



## MINOR OR MAJOR? CASTILIAN TABERNACLE-ALTARPIECES AND THE MONUMENTAL ARTS\*

¿ARTES MENORES O ARTES MAYORES?  
LOS RETABLOS-TABERNÁCULO CASTELLANOS  
Y LAS ARTES MONUMENTALES

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### Abstract

This article explores the origins and distinctive features of Castilian tabernacle-altarpieces. Less attention will be paid to the well-known examples of the fourteenth century (as for example the Castildelgado and Yurre altarpieces) and the focus will be on a number of poorly preserved, fragmented and altered examples of the late thirteenth century, for which proposals of reconstruction are provided in some instances. To investigate the origins of Castilian tabernacle-altarpieces, this study centres on several thirteenth-century sculptures that were made prominent by being placed either before back panels or within baldachins. These displays are usually regarded as the forerunners of genuine tabernacle-altarpieces. In this context, special attention is paid to the images of the Virgin and Child in the church of Villalcázar de Sirga (Palencia). Concerning the distinctive features of Castilian tabernacle-altarpieces, the text points out the relationship between the earliest tabernacle-altarpieces and the locally produced monumental and tomb sculpture, which in all likelihood served as a model for these early altarpieces.

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**Keywords**

Altarpiece, tabernacle-altarpiece, Gothic art, Gothic sculpture, Gothic painting, Crown of Castile, Contrasta, Santa María de Mave, Toledo cathedral, Villalcázar de Sirga.

**Resumen**

Este artículo indaga en el origen y en los rasgos distintivos de los retablos-tabernáculo castellanos. Por ello se presta especial atención no tanto a los ejemplares bien conocidos del siglo XIV (como, por ejemplo, los retablos de Castildelgado y de Yurre) como a algunos ejemplares de finales del siglo XIII pobremente conservados, fragmentados y manipulados, para algunos de los cuales se ofrecen propuestas de reconstrucción. Con respecto al origen de los retablos-tabernáculo castellanos, el estudio se centra en algunas esculturas del siglo XIII que fueron dotadas, o bien de un respaldo que las destacaba, o bien de un baldaquino que las albergaba, pues se suele considerar a estos dispositivos como precursores de los genuinos retablos-tabernáculo. En este contexto, se presta especial atención a las imágenes de la Virgen con el Niño de la iglesia de Villalcázar de Sirga (Palencia). Con respecto a los rasgos distintivos de los retablos-tabernáculo castellanos, el texto destaca la relación existente entre los ejemplares más antiguos y la escultura monumental y funeraria de producción local, que con toda probabilidad sirvió como modelo para estos retablos primitivos.

**Palabras clave**

Retablo, retablo-tabernáculo, arte gótico, escultura gótica, pintura gótica, Corona de Castilla, Contrasta, Santa María de Mave, catedral de Toledo, Villalcázar de Sirga.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

By the mid-thirteenth century, the Crown of Castile extended over about two thirds of the Iberian Peninsula, almost completely covering its middle section and a significant portion to the west. Following the victory in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212) by King Alfonso VIII (r. 1158–1214) and the subsequent campaigns throughout Andalusia by his grandson, King Fernando III (r. 1217–52), Castile became not only the leading force against the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, but also the dominant power in the whole peninsula, offset only to

and of the death and glorification of the Virgin (reliefs). REVERSE: plain black (overpainted). DATE: fourteenth century.

8.- *Contrasta/Kontrasta* (Álava/Araba) (?), hermitage of Nuestra Señora de Elizmendi, but ultimately either the hermitage of San Salvador or the hermitage of San Adrián (whereabouts unknown): three panels. DEDICATEE: presumably Virgin and Child. OBVERSE: scenes lost, presumably at least scenes of the infancy of Christ (reliefs). REVERSE: without information. DATE: thirteenth century. N.B.: the reliefs displayed on the panels in old photographs do not belong to the presumed *Contrasta* altarpiece, but to the Santa María de Mave altarpiece, which is not a tabernacle-altarpiece.

9.- Covarrubias (Burgos), collegiate church of San Cosme y San Damián: titular image and one incomplete panel. DEDICATEE: St James the Greater. OBVERSE: scenes of the life of St James the Greater (painting). REVERSE: without decoration. DATE: fourteenth century.

10.- Fuentes de Nava (Palencia), church of Santa María: all four panels. DEDICATEE: an unidentified bishop saint. OBVERSE: scenes of the life of an unidentified bishop saint (painting). REVERSE: plain red. DATE: fourteenth or fifteenth century.

11.- *Gáceta/Gazeta* (Álava/Araba), church of San Martín (Vitoria/Gasteiz [Álava/Araba], Elizbarrutiko Arte Sakratuaren Museoa – Museo Diocesano de Arte Sacro, inv. nos 617 and 619): titular image and baldachin, incomplete (canopy and part of the back panel). DEDICATEE: St Michael. OBVERSE: no panels preserved. REVERSE: *idem*. DATE: fourteenth or fifteenth century. N.B.: there is no conclusive evidence about this being originally a tabernacle-altarpiece, as only the upper section of the baldachin is preserved, but this is the most likely.

12.- Garray (Soria), hermitage of the Mártires (Garray [Soria], church of San Juan Bautista – the supposed titular image –, and whereabouts unknown – the baldachin –): titular image? (it is unlikely that the one presiding over the ensemble known through an old photograph is the original one) and baldachin. DEDICATEE: uncertain, Virgin and Child? OBVERSE: no panels preserved. REVERSE: *idem*. DATE: thirteenth or fourteenth century. N.B.: there is no conclusive evidence about this being originally a tabernacle-altarpiece, as the configuration of the ensemble known through an old photograph shows the altarpiece in a late medieval alteration, but this is the most likely.

13.- Heredia (Álava/Araba), hermitage of San Bartolomé (Vitoria/Gasteiz [Álava/Araba], Elizbarrutiko Arte Sakratuaren Museoa – Museo Diocesano de Arte Sacro, inv. nos 423, 424, 425 and 426): two incomplete panels, fragmented.