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Article

From one Cast and yet with Many Contributors: Medieval Bronze Baptismal Fonts and their Originators

Jochen Hermann Vennebusch | Hamburg

Nichilominus quoque cunctos sibi adhaerentes ad huiusmodi negocium, ut ita dicam, ultra vires impellebat, nec aliquid artis erat, quod non attemptaret, etiam si ad unguem pertingere non valeret. [...] Ecclesiam namque miro studio decorare ardenter instabat. Unde exquisita ac lucida pictura tam parietes quam laquearia exornabat, ut ex veteri novam putares. Fecit et ad sollempnem processionem in praecipuis festis euangelia auro et gemmis clarissima, thimiamateria quoque precii et ponderis magnifici, calices nichilominus plures, et unum ex onichino, alterum vero cristallinum mira industria composuit. Adhuc autem unum aureum, valentem libras viginti publici ponderis, ex purissimo auro in usum ministerii conflavit.¹

However, he also pushed all those who were close to him to work in such a way that one might say [it was] beyond their strength. And there was no field of art in which he would not try his hand [himself], even if he did not manage to master it perfectly. [...] With great fervour he passionately insisted on decorating the church. Thus, he decorated both the walls and the beamed ceiling with exquisite and luminous paintings, so that you might think the old church had become new. Furthermore, on the main feast days he made Gospel books gleaming with gold and precious stones for the solemn procession, as well as censers of great value and weight. This notwithstanding, he collected a number of chalices with admirable energy, one of onyx, another of crystal. Moreover, he made a chalice of the purest gold, worth twenty silver pounds in the public weight, for use in the divine service.

It was probably panegyric descriptions such as the above that led the local historian Hermann Adolf Lüntzel to assume² that the Hildesheim bishop Bernward (d.1022)

[sich] schon in seinem Jünglingsalter mit Schreiben, Malen, Metallarbeiten, mit der Baukunst gern beschäftigte, und dass, nachdem er Bischof geworden, seine Lebensordnung den täglichen Besuch der von ihm beschäftigten Künstler und Handwerker mit sich brachte.

liked to occupy himself with writing, painting, metalwork and building even in his youth, and that, after he became bishop, visiting the artists and craftsmen he employed were an integral part of his daily life.

Such descriptions are found in the biography of the Hildesheim bishop Bernward and in numerous works associated with him and are inscribed with the Latin ‘BERNVVARDVS PRESVL FECIT HOC’ (‘Bishop Bernward made this’) or with a similar inscription.³ The art historian Stephan Beissel put it even more forcefully in 1895:⁴

Freilich ist nicht zu leugnen, dass bei vielen mittelalterlichen Schriftstellern die Worte: „Jener Bischof baute diese Kirche, fertigte eine Altartafel, bereitete ein Reliquiar“ sicher nicht so zu deuten sind, als ob der Betreffende Baumeister oder Goldschmied gewesen sei, weil ja auch heute mancher Fürst ein Schloss oder eine Festung baut, ohne Maurer zu sein. Aber des Thangmar Berichte [...] sind derart abgefasst, dass sie offenbar sagen, Bernward habe in seiner Jugend die persönliche Uebung der technischen Künste erlernt und das Gelernte später praktisch verwerthet. Nur übertriebene Zweifelsucht kann es versuchen, Bernward aus der Reihe ausübender Künstler zu streichen.

Admittedly, it cannot be denied that in many medieval writers the words: ‘That bishop *built* this church, *made* an altarpiece,

¹ Thangmar, *Leben des hl. Bernward*, ed. Kallfalz 1973, chap. 6 and 8, 282 and 286. Unless otherwise stated, translations of the inscriptions and texts were provided by the author.

² Lüntzel 1856, 51.

³ On these inscriptions, see Wulf 2003, 202–205 [14], 207–209 [17, 18]; on the contextualisation of the inscriptions, see Wulf 2008, 6–9.

⁴ Beissel 1895, 14 (emphasis in the original).

created a reliquary' are certainly not to be interpreted as if the person in question had been an architect or goldsmith, because even today some princes build a castle or a fortress without being a mason. But Thangmar's reports [...] are written in such a way that they clearly say that Bernward personally learned the practice of the technical arts in his youth and later put what he had learned to practical use. Only exaggerated skepticism would attempt to exclude Bernward from the ranks of practising artists.

Thus Bernward, who, before he became bishop of Hildesheim, was tutor to the later Emperor Otto III (980–1002), was stylised as a kind of 'super-originator': According to the medieval biography he was an architect, illuminator, scribe, goldsmith, sculptor and bronze caster; he proposed ideas, inspired both inscriptions and pictorial designs, and donated works of art that were produced at his episcopal see. He was therefore regarded as both the intellectual and the material originator of the manuscripts, bronze castings, goldsmith's work, and church buildings that he initiated.⁵ More recently, however, art historical research has moved away from seeing Bernward as the actual and, above all, practical creator of the various artefacts. The creators of the individual goldsmith's works, bronze castings and manuscripts are so diverse that they cannot be attributed to one single 'artist'.⁶ Thus, Bernward is now regarded, certainly not without good reason, as simply an intellectual originator, a theological-conceptual initiator as well as patron and donor.

The famous bronze doors (1015)⁷ and the monumental Christ's Column (around 1020)⁸ in St. Mary's Cathedral in Hildesheim as well as the filigree silver candlesticks and various metal castings are attributed to Bernward's initiative.⁹ The production of such castings – the small liturgical bronzes and the larger objects – required the interplay of

various specialised crafts at different stages of production. The diversification of the roles of specialised craftsmen was already a feature in the production of high medieval artefacts and will be examined in more detail in the following, i.e. in the description of late medieval bronze baptismal fonts constructed between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The primary aim of the present contribution – focusing on the concept of originators – is to examine the facts and to draw analogies with other late medieval crafts and workshops. Based on the evidence of sources and material findings we shall attempt to raise relevant questions rather than venture definitive answers, and, in line with the objectives expressed by Klaus Niehr,¹⁰ we shall try to sensitise future research into art history in order to trace the roles of the various actors responsible for the production of an artefact: casters, sculptors as well as – if only marginally – donors.

In the following, several North German bronze baptismal fonts are examined. These artefacts are significant objects whose inscriptions allow us to draw conclusions about the originators involved in the casting, the technological processes involved in their production and the details of the pictorial programs displayed on the *cuppae*. The fact that inscriptions are shown on many of the baptismal fonts means that they may be seen as Written Artefacts which in many cases offer evidence concerning both the originators and the people involved in the actual production of the bronze castings. Thus, the focus of the investigation is production methods rather than style, i.e. the methods which allow us to draw conclusions about the roles of the originators involved. We shall see that, over time, the contributions of the various craftsmen evolved and became specialised – analogous to other genres of medieval objects, e.g. altarpieces. In this respect, any diversification of the various trades and the division of labour within the workshops goes hand in hand with the economisation of the production processes, whereby specialisation led to the use of modules, sometimes even to the serial production of the objects.

1. Tracing an intellectual originator – the baptismal font of Osnabrück Cathedral

The baptismal font of St. Peter's Cathedral in Osnabrück was probably cast around 1225 (see Fig. 1).¹¹

⁵ See also Brandt 2011/2012; Beuckers 2013, 21–23; Weinryb 2023, 27, 31.

⁶ On the stylistic differences between bronze door and bronze column, see Brand and Eggebrecht 1993, 546.

⁷ On the bronze doors, see Tschan 1951, 141–270; Wesenberg 1955, 65–116, 172–181 [8]; Brand and Eggebrecht 1993, 503–512 [VII-33; Rainer Kahsnitz]; Brandt 2016.

⁸ On the bronze column, see Tschan 1951, 271–350; Wesenberg 1955, 117–150, 181–182 [9]; Brand and Eggebrecht 1993, 540–548 [VIII-17; Rainer Kahsnitz]; Brandt 2022.

⁹ The silver candlesticks were fashioned in the early eleventh century; since 1960 they have been in the treasury of Hildesheim Cathedral on loan from the parish of St Magdalene. On the candlesticks, see Tschan 1951, 129–140; Brand and Eggebrecht 1993, 581–584 [VIII-32; Michael Brandt]; Brandt, Höhl and Lutz 2015, 38 [11].

¹⁰ Niehr 2022.

¹¹ On this baptismal font, see Niehr 1992, 328–329 [107]; Schlegel 2012, 469–472 [69].



Fig. 1: Bronze baptismal font, St. Peter's Cathedral Osnabrück, c. 1225.

As Fig. 1. shows, the vessel has the shape of a large bucket resting on three lion paws; it is 65 cm high and has a diameter of 63 cm. Three bands can be seen around the *cuppa*, of which the top two – the one below the upper rim and the one approximately in the middle of the vessel – are engraved with an inscription.¹² In addition, the five almost semi-circular relief panels between the upper and middle bands are also framed by inscriptions designating, on the one hand, the two apostolic princes Peter and Paul and, on the other, the half-figures of the Angel of the Lord, John the Baptist and Jesus standing in the Jordan – a baptismal scene which is often seen in the iconography of these fonts. The text on the upper rim documents reflections on the origin and effect of the sacrament of baptism,¹³ while the lower inscription provides information on the production of the baptismal font and on the donor:

+ · WILBERNVS · PETRE · CONFERT · ISTVT · TIBI
· DONVM · + · VT · P(ER) TE · SVMMVM · POSSIT ·
HABERE · BONV(M) · GERARD(VS) · ME FEC(IT) ·

Wilbernus gives you, Peter, this gift so that through you he may obtain the highest good. Gerhard made me.

Accordingly, Wilbernus can be identified as the donor¹⁴ of this font and Gerhard as its ‘material originator’. Although research into the identity of Wilbernus has long been inconclusive,¹⁵ we know that he commissioned and financed this baptismal font. In contrast, Gerhard’s role is not clear: was he the caster of the vessel, the modeler of the reliefs, the ‘scribe’ of the inscriptions? Was he, perhaps, solely responsible for all of these activities? The fact that only Gerhard’s name is mentioned in the context of the actual production of the baptismal font would suggest that he alone was responsible for it.¹⁶ Interestingly – and very relevant to the present discussion – the name of Wilbernus is also found on the bronze baptismal font in Hildesheim Cathedral, donated in 1226 (see Fig. 2). The date of production, the general materiality of the vessel, the complexity of the

theological inscription as well as certain matching stylistic details of the reliefs – as well as the name – suggest a strong connection between the bronze baptismal fonts in Osnabrück and Hildesheim.¹⁷

Despite the numerous correspondences mentioned above, the two bronze castings show important differences: Firstly, they are very different in shape. While the *cuppa* in Hildesheim rests on four elaborately sculpted personifications of the Rivers of Paradise and the total height (with cover) is 170 cm, the vessel in Osnabrück Cathedral resembles a bucket with a total height of 65 cm resting on three lion’s paws (but without a cover, which – if it existed – was probably rather flat and simple in design). Secondly, although the Hildesheim inscription reveals a theological concept and designates Wilbernus as the donor, as in Osnabrück, Gerhard’s name is missing. Given the fact that the Hildesheim font is one of the most important medieval bronze baptismal fonts known to us, we would expect the name of the person responsible for the casting of the object.

Two other baptismal fonts in the region of Osnabrück have a similar shape to that found in the Osnabrück Cathedral and thus, presumably originated in the same workshop. However, compared to the font in the cathedral, the bronze castings in the churches of St. Peter and Paul in Oesede and of St. Anne in Twistringen differ significantly in their respective designs and in their quality (see Figs 3 and 4).¹⁸

While the baptismal font in Osnabrück Cathedral is elaborately decorated with reliefs and inscriptions, the *cuppa* in Oesede only shows modelled figures of the apostles, reproduced rather imprecisely. In contrast, the baptismal vessel in Twistringen presents almost playful, geometric-looking characters formed with the help of wax strings and richly decorated, precise inscriptions. It can be assumed that the similarities found in all four vessels indicate that the people involved in the casting – in both Hildesheim and Osnabrück, in Georgsmarienhütte-Oesede and perhaps Twistringen – were the same, and that the differences are the consequence of different actors involved in the later work: the reliefs and the inscriptions. It is almost certain that Wilbernus, as a cleric and dean of the cathedral in Hildesheim and administrator of the diocese of Osnabrück, had a solid theological education, and that he can be considered as the originator of the theological content and of the figurative

¹² On the inscriptions on the baptismal font, see Wehking 1988, 16–18 [9].

¹³ On the sacramental theological inscription, see Vennebusch 2024a.

¹⁴ On the motivations of medieval donors, see Beuckers 2013; on the names of donors on medieval liturgical objects, see Lange 2007; Tripps 2018.

¹⁵ See the discussion in Dolfen 1964 and Wehking 1988, 17–18.

¹⁶ See on Gerhard and his works Mithoff 1866, 56–57; Mithoff 1885, 108–109.

¹⁷ See on this baptismal font Höhl 2009.

¹⁸ On these baptismal fonts, see Weiß 1992, 1013–1014 (Oesede), 1276 (Twistringen); Katholische Kirchengemeinde St. Peter und Paul [s.a.], 6.



Fig. 2: Bronze baptismal font, St. Mary's Cathedral Hildesheim, 1226.



Fig. 3: Bronze baptismal font, St. Peter's and Paul's Church Georgsmarienhütte-Oesede, around 1220/1230.



Fig. 4: Bronze baptismal font, St. Anne's Church Twistringen, around 1220/1230.

programs. The stylistic similarities might be traced back either to similar models used in the production of the respective reliefs or even to identical sculptors manufacturing the wax models of the relief figures in the cathedrals of Hildesheim and Osnabrück. In contrast, the obvious differences in the basic shape of the two baptismal fonts is almost certainly due to different production methods and concepts used in the respective workshops. In this context, it is conceivable that Gerhard was the caster or head of the Osnabrück workshop, where sculptors who also worked in Hildesheim were then employed.

2. Hans Apengeter's baptismal fonts – testimonies to the interplay of wood sculptors and a bronze casting workshop

About a century later, Hans Apengeter appeared as a caster in the Baltic Sea region. We find his name in some inscriptions, but numerous monumental bronze and brass castings can be attributed to him. Among these objects are two baptismal fonts found in the churches of St. Mary in Wismar (around 1335; installed in St. Nicholas' Church after the Second World War)¹⁹ and Lübeck (1337) respectively (see Figs 5 and 6).²⁰

The *cuppae* of both bronze castings rest on carrying figures in the form of angels – although the wings have been lost in the meantime – and are divided into two registers. The narrative and figurative programs are completely identical on both baptismal vessels. The lower register shows scenes from the life of Jesus, such as the Baptism, the Temptation, the Prayer on the Mount of Olives and the Flagellation, as well as figures of the Wise and Foolish Virgins and a Man of Sorrows flanked by John and Mary. In the upper register, the sequence of Passion scenes continues with the Crucifixion, the Descent into Hell, and the Resurrection, completed by a *deësis* and the figures of the Apostles, some of whom can be identified by their attributes. Furthermore, individual figures on the *cuppae* as well as the respective carrying figures of both baptismal fonts are almost identical. They are completely congruent in their conceptual content,²¹ but there are clear stylistic differences. One prominent difference is that, although the carrying figures in both Wismar and Lübeck are fashioned as angels, those in Wismar have a much more classical and serene appearance, with a hairstyle showing hardly any individual strands, and dressed in a robe which is very softly draped. In contrast, the angels in Lübeck have a more elegant drapery, with finely chiselled strands of hair;

¹⁹ On this baptismal font, see Profanter 2022 (with further literature).

²⁰ On this baptismal font, see Vennebusch 2022a (with further literature).

²¹ Mundt 1908, 51.



Fig. 5: Hans Apengeter, bronze baptismal font, St. Mary's Church Wismar (now in St. Nicholas' Church), around 1335.



Fig. 6: Hans Apengeter, Bronze baptismal font, St. Mary's Church Lübeck, 1337.

furthermore, the positions of the hands and head are very different.²² The variation in the details is seen again in the design of the individual reliefs on both fonts; for example, the details of the plants and the figure of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane differ completely.²³ Again, while the Mouth of Hell is similar on both baptismal fonts, the details are modelled differently. Despite these differences in detail, the general conception and architectural framing of these fonts are similar.²⁴ For this reason, Hans Wentzel assumed that pattern- or model-books for these scenes existed, containing a basic layout of the images which were then adapted by the sculptors.²⁵

While the baptismal fonts of Wismar and Lübeck seem, at first glance, to be completely identical, an examination of the production process offers deeper insights into the nature of the obvious correspondences and the equally striking differences between them: both were made using the lost wax process, in which a clay model of the bronze casting – covered with a thick layer of wax – was built onto a base

over a brick core covered with clay; this gave the interior of the baptismal font its shape. The architectural frames – presumably individual figures such as the mouth of hell and forms of plants and trees – were worked out of this wax layer. Individual figures such as the Wise and Foolish Virgins and the Apostles – also made of wax – were placed on this casting mould with the help of models.²⁶ In some cases, these figures were ‘individualised’ by the addition of attributes and the reworking of facial features, hairstyle, or robe draperies. The wax layer was then covered with clay (the mantle), and the whole structure was heated by a fire underneath the base; the wax melted, leaving its shape imprinted in the hardened clay mantle.²⁷ After hardening, the mantle and the rest of the casting model were removed from the core and only the mantle was put over the core before the space between the two moulds was filled with the molten, liquid bronze.

On the baptismal font in St Mary's Church in Lübeck the inscription cut into the bands that run under the upper rim and between the two relief registers around the *cuppa* was made before the clay mantle was applied. This inscription draws our attention to the originators of this bronze casting:²⁸

²² Vennebusch 2022a, 117.

²³ Vennebusch 2022a, 117–118.

²⁴ The composition of reliefs on contemporary altarpieces also shows these similarities; see Niehr 2022, 172–176.

²⁵ On the question of pattern or model books, see Wentzel 1937, 70–71, Wentzel 1941, XII–XIII.

²⁶ Mundt 1908, 52; Niehr 2022, 168, 180–181; Vennebusch 2022a, 118.

²⁷ On this method, see Beelte 1962, 108–112.

²⁸ On the inscription, see Lampe 2022, 344–346 [12]; Vennebusch 2022a, 107–108.

ANNO · D(OMI)NI · M° · CCC · XXX° VII° · JN · UI//GILIA ·
 PE(N)THECOSTES · PERFECTVM · EST · PRESENS ·
 OPVS · MARIA · WES · T/O ALLEN · GMALEN ·
 GNEDICH HERN · EVERDE UAN · ALEN · CRIST(US) ·
 DI DI · MART(ER) · HEFT · GELEDEN · GNADE ·
 HERN · IOH(AN)E · UAN SCHEPENSTEDEN · / UNDE ·
 UERSEGTEG · NICHT · HEMELRIKE · IWME · TRWEN ·
 DIENER · DARTWIK · (CHRIST)E · UERGIF · ALLE ·
 MISSEDAT · DEME · DI · DIT · VAT · GEMAKET · HAT ·
 HANS · APENGITER · WAS · HE · GENANT · VND · WAS ·
 GEBORN · UAN · SASSEN LANT ·

In the year of our Lord 1337 on the eve of Pentecost this work was completed. Mary be merciful in all cases to Mister Everd van Alen. Christ who suffered the martyrdom be gracious to Mister John of Schepenstede / And do not deny the Kingdom of Heaven to his faithful servant Hartwich. Christ, forgive all evil deeds to him who made this baptismal font: Hans Apengeter he was called, and came from Saxony.

Thus, Everd van Alen and Johann van Schepenstede, presumably also Hartwich, the workshop foreman of St. Mary's Church, can be assumed to be the donors, while Hans Apengeter is explicitly named in the inscription as the actual caster. Again, the inscription characterises a single person as responsible for the whole casting. However, the complexity of one of the bronze castings as well as the stylistic differences of various objects associated with or attributed to Hans Apengeter – mentioned in various inscriptions²⁹ – suggest that several craftsmen were involved in the production of the two bronze castings. The reliefs on both baptismal fonts are similar, and neither of them bears any inscription related to the sacrament of baptism. This similarity, and the fact that figures of the Apostles and the Virgins as well as of the Passion scenes are found on both fonts, strongly suggests that a general narrative program was realised, a program which can be found in a similar form on contemporary altarpieces from the first half of the fourteenth century.³⁰

The mutual influence of the principal pieces of medieval church furnishing found in these churches is also suggested by the clear 'architectonisation' of the reliefs on the baptismal

font, a style which is also found in completely architectonically structured altarpieces, where individual sculptures or scenes composed in cycles are found in the arcades. For this reason, it can be assumed that the sculptors responsible for the contemporary woodcarvings were also involved in the production of the bronze castings, and given the quality of the figures on the baptismal fonts, we may assume that these figures were made by high-ranking sculptors. Such figures were made using patrices – the hollow moulds into which the wax of the casting mould was eventually pressed – a task which required the participation of high-ranking sculptors.³¹ In contrast, individual parts such as the rather clumsily designed plants in the Mount of Olives scene on the Lübeck casting seem to have been freely modelled by less talented assistants or in the foundry workshop itself.

The patrices of the figures on the two baptismal vessels in Wismar and Lübeck have sometimes been attributed to Hermann Walther von Kolberg, to whom the sculptures of the main altarpiece of the former Benedictine abbey church of Cismar – near Lübeck – as well as the Bocholt stalls in Lübeck Cathedral are also attributed.³² However, despite strong motivic, iconographic and stylistic correspondences between the bronze figures and wood carvings from fourteenth century workshops in Lübeck, his role as originator of these objects or designs cannot be definitively established. We may therefore assume that the hollow moulds for the wax models were not taken from wooden sculptures that were then used again (for example on altarpieces), but that these sculptures were made specifically for further use as patrices. We may therefore assume that the sculptures serving as patrices, and the bronze castings were made within a very short time span. Thus, the production of patrices exclusively for the manufacture of moulds for the wax plates applied to the *cuppae* of the baptismal fonts cannot be assumed for all these bronze castings. In the present case, this also applies to the clearly observable temporal connection between the production of the patrices and the baptismal vessels.

3. Towards serial production – additively and modularly constructed baptismal fonts of the fourteenth century

The bronze baptismal fonts made in Lüneburg – especially in the first half of the fourteenth century – have no scenic or

²⁹ Niehr 2022, 169–170, 176–177.

³⁰ The high altarpiece of the church in the former Cistercian monastery of Doberan near Rostock was built in the early fourteenth century. In concept, it is similar to the churches in Lübeck and Wismar, with a relief cycle of narrative scenes and isolated sculptures. On this altarpiece, see von Fircks 2018.

³¹ Niehr 2022, 177–178.

³² Niehr 2022, 178–179; Beuckers and Vennebusch 2022, 358. On Hermann Walther von Kolberg, see Wentzel 1937, 70–71; Wentzel 1938, 93–105; Wentzel 1941, XII–XX.



Fig. 7: Bronze baptismal font, St. Nicholas' Church Borstel, first half of the fourteenth century.

narrative programs; instead, they feature unusually figurative and ornamental applications. This stands in clear contrast to the fonts and figures cast in Hildesheim, Osnabrück and the workshop of Hans Apengeter. While the artefacts presented so far indicate a close connection to sculpture workshops, the baptismal vessels originating in Lüneburg are linked to other types of work. The various baptismal fonts shown above (see Figs 7 and 8) are closely connected with the name Ulricus. Some of these fonts are found in the Lüneburg Heath, others are found to the north and south of the Lower Elbe – Dithmarschen to the north and the area around Stade to the south.

Evidence for the origin of individual baptismal fonts in the same workshop can be found, firstly, in the inscriptions which run below the upper rim of the bowl, where they usually have the same wording: 'QVI BAPTIZATVR HOC SACRO FONTE LAVATVR' ('Whoever is baptised in this holy fountain is washed'), sometimes with the additions 'MVNDVS LABE' ('pure from sin') or 'ET CATHOLICVS REPVTATVR' ('and he is considered a Catholic').³³

³³ Mundt 1908, 19–27; Vennebusch 2023b, 440–445.

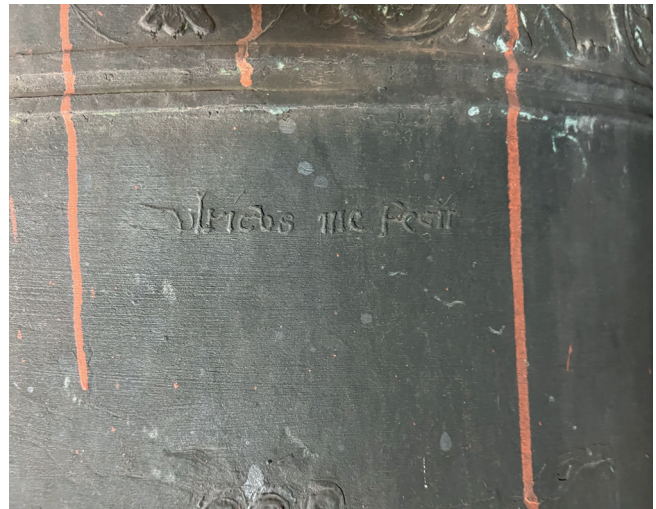


Fig. 8: Ulricus, 'Sunday Bell', Collegiate Church of St. Peter and Paul Bardowick, around 1325.

Secondly, the *cuppae* of these bronze castings is dominated by the figure of the enthroned Pantocrator, which appears four times and is surrounded by medallions with the tetramorph of the Evangelists (Matthew: angel; Mark: lion; Luke: ox; John: eagle). Between each of these relief figures there is a smaller figure showing Peter with the key, Paul with the sword, a bishop with the palm frond of the martyrs and a saint with a book. These four applications are not only found in the bronze castings of this group of works, but can also be seen on other baptismal fonts such as the one in the St. Jacob's Church in Lüdingworth near Cuxhaven, which is dated to the middle of the fourteenth century.³⁴ Some of these baptismal fonts show clear epigraphic similarities with the inscription found on the shoulder of the 'Sunday Bell' ('Sonntagsglocke') in the collegiate church of St. Peter and Paul in Bardowick, which dates to around 1325 and which has the following inscription:³⁵

+ O REX · GLORIE · XPE · UENI · CVM · PACE

O, King of Glory, Christ, come with your peace!

³⁴ On this baptismal font, see Mithoff 1878, 64; Mundt 1908, 14–15; Weckwerth 2004a, 6; Vennebusch 2023b, 435–440.

³⁵ On this bell, see Wrede 1908, 14–20; Friske 2017, 10–11; Peter 2018, 414–415; Peter 2019, 61. A second inscription by the same 'scribe' ('+ DVM · TRAOR · AUDITE · VOCO · UOS · AT · SACRA · VENITE' ['While I am being rung, listen. I call you to the Holy. Come!']) is found on the 'Penitential Bell' ('Bußglocke') of the collegiate church in Bardowick, which is also dated to around 1325. On this bell, see Wrede 1908, 20–22.



Fig. 9: Front cover of the 'Spandau Gospels', Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 375.

Since the flank of the bell also bears the small inscription ‘ulricus me fecit’ (‘Ulrich made me’), the baptismal fonts were also attributed to Ulricus, although he is not named in any of the inscriptions found on the baptismal fonts themselves (see Fig. 8). In this context, however, it should be noted that the considerable epigraphic differences between the inscription on the shoulder and the one on the flank suggest that the same ‘scribe’ cannot be assumed.³⁶

The question as to what role Ulricus played as originator in the production of the various bronze castings cannot be conclusively answered. In contrast, the use of relief appliqués, which originate from the goldsmith’s art, can be determined quite clearly: For example, the Pantocrator with the four medallions of the symbolic creatures portraying the Evangelists is found on the front cover of the ‘Spandau Gospels’³⁷, which is thought to have been made in northern Germany, possibly in Hamburg, in the late thirteenth century (see Fig. 9).³⁸

According to Erich Meyer, both the gilded silver medallions of the Animalia and the Pantocrator figure were punched. It can therefore be assumed that these punches, made by a goldsmith, were used to produce either the wax moulds for the applications of the baptismal fonts themselves or – more likely – the dies used for the later production of the moulds.³⁹ The various baptismal fonts that have such reliefs on their *cuppae* were made using the mantle lifting process. This process was more economical and less expensive than the lost wax process, since the wax – a precious raw material at the time – was only needed for the applications, and not for the basic structure of the baptismal vessel.⁴⁰ In the mantle lifting process, all three forms – the core, the model of the baptismal font and the mantle – were made of clay. In the final stage, wax applications produced with the help of hollow moulds were placed upside down on the casting model before the mantle was applied; the clay layers were then burnt, and the wax melted out. In this way, bronze castings could be produced almost serially, and a program of reliefs could easily be reproduced.

Obviously, a varying degree of care was taken in the casting workshop. In some cases, the small figures were placed very accurately, and the overhangs of the support plate



Fig. 10: Birth of Jesus, bronze baptismal font, St. Peter’s and Paul’s Church Betzendorf, 1368.

were then removed; in other cases, these figures were placed directly onto the casting model without any reworking of the wax applications, so that the platelets, which were only roughly and hurriedly shaped, are still visible in the casting. However, the use of reliefs, which originally came from the field of the goldsmith’s art and were thus made by originators working with delicate filigree, is not limited to the figures of the Pantocrator and the four Evangelists. Other baptismal fonts, probably also cast in Lüneburg from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards, such as the baptismal fonts in Wietzendorf (around 1350)⁴¹ and Betzendorf (1368),⁴² illustrated above, show both ornamental applications such as bracteates and medallions portraying scenes from the life of Jesus, sometimes arranged in a narrative cycle (see Fig. 10).

This kind of decoration can be found on fourteenth century paraments in the form of punched decorative plates; such items have been preserved in nunneries in the Lüneburg Heath, as shown here (see Fig. 11).⁴³

³⁶ Friske 2017, 19.

³⁷ Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 375.

³⁸ On this book cover, see Saherwala and Theissen 1987, 249 [IV.16].

³⁹ On this production method, see Meyer 1932, 178.

⁴⁰ On this method, see Otte 1884, 108–113; Beelte 1962, 112–114.

⁴¹ On this baptismal font, see Kähler 1993, 26–28; Vennebusch 2022c, 37–38.

⁴² On this baptismal font, see Mithoff 1877, 24; Kähler 1993, 22–26; Vennebusch 2023a, 66–73.

⁴³ On the use of decorative plates on paraments, see von Boehn 1934; von Boehn 1935; Appuhn 1955; Appuhn 1966, 113 [Nr. 26]; Appuhn 1989, 32–33.



Fig. 11: 'Fürleger' with decorative plates (Resurrection left, Birth of Jesus right), pearl embroidery / gold and silver plate, first half of the fourteenth century, Isenhagen Monastery Hankensbüttel.

Thus, the origin of these reliefs – respectively of the punches with which they were shaped – can be traced back to goldsmith's workshops; the latter were possibly located in the vicinity of the former monasteries of the Cistercian and Benedictine nuns. Furthermore, these appliqués were not made exclusively for use as patrices for the decoration of bronze castings, as can be assumed for the patrices or sculptures made in Hans Apengeter's workshop; such items were created by wood sculptors. Indeed, given the various depth of the reliefs and the dimensions of the small medallions (measuring about 5.5 cm and depicting scenes from the Life of Jesus) as well the elaborately sculpted figure of the Pantocrator (with a height of about 22.5 cm), the 'original patrices' can be assumed to have had different functions: While the smaller reliefs (which, it seems, were originally created as models – in thin gold or silver plate or wax – and used in for further reproductions) were later sewn onto paraments as applications reproduced with punches, the larger figure of the Pantocrator was probably planned as a very impressive book cover decoration.

We may thus conclude that patrices were used in the following ways: On the one hand, conceptually or artistically important baptismal fonts were decorated with the help of specially made, highly sculptural patrices which were rarely used more than once, namely, in the production of the larger bronze castings. Here, the involvement of sculptors seems to have been the reason for the extraordinary quality of the reliefs. Even in these cases, however, individual figures were produced serially and eventually 'individualised' by adapting or adding certain attributes. On the other hand, flat appliqués, which were usually modest in size, and which are

found on numerous baptismal fonts, are more likely to be an indication of the serial – and thus more cost-effective – production of bronze castings.

In view of the serial production of the bronze baptismal fonts and other advances, the question arises as to what extent they are still 'originals' – if they ever were. In any answer to this question, both the arrangement and design of the wax moulds on the *cuppae* must be considered, for they play a significant role; however, the importance of the inscriptions carved into the hardened clay mantle after the moulds were fired should not be underestimated. These inscriptions show a great deal of variation and ensure the individualisation of each bronze casting. Not only do they exhibit individual epigraphic characteristics that reveal the 'handwriting' of a particular 'scribe', but in some cases, the inscriptions show faces carved into the letters. The bells of the collegiate church in Bardowick – including the 'Sunday Bell' ('Sonntagsglocke') – have such inscriptions. However, the differences in the respective inscriptions are considerable, and it is unlikely that the scribe of the main inscriptions on the shoulders of the bells (and thus also on the baptismal fonts) was the Ulricus who placed the smaller inscription on the 'Sonntagsglocke'. Nevertheless, this is not an isolated case, as the 'Big Market Bell' ('Große Marktglocke') in the town hall in Lüneburg, dating from 1385, proves: in addition to large and elaborately incised depictions of Mary, the Mother of God, with the infant Jesus and John the Baptist, this bell bears the inscription⁴⁴

⁴⁴ On this bell, see Wrede 1904, 51–52 [31].



Fig. 12: Bronze baptismal font, Minster of St. Alexander Einbeck, 1427.

+ANNO * D(OMI)NI * M * CCC * L * X * X * V + LAUDATE
* EVM * I(N) * SIMBALIS * BENESONANTIBVS +

In the year of the Lord 1385. Praise him with melodious
cymbals!

Furthermore, the flank between the two incised drawings shows an inscription band, also incised and rolled in at both ends, into which the words ‘m(a)g(iste)r / iohan(ne)s me fecit’ (‘Master Johannes made me’) have been ‘written’ rather clumsily; they are also in the hardened clay mantle, but to the left. The epigraphic idiosyncrasies of the two inscriptions and in particular their different qualities suggest that the caster (presumably Johannes) and the unnamed ‘scribe’ of the main inscription are different persons and thus specific ‘originators’ of this bell, each with their own contributions to this casting.

4. Putting the pieces together – the baptismal font from Einbeck and the diversification of bronze casting

From the fifteenth century onwards, the production of baptismal fonts became increasingly varied; these vessels were often no longer cast ‘in one piece’ but constructed from different parts. Whereas the production of the older baptismal fonts can be described as ‘modular’ – simply constructed using the mantle-lifting method with serially reproduced medallions, figures and bracteates – the more recent bronze castings were produced using an ‘additive’, ‘diversified’ and ‘combinatory’ method. An example of such a baptismal font can be found in the former collegiate church of St. Alexander in Einbeck near Hannover. This font is also of interest because it allows us to draw reliable conclusions about some of the originators involved in its production (see Fig. 12).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ On this baptismal font, see Heege 2000, 19; Kellmann 2017, 262–263.

The baptismal font, now installed in the Chapel of the Holy Blood (in the Minster of St. Alexander), has the appearance of a sturdy, thickset chalice. The broad octagonal *cuppa* rests on a central foot with a *nodus*, which is flanked by four lion figures with escutcheons arranged crosswise. The upper and lower rims of the *cuppa* are framed by two circumferential inscription bands which encase the relief register. The latter is formed in eight tracery arcades each of which contains a figure: Saints Alexander (‘sanctus · allexander ·’), Felicitas (‘s(an)c(t)a · felicitas · mat(e)r – allex(a)nd(ri)’), John the Baptist (‘Joha(n)nes · babtista ·’), John the Evangelist (‘i(o)h(ann)es · ewa(ngelis)ta ·’), Peter (‘petrus’), Thomas (‘s(an)c(t)us · thomas · apostolus ·’), the Mother of God Mary with the Child Jesus (‘sancta · maria · virgo’) and the Risen Christ (‘Jhesus · cristus’). These figures are identified by various attributes and by the inscriptions in the band below.⁴⁶ Further inscriptions contain two antiphons which are used when dispensing holy water at the beginning of the Sunday mass during the year:

+ Asperges · me · d(omi)ne · ysopo · et · // mu(n)dabor ·
lauabis · me · i(n)sup(er) · ny//ue(m) · de · albabor

You will wet me, Lord, with hyssop, and I will be cleansed;
you will wash me, I will become whiter than snow

Respectively at Easter time:

Vidi · aqua(m) · eg(r)ed(i)e(n)te(m) // · de · te(m)plo ·
a late(re) · dext(r)o · all(elui)a · et · om(ne)s // ad · quos
· per · venit · aqua · is // ta · salui · facti · su(n)t · et ·
dicent · // alleluia · all(elui)a

I saw the water coming out of the temple on the right
side, Hallelujah, and all to whom this water came were
healed, and they will say: Hallelujah, Halleluja

In addition, the baptismal font is dated: ‘Anno · d(omi)ni · // · millesi(m)o · c°c°c° · xxvii° ·’ (‘In the year of the Lord 1427’). Of particular interest are the two inscriptions in which the originators involved in the production of the bronze casting are named: Below the figures of St. John the Evangelist and St. Thomas is the inscription:

got · gheue · de(n) · sele(n) · // rat · de · dit · ghe · m(a)
k(e)t · h(a)t · regner(us) · / hen(n)y(n)g(us) ·

God grant counsel to the soul of him who made this.
Henning Regner.

in which the material originator of the baptismal font is named (and God is asked to grant salvation to his soul): the bronze caster Henning Regner, probably from Hannover.⁴⁷ In addition, a kneeling figure dressed in liturgical vestments (alb, *pluviale* and *almutie*) can be seen next to the apostle Thomas; this is the figure of the donor, Degenhard Ree (see Fig. 13).

The almuce identifies Degenhard Ree as a canon, thus providing a direct link to the Einbeck collegiate chapter. The donor is now identified beyond doubt by the inscription, which winds along in a curved band between the small figure of the donor and the apostle Thomas:

d(omi)n(us) · dege(n)hard(us) · ree · orate · pro · dato(r)e ·

Lord Degenhard Ree. Pray for the donor!

Here, Degenhard Ree is explicitly mentioned as the donor, for whose salvation the reader is asked to intercede. Although – as with other baptismal fonts – only the donor (Degenhard Ree) and the supposed bronze caster (Henning Regner) are named in the inscriptions, the technology involved in the production of this baptismal font clearly implies that, in contrast to the baptismal vessels analysed so far, the artefact from Einbeck was not cast in one piece, a fact which clearly suggests that a number of originators were involved in the production of this bronze casting. The individual architectural elements such as the buttresses and the blind tracery inserted between them are riveted to the *cuppa*, as are the figures. This is particularly evident in the small flaps extending from the pillars and reaching into the relief fields, in which the rivets are recognisable. We may therefore conclude that the individual compartments were moulded and cast separately before the various elements were attached to the baptismal font.⁴⁸ Even in the production of the architecturally structured baptismal fonts from Wismar

⁴⁷ On Henning Regner, see Mithoff 1885, 261; Habicht 1913, 258–260; Habicht 1917, 206–207.

⁴⁸ On this idea, see Vennebusch 2024b.

⁴⁶ On the inscriptions, see Hülse 1996, 14–15 [10].



Fig. 13: Degenhard Ree kneeling in front of St. Thomas, bronze baptismal font, Minster of St. Alexander Einbeck, 1427.

and Lübeck, it can be assumed that, although the casting was done in one piece, the workshop was organised according to the division of labour.

The separate production of the individual castings is accompanied by progressive diversification of the respective crafts, and is not specific to the production of bronze baptismal fonts, rather, it is characteristic of late medieval workshop organisation.⁴⁹ Accordingly, in addition to the caster, we may assume that tracery cutters for the architectural elements, sculptors for the figures and possibly craftsmen coming from a goldsmith's workshop undertook this highly specialised work together – in a single casting house. This assumption is based on the observation that the inscription was engraved into the bronze only after casting and achieved by hatching the areas between the letters.⁵⁰ Such a technique was especially common in the field of late medieval goldsmithing and required very precise work.

In reviewing the history of the construction of medieval baptismal fonts, the amount of existing data cannot be compared with that available for other bronze castings: for instance, the bell of St. Martin's Church in Lühnde near Hildesheim – cast in 1278 and fractured and melted down in 1858 for a new casting – had figurative drawings of extraordinary quality incised into its flank. As regards the identity of the originators an inscription on this bell – in small letters below the dominant inscription – is of considerable significance:⁵¹

SIGNO · DIES · FESTOS · FLEO · DEFVNCTOS VOCO ·
VIVOS

I signify the feast days, mourn the deceased, call the living.

Around the shoulder:

ANNO DOMINI M · CC · LXX · VIII · ME FVDIT ·
TIDERIC(VS) VI · K(ALENDAS) · NOVE(M)B(R)IS · ET
· ME · PINXIT · HERMANNUS PLEBAN(VS) ·

In the year of the Lord 1278, Dietrich cast me on the 6th day
before the Kalends of November, and priest Hermann painted me.

⁴⁹ Huth 1967, 31–54.

⁵⁰ Vennebusch 2022b, 162.

⁵¹ Mithoff 1875, 198–199; Wulf 2014, 51–53 [4]. Whether or not Hermann himself also developed the figurative drawing he incised into the clay mantle is debatable; models for incised drawings were frequently used. On these incised drawings, see Peter 1983.

This inscription clearly shows that different people were responsible for the casting and for the applied decoration of the object, in this case the bell. Again, an inscription on the tomb of Bishop Wolfhard von Roth in Augsburg Cathedral offers further evidence of a division of labour in the workshops in which large bronze castings were produced; the following inscription is found at the feet of the deceased's *gisant*:⁵²

. OTTO . ME . CERA . FECIT . CVONRATQ(VE) . PER .
E(RA)

Otto made me of wax and Konrad of bronze.

This inscription shows that, while the priest Hermann carved the drawings (presumably also the inscriptions) into the clay mantle of the bell (possibly made by Dietrich), it was Otto who created the complete wax model of the tomb that was then cast in bronze by Conrad – who is assigned the role of the one who converted Otto's plastic work from the temporary wax to the permanent bronze. In the case of bronze baptismal fonts, such written evidence is not available. Thus, any conclusions about the division of labour and the different originators in the various crafts involved in the casting and their gradual specialisation must be deduced. However, given the complexity of the casting and design of baptismal fonts – much more complex than that of bells – we may assume that the information found in the inscriptions on Bishop von Roth's tomb and on the bell in Lühnde are relevant to the conception and production of baptismal fonts. Furthermore, the role of the donors and of the presumed casters is explicitly documented by numerous inscriptions.

5. Conclusion

For centuries, baptismal fonts have been seen as the product of an all-round talent rather than of a workshop where numerous professionals were involved in the production process. A single person was seen as having been primarily responsible for the casting (and, at least in the fourteenth century, for a single casting) and this person was named in the inscription – along with the donor(s). The common stylisation of individual persons, be they ecclesiastical dignitaries, sculptors, or even bronze casters, especially in the art historiography of the nineteenth century, helped to

⁵² Bornschlegel 2020, 106–107; Diemer 2020; Olchawa 2020, 186–193.

consolidate this view. In fact, however, these workshops did not differ from the sculpture workshops about which more is known; such workshops had craftsmen from different specialised fields in their ranks producing the individual elements of an object that were then put together, forming a distinct object. However, the present study of baptismal fonts and their complexity reveals that, even in late medieval casting workshops, their production involved a division of labour and became increasingly well-organized. Over time, technological innovations and diversification as well as the separation of tasks and conceptual changes in design led to an ever-increasing complexity.

In order to delineate – or redefine – the role of the persons named in the inscriptions on the baptismal fonts, it is worth taking a further look at the *Vita* of Bernward of Hildesheim mentioned in the introduction. Regarding Bernward's role as originator, Thangmar wrote the following:⁵³

Inde officinas ubi diversi usus metalla fiebant circuiens,
singulorum opera libraba

Then he went around through the workshops where metals
were worked in various ways and he evaluated the work of
the individual craftsmen.

Thus, although elsewhere, Thangmar characterises Bernward as a skilled person, here he clearly assigns him the post of overseer – in the role of a workshop manager. In this paper it is argued that the same should be considered with regard to the production of late medieval bronze castings.

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⁵³ Thangmar, *Leben des hl. Bernward*, ed. Kallfälz 1973, chap. 5, 280.

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