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# REMODELLED AND REUSED FROM MEDIEVAL MADONNA TABERNACLES TO LUTHERAN ALTARPIECES

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## **Abstract**

In Hedalen stave church there is a beautiful ‘rose-painted’ altarpiece installed during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The altarpiece was once a medieval tabernacle housing a wooden Madonna sculpture. Another tabernacle is preserved in the neighbouring stave church of Reinli, which was dismembered in the 1880s and remodelled into a Lutheran altarpiece. In connection with conservation works conducted on the altarpiece from Hedalen, at the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU) interpretation and digital reconstructions was made to define its original appearance. Examinations of the altarpiece in Hedalen showed that it had once been a Madonna tabernacle as assumed by former scholars. The decorated scenes on the inside of the wings were from the Incarnation story, and had the same iconography found on most of the preserved Madonna tabernacles throughout Scandinavia as well as southern Europe. Both of the over-painted and reconstructed tabernacles have their original paint on the exterior preserved, showing monochrome surfaces in red or green, or combinations of simple patterns of red and green.

*Keywords:* Catholic Madonna, Lutheran altarpiece, medieval tabernacle, painted sculpture

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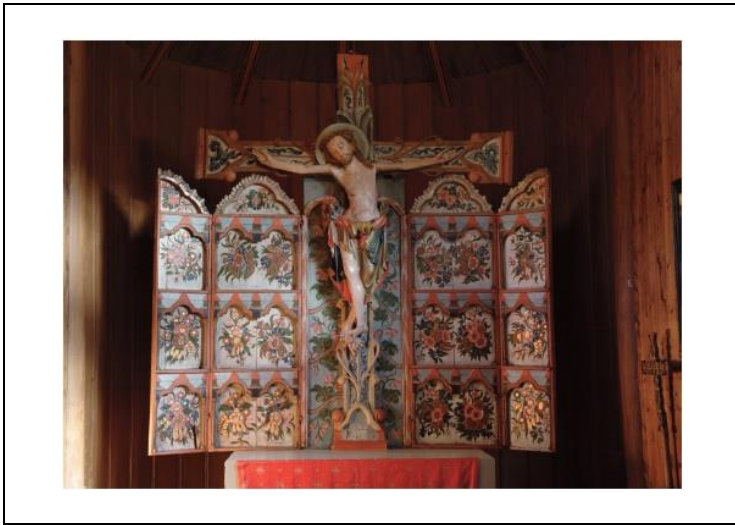
## **1. Introduction**

Although once present in almost every church, most medieval wood sculpture is lost in many parts of Europe. In many countries they were almost entirely destroyed after the Reformation. The Scandinavian wood sculptures represent a substantial part of the common European cultural heritage of this form of art [1]. As in Scandinavia, there are also several Madonna sculptures in Italy and Spain with canopies or parts thereof preserved which were very likely once to have had wings. One can assume that these tabernacles were in vogue throughout most of Europe, but became *démodé* with the advent of large painted and sculpted altarpieces in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century [2, 3].

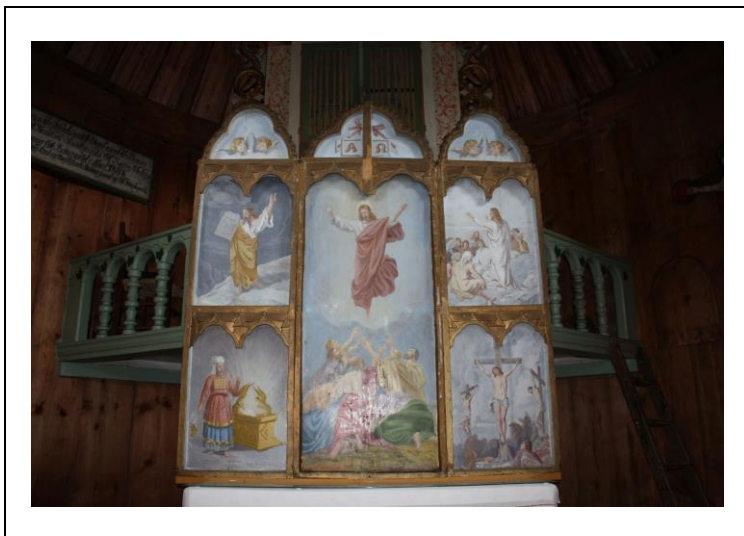
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In Oppland County, Norway, there are two neighbouring stave churches: Hedalen and Reinli, with two extraordinarily altarpieces. They are both composed of a medieval corpus of a tabernacle once housing a wooden sculpture. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century they were remodelled, overpainted and converted to Lutheran altarpieces. Their original appearance has as a consequence been hidden and lost. However, thanks to the combination of several research methods, new results were discovered. In this article, I will explore how these altarpieces looked like when they were tabernacles, presumably housing Madonna sculpture.



**Figure 1.** The Hedalen Church altarpiece: tabernacle today with the medieval crucifix nailed to the back panel (photo: Mille Stein).



**Figure 2.** The Reinli altarpiece (photo: Elisabeth Andersen).

## **2. Background**

Many Scandinavian churches kept their medieval sculptures for centuries after the Reformation, even if their original shape, location and purpose gradually disappeared. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century several of these sculptures were sent to museums or went missing. Today, there are 17 Madonna tabernacles, or fragments of them, from c. 1100 - ca. 1350 preserved in Scandinavia. Two of these have been remodelled and reused as Lutheran altarpieces, one in Hedalen stave church and another in Reinli stave church.

The altarpiece in Hedalen church consists of a medieval crucifix attached to a floral decorated ('rose-painted') corpus of a tabernacle (Figure 1). The crucifix and the corpus of the tabernacle are both dating from around 1250. The tabernacle was overpainted and remodelled during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In the neighbouring church, Reinli, there is also a Lutheran altarpiece made of a medieval tabernacle from the same time and shape as Hedalen's. The tabernacle in Reinli was dismembered in the 1880s and converted into a Lutheran altarpiece (Figure 2). Scenes from the Old and New Testament were painted in the 1890s and 1920s.

## **3. Method and analysis**

To ensure the preservation of the altarpiece in Hedalen, it was subject to a technical examination by NIKU (Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research) [4-6]. The altarpiece had been examined previously by scholars [7, 8] to plot the original appearance of the medieval tabernacle. Their methods, however, were chiefly theoretical and there were no certainties with regards to defining what was hidden under the overpaint. The aim of NIKU's investigation was to use technical analysis and comparative studies to reconstruct the original appearance of the tabernacle. The examination was made using binocular light, direct light, raking light, and infrared light (IR). The paint structures were assessed by means of cross-section analysis [4-6].

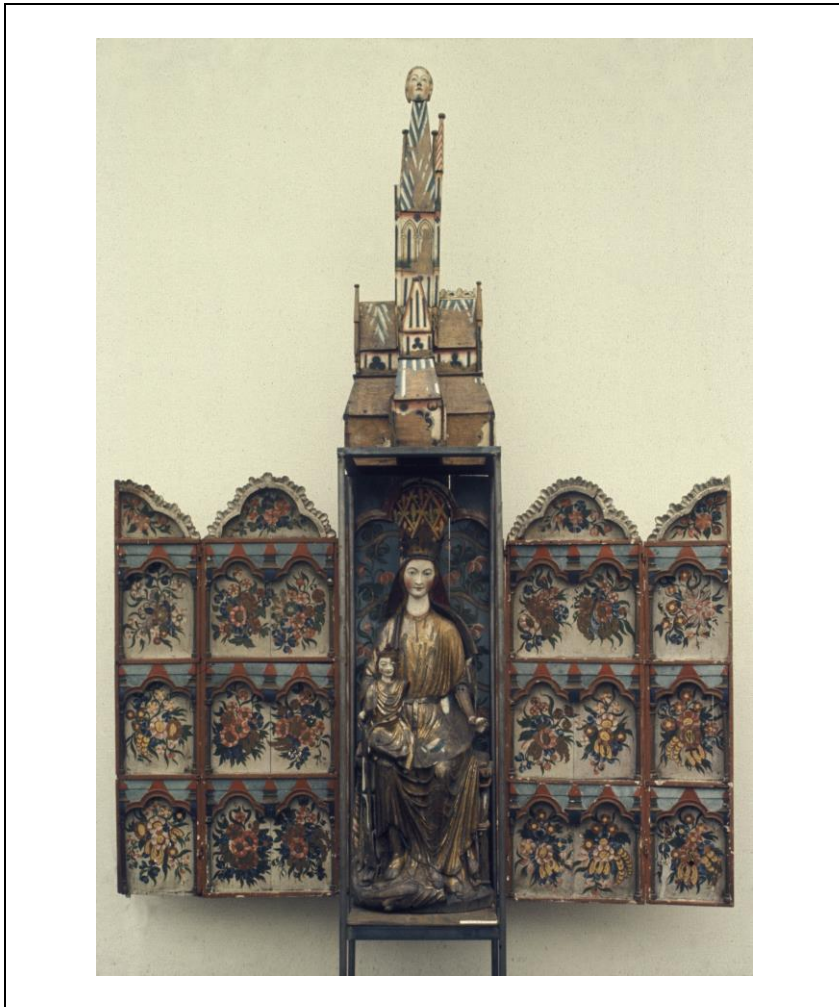
The altarpiece from Reinli was included in the investigation, but only with observation of the surfaces and four X-ray pictures from the wings. Through comparative analysis based on findings from Hedalen and descriptions from 19<sup>th</sup> century, an attempt was made to reconstruct its original appearance.

## **4. Lutheran altarpieces and Madonna tabernacles**

### ***4.1. The Madonna tabernacle from Hedalen***

The altarpiece in Hedalen was originally a tabernacle housing a wooden sculpture of the Virgin Mary (Figure 3). It has been dated to mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. It is not known what happened to the tabernacle until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the tabernacle was converted to a Lutheran altarpiece. The Madonna

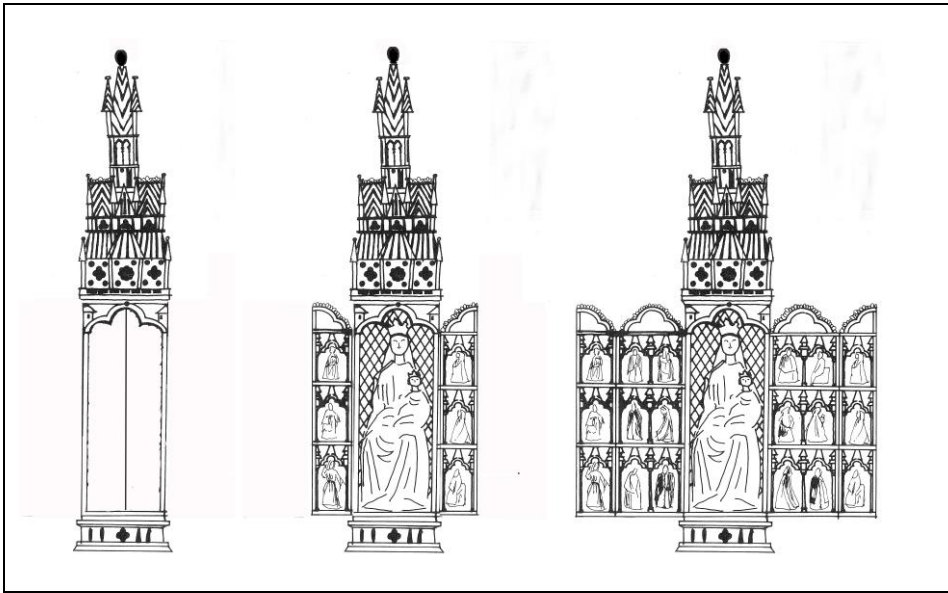
sculpture and the church model, once located at the top of the tabernacle, were at the same time moved elsewhere in the church.



**Figure 3.** Tabernacle from Hedalen. Exhibition at Høvikodden 1973.  
Photo: Riksantikvaren 1972.

The tabernacle in Hedalen consists of four wings, two side-wings and two half-wings, attached by hinges to a backpanel. The canopy, which is now lost, was intended to rest on four posts sheltering the image of the seated Virgin and Child. Around this rectangular space, four wings were hinged together, enclosing the sculpture when the tabernacle was closed, and surmounted by a church model with a towered pinnacle (Figure 4). The wider wings formed the lateral walls while the narrower ones composed the front when the tabernacle was closed. The wings could be swung to two open positions: only the front wings folded to the side, or all four wings opened. In open position it measures 162 x 235 x 6 cm. On the inside it has four tiers and 18 trefoil niches. The niches

are divided by horizontal battens and architectural decorations, overpainted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The scenes in the niches were decorated with wooden relief figures, now lost. The backgrounds of the niches were decorated with imitation gold (yellow lacquer on silver) incised with decorative patterns. The wings have their original paint preserved on the exterior: chequerboard pattern of red and green in all six squares (two half-squares in the half-wings form two squares when closed), and in addition the trefoil alternating red and green. The back panel of the tabernacle shows no traces of paint, which may suggest that it had not been visible to spectators and was probably placed against a wall.



**Figure 4.** Tabernacle in three positions: closed, only half wings opened and all four wings opened. Drawings by Sigrid Holm, edited by Elisabeth Andersen.

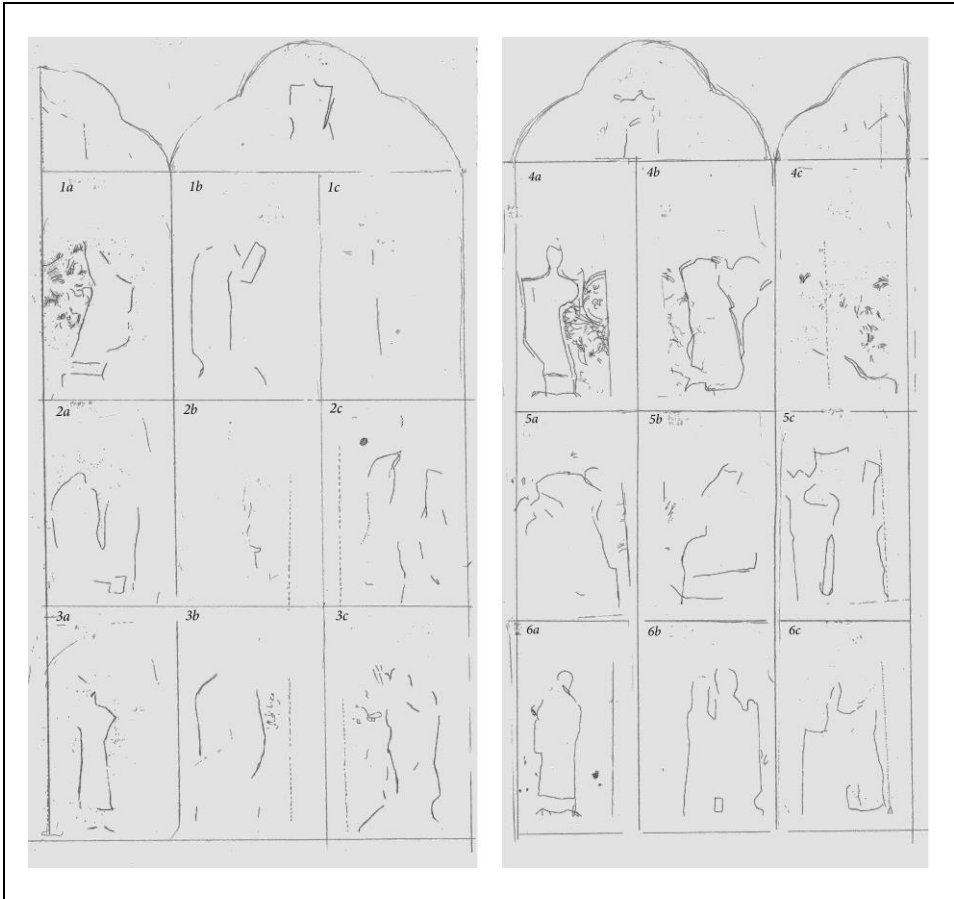
#### **4.2. *Madonna tabernacle from Reinli***

The altarpiece in Reinli was originally the corpus of a medieval tabernacle (of the same shape as Hedalen's) measuring approximately 196 x 224 x 7 cm. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the two half-wings were placed side by side to form the middle section of the altarpiece, and the side-wings were made into the side sections of the new composition. The Ascension of Christ was painted on the middle section of the interior in the 1890s and the scenes from the Old and New Testament, painted on the side sections in the 1920s. The back panel of the tabernacle was still in the church in 1885. The back panel was removed, probably already during the restoration of the church in the late 1880s. The church model, once surmounted the tabernacle, was sent to the museum in Bergen in the 1870s.

The lack of older written sources makes it difficult to know what the Reinli tabernacle originally looked like. However, we can get an indication of the medieval appearance by reading the 1884 description of the tabernacle, together with supplementary ocular observations and findings from the Hedalen case (Figure 5) [9]. According to the 1884 description the back panel was gilded and painted. It had small incised 5 cm squares which encircled small rosettes. The description is unclear but it may indicate that the throne's canopy, called a cornice in the document, was preserved. The cornice had 'decorated' rosettes beneath which was a trefoil-shaped arch. On the inside the wings have three tiers and 12 trefoil niches. Similar to the Hedalen altarpiece, the niches are divided by horizontal battens and architectural decorations. The tabernacle was also surmounted by a church model, still preserved at the museum in Bergen. The wings have, like the Hedalen case, had their original paint preserved on the exterior, although the pattern with red side wings and green half-wings is even simpler here.



**Figure 5.** Reconstruction of the Madonna tabernacle from Reinli in open positions.  
Drawing: Ola Storsletten, digitalisation: Elisabeth Andersen.



**Figure 6.** Incisions from the Hedalen wings. Drawing: Agn s Juste-Groene and Dorota Leszczynska-Danek, NIKU 2006.

### **4.3. Iconographic analysis**

Under the ‘Rose-paint’ layer on the Hedalen altarpiece there are traces of incisions from earliest history of the tabernacles (Figure 6). The incisions were made to outline where the relief figures were meant to be attached, so that the silver leaf could be spared. An interpretation of these incised drawings helped verify the earlier theories that this actually was the original tabernacle belonging to the Madonna sculpture, and thus supported further theories of which scenes that could have been included. In order to interpret the incised drawings (Figure 6) I had to compare them with remains of other wooden tabernacles, together with their small-scale counterparts: the tabernacles made of precious metals and ivory. Altar frontals from the same period, mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, were also useful for helping identify the scenes. In Norway we have 31 altar frontals from ca. 1250-ca.1350; more than a third of them having The Virgin Mary as main topic [10, 11]. These frontals also have incisions where the figures once were painted. It was therefore possible using them as reference, especially where the lines were

difficult to read out. The iconographic program was very similar between the tabernacles and altar frontals: the Virgin Mary with the Child in the central niche, surrounded by scenes from the Incarnation story.

The scenes in the Hedalen tabernacle are Annunciation (1a-c), Visitation (2a-c), Adoration of the Magi (3a-c), Annunciation to the Shepherds (4a-c), Nativity (5a-c) and Presentation in the Temple (6a-c). What I found in my research is that at least two scenes were always included; The Annunciation always appeared in the story of the Incarnation, and was often followed by Visitation. The Adoration of the Magi was also always present. This scene had a fixed place in the composition at the bottom, on the left side, at the foot of the Madonna.

An attempt was also made to find traces of the scenes underneath the overpaint on the Reinli altarpiece. X-ray pictures of the wings were taken, but these images provided little information about the wings' original decoration. The images however showed that there had been recesses in the imitation gilding in the tabernacle niches, where the reliefs once were placed. The tabernacle had also surrounded a Madonna sculpture, just like the Hedalen tabernacle. The small relief figures, once placed in the niches, were lost by 1884 [9]. It is not known what the Madonna sculpture looked like in detail or what happened to it.

## **5. Conclusions**

The two Lutheran altarpieces in Valdres have a long history that goes all the way back to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. The altarpiece in Hedalen stave church in Valdres was once a medieval tabernacle, housing a wooden Madonna sculpture. This article has summarised how the combination of different research methods could provide new information about the original appearance of the altarpieces. Incised drawings were found in the niches of the wings, showing that they once contained small reliefs. Interpretation of the drawings indicate that the reliefs, now lost, were scenes from the Incarnation story, and confirm earlier theories that this was a Madonna tabernacle. The scenes could also be identified as Annunciation, Visitation, Adoration of the Magi, Annunciation to the Shepherds, Nativity and Presentation in the Temple. These scenes are found also in other Madonna tabernacles and altar frontals from the same period.

The altarpiece in Reinli stave church also housed a wooden Madonna sculpture. An attempt was made to reconstruct the tabernacle, based on the findings from the Hedalen tabernacle analysis, written sources as well as surface-only observation. The wings were decorated with relief figures, but further examinations have to be done in order to identify them. Both Hedalen and Reinli have their original painting preserved on the exterior: monochrome surfaces in red and green.

The two tabernacles in Hedalen and Reinli survived through the late-medieval new fashions, through the Reformation, and in the centuries to come. They were kept in the church, reconstructed and reused with a new function. They were adapted to a Lutheran congregation, but still carrying traces of how



early tabernacles from ca. 1200- ca.1350, could have looked like, throughout Europe.

## **Acknowledgment**

I want to thank conservator Mille Stein for making me aware of the colours on the tabernacles' exterior, and for showing me the results of her examination results and reconstructions of the tabernacles from Hedalen and Reinli.

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