

*Anneli Randla*

## THE DEVIL AND KING DAVID IN PILISTVERE

St Andrew's in Pilistvere is a typical late 13<sup>th</sup> century stone church in central Estonia.<sup>1</sup> Its majestic but relatively plain architecture gives the church a certain feeling of serene dignity. The few decorative elements of the northern portal and the corbels in the nave are exceptional in the architectural sculpture of medieval Livonia (present-day Estonia and Latvia).

The partly damaged impostes of the portal bear the depictions of a dragon on the left hand side and a man in the grip of a devil on the right hand side (Fig. 1). The message about the dangers of the worldly life as opposed to the safety of the sacred space is very clear.

Inside the church, most corbels have foliage decoration but the one to the right of the triumphal arch is different. Although it has been badly damaged, the iconography can still be worked out: here Samson, the hero of the Old Testament is shown breaking the pillar of the temple of the Philistines, which he demolished after having been tricked by Delilah.<sup>2</sup> Here again the medieval congregation was reminded of earthly vices and divine intervention.

None of the medieval furnishings have survived in the church. Luckily, the 17<sup>th</sup> century wooden pulpit of the post-Reformation interior still adorns the triumphal arch. The polygonal pulpit is decorated with the

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1 On the architecture of the church see: Villem Raam, "Nelinurkse kooritüübi mõningatest variatsioonidest Eesti keskaegses arhitektuuris", *Kunstiteadus. Kunstikriitika* 5 (Tallinn: Kunst, 1983), 88–90; Villem Raam, "Märkmeid Ambla kirikust ja Kesk-Eesti kirikute ehitusloost üldse", *Kunstiteadus. Kunstikriitika* 6 (Tallinn: Kunst, 1986), 184–205; Kaur Altko, *Viljandi praostkonna kirikud* (Viljandi: EELK Viljandi praostkond, 1995), 18; Villem Raam, "Pilistvere Andrease kirik", *Eesti arhitektuur* 2 (Tallinn: Valgus, 1996), 189–190.

2 Kaur Altko, *101 Eesti pühakoda* (Tallinn: Varrak, 2015), 200–201.

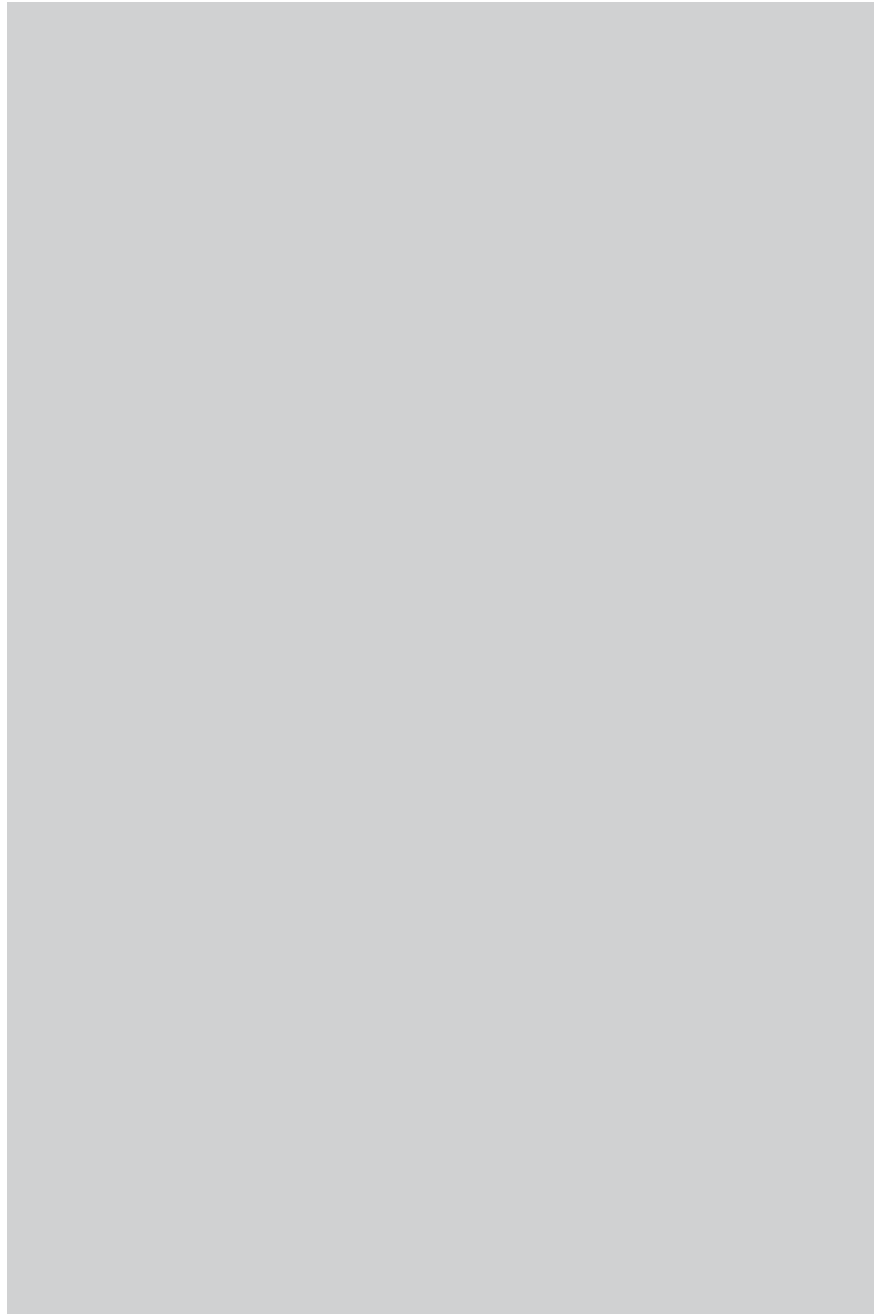


Fig. 1. Man in the grip of a devil from the northern portal on St Andrew's in Pilistvere. Photo: Peeter Säre.



Fig. 2. The eastern side of the loft in St Andrew's in Pilistvere. Photo: Peeter Säre.

figures of Christ and the evangelists; the panels of the pulpit stairs have Biblical texts both in German and Estonian. Sten Karling found documentary evidence that Thomas Öhmann, a carpenter from Tartu, had been paid for making this pulpit in 1686.<sup>3</sup>

In the same source, the altar retable, pews and a loft are mentioned.<sup>4</sup> The retable has not been preserved (the present one dates from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century); the pews have been repaired and changed several times since the 17<sup>th</sup> century but some of the original parts may have survived. The relatively simple form and no visible decoration on the present loft has not attracted the attention of art historians, although actually the loft also dates back to 1686 (Fig. 2). The loft runs from the first bay of the southern aisle to the west and crosses the church at a right angle. It consists of 22 framed panels. The northern part of the loft was partly demolished in the 1950s.

<sup>3</sup> Sten Karling, *Holzschnitzerei und Tischlerkunst der Renaissance und des Barocks in Estland* (Tartu: Õpetatud Eesti Selts, 1943), 352–354.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

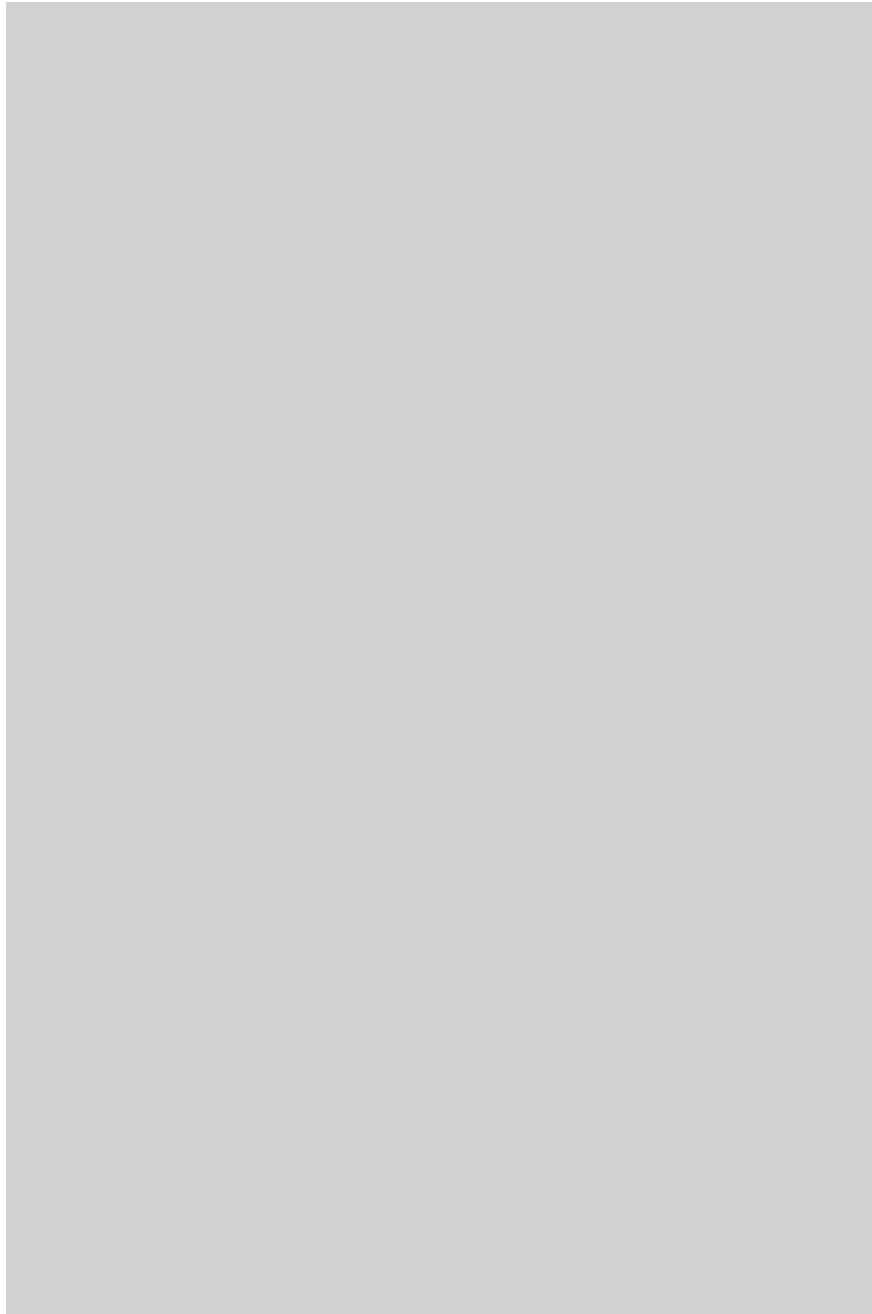


Fig. 3. King David on the panel of the loft. Photo: Peeter Säre.



Fig. 4. Golden letter A of the name "Aaron" and white letter T of the upper paint layer. Photo: Peeter Säre.

In the summer of 2015 the Department of Conservation of the Estonian Academy of Arts conducted investigations on the loft and revealed that its design had been far more sophisticated than its present appearance would suggest.<sup>5</sup> There have been at least four different finishing layers and the first of them is contemporary with the construction of the loft.

It turned out that in the earliest decorative scheme elders of the Old Testament are depicted on the four panels of the eastern end of the loft. Moses, Aron, King David and King Solomon are shown on the panels (Fig. 3). Beneath each figure, on the smaller rectangular panels their names are lavishly written in gold against a black background (Fig. 4).

The figures were only partly exposed during the investigations due to the aims defined for the works, time limitations and because of a complicated conservation dilemma which is described below. However, the revealed fragments prove that the half-length figures were painted by a professional hand (Fig. 5). The detailed rendering of the eyes and noses

<sup>5</sup> See the full report of the investigations in the archives of the National Heritage Board and on the website [kirikud.muinas.ee](http://kirikud.muinas.ee).

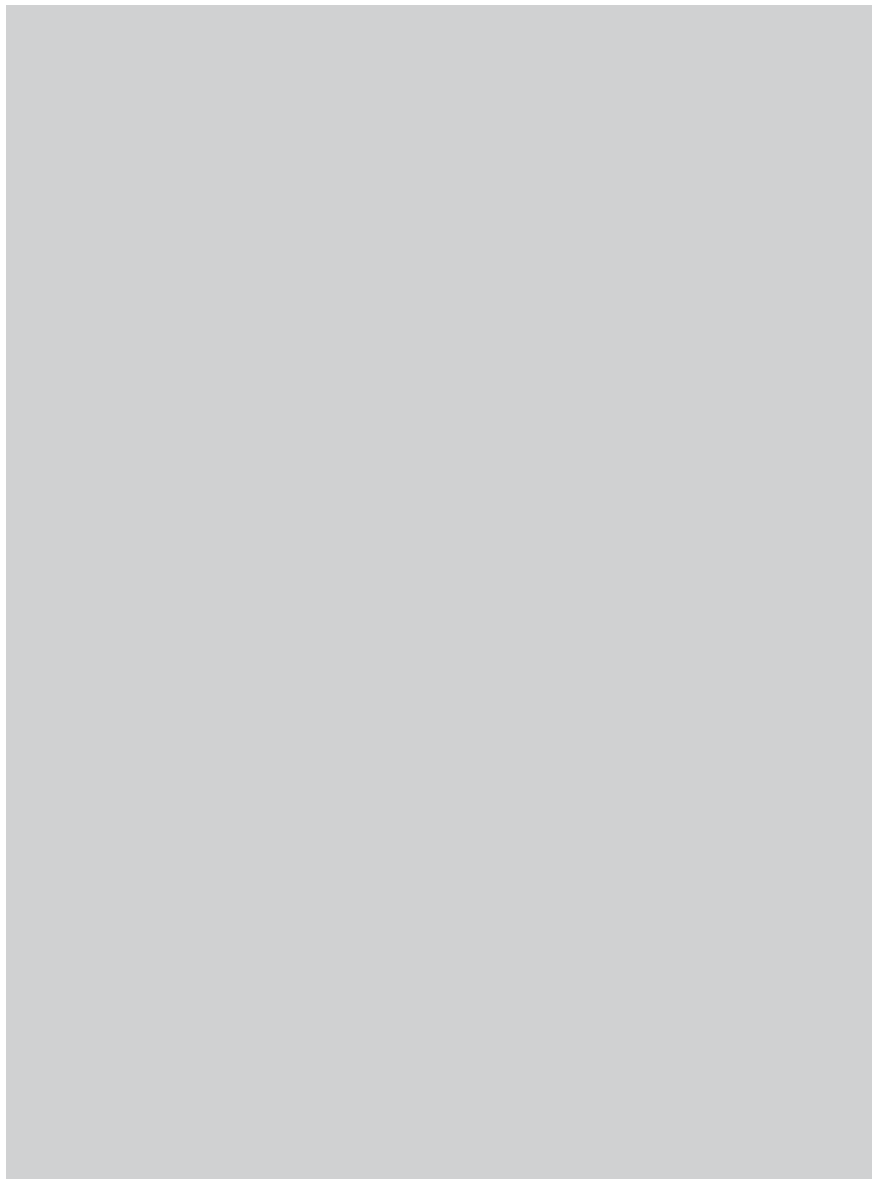


Fig. 5. Aron on the panel of the loft. Photo: Peeter Säre.

gives individuality to their characters. Their elaborate clothing, especially the jewelled breast-plate of Aron and the ermine-trimmed mantle of King David, were designed with great care and skilfully painted

using expensive pigments, as well as real silver and gold, as proved by the chemical analysis of the paint layer.<sup>6</sup>

The frames of the panels, the cornices and pilasters in between them were decorated with marbling in different shades of red, blue, grey and yellow.

Although the carpenter of the loft is known, the name of the painter was not recorded. There are no counterparts to these paintings in the religious art of the period in the overseas provinces of Sweden (i.e. Estonia and Latvia). The painter most probably came from Tartu, as did the carpenter. Unfortunately, the archives of Tartu have been damaged by fire several times and there is very little hope of finding documentary evidence about the painters in Tartu at the time.

Likewise, the southern part of Estonia and the northern part of Latvia suffered badly in the wars of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and therefore very little of the 17<sup>th</sup> century furnishings have been preserved in churches. However, the discovery in Pilistvere shows that some material might still survive but has not been revealed yet.<sup>7</sup> For the time being, it can only be claimed that the painter was a skilled master and probably painted many other church and secular interior elements.

Because of the limited scale of the 2015 investigations, other panels of the loft were not uncovered. But random microscopic tests showed that all of the other panels had also been painted and bore the names or captions of the depictions on the lower rectangular panels. Unfortunately, non-destructive methods, such as infrared reflectography, did not reveal the design of the first decorative paint layer.<sup>8</sup> Therefore other techniques have to be used to determine the iconography and design of the other panels of the loft.

The first finishing layer was covered at some point with Biblical quotes in German and Estonian. The panels with portraits were painted dark grey and texts were written in white Gothic script. The lower panels were also repainted and decorated with abbreviations of the quotes. This scheme resembles the design on the panels of the stairs of the pulpit, which have been dated to the original decoration of the pulpit, i.e.

<sup>6</sup> The pigment and binder analysis was conducted by Signe Vahur at the Institute of Chemistry of Tartu University (see *Analüüsitunnistus nr L1-006-16, 03.08.2016*).

<sup>7</sup> For painting in Tallinn in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Pia Ehasalu, *Rootsiaegne maalikunst Tallinnas (1561–1710). Produksioon ja retseptioon* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia Kunstiteaduse Instituut, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> For the possible reasons for this failure, see *Analüüsitunnistus nr L1-006-16, 03.08.2016*.

1686.<sup>9</sup> However, on closer inspection it is evident that the finishing layer with scriptures is not the earliest one on these panels. Thus the dating has to be later.

A clue for dating the texts on the loft – and probably the pulpit – can be found in an insignificant letter from 1970, in which a former member of the parish wrote that his grandmother had told him that she remembered some sort of paintings having embellished the loft in her youth.<sup>10</sup> This would suggest that at least the loft paintings were covered up no earlier than the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In any case this dating requires further study. Even if it were that late, it has significance in the cultural history of Estonia because of the scriptures being quoted both in German and Estonian. Although there is a photograph from 1929 of the interior of the church where the loft with texts can be seen, it is not possible to identify all of the texts (Fig. 6). Therefore, when exposing the paintings, the areas beneath the letters of the Biblical quotes were left untouched.

The texts on the panels in turn were covered up in 1936 during the refurbishing of the church. No reason for this has been recorded but most probably this had to do with the nationalistic feelings of the 1930s, when the German texts might have been seen as inappropriate for an Estonian church. However, the texts on the pulpit remained visible. On the contrary, the latter might have happened due to the rising awareness of ecclesiastical heritage: the altar retables and pulpits of the Baroque period were being recorded and listed at that time.

The last repainting of the church furnishings took place in the 1980s, when the interior got its present, greenish shades.

In conclusion, the limited investigations of summer 2015 already enriched the art historical corpus of the painted works in the overseas provinces of the Swedish empire with professional paintings on subjects of the Old Testament. At present, there are more questions raised than answered and the investigations on these paintings will continue.

<sup>9</sup> *Eesti kunsti ajalugu 2. 1520–1770*, ed. by Krista Kodres (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005), 356–357.

<sup>10</sup> *Pilistvere kirik. Kirjavahetus*. Estonian National Archives, f 5071, n 1, s 273, l 15.

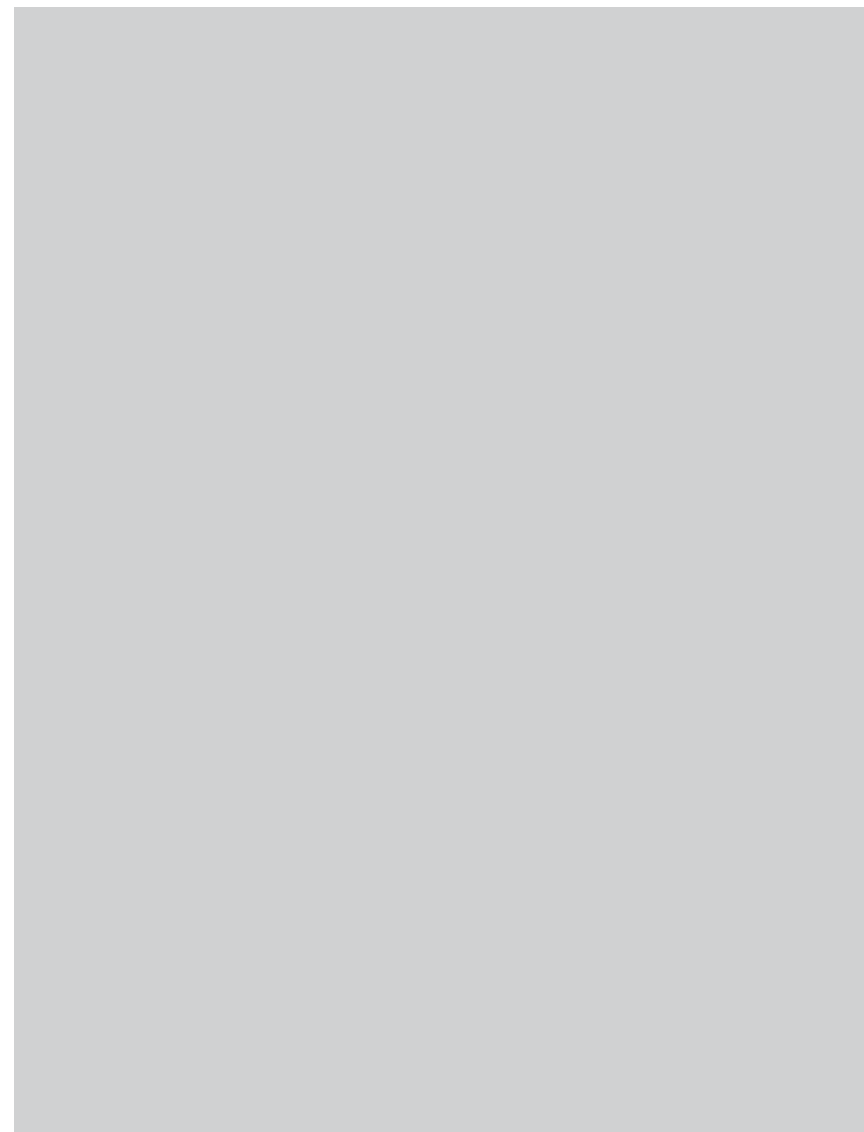


Fig. 6. Church interior in 1929. Photo: Osvald Michelson, Art Historical Photo Collection of Tartu University.

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**KEYWORDS:** MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE; 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CHURCH FURNISHINGS; 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PAINTING; PIGMENTS

**CV:**

Anneli Randla (b. 1970) received her PhD in art history at the University of Cambridge in 1999. She worked for the National Heritage Board of Estonia for ten years. Since 2008 Randla has been an associate professor and since 2016 senior researcher in the Department of Conservation at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Her main research interests are: medieval ecclesiastical architecture, medieval murals, technical art history and the history of conservation.