

The Crucifixion Group from Harju-Risti

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Summary

The medieval crucifix together with the sculptures of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist located in the Harju-Risti Church till 1958 and now exhibited in the Niguliste Museum did not originally form an integral Calvary group but were joined together later. The crucifix, made in the last quarter of the 14th century, is significant due to the lily motifs on the cross and the rare material in the medieval wooden sculpture – beech (*fagus silvatica*) – which was used to carve the figure of Christ. The crucifix was brought to the Harju-Risti Church from the neighbouring Padise Monastery and, by Cistercian tradition, was viewable from both sides, indicated by the residues of polychromy on the back of the cross. The magnificent accompanying figures crafted in the 1410s–1430s originate probably from some bigger church in Tallinn (St Olav?).

The present article examines the Calvary sculptures located in the Harju-Risti Church till 1958 but currently displayed in the Niguliste Museum, dwells on the question of their age and place of manufacture, and studies for which churches the sculptures were initially commissioned.

The crucifix (Christ on the cross) under examination together with the sculptures of St Mary and St John the Evangelist did not originally form an integral Calvary group but were joined together at some later time. This opinion is primarily supported by differences in dimensions – the figure of Christ (175 cm) is proportionally smaller than that of St Mary and St John (227 cm and 217 respectively). Taking into account both the central position of the sculpture from the iconographic aspect and its location high up below the vaults, the crucifix is, in general, bigger than the accompanying figures. Secondly, differences also surface in the material used: while the cross, St Mary and John are made of oak, common to medieval sculpture, the figure of Christ is made of beech (*fagus silvatica*). Furthermore, the different structure (habitat) of the oak used for making the accompanying figures and the cross is evident through initial visual observation. Also an examination of the sculptures' technological aspects makes it clear that their merger into an integral group in the small Harju-Risti Church must have been secondary. Consequently, the accompanying figures and the crucifix can be treated separately when designating them spatially and temporally.

The underlying theories, acceptable until now, were formulated by Sten Karling in 1946 and Kersti Markus in 1992. Karling connected the master of

the three figures with the Meuse region in the 1370s–1380s. However, there have been further specifications in professional literature due to the dating of comparative examples. Crucifixes from Aldeneyk and Looz, named as key examples and dated today to the 14th century, bear no stylistic similarity with the Christ of Harju-Risti. In addition, the examples from the Low Countries associated with the accompanying figures are dated today to the first half of the 14th century. As Karling fails to name a single Meuse-region sculpture originating from the end of the century, the author is not convinced of the connection of the dating and the place of manufacture of the Harju-Risti sculptures with the Low Countries of the 1380s.

Kersti Markus dates the St John the Evangelist and St Mary figures to the 1390s and the crucifix to the 1400s, whereas the place where the crucifix was made, according to Markus, was Brabant and that of the accompanying figures was the Low Countries. Presupposing a common origin of the Harju-Risti figures, Markus does not provide any examples that would assert a connection between the accompanying figures and the Low Countries. The opinion of the author relies predominantly on a comparison of the crucifix with the sitting sculpture of God the Father from Hakendover, in the Brabant region, in the retable from *Godelijke Zaligmakerkerk* (1400–1404).

According to the author, the figure God the Father from Hakendover does not provide close points of contact with the Christ of Harju-Risti, but indicates the usage of ‘beuneveulish’ (André Beauneveu, years of activity c. 1360–1402) motifs and thus supports dating to the period between the last quarter of the 14th and the early 15th century. One can encounter

the general type used in the portrayal of the Harju-Risti Christ’s face, hair and beard on both the west and east sides of the River Rhine, therefore making an exact specification of the place of manufacture according to an analysis of style and type in today’s state of research impossible. In a situation where non-traditional beech was used in carving the Christ, we find some help from material-specific studies. Beech was not used for wooden sculptures originating from larger centres of the Low Countries, including Brabant. Relying on guild regulations, we can also rule out Lübeck and Paris as possible regions.

In the opinion of the author, the widespread dating to the end of the 14th century in studies focusing on the St Mary and St John of Harju-Risti stem from the ‘old-fashioned’ general type attributed to the sculptures, which one can encounter already in the early 14th century. On the other hand, one can notice here extreme attention to detail, expression and imitation typical of the portrayal of a face in the early 15th century. These figures represent the ‘retrospective’ tendency, associated with the closing stages of the ‘international Gothic’, and were made between the 1410s–1430s. Although the dating is supported by examples originating mainly from the Lübeck and Lower Saxon areas, and point occasionally also to possible stylistic similarities, the accompanying figures of Harju-Risti offer opportunities for comparison with the artwork of different European regions of the period. As a result, the possible place of manufacture remains open to future research. Continuous work to specify the origin of the three sculptures can be supported through technological and material-specific studies, and by

continual gathering of comparative material and detailed comparison.

The three sculptures forming the Calvary group were situated till 1958 on the eastern wall of the nave of the Harju-Risti Church, south of the triumphal arch. The assumed location is also the eastern wall of the choir. Both locations for the sculptures are unambiguously secondary, as figures are meant to also be viewed from the back side. To support this claim, we can find polychromy residues on the back side of the cross. On the crossing point of its arms, one can see fragments of the contours of Christ's head. On the back side of the cross's right arm, a rhomb is clearly distinguishable, surrounding an undefined outline of an image. The other arms of the cross have only partial traces of polychromy. These fragments of colours definitely originate from the period prior to the move to the Harju-Risti Church, where the figures gained a thick layer of lime, similar to that on the wall, by the beginning of the 20th century at the latest. The need to display the back side is also indicated by the accompanying figures: the sculptures are carved from 3/4 of a tree trunk and covered with a lid on the back side, which has been given a form marking the drapery of a garb.

The Calvary figures of Harju-Risti are, from an iconographic vantage point and due to their size, sculptures of the triumph group, which is traditionally located in the focal position of the church – in the zone of the triumph arch. Given the low-positioned zone of the triumph arch in Harju-Risti, it is improbable that their original location was in a country church.

The dominant opinion in professional literature is that the group reached Harju-Risti from the neighbouring Padise Cistercian abbey after its secularization

in 1559. The key arguments list the connection between the Padise Monastery and Risti Church in the Middle Ages (patronage). The present article, besides dealing with iconographical meanings and connections of sculptures, touches upon the art traditions of the Cistercians.

The monumental crucifixes of the Cistercians were located in places that dominated the entire church interior and remained, until the late Middle-Ages, two-sided – viewable from the side of the monks and that of the laymen's choir. Therefore, they were also decorated on both sides.

In the case of the surviving examples, the painted crucifix is mainly depicted on the side that faces the monks' choir. Although disparities between the rules and reality can be detected already in the early period of the Order's existence, the two-sided usage of the Harju-Risti crucifix and the possible connection with Cistercian traditions are in fact supported by the residues of polychromy on the back of the cross, especially the fragmentary contours of Christ's head in the crossing point of the arms.

Another factor also supporting the original location of the crucifix in Padise is associated with the possible interpretations of the lily-crucifix, quite rare in our region. Depending on the context, a lily symbolised Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Church in its *arbor bona* meaning in the Middle Ages. An important link for opening up the iconography of the lily crucifixes is March 25 – the Lady Day – known in the Middle Ages as the day when Christ was crucified. Here the Cistercian background combines with the cult of Mary, so widely practised inside the Order. In addition, we find the lily-tailed unicorn, depicted on

the most eastward figural console of the northern wall of the Padise Monastery.

In early professional literature, the meaning of reliefs was revealed through the dualistic key (bad-good) of ethical categories, but the unicorn can here also symbolise Christ, his incarnation or even Mary in her virginity, which is emphasized with the depiction of the lily on the tip of the animal's tail.

Contrary to the existing positions, the author does not consider the association of the sculptures of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist with the Cistercians and their origin from the abbey of the Padise Monastery possible. First, no groups of triumph crucifixes dated to the late Middle Ages or earlier have been preserved within the Cistercian Order. This is clear from the fact that in comparison with the Calvary groups of the multitude of figures outside the Order's monasteries, the appearance of Cistercian crucifixes had to be reduced to a minimum – in terms of splendour, decorative additions and accompanying figures. Furthermore, the existence of the accompanying figures next to the Crucified does not correspond with the principle of the two-sided usage of the abbey's triumph-zone.

It is possible that the majestic figures of St Mary and John were originally commissioned for a bigger church in Tallinn, where construction work took place in the first quarter of the 15th century, also including the triumph-zone. In the search for a possible location, most of Tallinn's medieval churches should be taken in account. Regarding its immense size and building chronology (the choir being finished in 1420–1425), St Olav's Church could be singled out as being most likely. It is important to remember, while researching the original location

of the Calvary figures, that medieval Calvary groups, contrary to other Catholic artwork, also fit into the post-Reformation Church. This excludes the option that the accompanying figures were brought to or bought for a little country church because of their inappropriateness to a Lutheran church. Thus a functional change in the original location (church) could have been the reason which explains the removal of the crucifix from Padise to Harju-Risti, for example the secularization of the monastery. It is plausible that the connection between St Olav's Church and the Cistercian St Michael Monastery in Tallinn proved to also be decisive for the accompanying figures. As a result, the moving of St Mary and John into the small Harju-Risti Church could be associated with a change in the monastery's ownership during the post-Reformation period. One also cannot rule out the possibility that at one point the figures sustained some major damage (especially the St John figure), whereupon they were dismantled, repaired and brought to Harju-Risti for an unknown reason.

*Translated by Martin Jaigma
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