Hans Leinberger's St. Castulus Cycle and the Influence of Humanist Hagiography

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The sculpture of Bavaria in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries continued a tradition of religious imagery that was established in the Middle Ages. The winged retable was most representative of this old tradition, and large, carved altarpieces continued to be commissioned alongside newer religious images generated for private devotion.[1] Before the Reformation and the emergence of Protestant iconoclasm, religious art provided the economic foundation for many German sculptors, and much of this art was promoted by the continuing popularity of pilgrimage which was an integral part of late medieval life.[2]

From 1511-1514, Hans Leinberger created one of the last Gothic carved altars for the pilgrimage church of St. Castulus in Moosburg (Figure 1).[3] This large, three tiered structure is located in the apse of the small, Romanesque Parish Church of Moosburg (previously the Stiftskirche or foundation church). Four carved relief panels illustrating the martyrdom of St. Castulus are believed to have made up the inner portions of the original moveable wings. However, the wings (Figures 2-5) were removed during a renovation of the altar in 1782, and the St. Castulus reliefs are no longer part of the main structure. Today they are positioned at eye level on the walls of the apse, creating an impressive installation which honors St. Castulus, The Virgin Mary, and Emperor Heinrich II in conjunction with various other local saints and figures from the New Testament.[4]

The Moosburg altarpiece is structured in a manner characteristic of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century winged retables in Germany.[5] The *Corpus* is the main body of the altarpiece that houses an image of the Virgin and Child flanked by a representation of St. Castulus holding his martyr's sword and an image of Emperor Heinrich II, a popular Bavarian saint. Figures of Ss. John the Baptist and John the Evangelist adorn the outer sides of the *Corpus*, and a sculpted image of Christ on the cross is located amidst an interweaving of finials and tracery at the pinnacle of the structure. Beneath the *Corpus*, the predella actually housed the relics of St. Castulus and has painted wings by Hans Wertinger from 1516 with images of the church canons and the Bavarian dukes who were the donors of the altar.[6]

The four relief panels depict the life of St. Castulus, a third century martyr who was put to death under the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. According to his legend, St. Castulus was Diocletian's steward. He was discoverd maintaining a Christrian cell in the imperial palace and was brought before the Emperor who sentenced him to be tortured and killed. His martyrdom occurred on March 26th in the year 286, and his body was buried in the catacombs where it remained until the ninth century when two Benedictine monks from Moosburg acquired his relics and brought them to Bavaria.[7] In the late fifteenth century his cult experienced a revival, and pilgrims began visiting Moosburg, an event which provided funds for

1 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 1994) 443-453.

2 See Jeffrey Chips Smith, *German Sculpture of the Later Renaissance c. 1520-1580: Art in an Age of Uncertainty* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1994). In the introduction as well as the first chapter of this book he provides a survey of the artist's role prior to the Reformation. In addition, Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) contains several chapters whch deal with the German Renaissance sculptor's status in society and the economic world that surrounded him.

3 Georg Lill, *Hans Leinberger, der Bildschnitzer von Landshut, Welt und Umwelt des Künstlers* (Munich: Verlag F. Bruckmann, 1942) 36-37. The entire altarpiece is 14.40 x 4.29 m with the central body of the structure measuring 378 x 241 cm. The dimensions of the St. Castulus relief panels are 118 x 105 cm.

4 Claudia Behle, *Hans Leinberger: Leben und Eigenart des Künstlers Slilistische Entwicklung Rekonstruktion der Gruppen und Altäre* (Munich: Kommissionsverlag UNI-Druck, 1984) 12-29. Here Behle introduces the reconstuction of the original altar which did include wings. She also discusses the details of the 1782 renovation in depth.

5 For general information on the structure of German winged retables see Baxandall 66-67. See also James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, The Graphic Arts from 1350-1575* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., and Englewood Cliffs; New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), Gert von der Osten and Horst Vey, *Painting and Sculpture in Germany and the Netherlands,1500-1600* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), and Theodore Müller, *Sculpture in the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Spain, 1400-1500* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966).

6 Lill 38-39.

7 For the legend of St. Castulus, see Belli Isa Barsali, "Castulo," *The Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, vol. III (Rome: Pontifica Universita Lateranese, 1963) 948-949; Joh. Bollandus, "St. Castulus, March 26, 286" *Acta Sanctorum Martii*, tom. III (Antwerpiae, 1668) 612; Lill 36, 88-89; Hans Thoma, *Hans Leinberger: seine Stadt, seine Zeit, sein Werk* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1979) 68-70. The monks of the Benedictine cloister acquired the relics of St. Castulus while on a pilgrimage to Rome. More than likely, the saint's relics were stolen from the catacombs which was a common practice during this time. For more information regarding the theft of relics see Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978). For details on how this trend developed within Germany see also Hans K. Schulze,

Leinberger's altarpiece. Due to various miracles recorded at the shrine, St. Castulus became the patron saint of flash floods, droughts, the disease erysipelas, and horse theft.[8]

At this time, many shrines were promoted by pilgrimage which was an integral part of late medieval life, and images were often used to emphasize the miraculous wonders of their patron saints. It is within this setting and for this purpose that Leinberger's St. Castulus altarpiece was constructed; however, the donors chose a more traditional winged retable that functioned completely within the context of the liturgy and allowed visiting pilgrims limited access to the miracle-working relics. In addition, the sensational miracles of St. Castulus are conspicuously absent from the carved reliefs that were intended to highlight the most important events of the saint's life for the illiterate. In most cases such reliefs described famous miracles performed by the saint and reinforced the expectations of the believers.

Previous scholarship on the St. Castulus cycle has recounted the episodes of the martyrdom and dealt with the formal aspects of this work, primarily focusing on the intricate carving exhibited in the reliefs.[9] However, the Moosburg installation has yet to be considered within its pilgrimage setting during the unique Pre-Reformation era in Bavaria. My study will examine the iconography of the St. Castulus cycle as part of a pilgrimage shrine, taking into consideration the Reformation rumblings of the early sixteenth century as well as the increasing influences of Humanism. I will suggest that Leinberger's altarpiece is different from most saint's shrines during this period in that it reflects the Reformist ideals of German Humanists who sought to change Church practices and renew the integrity of religious devotion. Pilgrimage was often criticized by Reformers for materialistic displays of self promotion that focused on miracles and lead to the misguided use of images. Several Humanists were involved in rewriting the stories of the saints, focusing on historical accuracy and presenting good examples worthy of proper veneration.[10] When discussing the St. Castulus cycle in this context, it can be seen as a visual Humanist narrative, reflecting Reform within the Catholic Church.

In each of Leinberger's carved scenes an episode in the life of this martyr is described, and St. Castulus is represented as an *Imitatio Christi* or imitation of Christ. Leinberger has incorporated a long tradition of Passion iconography in the carved depictions of this early Roman martyr. The cycle begins (Figure 2) with St. Castulus, clad in a long robe, preaching to a group of Christian followers who kneel before him with rosaries and bowed heads. These Christians are dressed in the contemporary clothing styles of the early sixteenth century which are seen frequently throughout paintings, prints, and sculptures of this period. Oftentimes pilgrims and other travelers are pictured wearing this style of clothing.[11] The visual evidence suggests that pilgrims visiting the Moosburg shrine would have been dressed in a manner similar to the Christians in Leinberger's panels, and the venerators of St. Castulus, who made up the primary audience for these images, would have identified with these faithful Christians. Before these reverent figures, St. Castulus with his flowing mantle, long hair, and beard, creates a Christlike image. He appears serene and unwavering during his arrest by two armor-clad soldiers who prepare to take him before the Emperor Diocletian.

These soldiers become the main actors in the cycle and reappear in each panel dressed in a classical style of armor that consists of carefully modeled breastplates and skirts made up of cloth or metal. Their helmets are of particular interest in that they are adorned with a variety of animal motifs such as wings, scales, curling rams' horns, and the angry faces of lions and fantastical birds. Contemporary Bavarian soldiers did wear similar armor with helmets fashioned to look like the heads of animals, but these gruesome armors must have been fashioned by Leinberger as references to the tormentors of Christ, who were often depicted as ferocious animals. This motif was derived from the 21st Psalm in which the speaker refers to lions, dogs, and wild oxen that plague him with relentless suffering.[12]

The second panel of the cycle (Figure 3) depicts Castulus before Diocletian who wears a long robe, a crown,[13] and holds a stick-like scepter. From his throne he orders the soldiers to torture and kill the saint. The Emperor wears an angry frown

"Heiligenverehrung und Reliquienkult in Mitteldeutschland," in *Festschrift für Friedrich von Zahn*, ed. Walter Schlesinger (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1968).

8 The earliest documented *Vita* for St. Castulus is a Latin version from 1523 which is an unusually late date. For citation see *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiquae et Mediae Aetatis*, Novum supplementum (Bruxelles: Société de Bollandistes, 1986) 191, listed as *Compendium seu Legendarium* (Papie, 1523), sign. H.3v-H.4. See also *Analecta Bollandiana* 17 (1898): 52, and Lill 288 note 3. Lill based his information regarding St. Castulus on several German *Vitae* and miracle books which were produced in 1584, 1665, 1731, 1736, 1843, and 1878.

9 Most notable are Lill; Adolf Feulner, "Hans Leinbergers Moosburger Altar," in *Meisterwerke der Plastik Bayerns* vol. 3, ed. Fritz Burger and Adolf Feulner (Munich: Riehn and Reusch, 1923); George Habich, "Hans Leinberger, des Meister des Moosburger Altares," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 1 (1906): 113-135; Johannes Taubert, "Zur Oberflächenbehandlung der Castulus-Reliefs von Hans Leinberger," in *Werden und Wandlung: Studien zur Kunst der Donauschule* (Linz, 1967); and Hans Thoma.

10 James Michael Weiss, "Hagiography by German Humanists 1483-1516," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 15 (1985): 299-316.

11 For information regarding the common clothing styles of the sixteenth century, see Christopher Weiditz, *Authentic Everyday Dress of the Renaissance: All 154 Plates from the 'Trachtenbuch'* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994); and Max Barsis, *The Common Man Through the Centuries* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973). See also Albrecht Altdorfer's print of the baggage train from the triumphal procession of Maximilian I, 1516-18, his painting of the miraculous well at the Church of St. Florian, *c*. 1516, and Michael Ostendorfer's woodcut depicting the pilgrimage to the Schöne Maria in Regensburg, *c*. 1519-1520.

12 James H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Kortrijk, Belgium: Van Ghemmert Publishing Company, 1979) 33-43.

while St. Castulus remains a figure of serenity in the center. His passive stance before the Emperor is similar to that of Christ in depictions of Christ before Pontius Pilate.

The third image (Figure 4) describes the torture of the saint. In this scene St. Castulus is stripped bare and tied upside down while four soldiers beat him with clubs. References to the Crucifixion are evident in this scene, and it draws from other *Imitatio Christi* events such as the martyrdom of St. Peter, who was crucified upside down. Unlike the previous scenes which take place in shallow interiors, the scene of torture is set in an outdoor courtyard where Diocletian oversees the operation from the right hand side of the panel.

In the last relief (Figure 5), St. Castulus' broken and abused body is buried alive under sand and rocks by four soldiers. Again, Diocletian looks on, but here he is a small figure in the background standing amongst a group of sinister soldiers on a balcony overlooking the action which takes place in the courtyard. The busy soldiers in their fantastical uniforms go about the task of burying St. Castulus alive with little emotion in their facial expressions.

In Bavaria prior to the Reformation, pilgrimage was one of the most popular and widely performed acts of worship. For those living during the Late Middle Ages this was considered the best solution for dealing with the difficult challenges of life. Saints' remains as well as other holy relics were venerated through a variety of different cults, and pilgrims were attracted to shrines by accounts of miracles and hopes for blessings.[14] Images were very important at these sites. Oftentimes the behavior at these places was unruly and overly emotional as pilgrims begged for mercy and miracles, and this custom attracted a great deal of criticism from Reformists.

One of the most controversial pilgrimages was devoted to the Schöne Maria and located in Regensburg. This pilgrimage was prompted by a miracle that occurred in 1519 after the Jewish community was expelled from the city. When a miracle occurred during the destruction of the synagogue, it was taken as a sign of approval and a reason to promote a pilgrimage.[15] As faithful followers reached the shrine they streamed into a wooden chapel to view an iconic image of the Virgin Mary that had been relocated to the site. A woodcut by Michael Ostendorfer (Figure 6), *c.*1519-1520, records this event and is a testimony to the crowds of people and the histrionics displayed toward the images. The faithful are shown lining up outside the church to see the icon of the Virgin within, while those outside surround a statue of the Schöne Maria. These zealous pilgrims are depicted falling to the ground and imploring the Virgin for her blessing. Even though neither of these images had performed the actual miracles, the shrine was considered incomplete without them, and pilgrims saw the representations as powerful emblems of the Virgin.

Images were also very important for grave cults which were experiencing a renaissance at this time. The development of the Moosburg pilgrimage was part of the trend in which older saints' relics were rediscovered and transferred to new elaborate tombs funded by pilgrimage.[16] In addition, shrines honoring established saints also planned renovations intended to promote their patrons.

In 1499 the bishop of Bamberg, commissioned Tilman Reimenschneider to carve a new stone tomb for the city's patrons, Emperor Heinrich II and his wife Empress Kunigunde. This grand new tomb allowed pilgrims easy access to the shrine and focused on the saints' miracles. The effigies of the two saints are recognizable on the top of the monument, but they are not easily viewed due to the height of the tomb. It is the six large reliefs that adorn the sides of the tomb that draw the most attention.[17] These panels depict the major miraculous events in the saints' lives such as St. Benedict curing Heinrich.

The popularity of miraculous stories can be linked with one of the most significant elements of pilgrimage shrines. Miracle books or saints' *Vitae* were a common component of most sites, and they were closely linked to the imagery chosen for tombs, altars, and other visual displays. The *Vita* told the story of the saint's life; however, it was only a small component of the miracle book whose bulk was typically made up of lists that documented all of the miracles performed at the saint's shrine or during his life. These stories were often at the root of a shrine's popularity, and everything possible was done to highlight these events in order to impress and attract more pilgrims.[18]

Efforts to bolster the cults of patron saints often resulted in the writing of new *Vitae* to be displayed at the shrine, and in several instances Humanists were chosen to carry out these commissions. Many of these writings attempted to reform traditional hagiography by eliminating any unverifiable material. This type of Humanist hagiography was outlined by Desidirus Erasmus in the *Hieryonymi Stridonensis Vita* [19] of 1516 in which he pointed out a number of flaws in the traditional method of

13 This unusual crown appears helmet-like in profile, but when seen from the front it is the same crown worn by Emperor Maximilian I in numerous contemporary images.

14 Philip M. Soergel, *Wondrous in His Saints: Counter-Reformation Propaganda in Bavaria* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 21-27.

15 Gerlinde Stahl, "Die Wallfahrt zur Schönen Maria," *Beitrage zur Geschichte des Bistums Regensburg* 2 (1968): 79ff; and Christopher Wood, "Ritual and the Virgin on the Column: The Cult of the Schöne Maria in Regensburg," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6 (1992): 87-107. See also Soergel 52-69; Belting 453-457; and David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1989) 100-104.

16 Steven D. Sargent, "Miracle Books and Pilgrimage Shrines in Late Medieval Bavaria," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 13 (1986): 462.

17 Smith 17-18.

18 Sargeant 455-460. See also Soergel 29-36.

19 Desidirus Erasmus, *Hieronymi Stridonensis Vita*, in *Erasmi Opuscula: A Supplement to the Opera Omnia*, ed., Wallace K. Ferguson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhogg, 1933).

hagiography in which the saint's miracles took center stage. Here, Erasmus criticized the fabrications of other hagiographers and promoted a new standard of historical accuracy that emphasized the purity of the saints' examples. This influential introduction has often been singled out as an uprecedented break with tradition; however, it has been noted that the value of these comments lies in their expression of Humanist standards that had been affecting hagiography for many years.[20]

These notions concerning historical accuracy and hagiography were brought in close contact with the Moosburg Altarpiece through the Humanist Johannes Aventinus, who was employed by the Bavarian Duke Wilhelm IV as a prelate for his two younger brothers Ludwig and Ernst and later as a chronicler for Bavaria.[21] It is Duke Wilhelm and his brothers who appear on the predella wings of the Moosburg altarpiece as the donors, and although the documentation of the original commission for the altar no longer exists, it was during this time that Aventinus was acting as tutor for Ludwig and Ernst.[22] As a Humanist, Aventinus shared a love of historical accuracy evidenced in his *History of Altötting* in 1519, and his voluminous *Bavarian Chronicle*, published after his death in 1580.[23] In both of these works he took great care to present a correct account of history much like the Humanist hagiographers, and his influence may have played an important role in the creation of the Moosburg Altarpiece.

The popular religious practices of the Late Middle Ages as well as the growing concerns and criticism set forth by Humanists are part of the social setting in which Leinberger's Moosburg Altarpiece and St. Castulus reliefs were created. The sudden revitalization of the shrine coincided with pilgrimage revivals throughout Germany, and while Gothic winged retables remained common throughout Bavaria, it was becoming more unusual to see large altarpieces acting as pilgrimage shrines. Other pilgrimage sites catered directly to pilgrims in that they featured miracles and could be approached and touched, thereby directly transferring blessings to the sick and frightened venerators.

In response to this emphasis on miracles Erasmus and other Humanists desired a more rational and useful role for the saints. Rather than exalting them because of their supposed miraculous powers, they wanted to refocus saints' cults on their historically accurate lives. This eradicated superstition from veneration and left behind stories of holy lives cleansed of materialism and set forth as virtuous Christlike examples for men to follow.

The visual format and details of the Moosburg Altarpiece and St. Castulus cycle exhibit these Humanist ideals. This can be seen through the historically accurate depiction of the saint it honors combined with its traditional presentation in the form of an austere altar that is separated from the people. As a monument it is more difficult to approach, and it remains firmly rooted in its sacred space in the apse of the church.

The St. Castulus relief panels clearly exhibit Humanist issues of historical accuracy as they focus exclusively on the martyrdom of St. Castulus. In none of these panels do we see representations of miracles. St. Castulus' proud willingness to profess his faith results in a holy figure whose life was worthy of imitation. Throughout the story of St. Castulus, the emphasis on his Christlike holiness and sacrifice is made quite clear. Here, St. Castulus mirrors Christ, and there is no mistaking the type of veneration the altar reliefs were intended to inspire. The good Christian followers pictured before St. Castulus do not beg for miracles and prostrate themselves before him; rather, they kneel reverently in a sober manner as they clutch rosaries and bow their heads to this holy man. His persona is respectfully honored in the image, not exploited in an irreverent frenzy. Just as the donors on the wings of the predella kneel in veneration, so do the good Christian followers in the scenes of St. Castulus' life.

The format of the shrine reflects a desire to maintain control over pilgrimage veneration and to maintain a sacred atmosphere, to promote quiet contemplation on living a better life rather than a materialistic scramble in search of magical cures. The Moosburg installation presents itself in the light of Humanistic reform. As a whole it retains its hierarchical role within the spiritual realm of the Church, and the St. Castulus reliefs exhibit the ideals of Humanist hagiographers who sought to represent the saints as the virtuous examples they were intended to be.

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20 Weiss 299-316. Here he provides numerous hagiographic examples by humanists that preceded Erasmus' *Life of St. Jerome* and adhered to the standards he was later to outline.

21 See Gerald Strauss, *Historian in an Age of Crisis: The Life and Work of Johannes Aventinus, 1477-1534* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963).

22 Lill 39-40.

23 Strauss 69-71.

Figure 1. Hans Leinberger, high altar, 1511-1514. Moosburg, former Stiftskirche.

Figure 2. Hans Leinberger, *The Arrest of St. Castulus*, limewood relief, 1513/1514. Moosburg, former Stiftskirche. (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Munich)

Figure 3. Hans Leinberger, *St. Castulus Before Diocletian*, limewood relief, 1513/1514. Moosburg, former Stiftskirche. (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Munich)

Figure 4. Hans Leinberger, *The Torture of St. Castulus*, limewood relief, 1513/1514. Moosburg, former Stiftskirche. (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Munich)

Figure 5. Hans Leinberger, *The Burial of St. Castulus*, limewood relief, 1513/1514. Moosburg, former Stiftskirche. (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, Munich)

Figure 6. Michael Ostendorfer, *Pilgrimage to the Church of the Schöne Maria in Regensburg*, woodcut, 1519-1520. Veste Coburg. (Warburg Institute)