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Hans Memling's Nájera altarpiece: new documentary evidence

by BART FRANSEN

An unpublished document in the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid has established the date of the Nájera altarpiece. It confirms in addition its recently questioned origin in Flanders and identifies its patron as Gonzalo de Cabredo, prior of Nájera from 1453 to 1486.

THREE PANELS SHOWING God the Father surrounded by singing and musician angels are all that remain of a monumental, multi-panel altarpiece attributed to Hans Memling that was made for the Benedictine monastery of S. María la Real in Nájera, Rioja (Fig. 1–3). Founded in 1052 by the King of Navarre, García Sánchez III, the monastery served as a mausoleum for monarchs, princes and noblemen of Navarre.¹ Following his conquest of Nájera in 1076, Alfonso VI of Leon and Castile presented the monastery to the Benedictine Order of Cluny in France. It remained a priory directly dependent on Cluny until, at the end of the fifteenth century, it gained its independence and became a self-governing abbey.

The three Memling panels were probably located in the uppermost register of the main altarpiece of the abbey church. The lost elements include the central panel, which depicted the *Assumption of the Virgin*. Judging from the dimensions of the surviving panels (together they measure 191.5 by 747 cm, including the frames), the ensemble was the largest altarpiece Memling ever made. The last trace of the missing panels is a description of 1795 in a travel diary by Melchior Gaspar

de Jovellanos, who attributed the paintings to the German school, and even perhaps to Albrecht Dürer. By then the altarpiece had been replaced by one painted in 1692.² Jovellanos found the panels dismembered and stored in different places in the monastery: the *Assumption of the Virgin* was in the upper cloister; two panels showing *Sts Vitalis and Agricola* and *Sts Prudence and Benedict, Two Apostles* and the three panels of *God the Father surrounded by singing and musician angels* were in the chapter house.³

In 1886 an art dealer from Madrid called Rafael García or Rafael Sánchez succeeded in acquiring the three surviving panels.⁴ After passing through galleries in Madrid, Lyon, Paris and Brussels, they were finally bought in 1895 by the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp for the then vast sum of 240,000 Belgian francs.⁵ Regarded ever since as one of the museum's greatest treasures, they have recently been cleaned and conserved.⁶

In a book published in 1675, which contains the earliest known reference to the Nájera altarpiece prior to its dismemberment, Gregorio de Argaiz stated that 'the altarpiece of the main altar, which is painted, is dedicated to the *Assumption of the Virgin*, and by tradition it is considered to have been painted in Flanders'.⁷ Unfortunately, later scholars were unaware of this significant piece of information. In 1893 Alphonse Wauters was the first scholar to ascribe the three panels of what he called the 'triptych' to Hans Memling. Dating the commission to around 1485, he argued that the patron may have been a member of the Spanish merchant community in Bruges, some of whom were described as 'from Nájera'.⁸ In the current literature, the attribution to

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¹ M. Cantera Montenegro: 'Santa María la Real de Nájera: fundación y primeros tiempos', *En la España Medieval* 2 (1982), pp.253–74; J. L. Sáez Lerena: *Real Patronato de Santa María la Real de Nájera: Cuarenta Años*, Nájera 2000, pp.15–34.

² J. Valdeón Baroque and M.T. Sánchez Trujillano: exh. cat. *La Rioja, tierra abierta. Nájera, legado medieval*, Nájera (Monasterio de S. María la Real) 2005, pp.92–95.

³ 'Lunes, 18 [de mayo de 1795] [. . .] En éste [el claustro alto] una excelente tabla que representa a la Virgen, casi de tamaño natural, en su Asunción, de la escuela alemana, y puede ser muy bien de Alberto Durer; todo es bellissimo: cabeza, manos, paños, angelitos verdaderamente celestiales, bordaduras; solo tiene en derredor un cielo arremolachado y unas nubes durísimas que no corresponden. [. . .] Martes, 19 [de mayo 1795] [. . .] A ver los cuadros del retablo viejo, que están en el Capítulo arrinconados. ¡Qué lástima! Son asombrosos; parecen todos de una mano; todos de la misma que la Asunción del claustro; acaso de Alberto [Durer]; un Padre Eterno; tres coros de ángeles con instrumentos músicos y cantando; San Vidal y Agrícola, mártires; San Prudencio y San Benito; de apóstoles, dos', G.M. de Jovellanos: *Obras. Diarios (Memorias íntimas) 1790–1801*, Madrid 1915, pp.225–26.

⁴ C. Garrán: 'Una joya de Nájera en Bélgica', *La Rioja (Logroño)* (August–

December 1906); F. Fernández Pardo: 'Ruina y abandono en torno al Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Nájera', *Berceo* 12 (2004), pp.12–13.

⁵ The three panels were sold to the Royal Museum by Léon Gauchez. On this dealer, see C. Hesterbeek-Bert: 'Léon Gauchez, un marchand d'art de la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle: ses rapports avec les Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique. Quelques révélations puisées aux archives du musée', *Bulletin des Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles* 43–44 (1994–95), p.211.

⁶ The conservation was carried out by Lizet Klaassen and Marie Postec. To celebrate the completion of this treatment, the Royal Museum organised a symposium in collaboration with the University of Antwerp. The proceedings will include a broader overview of the material history, commissioning and reconstruction of the Nájera altarpiece, see B. Fransen and L. Longneaux: 'The main altar of the Benedictine abbey church in Nájera', in M. Ainsworth, D. Lampens and L. Klaassen, eds.: *Proceedings of the Symposium Harmony in Bright Colours. Memling's Christ with Singing and Music-making Angels Restored. Antwerp. 13–14 March 2017* (forthcoming).

⁷ 'El retablo del Altar Mayor, que es de pincel, dedicado al Misterio de la Asunción de la Virgen, y tienen por tradición que se pintó en Flandes', G. de Argaiz: *La soledad laureada por San Benito*, Madrid 1675, p.386.

⁸ A.J. Wauters: *Sept études pour servir à l'histoire de Hans Memling*, Brussels 1893, pp.55 and 65–67.

Memling and his workshop and a date in the late 1480s have been generally accepted.⁹ Recently, however, some scholars have cast doubt on the Northern origin of the panels, since both chalk and gypsum have been detected in the preparation layer, the latter being a characteristic ground material for Southern European easel painting.¹⁰

The question of the patron of the altarpiece has been unresolved until now. In 1906 and 1908 Constantino Garrán published lengthy articles in the newspaper *La Rioja* in which he commented on the sale of the panels and explored archival sources in the hope of identifying their patron, but he was unable to add anything to Wauters's hypothesis.¹¹ In 1924 Elias Tormo y Monzó argued that the Nájera merchants in Bruges may have been intermediary agents, but rightly concluded that the order must have been placed by the monastery itself.¹² He hypothesised that Prior Pedro Martínez de Santa Coloma (prior 1423–53) was the patron of the altarpiece, but this idea was based on an erroneous attribution of the paintings to a certain 'Maestro Luis', active in the 1440s, and was not followed in the literature. However, it was Tormo y Monzó, using evidence from Jovellanos's diary, who first argued that the three panels neither originated from an organ nor formed a triptych, as had been suggested, but were originally part of the main altarpiece of the abbey church, which was dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin.

Since then, various priors and abbots have been proposed as patrons. Some authors have identified the patron as a prior who was directly appointed by Cluny, others as an abbot from the period when the monastery became independent.¹³ The last Nájera priors appointed by Cluny were Gonzalo de Cabredo (prior 1453–86) and Diego de Garnica (prior 1486–89).¹⁴ The latter, however, never established himself at Nájera, where the monks had begun an independence movement and no longer recognised the prior appointed by Cluny. One of the rebel monks was Pablo Martínez de Uruñuela, who, after a couple of years of lobbying the pope and King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, became the first independent abbot of Nájera (1486–1507).¹⁵

An unpublished document about the transition period between the priory and abbey of Nájera throws new light on these questions. This document, in the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid, is entitled *Libro Segundo de los Censos* (Second book of the Censuses) and consists of forty-three folios.¹⁶ It contains careful transcriptions made in the last quarter of the eighteenth century from a lost original *Libro Segundo de los Censos*. The copyist carefully noted the numbers of the folios from which the information came, and occasionally added personal comments.¹⁷ The main focus of the manuscript is the period of the rule of Abbot Pablo Martínez, but it also contains some

information about the earlier and later periods. There are three explicit references to the altarpiece.¹⁸

The first reads, 'In the year 1483, on the 20th of July, Don Gonzalo de Cabredo, prior of Nájera had already ordered the altarpiece in Flanders'.¹⁹ This establishes the date of the commission – sometime before 20th July 1483 – its original patron, Prior Gonzalo de Cabredo, and the origin of the altarpiece, in Flanders. To avoid confusion with the Baroque altarpiece that had decorated the main altar since 1692, the copyist added '*retablo viejo*' ('old altarpiece') in the left margin, noting that this information came from fol.192v in the original document.

Gonzalo de Cabredo was called 'de Vergara', after his native town in Gipuzcoa. He had been a monk in the Benedictine monastery of S. Millán de la Cogolla, also in the Rioja region, before being appointed prior of Nájera by the abbot of Cluny in 1456. He continued renovation works on the church and the monastery that had been initiated by his predecessor. He died on 7th May 1486 and was buried in St Anthony's Chapel in the abbey church.²⁰ His successor, Pablo Martínez de Uruñuela, continued the renovation of the monastery. In the document, reference is made to a delivery of stone for the construction of the main altar in the abbey church in 1488.²¹ It also mentions the acquisition by Don Pablo in 1492 of a curtain to hang in front of the altar during Lent.²²

The second reference to the altarpiece reads 'Prior Don Pablo, after being elected and before taking possession, also ordered several works that had been initiated in the period of his predecessor and other new ones. Among the first [. . .] he ensured] that the altarpiece commissioned by his predecessor at any cost [*a toda costa*] in Flanders was to be completed and installed on the altar'.²³ Clearly, the Nájera altarpiece was among the works initiated by his predecessor that Don Pablo brought to completion after being elected by the Nájera monks and before taking possession of the monastery. The expression '*a toda costa*' is remarkable. It may indicate that Don Gonzalo had insisted on having the altarpiece imported from Flanders.

A third and final reference to the altarpiece appears on fol.25, where several works ordered by Don Pablo are listed:

The second work was the commission to carry out the execution and finishing of the altarpiece, ordered by his predecessor, Don Gonzalo de Cabredo, in Flanders, and that now is dismembered in panels in the upper cloister; they are very beautiful paintings. This altarpiece, put in place, cost 239,383 maravedís and this was all paid by Don Pablo, except for 6,500 maravedís that Don Gonzalo had already paid at his death. The altarpiece was put in place in the year 1494.²⁴

⁹ P. Vandenbroeck: *Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Catalogus schilderijen 14de en 15de eeuw*, Antwerp 1985, pp.138–43; D. De Vos: *Hans Memling. L'œuvre complète*, Antwerp 1994, pp.56–57 and 289–82; T.H. Borchert: 'Memling's Antwerp God the Father with music-making angels', *Le dessin sous-jacent et la technologie dans la peinture. Colloque X, 5–7 septembre 1993* (1995), pp.153–68; B.G. Lane: *Hans Memling: Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges*, London and Turnhout 2009, pp.96–98 and 256; D. Martens: *Peinture flamande et goût ibérique aux XVème et XVIème siècles*, Brussels 2010, p.101; P. Vandenbroeck: *De eeuw der Vlaamse primitieven*, Antwerp 2014, pp.92–97.

¹⁰ G. Van der Snickt *et al.*: 'Material analyses of "Christ with singing and music-making Angels", a late 15th-c panel painting attributed to Hans Memling and assistants: Part I. non-invasive "in situ" investigations', *Journal of Analytical Atomic Spectrometry* 26 (2011), pp.2221–22 and 2228; Vandenbroeck 2014, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp.92–97; M. Parez: 'Biografía', in T.-H. Borchert, ed.: *exh. cat. Memling.*

Rinascimento fiammingo, Rome (Scuderie del Quirinale) 2014–15, pp.229–30.

¹¹ Garrán, *op. cit.* (note 4); C. Garrán: 'Los Memling de Nájera', *La Rioja* (December, 1908).

¹² E. Tormo: 'Las tablas memlingianas de Nájera, del museo de Amberes. Su primitivo destino, fecha y autor(?)', in E. Bertaux: *Mélanges Bertaux. Recueil de travaux dédié à la mémoire d'Emile Bertaux* (Paris 1924), pp.300–22.

¹³ Borchert, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp.158–59.

¹⁴ M. Cantera Montenegro: 'La comunidad monástica de Santa María de Nájera durante la edad media', *En la España Medieval* 36 (2013), pp.232–34.

¹⁵ *Idem*: 'Viaje a Roma de un prior de Santa María de Nájera', *Berceo* 164 (2013), pp.325–41.

¹⁶ I am very grateful to the staff of the Archivo Histórico Nacional for scanning the full document for me. A microfilm of the document is preserved at the monastery of S. María la Real in Nájera, and has been consulted in part by the



1. *God the Father surrounded by singing and musician angels* (central panel), by Hans Memling, 1483–94. Panel, 169.7 by 212.7 cm. (Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp).

The eighteenth-century copyist added to the original text that the altarpiece had been dismembered and that the panels were kept in the upper cloister. This varies from the description given by Jovellanos in his travel diary, for the copyist does not place any of the panels in the chapter house.²⁵

This last reference also includes crucial information about

the price of the altarpiece, nearly 240,000 maravedís. The fact that Don Gonzalo paid such a small percentage of the total cost may suggest that work on the altarpiece had not progressed far when he died on 7th May 1486. On the other hand, it may also indicate that Memling's workshop was sufficiently solvent to advance the production costs. This remains an open question.

local archivist J.L. Sáez Lerena, see *idem*: '¿Quién trajo el tríptico de Memling al monasterio?', *Nájera* (January 2004), p.4.

¹⁷ Since he had access to the original accounts, the author of the document may have been the archivist at the monastery, in which case he can possibly be identified with the archivist Prudencio Bujanda, who entered the monastery in 1756. He is the author of another manuscript that contains an incoherent ensemble of transcriptions and annotations regarding the monastery of Nájera and the Benedictine order, dated 1803, see B. Jiménez: 'Apuntes de Fr. Prudencio Bujanda. Monje de Sta. María la Real de Nájera', *Berceo* 28 (1953), pp.427–38. When in 1795 Jovellanos visited the monastery he referred to Bujanda as 'an honest and well-educated man' ('*hombre franco y bien instruido*'), *op. cit.* (note 3), p.226.

¹⁸ For different research purposes the document has already been explored in M. Cantera Montenegro: *Colección documental de Santa María de Nájera, Siglo XV. Regesta documental*, Logroño, 2011; *idem, op. cit.* (note 14); *idem, op. cit.* (note 15); A.

Barrón García: 'Bóvedas con figuras de estrellas y combados del tardogótico en La Rioja', *Tvíaso* 21 (2012–13), pp.219–69; and *idem*: 'Las artes decorativas del gótico en Castilla', *El Duero Oriental en la Transición de la Edad Media a la Moderna Historia Arte y Patrimonio (Biblioteca, estudio e investigación 25)*, Arando de Duero 2010, p.3, note 1.

¹⁹ See Appendix 1 below.

²⁰ J.M. Pastor Blanco: 'Rodrigo De Cabredo y Vergara', *Berceo* 164 (2013), pp.215–47; Cantera Montenegro, *op. cit.* (note 14), pp.232–34; Cantera Montenegro, *op. cit.* (note 15), p.72, note 264.

²¹ Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Clero, leg.2952, fol.9.

²² *Ibid.*, fol.18.

²³ See Appendix 2.

²⁴ See Appendix 3.

²⁵ Jovellanos, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.225–26.



2. *God the Father surrounded by singing and musician angels* (left flanking panel), by Hans Memling. 1483–94. Panel, 170 by 231.5 cm. (Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp).

The reference reveals, moreover, that the altarpiece was installed in 1494, the year of Memling's death and eleven years after it had been commissioned. The reason for the long period between the commission and the installation was not necessarily related to delays in the production of the paintings. After Don Gonzalo's death the monastery underwent a turbulent period that may have resulted in interruptions to the work. Another possible reason could have been a lack of money, since the following paragraph in the *Libro Segundo de los Censos* states that 'He [Don Pablo] also carried out many other works on the church and the monastery, and those who know the state [of conservation] of the house at that time and the limited means to undertake such works, will admire the magnanimous heart of this man'.²⁶

²⁶ See Appendix 3.

²⁷ D. Martens: 'Identification du "tableau de l'Adoration des Mages" flamand, anciennement à la Chartreuse de Miraflores', *Annales d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie* 22 (2000), pp.65–66.

²⁸ I. Redondo Parés: 'Coste de materiales; el valor del retablo Luna', in M. Miquel, O. Pérez Monzón and M. Martín Gil, eds.: *Retórica Artística en el tardogótico*

Despite the limited resources available for the renovation works, Abbot Pablo Martínez was able to pay the extremely high price for the altarpiece that his predecessor had ordered. Compared to other altarpieces of the period, 239,383 maravedís was a considerable amount. For example, the *Triptych of the adoration of the Magi* painted around 1495 by the Master of the Legend of St Catherine in Brussels for the Miraflores Charterhouse, which measured 175 by 250 cm., cost just 26,810 maravedís.²⁷ Closer in size to the Nájera altarpiece, the total width of which was 675.2 cm. (without the frames), is the altarpiece made by Sancho de Zamora and others in 1488–89 for the Chapel of Don Álvaro de Luna in Toledo Cathedral, which cost 105,000 maravedís and measures 720 by 550 cm.²⁸ Finally, in 1509 Juan de Flandes was paid 187,000 maravedís for a monumental altar-

castellano: la capilla fúnebre de Álvaro de Luna en contexto, Madrid (forthcoming).

²⁹ I. Vandevivere: *La cathédrale de Palencia et l'église paroissiale de Cervra de Pisuegra* (*Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle* 10), Brussels 1967, pp.67–71; M. Weniger: *Sittow, Morros, Juan de Flandes. Drei Maler aus dem Norden am Hof Isabellas von Kastilien*, Kiel 2011, pp.241–50; P. Silva Maroto: *Juan de Flandes*, Salamanca 2006, pp.333–44.



3. *God the Father surrounded by singing and musician angels* (right flanking panel), by Hans Memling. 1483–94. Panel, 170 by 231 cm. (Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp).

piece for Palencia Cathedral, which comprised eleven separate panel paintings. The total cost was around 300,000 maravedís.²⁹ This included the joinery and sculpture and the costs of transport and installation. It seems likely that the nearly 240,000 maravedís that the Nájera altarpiece cost also included a payment for transport from Flanders.

Together, the three references in the eighteenth-century copy of the *Libro Segundo de los Censos* make a crucial contribution to our knowledge of Memling's Nájera altarpiece. They establish beyond doubt not only its date, patron and price but also confirm its provenance and the fact that it was made 'a toda costa' in Flanders.

Appendix

1. Extract from the 'Libro Segundo de los Censos' of the Abbey of Nájera, Rioja: Don Gonzalo de Cabredo, prior of Nájera, has ordered an altarpiece in Flanders. (Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Clero, leg.2952, fol.4).

Año de 1483, a 20 de Julio ya había encargado don Gonzalo de Cabredo, Prior de Nagera, el Retablo en Flandes.

2. Extract from the 'Libro Segundo de los Censos' of the Abbey of Nájera, Rioja: Don Pablo Martínez de Uruñuela, prior of Nájera, has ensured

that the altarpiece will be completed. (Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Clero, leg.2952, fol.21).

Hizo tambien el Prior Don Pablo despues de [ser] electo, y antes de tomar la posesion, varias obras que havian quedado empezadas en tiempo de su antecesor Don Gonzalo, y otras de nuevo. De las primeras, fue una la conclusión del caracol para subir los monges al choro Alto, desde la Iglesia; cuya entrada tenia (y ahun oy perseveran vestigios de ella) por la capilla de San Juan, y salida al claustro bajo, por la puerta de este nombre: Este caracol se deshizo por los años de 1771 y en su hueco se hizo la capilla de Santa Gertrudes. Otra, hacer que se concluyere el Retablo antiguo, que su antecesor havia mandado hacer a toda costa en Flandes, hasta colocarlo en su sitio.

3. Extract from the 'Libro Segundo de los Censos' of the Abbey of Nájera, Rioja: The altarpiece, which cost 239,383 maravedís, was installed in 1494. (Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Clero, leg.2952, fol.25).

La segunda obra, fue el hacer [que] se llevase a execución, y acabase el Retablo, que su antecesor Don Gonzalo de Cabredo havia encargado en Flandes, y es el que oy persevera deshecho y en quadros en el Claustro alto, de unas pinturas muy bellas: este Retablo, puesto en casa, costó 239383 maravedies, y todos los pagó Don Pablo, a excepcion de 6500 maravedis que tenia pagados Don Gonzalo, quando murio (22) Pusose en su sitio dicho Retablo Año de 1494.

Otras muchas obras hizo tanto en la Iglesia como en el Monasterio que para quien conoce el estado que tenia entonces la casa, y los pocos medios para emprender semejantes obras admirará el corazón magnanimo de este hombre.

Errata

Unfortunately, the folio numbers referred to in this article are not correct and should read as page numbers. After having access to the codicological data, we now know that the manuscript has 21 folios, that these are written on both sides and that between folios 13 and 14 the binding includes an inserted folio with writing only on the recto side. The correct numbering of the folios therefor should be the following:

Page 102, left column, §3, line 5: reads forty-three folios, should read twenty-one folios.

Page 102, right column, §4, line 1: reads fol. 25, should read fol. 13.

Page 104, note 21: reads fol. 9, should read fol. 5.

Page 104, note 22: reads fol. 18, should read fol. 9v.

Page 105, left column, §3, line 3: reads fol. 4, should read fol. 2v.

Page 105, right column, line 21: reads fol. 21, should read fol. 11.

Page 105, right column, §3, line 3: reads fol. 25, should read fol. 13.