from the passage in the contract with León Picardo, where he commits himself to paint "the retable and the *custodia*".[102]

The clear distinction of the two elements suggests that the *custodia* was a separate furnishing with a design of its own; we may think of a tower-shaped microarchitecture, as can be seen in Toledo Cathedral, where it was incorporated into the retable in 1503 (fig. 32), and the pilgrimage church of Our Lady of La Encina in Basque Artziniega, where a separate wooden Sacrament tower was erected on the north side of the altarpiece around 1520 (fig. 22). Placing the tabernacle at the centre of the predella would become standard practice

several decades later, after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) had prescribed Eucharistic storage on the high altar. In the Iberian Peninsula, this custom had already before seen considerable spread. It seems to have originated in Catalonia during the second half of the fourteenth century; later examples of predella-tabernacles are found further west; for example, in the collegiate church of Bolea (prov. Huesca) and the village churches of Anento (prov. Zaragoza) and

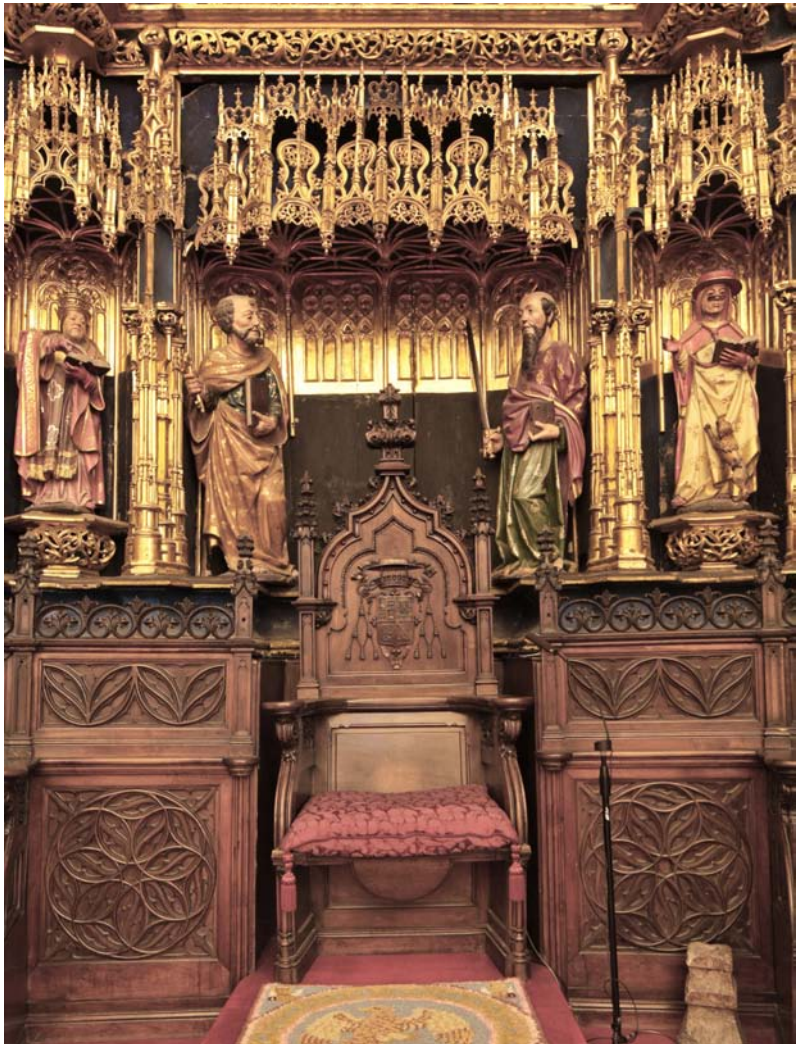

Fig. 31. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: St Peter and St Paul. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

Fig. 32. Toledo (Spain), cathedral, high altarpiece, 1498–1503: tabernacle. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2021.

Marañón (Navarre) (fig. 33). In Castile, the custom spread somewhat later, with the aforementioned tabernacle in Toledo Cathedral being the earliest known example. This openwork pinnacle in the lower tier of the central section is a fascinating combination of the Flemish/German custom of storing the Eucharist in a tower-shaped Sacrament house and the Spanish habit of installing the tab-

ernacle at the heart of the retable.[103] With its predella tabernacle, the Oviedo altarpiece may have been another pioneer in the Castilian context. It possibly survived Trent because it met its standards, but not the subsequent Baroque period with its characteristic striving for the theatrical.[104]

In keeping with most of the large late Gothic retables, the central section in Oviedo distinguishes itself from the ones on the sides in that it displays representational rather than narrative imagery. The lower compartment includes a sculpture of Christ enthroned holding a sphere in his left hand and surrounded by the four creatures representing the four Evangelists (fig. 34). This image of Christ in Majesty (*Maiestas Christi*) has deep roots in Christian iconography and was particularly widespread in the Romanesque period, when it was often represented above the high altar in the painted calotte of the apse. In Oviedo

Fig. 33. Marañón (Spain), parish church, high altarpiece, early 16th century: tabernacle. Photo Justin Kroesen 2021.

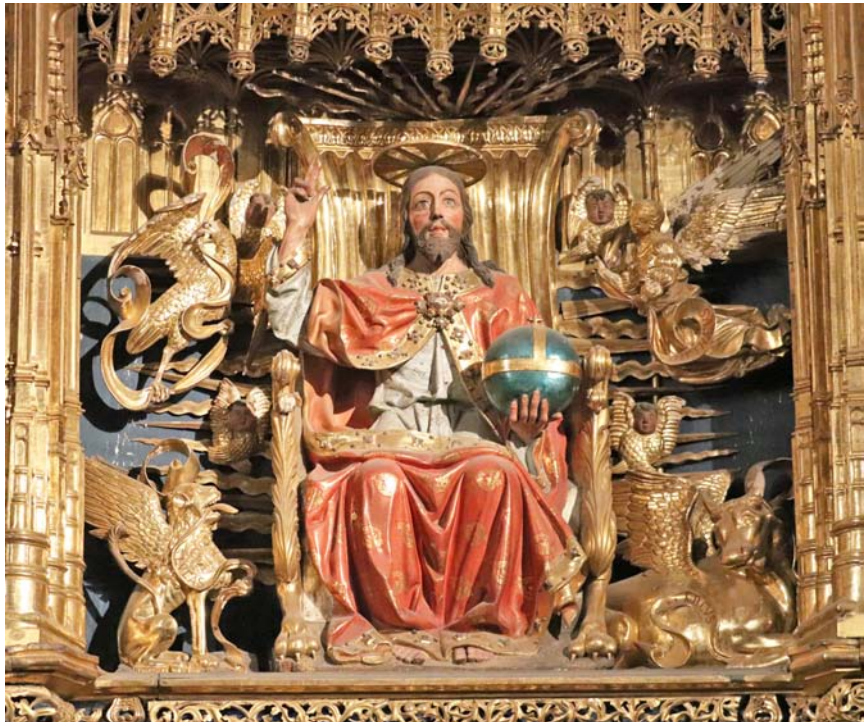

Fig. 34. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: Christ in Majesty. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

Cathedral, it serves as an image of the church patron, Christ the Saviour, appearing immediately over the altar. Such patronal images were often remarkably stable in their location, which makes it likely that the thirteenth-century stone statue of *Cristo Salvador* that is placed at the entrance to the apse on the south side (fig. 35) was originally also placed on the high altar, perhaps under the conjectured ciborium and possibly in conjunction with a precious altar retable.[105] The sculpture of Christ enthroned in the new altarpiece may be considered to be its updated successor, although, remarkably, it harks back to even older iconographical conventions.

The compartment above the enthroned Christ features the Assumption of the Virgin Mary by eight hovering angels, of which the two uppermost hold a crown over her head. In the lower left corner, a small kneeling figure represents Bishop Villaquirán, who commissioned the altarpiece in 1511 (fig. 36).[106]

Fig. 35. Oviedo Cathedral, statue of Christ, 13th century. Photo Justin Kroesen 2016.

Apart from possibly being a token of his personal Marian piety, the presence of the bishop in the retable illustrates the growing self-conscience of individuals – clerics and lay persons alike – during the sixteenth century. Erecting a giant altarpiece, following the examples of Toledo and Sevilla, was clearly part of the bishop's reform programme. When the retable reached completion, in acknowledgement of Villaquirán's effort and that of his two successors, Diego de Muros and Francisco de Mendoza, their coats of arms were added at the corners of the altarpiece, alongside the emblem of the Spanish monarchy.[107] This helped turning the altarpiece from a private commission by one bishop into a

collective endeavour of the entire diocese and a public artwork for the whole community. The upper section represents a three-figured carved Calvary group against a painted background showing a wooded landscape, with hovering angels collecting the blood from Christ's hands in chalices adding a Eucharistic reference. The presence of the Assumption of the Virgin and the Calvary group in the upper half of the central section was a standard feature in Spanish late-medieval retable iconography.[108]

The four lateral sections are divided into four registers and represent scenes from the Gospels, some of which are only rarely found in medieval retable iconography. The lower tier features three standard scenes from Christ's youth – the Presentation in the Temple, the Flight into Egypt and the Twelve-Year-

Fig. 36. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: kneeling figure of Bishop Villaquirán. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

Fig. 37. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: the Temptation of Christ in the desert. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

Old-Jesus in the Temple – ending with the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. The iconography found in the second tier is the most peculiar and shows several scenes from Christ's public life. The episode on the left depicts the Temptation of Christ by the Devil in the desert (fig. 37). The fact that this moment does not occur in any of the large narrative altarpieces of the same period in Castile discussed in the previous section may suggest that it was specifically ordered by the commissioner(s) of the altarpiece. It is remarkable to find such a clear and graphic depiction of Christ's antagonist, who appears as an ugly, horned figure

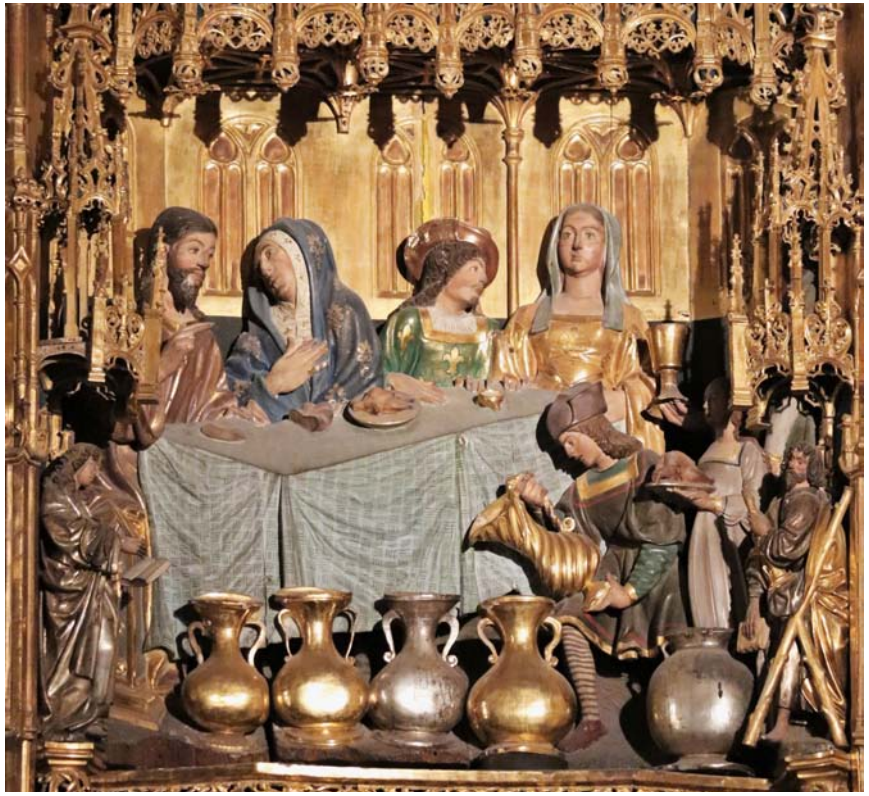

Fig. 38. Oviedo Cathedral, high altarpiece, 1511–1531: the Wedding at Cana. Photo Aintzane Erkizia-Martikorena 2025.

with a second face on his belly, so prominently represented in a high altar retable. On the right, Christ raises Lazarus from the dead, with the person on the left covering his nose because of the bad smell, following the text in the Gospel as well as an old iconographical convention.

The most outstanding scene in the programme of the Oviedo retable is that of Christ turning water into wine at the Wedding at Cana (fig. 38). The episode looks familiar at first sight, with the blessing Christ in the presence of the Virgin Mary and the newlyweds sitting behind a set table, while a servant pours water into five round-bellied jugs standing in the foreground. However, the Gospel of St John says that "there were set there six waterpots of stone" (John 2:6 KJV). The absence of the sixth one in the Oviedo scene makes a subtle

reference to one of the church's most prestigious possessions: a late Antique stone jar (*hydria*) that is said to have been present at Cana (fig. 39).[109] This contact relic is exposed in an arched niche in the northern transept, within sight distance to the retable. The niche is closed with a sturdy wooden door and the arch is crowned with a standing figure of a bishop. Pilgrims on their way to Compostela would touch the jar by sticking their staffs through a little opening in the door, until Bishop Juan Torres de Osorio (1624–1627) put an

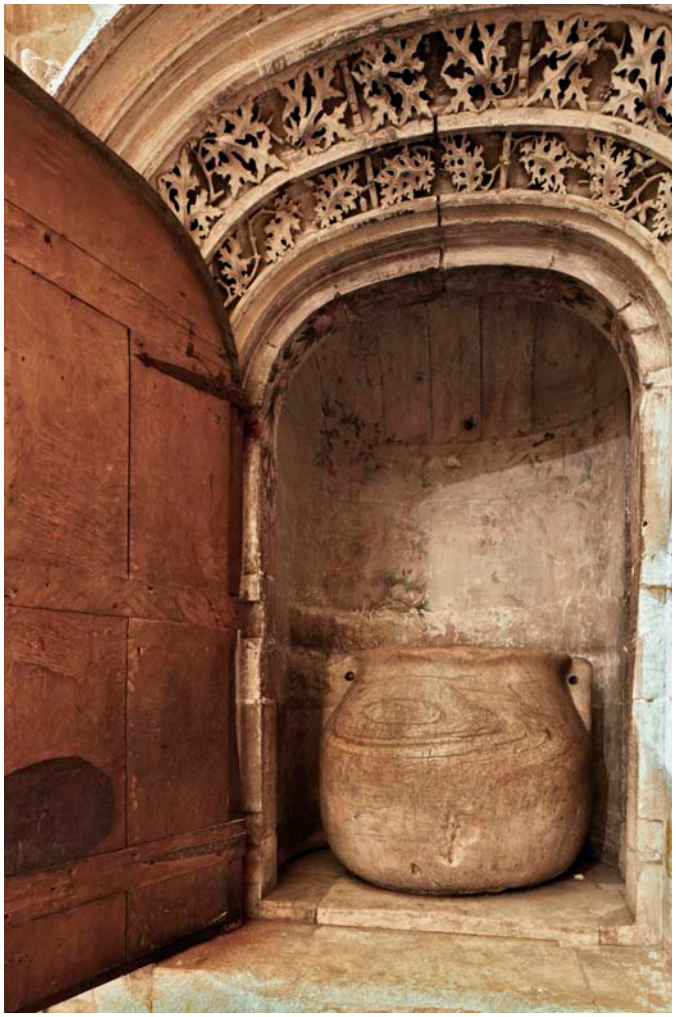

Fig. 39. Oviedo Cathedral, niche in the transept holding a late Antique jar venerated as a contact relic from the Wedding at Cana. Photo Justin Kroesen 2025.

end to the practice. The jar was shown to the faithful every year on the day of St Matthew, 21 September, and on the occasion that the passage on the Wedding at Cana was read from the Gospel, on the second Sunday after Epiphany, when devotees drank from the blessed water that had previously been deposited inside.[110] Thus, the narrated reality of the Gospels and the lived reality of medieval Oviedo merged and became one: the jug served as proof for the believer that the story depicted had really occurred and that, even more importantly, Oviedo had become part of it. While looking at the Wedding at Cana scene, the boundary between sacred text, sacred image and reality became fluid and blurred in the experience of the faithful.

The Entry into Jerusalem then forms an overture to the story of Christ's Passion, represented by a standard cycle that fills the third tier: the Prayer in Gethsemane, the Flagellation of Christ, his Mocking and Crowning with Thorns, and Christ carrying the cross.[111] The upper tier, flanking the central Calvary, which follows chronologically on the last scene in the tier below, contains four scenes following Christ's Crucifixion: the Resurrection of Christ and the Doubting Thomas on the left and Christ's Ascension and the Pentecost on the right; in the Thomas scene, the apostle St James stands out as a pilgrim wearing a hat with a shell, attire that must have been familiar to the churchgoers in Oviedo, where many travellers passed through on their way to Compostela.[112] The programme of the retable is completed by a large number of smaller individual figures placed under baldachins, which populate the frames around and between the scenes and who, together, form a celestial court around the sacred narrative.[113] Twelve judges from the Old Testament correspond in number with the twelve apostles who appear between the scenes in the second tier of the main corpus. While the third tier features six trios of prophets, kings of Judah fill the spandrels at the top of the retable. Based on the anatomical characteristics of the kings, which have been related to the figures on the choirstalls, several authors have considered these to be reused elements from a predecessor altarpiece or from the earlier discussed ciborium; they may have become kings only after reworking.[114]

Conclusion: an Atlantic altarpiece

The monumental altarpiece in the main apse of Oviedo cathedral, which was erected between 1511 and 1531, is one of the largest and best preserved among

Spain's giant late Gothic *retablos*. These wingless altarpieces, which fill most of the apse walls in the churches they preside over, are architecturally structured into sections and tiers and display comprehensive narrative programmes. The artistic characteristics of the Oviedo altarpiece and the written records that shed light on its creation together reveal a remarkable artwork that prompts reflection on artistic and cultural connections along the European Atlantic rim, from the Iberian Peninsula via northern France to the Low Countries. From our analysis, the retable comes to the fore as an intriguing combination of Spanish and Netherlandish characteristics. It is undeniably Spanish because of its wingless format and vast size, which is unparallelled outside the Iberian Peninsula. In Iberia, altarpieces had been growing in size from the late fourteenth century, first in Catalonia and Aragon and later also further west, in Castile and Portugal. The closest peers of the altarpiece of Oviedo are found in other cathedrals in the former kingdom of Castile including Toledo, Sevilla, and especially Ourense, as well as in several other churches in northern Spain and along the Cantabrian coast, where overseas ties to the Low Countries were particularly strong.

The style of the retable's scenes and figures, as well as its architectural decorations, however, are distinctly foreign, inscribed in the Netherlandish-inspired flamboyant late Gothic style. This style was fashionable throughout Western Europe at the time, when altarpieces produced in the Low Countries were exported overseas from Iceland to the Canary Islands. Netherlandish art was especially favoured in Spain, stimulated by the country's political union with Burgundy, and became synonymous with opulence, refined splendour and inward-looking piety. The altarpiece's "Netherlandishness" is confirmed by several records which mention artists carrying names that can be connected to places in the Low Countries, such as Brussels, Antwerp and possibly Zealand or Holland, as well as to Picardy in northern France. They worked together with Spanish craftsmen on an artwork that was stylistically Netherlandish, but technically and structurally rooted in the Iberian tradition. While the majority of the carvers seem to have been foreigners, the joiners may be assumed to have been Spanish, erecting a wooden structure of a size and might unknown to the Netherlanders. What they crafted jointly is not simply a mix of Flemish and Spanish art, as the traditional term *hispanoflamenco* suggests, but much more than the sum of both. Studying the Oviedo altarpiece in its entire Atlantic con-

text, from Spain to the Low Countries, does more justice to its complex, hybrid character and makes this altarpiece a truly outstanding cultural artefact of great artistic and historical relevance.

In terms of iconography, the retable celebrates the church patron, Christ the Saviour. He was bodily present in the tabernacle that most probably occupied the central section of the predella, flanked by the apostles St Peter and St Paul who represented the Church. In the compartment above it, Christ is represented in his heavenly environment, enthroned and surrounded by the Four Evangelists. The side sections, distributed over three tiers, narrate the different stages of his dwelling on earth: his childhood, public life, and Passion. The prominence of the four scenes from Christ's public life primarily serves to visualize his salvific power: the same strength that made Christ resist the devil in the desert enabled him to turn water into wine at Cana and vanquish death for Lazarus. The Temptation in the Desert and the Wedding at Cana are only rarely found in contemporary retable iconography and must have been explicitly commissioned by the promoter(s) of the altarpiece. Moreover, the latter scene makes a subtle reference to Oviedo's most prestigious Biblical contact relic, namely the marble jar preserved in the north transept that was believed to have been present at Cana. Thus, the narrated reality of the Gospel, the depicted reality of the altarpiece and the lived reality of late medieval Oviedo became intriguingly intertwined.

We can only explain the shape and content of the Oviedo altarpiece by studying it in its multiple contexts, both in time and space, and both local and global. Spain's early sixteenth-century economic bonanza, growing individualism and incipient church reform all impacted on the arts of the period and its mecenate. The study of the altar's spatial setting has revealed that the altarpiece was part of a larger, composite landscape of interior furnishings that also included the choirstalls, a choir partition and several trellises. The stylistic and spatial coherence between these furnishings is such that they may all be regarded as parts of the same renewal campaign of the cathedral's interior that took place roughly between 1480 and 1530. The visibility of the altarpiece was favoured by the location of the choirstalls in the nave and its view was filtered by a large, mesmerizing trellis, both typically Spanish phenomena. The furnishings' stylistic inspiration on the art of the Low Countries and northern France reminds us of the overseas networks that connected late medieval Oviedo economically

and culturally to Europe's primary (art) markets at the time. All of the above has left its traces on the altarpiece, which, as an object type, sat at the heart of medieval society, its culture and economy: the significance of retables reached far beyond the liturgical context, as they served to express the status and pride of commissioners and symbolized the traditions, legends and identity of communities.

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Notes

1 These measures are derived from Frontón Simón, Pérez Carrasco and Puras Higueras 1993, 218. Other authors, following Cuesta Fernández 1957, 76, mention a size of 12 x 12 m, but this does not take into account the retable's polygonal groundplan and socle.

2 The number of figures is derived from Puras Higueras 1993b, 172.

3 "Tercero en orden entre los retablos de su género, precediéndole los de Sevilla y Toledo en importancia y en fecha", Gómez-Moreno 1933, 1.

4 "[...] efecto sorprendente y encantador", see Cuesta Fernández 1957, 78.

5 "[...] obra más alabada que estudiada", see Caso Fernández 1984, 310–311.

6 "Se podría pensar en el tabú que supone para los investigadores, el tener constancia de la existencia y publicación de la documentación de la obra. Este hecho, en vez de animar a posteriores investigaciones, a entrar en mayores profundidades a personas con los conocimientos adecuados, parece que ha servido de freno para dar por zanjada la cuestión", see Barroso Villar 1987-88-89, 2.

7 For these reasons, we have added English translations of names and place names.

8 Construction of the cloister and annexes on the south side started in the late thirteenth century. On the history of the building, see Caso Fernández 1981a; Carrero Santamaría 2003. On the early medieval basilica, see García de Castro Valdés 2017; on its gradual transformation, see Carrero Santamaría 2018.

9 González Santos 1998, 66.

10 Sobrino 2009, 340.

11 González Santos 1998, 43.

12 These windows were largely destroyed in an uprising in 1934 and during the ensuing Spanish Civil War.

13 A first overview of the cathedral's architectural history was provided by Cuesta 1957. For a concise outline, see González Santos 1998, 44.

14 González Santos 1998, 44.

15 The relief originally stood on an altar in the south transept and is now preserved in the chapter house, see González Santos 1998, 37–38. In 1552, according to the chapter records, a copper globe to be put at the top of the spire arrived from Flanders, see Cuesta Fernández 1957, 15.

16 The wide ambulatory that now surrounds the apse was constructed in 1626, as is indicated at the entrance on both sides.

17 Published in Quadrado 1855.

18 González Santos 1998, 86–88.

19 "[...] muchos maestros estrangeros", cited after Teijeira Pablos 1998, 31.

20 According to María Dolores Teijeira Pablos, all known names of the artists connected to the choirstalls in the Leonese group indicate largely Flemish origins, see Teijeira Pablos 1993, 114. For a short overview, see Teijeira Pablos 1996.

21 Teijeira Pablos 1998, 31–32.

22 Here, the stalls would suffer damage during the 1934 uprising; a restoration followed in the 1980s. On the sad history of the stalls' removal, see Kraus and Kraus 1986, 1–85.

23 Chamoso Lamas 1950, 191.

24 The *coro* was studied and partially reconstructed by Otero Túñez & Yzquierdo Perrín 1990. For the latest insights into what the choir looked like, see: https://kosmotech-1200.cispac.gal/o-coro/.

25 During the sixteenth century, the model was even exported to the Americas.

26 Cuesta Fernández 1957, 80.

27 For an overview and critical discussion of "the Spanish mode", see Navascués Palacio 1998, 62; Teijeira Pablos 2000; Carrero Santamaría 2008; Carrero Santamaría 2009, Carrero Santamaría 2019, esp. 69–103. Exceptions to the rule include several important cathedrals, such as Ávila, Burgos, Cuenca and León.

28 For a concise analysis of the visibility of high altars in Spanish churches resulting from "the Spanish mode", see Kroesen 2023, 189–217 and Carrero Santamaría 2019, 327–328.

29 Despite their spread and impact, there is hardly any literature on trellises in medieval Spanish churches. Short articles with a general scope are Olaguer-Feliú y Alonso 1997, Marías Franco 1999 and Domínguez Cubero 2016. Regional studies on trellises of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries include Dominguez Cubero 1989, Gallego de Miguel 1994 and Rokiski Lázaro 1998.

30 This pattern is well preserved in Albi Cathedral in southwestern France, as well as in several German and English cathedrals, including Halberstadt, Havelberg, Exeter and York.

31 For a European overview, see Kroesen 2014. An Iberian example is the fourteenth-century metal canopy in the cathedral of Girona in Catalonia, which had close artistic connections to Italy throughout the Middle Ages.

32 On baldachins in Galician art history, see Filgueira Valverde and Ramón e Fernández-Oxea 1987.

33 Many other ciboria were erected over the side altars in the eastern corners of the nave, examples of which survive in the parish churches of San Pedro de Xurenzás and San Tomé de Serantes (prov. Ourense), see Kroesen 2014, 202–204.

34 It is now located in the northern transept, but must originally have stood over the high altar in the chancel.

35 This argument is worked out further in Kroesen 2023, 217–226.

36 The development of Spanish medieval altarpieces described here is largely based on the account offered in Kroesen 2009, 9–147.

37 The term "International Gothic", under which the retables of Manresa and Valencia

are commonly shared, refers to the style of their paintings and not to their structure, which is an exclusively Iberian affair.

38 Gil Delgado 1998, 28. See also various chapters in Ferrand et al. 1981. During the 1520s, a protruding crown was added on top, creating a staggering height of 26 m and a total surface of around 400 m2.

39 For an overview, see Kahsnitz 2006.

40 Compared to retables in Spain, the thrust of the altarpiece in Coimbra is remarkably less narrative, as it comprises less compartments and displays mostly individual figures.

41 This was observed regarding the Oviedo altarpiece by Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 98.

42 The attribution to Marçal de Sax is debated, see Montero Tortajada 2024.

43 Although various loads of Flemish oak ("roble de Flandes") arrived in Seville before 1492, it is not clear how much of the altarpiece was built, nor to what extent the altarpiece that was erected around thirty years later followed Dancaert's design.

44 There is a vast amount of literature on the success of Netherlandish and Netherlandish-inspired art – particularly altarpieces – in Spain. Comprehensive overviews include Yarza Luaces 1993, Martens 2010 and Nash 2014. Some recent studies include Redondo Parés 2020 and various chapters in Van Heesch, Janssen & Van der Stock 2018.

45 On the character and success of Netherlandish art in late medieval Europe, see Nash 2008. For a new history of the Burgundians, see Van Loo 2021.

46 On the spread of late Gothic Flemish and Brabant altarpieces, see Boodt & Schäfer 2007.

47 Jacobs 1998.

48 On such adjustments, see Moor 2019 and Bø 2020.

49 Intriguingly, these saints, some of whom were never officially canonized by the papal authority in Rome, must have been unknown to the Netherlandish artists who carved or painted them.

50 Jesús Muñiz Petralanda, Maite Barrio Olano and Ion Berasain Salvarredi observed in a recent article: "(...) though we ignore the mechanisms by which different commissioners made their artistic preferences known to altarpiece manufacturers, it seems evident that Flemish craftsmen showed great sensibility in adapting their style to meet Spanish tradition", Muñiz Petralanda, Barrio Olano & Berasain Salvarredi 2018, 61.

51 A winged retable of Flemish origin with similar "Spanish" characterictics of a much earlier date, around 1435, is preserved in the chapel of Chancellor Fernán López de Saldaña at the monastery church of St Clare in nearby Tordesillas. For an overview of Netherlandish altarpieces in Spain, see: https://retablos-flamencos.albayalde.org/.

52 Some reflection on the differences between Spanish and Netherlandish and German high altarpieces is also found in: Heim 2006 (with a focus on Toledo Cathedral) and Jakstat 2019 (with a focus on Ávila Cathedral).

53 The width of the altarpiece in Dortmund reaches a considerable 7.40 m when the wings are opened.

54 During Lent, however, and perhaps also in other periods of the liturgical year, many retables would have been covered with Lenten cloths, known in Spanish as *sargas*. In Aragón, some giant early sixteenth-century retables were equipped with painted wings, for example in the church of St Paul in Zaragoza.

55 In Portugal, the corresponding term *Luso-Flamengo* (Portuguese-Flemish) is used occasionally.

56 In Portugal, compared to Spain, more attention has been paid to the country's artistic relations with northern France, especially Normandy. Several artists from this region, including Nicolau de Chanterene (Nicholas of Chantereine) and João de Ruão (John of Rouen), are regarded as central figures in the development of early Renaissance sculpture in Portugal; see Dias 1996 and Dias 2003.

57 On this topic, see Kroesen 2009, 146 and Kroesen 2023, 168–169.

58 Individual sculptures and sculpture groups might of course be carved in the workshop and then be integrated in the retable that was being built. This is the way in which Giralte de Bruselas seems to have worked in Oviedo; see Caso Fernández 1992, 424.

59 Some late medieval altarpieces in England also reached monumental proportions; for example, the so-called "altar screens" in Winchester Cathedral and the former abbey church of St Albans, both of which date from 1460–1480. Due to the vast destruction of medieval church art in the Reformation, the extent to which these pieces were part of a wider landscape is unclear. It is unlikely that the Spanish retables were influenced by these artworks, as artistic relations between Castile and England were not particularly intense during the fifteenth century, except for exports of English retables with alabaster reliefs to northern Spain. The only fifteenth-century artist active in Castile whose name may indicate an English origin, Jorge Inglés (George the Englishman), was clearly trained in the Southern Netherlands.

60 Street 1914 (1st ed, 1865), vol. 2, 245.

61 "Die nationale spanische Form des Altaraufbaus ist der *Retablo*, die bis zu den Gewölben aufragende Bilderwand mit ihren rein flächenhaften Nebeneinander unzähliger Einzelfiguren und Reliefgruppen", cited from Weise, vol. 2/1, 1927, 91.

62 Harvey 1957, 8.

63 The contract is cited in the article by Cuesta & Arribas 1933, 7; see also Cuesta Fernández 1957, 72–75 and Caso Fernández 1992, 422. José Cuesta Fernández writes Giralte's name as "Giralte de Bruxelles", see Cuesta Fernández 1957, 73.

64 As was suggested by Frontón Simón 1993a, 21, 26, 30; see also Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 98.

Similar reform programmes in the spirit of Erasmian Humanism, which frequently included new high altarpieces, were rolled out around the same time in other Spanish cathedrals, including Toledo, where Cardinal Cisneros was a leading figure in what is known as the *Prerreforma* (pre-Reformation) movement, see Carraro Santamaría 2022.

65 Barroso Villar 1987-88-89, 7. It is not known whether the Giralte de Bruselas in Oviedo was the same as the "maestro Giralte" who worked with orther artists on the retable in the church of Santa María de la Asunción in Dueñas (prov. Palencia) in 1511. The retable in the church of San Isidoro in León, which was originally in Pozuelo de la Orden (prov. Valladolid), is documented in 1528 as a work of a certain "Giralte de Zamora", who has also been associated with our Giralte in Oviedo.

66 Germán Ramallo Asensio related the retable's square model to the aesthetics of the upcoming Renaissance style, see Ramallo Asensio 1979, 52.

67 Several remarkable scenes exclusive to the Oviedo altarpiece are discussed in the following section.

68 Caso Fernández 1992, 435–437. In 1989, the retable underwent a thorough cleansing. See also Puras Higueras 1993a, 158–166, and Puras Higueras 1993c.

69 Barroso Villar 1987-88-89, 3.

70 Caso Fernández 1992, 424.

71 "Item que las maderas e imaginerias que oy estan en el ciborio, que el dicho Giralte aprobeche todo lo que podiere dello para el retablo y que lo que metyere dello que aquello se cuente en la obra a vista de los oficiales que se han de tomar para tasar la obra", cited after Cuesta & Arribas 1933, 8. See also Caso Fernández 1992, 419–422; Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 106.

72 "[...] especialmente en el altar mayor", see Caso Fernández 1992, 420.

73 "[...] que se quitó del retablo que se desfizo del altar mayor", cited after Caso Fernández 1992, 421; see also Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 104–105; Cuesta Fernández 1957, 76.

74 Caso Fernández 1992, 419; the presence of an altarpiece was also assumed by Alonso Marañón de Espinosa in his *Historia eclesiástica de Asturias*, which was written around 1600. He noted that work on a retablo had started in the early fifteenth century under Bishop Diego Ramírez de Guzmán.

75 The retable was lost, as was the canopy, but its appearance is known through a drawing made by the canon José Vega y Verdugo in the 1660s.

76 This possibility was suggested by Barroso Villar 1987-88-89, 3.

77 On the relationship between hypothetical predecessor-altarpieces and the altar baldachin; see also Puras Higueras, "Historia material", esp. 151.

78 "Maestro de las obras de la reina", see Gómez-Moreno 1933, 5.

79 See Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 102, 124.

80 Caso Fernández 1992, 429.

81 Caso Fernández 1992, 424.

82 "[...] para ayuda de su camino", see Caso Fernández 1992, 425–426; Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 112.

83 Caso Fernández 1992, 426; Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 116–123.

84 Cuesta Fernández 1957, 75.

85 Caso Fernández 1992, 427–428. On the division of hands, see also Puras Higueras 1993b, here 185.

86 Barroso Villar 1987-88-89, 5; Caso Fernández 1992, 429–431; Pérez-Carrasco believes that Berruguete did start the work but never finished it, see Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 126–129.

87 "Es preciso que se predicasen nuestros casos en este nuestro obispado antes de venir cruzada, y la limosna que de allí se oviese, no se gaste en otra cosa sino en la pintura del retablo", cited after Caso Fernández 1992, 431.

88 Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 129–137.

89 Cuesta & Arribas 1933, 18 (on Machin de Plazencia); Cuesta Fernández believed that Bingueles was a painter (see Cuesta Fernández 1957, 75), but Caso Fernández did not find traces of him; see Caso Fernández 1992, 432.

90 "[...] uno de los mejores y mas nobles que ay en toda España", cited after Cuesta and Arribas 1933, 14.

91 "Otrosy todo el azul y carmesy que llevare el dicho retablo y figuras del ha de ser el azul muy fino de Flandes y de Alemana y los carmines de florencia muy finos. [...] ha de ser todo el oro trenzados de Portugal o castellanos vatidos", cited after Cuesta & Arribas 1933, 15.

92 "Hare tan buena y mejor como la que hize en los tres retablos de la Capilla del Condestable en Burgos y de las mesmas colores las quales tengo yo que me quedaron mucha parte dellas y la que faltare hare traer de Florencia donde hize traer aquella", cited after Cuesta and Arribas 1933, 15; Caso Fernández 1992, 431. In the contract, Picardo requires scaffolding (*andamios*) "to disarm the retable" (para le desarmar el retablo), which probably refers to the remnants of the old altar decoration, see Cuesta & Arribas 1933, 15; Caso Fernández 1992, 418–419.

93 Caso Fernández 1992, 434.

94 Gómez Moreno 1933, 2.

95 On his life and work, see Río de la Hoz 2001.

96 Gómez Moreno 1933, 2; Barroso Villar 1987-88-89, 7, 11.

97 Cuesta Fernández 1957, 76; Cuesta Fernández 1995, 54–55, 57. Pérez-Carrasco, however, believed that all figures were carved by Giralte de Bruselas and/or his work shop, see Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 107.

98 On this transition, see Kavaler 2012; Alonso Ruiz & Rodríguez Estévez 2016; Dias 2002.
99 Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 101–102.
100 On the ass, see Frontón Simón 1993b, 46.
101 See also Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 107; Puras Higueras 1993a, 160.
102 "Leon Picardo dorará, estofará y pintará el dicho retablo y la Custodia en toda la perfición como se contiene en los capitulos susodichos [...]. Iten que el dicho Leon Picardo traerá a su costa un buen maestro ensamblador para quitar y poner el dicho retablo y custodia", cited after Cuesta & Arribas 1933, 16.
103 See also Erkizia-Martikorena & Kroesen 2022, 171–173, 175.
104 Many late Gothic predella tabernacles across Spain were removed in the second half of the seventeenth century.
105 The statue even predates the construction of the Gothic apse. It has been located on the south side of the Capilla Mayor at least since the nineteenth century, as it appears here on a drawing made by Francisco Javier Parcerisa around 1850.
106 Frontón Simón 1993b, 97.
107 Caso Fernández 1992, 433–434; it is not clear why the emblem of Diego de Acuña, under whose rule the retable was completed, is not present. The coat of arms of the Spanish monarchy was later replaced by that of Benito Sanz y Forés, bishop of Oviedo from 1868 to 1881, under whose mandate the retable was restored and repainted.
108 On the Assumption motif, see Vandenbroeck 2022.
109 Frontón Simón 1993b, 63. According to José Cuesta Fernández, the jar is similar in shape to a second example that is preserved in Jerusalem, see Cuesta Fernández 1957, 35.
110 Cuesta Fernández 1957, 35.
111 In the last-mentioned scene, at the back, a figure is blowing a shofar as an indication of important events in Judaism; see Frontón Simón 1993b, 76.
112 Frontón Simón 1993b, 84.
113 For a description of these figures, see Frontón Simón 1993b.
114 See Pérez-Carrasco 1993, 108–109.

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