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In 2014, the 1200th anniversary of Charlemagne's death was celebrated with exhibitions and publications.¹ Even after such a long period of time the Holy Roman emperor appeals to our historic imagination. Just a couple of months earlier, in December 2013, I identified a figure on a recently discovered sixteenth-century wooden panel as a representation of Charlemagne. This panel, sold at auction, used to be part of a set of four stall ends (Fig. 1).² In this paper I will elaborate on its identification by looking at late medieval images of ecclesiastical and secular rulers on choir stalls and the reasons for their representation. In addition, I will present a hypothesis about the patron who commissioned the stall ends with Charlemagne's image on them.

Four Stall Ends

Choir stalls were part of the church furniture in cathedrals, collegiate and monastic churches, and, on a smaller scale, in parish and village churches. Placed in the choir, the liturgical centre of the church, they functioned as seats for the clergy. Generally, the stalls are made up of one or two rows of tip-up seats placed against the north, south, and sometimes the west side of the choir, and terminated with stall ends at the end of the rows. The back of the stalls is formed by panels, often finished with some canopy work. To give some relief to the clergy who sang and prayed standing up, the tip-up seats were provided with brackets underneath, the so-called misericords. The often prolific decorative sculpture on choir stalls is an abundant source for religious and profane subjects.

Throughout Europe, an estimated 750 such monuments from the late medieval period (1150–1550) have survived. Reformation, wars and secularization have led to the destruction

of many medieval choir stalls. Many more were dismantled, moved, and sold to other churches or private collections. This was also the case with the four sixteenth-century stall ends in question which once belonged to one ensemble. As in so many cases, information about provenance was lost because the nineteenth-century sellers and buyers of these wooden panels showed little interest in the origin of the woodwork.

Between 1836 and 1848 the four stall ends were bought by the Englishman Charles Scarisbrick. During that period, his house, Scarisbrick Hall in the county of Lancashire, was renewed and refurbished by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and his son Edward.³ Decorated with medieval and neo-Gothic furniture and art, the house was a prototype of the English Gothic Revival. Immediately after the death of Charles Scarisbrick in 1860 parts of the collection were sold at organized sales.⁴ Other auctions followed and in 1963 the four stall ends were sold at auction to a private collector from the Netherlands.⁵ Fifty years later the wooden panels returned to Great Britain to be sold to another private European collector.⁶

Trees of Lineage and Narratives

Each stall end depicts a tree with intricate branches springing from a figure sitting or lying down. Three of the four panels show well-known iconographical themes: the Tree of Jesse, *Ecclesia* holding a chalice with a tree, and the Apostles' Tree which springs from the chest of Christ who lies on his tomb. The schematic structure of the tree is an ideal medium to reveal how people and events relate to each other. The *Tree of Jesse*, which visualizes the ancestry of Christ, was immensely popular throughout the Late Middle Ages. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has explained a large part of the success of this



Fig. 1. Set of four panels from the sides of choir stalls, c. 1510–20, oak, 234 × 54 × 9 cm each, private collection.

genealogical tree with the idea that it expresses ‘the continuity of a line and the community of a lineage’.⁷ *Ecclesia* is the personification of the Church. She holds a chalice from which branches grow. This tree represents the New Testament with the life of Christ and his sacrifice for mankind. From bottom to top these branches hold the Holy Trinity, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Harrowing of Hell, the Crucifixion, the Entombment, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. Christ crucified takes the central position.

The Apostles’ Tree grows from Christ’s chest as a New Testament parallel to the Old Testament Jesse. He holds a cross and lies on his grave while the blood flows from his side wound into a chalice. The tree with the apostles – from bottom to top and left to right we see Peter, John, Paul, Bartholomew, James the Great, Andrew, Thomas, Matthew, Simon, Philip, Matthias, and James the Less – with Christ at the root visualizes the Christian community as a family. As such, it seems to point forward to a genealogy



Fig. 2. Jörg Syrlin, stall end on the south west side of the choir stalls, c. 1493, oak, Abbey Church of Blaubeuren (Baden-Württemberg). Photo: Courtesy of the Centre for Art Historical Documentation (CKD), Radboud University Nijmegen.

of Christian faith, because the apostles would continue to spread Christ's word.

Worldly Rulers on Choir Stalls

The fourth panel shows an armoured worldly ruler with sword, crown and orb, resting on a cushion as with Jesse and *Ecclesia*. While he seems to be asleep, a tree springs from his chest. Its branches are decorated with six bishops and six secular figures. Stall ends were mostly decorated with biblical subjects, saints, prophets, evangelists, and church fathers.⁸ But they were also an ideal place to depict ecclesiastical and worldly patrons in order to commemorate them. In the fourteenth century, the master carver Jean de Liège represented himself, together with his patron Amédée VII of Savoie (c. 1360–91), on the ends of the choir stalls in the Church of St Francis at Lausanne.⁹ Jean de Liège kneels with folded hands in front of the standing Count who holds a banner and the coat of arms

of the Savoian family. An inscription states that *Iohannis de Leodio* was the creator of these stalls in 1387.¹⁰

Another beautiful example can be found in the parish church of the German town of Memmingen (Bavaria) where twelve busts decorate the lower rows of the early sixteenth-century stall ends.¹¹ Not only are the church wardens, priest, and organist of St Martin's Church depicted here, but also the mayor and his wife and other local dignitaries. The function of this building as a parish church makes it likely that members of the city council were financially involved in the production of the stall, and subsequently integrated in its decoration.

The commemorative function of sculpture on stall ends is even more visible on the choir stalls in Blaubeuren Abbey (Baden-Württemberg). This Benedictine community was founded in the eleventh century by the counts of Tübingen and Von Ruck. The abbey church was rebuilt in the late fifteenth century after a fire. On this occasion, Jörg Syrlin (1455) made a set of choir stalls under the guidance of Abbot Heinrich III Fabri. In 1493 the set was finished and placed in the church.¹² The stall ends on the northwest and southwest sides are decorated with figures in old-fashioned costumes from about 1400. The clothing denotes that historic figures are presented here.¹³ On the low stall end, southwest side, a man and woman are depicted, the man holding an inscribed scroll (Fig. 2). A bust of a man with a hat and a scroll is placed on top of the stall end. Both the hat and the scroll have text. The inscriptions reveal the identity of the people depicted: they are Count Anselm von Tübingen with his wife Bertha and Count Henricus von Tübingen.¹⁴ In addition, members of the Von Ruck family are depicted on the stall ends. With these representations, the fifteenth-century patron honoured the founding fathers of the abbey and its church.

The aforementioned examples show that ecclesiastical and secular figures were depicted on stall ends. In almost all of these cases these people were the patrons of the choir stalls or the church building. The function of these representations does not differ from the representation of donors on other objects such as paintings



Fig. 3. Stall end on the north west side of the choir stalls, c. 1345, oak, Frankfurt am Main: Cathedral of St Bartholomew. Photo: Courtesy Centre for Art Historical Documentation (CKD), Radboud University Nijmegen.

or altarpieces. The patrons of the choir stalls were, similarly, seeking for salvation. Their representations on the stall ends showed their social position in a memorial to them.¹⁵

Holy Roman Emperors on Choir Stalls

In the collegiate church of St Bartholomew in Frankfurt am Main (Hesse) two stall ends – the ones located on the west side of the choir – show a well thought-out decoration. On the south-west panel we see in the lower section Christ crucified with Mary and Mary Magdalene. Above them, in the higher section, stands St Bartholomew holding his flayed skin. Next to the patron saint of the church, the coat of arms of Kuno II von Falkenstein (c. 1320–88) is depicted. Von Falkenstein, provost of the church's chapter and later archbishop of Trier, was the donor of the choir stalls ordered around 1345 and most probably the inventor of the programme for the stall ends.¹⁶ Sts Agnes and Catherine decorate the lower section of the north-west panel. The crowned man in the upper section holding a sceptre and the model of the church can be identified as Charlemagne who had been venerated as the founder of Frankfurt am Main since the thirteenth century (Fig. 3).¹⁷ The image on the stall end also shows him as the founder of the church. With the representation of St Bartholomew and Charlemagne on the stall ends, Kuno II von Falkenstein was honouring and commemorating the patron of the collegiate church and the presumed founder of the city, and, with the addition of his own coat of arms, he places himself alongside the patron of the choir stalls.

The image of Charlemagne decorates another stall end which is kept in the Focke-Museum in Bremen. Together with three other panels it once belonged to the stalls in the town hall of this city where it was used by the mayor and councillors.¹⁸ The panels, dating from 1405–10, are decorated with full-length figures: St Peter with tiara, holding a key, St Paul with book and sword, Bishop Willehad with staff and church model, and Charlemagne. The emperor wears a cape over his suit of armour. In his hands he holds the regalia: the orb and the sword. The

top of this panel is decorated with the double-headed crowned eagle. Charlemagne and Bishop Willehad (d. 789) were venerated in Bremen as the respective founders of the city and cathedral.¹⁹

Holy Roman emperors are not a common feature on choir stalls but they are traceable in places where they were venerated, mostly as founders of city and church. Images of Henry II (973–1024) – the only Holy Roman emperor who was officially canonized by the pope, in 1146 – and his wife Cunigunde of Luxembourg (975–1040) can be found on the choir stalls in Merseburg Cathedral (Saxony-Anhalt) and in Bamberg Cathedral (Bavaria).²⁰ Most of the time they (or one of them) are depicted holding the model of the church which underlines that they were seen and venerated as the founders of the building.

An image of Emperor Charles V (1500–58) and his wife Isabella of Portugal (1503–39) decorates the back panel of the choir stalls in Dordrecht Minster.²¹ This image is part of the decorative programme on the north side of the choir stalls where the Royal Entry of Charles V in Dordrecht (1515) is depicted. After this grand entry the emperor returned to the city twice again, on 21 and 22 July 1540. It is uncertain whether the emperor made use of the choir stalls on those occasions because the ensemble was under construction between 1538 and 1541.²² It has been suggested that Charles V might have been the patron but it seems more likely that another important benefactor commissioned its decoration.²³ While Charles V might have seen his entry represented in the woodcarving, the aforementioned representations of Henry II and Charlemagne were made after their demise. Patrons instigated these representations to commemorate of these important historic figures.

The Stall End Explained

To interpret the fourth panel with Charlemagne, the aforementioned veneration of the emperor in late medieval Bremen seems to offer a solution. As in the other three panels, Charlemagne is at the base of a tree. In genealogical trees the most important figures are usually located at

the bottom and the top. Here, the emperor at the bottom is counterbalanced by the figure of a bishop. This is reminiscent of the stall ends in the Focke-Museum where Charlemagne was depicted with Bishop Willehad. The veneration of the two started in thirteenth-century Bremen, and one of the earliest examples of this veneration is the first city seal which bears the image of the seated emperor and bishop holding a model of the church (c. 1220–30).

This representation, which became popular in Bremen, can be seen in painting and sculpture until the sixteenth century. A fresco (1532) in the upstairs vestibule of the town hall shows Charlemagne and Willehad in a similar position as on the seal. The church of Bremen takes the central position with both figures enthroned beside it. The composition is framed with an architectural painted border decorated with grotesques and coats of arms. The text, on the left side and at the bottom of the wall painting, refers to the history of Bremen and its position as free Hanseatic city.²⁴

A stone relief with a similar depiction, dating from 1512, stretches horizontally across the west rood loft of Bremen Cathedral (Fig. 4).²⁵ The only preserved part from the former rood screen and organ loft, the relief was commissioned by Archbishop Johann III Rode von Wale (c. 1445–1511).²⁶ Archival and stylistic research has revealed that Evert van Roden and his Münster workshop sculpted the relief, Van Roden and his journeymen working with different materials such as stone and wood.²⁷ In the central position are Charlemagne and Willehad, together holding the model of the church. They are flanked on both sides by five figures in a niche standing under an arch: bishops, male and female saints. The figures immediately next to the central relief are thought to be the archbishops of Bremen: Ansgar, Rimbert, Adalgar and Adalbert. The male saints have been interpreted as Sts Achatius and Quiriacus, whose relics are kept in the church, and Sts Maurice and Victor, both members of the Theban Legion. The female saints represented on the relief are presumably St Corona, whose grave was situated in the church, and St Emma of Lesum whose relics were also venerated here.²⁸ The identifica-



Fig. 4. Evert von Roden, stone relief (detail), *c.* 1512, Baumberger limestone, Bremen Cathedral, west rood loft. Photo: Courtesy of the Centre for Art Historical Documentation (CKD), Radboud University Nijmegen.

tion of these figures is confirmed by ten smaller figures, standing between the niches under a canopy, holding the attributes which refer to the bishops and saints. Behind Charlemagne stands a young man with long hair holding the regalia. The figure who accompanies Willehad has in his hands the bishop's staff and stola.²⁹ The two smaller figures on the far side of the relief are recognized as the donors Johann III Rode von Wale and his coadjutor and successor, Christoph von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (*c.* 1487–1558).³⁰ Both donors are kneeling and wearing the same kind of garment decorated with tassels. In front of them lies an empty coat of arms. The relief commemorates the founding and the subsequent history of the city and its church with their foremost important, secular and ecclesiastical fig-

ures, Charlemagne and Willehad. The donors, the then bishop and his successor, commissioned this stone relief to the greater honour and glory of Bremen Cathedral and made themselves part of its history.³¹

Possibly, the fourth panel of the choir stalls might have had a similar purpose. A tree springs from Charlemagne's chest. On its branches are prominent figures from the history of Bremen and at the top Bishop Willehad sprouts from a leaf bud (Fig. 5). All the figures, except for Charlemagne and Willehad, present an empty escutcheon.³² The four bishops residing on the left side all have an object in their left hand, from bottom to top: a ring, a flask, a pallium, and a staff. These objects are associated with the ordination of bishops, most probably the bishop



Fig. 5. *Tree of Charlemagne*, c. 1510–20, oak, 234 × 54 × 9 cm, private collection.

who is in the centre of the panel. Since the panel appears from stylistic considerations most likely to have been made between 1510 and 1520, only two persons can be considered for this position: Johann III Rode von Wale or Christoph von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. The former was raised in Bremen where his father held a position in the city council, and became archbishop of Bremen in 1497. To gain more power Johann III Rode von Wale entered into an alliance with the ducal family of Von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. Through this alliance Christoph became coadjutor of the archbishop when he was only twelve years old. After the death of the archbishop in 1511 he succeeded him. The succession was not without problems, because the papal appointment was not made until 1518.³³ So it might be Christoph von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel who takes central stage in this relief. As the new archbishop of Bremen at the beginning of the sixteenth century, he could have commissioned these choir stalls depicting the history of the diocese. In this panel, he made a personal political statement. The six secular figures carrying banners, sword and crown are possibly representatives of the city council and the ducal family.

If the identification of the bishop is correct, the likely location for the lost choir stalls was the Cathedral of Bremen. This location is not at all improbable considering the fact that Johann III Rode von Wale ordered the relief for the west rood loft at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Nowadays only the fragments of fourteenth-century choir stalls remain in the cathedral,³⁴ having been dismantled in 1823. The remaining fragments, stall ends, consist of closed panels which are divided into compartments and decorated with bas-relief. They show a completely different style of woodwork from the four openwork panels, not surprising given that the four panels were made approximately one hundred and fifty years later.

An inspiration for the image might have been the fourteenth-century *Levitensstuhl* (sedilia) of the Cathedral of Verden (Lower Saxony) where Christoph von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel was bishop from 1502 till his death in 1558. The open-work panels of the *Levitensstuhl* are deco-

rated with branches, with half-length figures side by side. More contemporary open-work panels are scarce but can be found in the choir stalls of the Netherlandish St Peter's Church in Oirschot and the Italian Abbey of Staffarda.³⁵ These choir stalls also date from the first half of the sixteenth century and both have a stall end decorated with the Tree of Jesse.³⁶ The Oirschot ensemble – destroyed by fire during World War II – was made by the master, Jan Borchman from the Low Countries, and the choir stalls of Staffarda were the product of a collaboration of French, Flemish and German carvers. While

there are stylistic difference between these panels, amongst other things in the way the figures are carved, the different examples from Germany, the Netherlands and Italy demonstrate that the open-work panels have a long tradition in choir stall carving which started in the fourteenth century. The four panels that were likely commissioned by Christoph von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel and might have been a part of lost choir stalls made for the Cathedral of Bremen, are a welcome addition to the remaining bits and pieces.

Notes

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- Sotheby's catalogue, *European Sculpture & Works of Art: Medieval to Modern, 4 December 2013* (London: Sotheby's, 2013), Lot 46.
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- Henry Spencer & Sons, *Scarisbrick Hall, Lancashire: superb XV–mid-XVII century paneling: fine garden statuary (29 November 1963)* (Retford: Henry Spencer & Sons, 1963).
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- Jan Karel Steppe, *Wereld van Vroomheid en Satire: Laat-gotische Koorbanken in Vlaanderen* (Kasterlee: De Vroente, 1973), p. 38: 'Iohannis de Leodio architectus Sabaudie cultu sculpsit egregio opus hoc multipharie anno * domini * milleno trecento * cum septeno pariter et octogeno hic oretur corde pleno'.
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- Kahsnitz, p. 345.
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- 20 Klaus Guth, *Kaiser Heinrich II. und Kaiserin Kunigunde, das Heilige Herrscherpaar: Leben, Legende, Kult und Kunst* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2002), pp. 144–70.
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- 22 Herman A. van Duinen, *De Koorbanken van de Grote of Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk te Dordrecht* (Leiden: Primavera, 2007), pp. 48–55.
- 23 Glover, p. 308.
- 24 Gramatzki, pp. 66–78.
- 25 Reinhard Karrenbrock, 'Westfalen – Bremen – Niederlande: Westfälische Bildhauer des späten Mittelalters in Bremen', in *Bremen und die Niederlande: Jahrbuch 1995–96 Wittheit zu Bremen*, ed. by Martina Rudloff (Bremen: Hauschild, 1997), pp. 40–62 (pp. 50–62).
- 26 *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1953–), x (1974), pp. 480–81.
- 27 Reinhard Karrenbrock, 'Einflüsse und Wechselwirkungen: die westfälische Steinskulptur der Zeit zwischen 1470 und 1560 und die Brabender' in *Die Brabender: Skulptur am Übergang vom Spätmittelalter zur Renaissance*, ed. by Hermann Arnhold (Münster: Aschendorff, 2005), p. 93.
- 28 Karrenbrock, 'Westfalen – Bremen – Niederlande', p. 51.
- 29 During restoration work in 1980 the position of these two figures was incorrectly changed. While they first looked at Charlemagne and Willehad, they now are turned away from the seated figures. The young man with long hair is now placed behind Willehad, while the man with stola and staff stands behind Charlemagne. Reinhard Karrenbrock, *Evert van Roden, der Meister des Hochaltars der Osnabrücker Johanniskirche: Ein Beitrag zur westfälischen Skulptur der Spätgotik* (Osnabrück: Wenner, 1992), p. 94.
- 30 *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1953–), III (1957), p. 243.
- 31 Karrenbrock, 'Evert van Roden', p. 96.
- 32 Escutcheons on choir stalls are a regular feature, but in many cases no coats of arms are visible. The lack of polychromy on choir stalls makes it unlikely that these escutcheons were once decorated with painted coats of arms.
- 33 Theodor Wolters, 'Erzbischof Christophs Kampf um das geistliche Fürstentum in den Stiftern Bremen und Verden' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universität Hamburg, 1939).
- 34 Victor C. Habicht, 'Das Chorgestühl des Domes zu Bremen', *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, 36 (1913), 227–80; Alfred Lohr, 'Das Chorgestühl im Dom zu Bremen: Studien zur niederdeutsche Skulptur um die Mitte des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts', *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, 13 (1974), 123–80. These and other stalls are described in publications from 1753 and 1822, see Zaccharias C. von Uffenbach, *Merkwürdige Reisen durch Niedersachsen, Holland und Engelland*, 3 vols (Ulm, 1753), II, p. 209; Adam Storck, *Ansichten der freien Hansestadt Bremen und ihrer Umgebung* (Frankfurt am Main: Wilmans, 1822), pp. 248–49.
- 35 Ingrid van Woudenberg, 'De Koorbanken van Oirschot', in *De koorbanken van Oirschot en Aarschot gezien door de lens van Hans Sibbelee en Jan Verspaandonk*, ed. by Christel Theunissen (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2011), pp. 46–92; Guido Gentile, 'Il coro dell'Abbazia di Staffarda' in *La fede e i mostri: Cori lignei scolpiti in Piemonte e Valle d'Aosta (secoli XIV–XVI)*, ed. by Giovanni Romano (Turin: Fondazione CRT Cassa di risparmio di Torino, 2002), pp. 249–82.
- 36 Gentile, pp. 254–67. The choir stalls of Staffarda are now divided over two locations: the Church of S. Vittore in Pollenzo (Piemonte) and the Museo Civico d'Arte Antica (Palazzo Madama) in Turin. The panel with the Tree of Jesse is part of the museum collection, inv. no. CFR. 1778/L/1.

