

# On Dragons and Lizards in the Reliquary Statuette of Saint George in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin

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*The late fifteenth-century German metal reliquary statuette of Saint George is part of the permanent collections of the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin. The iconographic theme of St George and the dragon was widespread across Europe during the Late Middle Ages. It involved a powerful message of the triumph of Christianity over the evil of heresy. The reliquary, connected to two other practically coetaneous pieces, shows an impressive dragon being attacked by the saint. The beast is situated on*

*a circular rustic hill on whose irregular rocky surface lizards and other small dragons (its offspring) move about. Why were they included and what do they mean in this context? What models were these dragons based on? This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of this exceptional example of German metalwork by focusing on the zoomorphic characters in this hagiographical narrative rather than on the saint.*



Its body heavy and sturdy, the dragon tenses its front claws and sucks the air in between its ribs due to the tremendous pain caused by Saint George's spear stuck in its neck (fig. 1). Its gaze expresses suffering even as the strained muscles of its snout push hard against the saint's shield. Reflected in the latter's shiny surface, the dragon's sharp teeth, which resemble those of a crocodile, seem to penetrate the metal. In the back, its long, spiny tail rises up against the legs of the former Cappadocian officer, who stands astride its monstrous back.

But why start with a description of a beast that is often considered a mere »detail« or »secondary character« in this scene of struggle? Why open the debate about the exceptional reliquary statuette of St George<sup>1</sup> in the Kunstgewerbemuseum by focusing on the dragon? Underpinning these rhetorical questions is the fact that most discussions about this particular fifteenth-century metalwork concentrate on the protagonism of the anthropomorphic figure of the saint, who seems to be at the core of the group.<sup>2</sup> However, it is actually the dragon that, as a cen-

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1 Unknown, reliquary statuette of St George, Low Countries, Baltic Region, Lübeck(?), ca. 1475, silver, partially gilded, base originally partially enamelled, 30.7 × 14.9 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin (inv. 1878,618).

2 The elegant and almost dancing figure of St George in the Berlin reliquary is often compared with the figures of the saint in the reliquaries from Hamburg (unknown, reliquary statuette of St George, Elbing[?], ca. 1480, silver, coral, amethyst, and ruby, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg [inv. 1950/31]) and from Riga (Bernt Heynemann, reliquary statuette of St George from Riga, Lübeck, 1507, cast and painted gilded silver, Ludwig Roselius Museum, Bremen), while the sculptures' bases are considered merely »accessory parts«. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen, V, Hamburg 1960, p. 160; Maria Anczykowski, St. Georgsreliquiar aus Riga, in: Maria Anczykowski, Hans-Albrecht Koch, Annelore Leistikow, Hildegard Wiewelhove, Der Silberschatz der Compagnie der Schwarzen Häupter aus Riga. exh. cat. [Bremen, Roselius-Haus, 23.3.1997–1.6.1997; Bielefeld, Kunstgewerbesammlung der Stadt Bielefeld/Stiftung Huelsmann, 21.6.1997–28.9.1997], Bremen 1997, p. 37.

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tral locus of tension, is the key engine activating the compositional structure. For a long time, Western discourses were rooted in the premise that humanity is dominant as a cultural value above all other non-human beings, whether real or invented and collected in repertoires of mythological and legendary creatures. According to Mónica B. Cragnolini, over time, the virile male subject was increasingly positioned as a prototypical model of the homogenization of differences, which was also expressed through the disciplining and subjugation of the Other's body as an object.<sup>3</sup> This particular characteristic can also be seen in the iconography of St George slaying the dragon, albeit in the context of the triumphal Christian doctrinal ideas. Not surprisingly, many historiographical discourses also reveal a prevalently anthropocentric viewpoint, even in their analytical approaches to this martial theme.

Consequently, in the Berlin reliquary from around 1475, the dragon functions as a nexus, as a delimitating point between two dissimilar and opposing spheres: the divine one (the action place of the saint, related to civility and cultural rules) and the earthly one (the wild realm of the beast, which acts as a mirror of hell and where evil proliferates endlessly). The strength of these evil forces, incorporated by the main dragon, is conveyed by the spear, which, astonishingly, the beast has broken into three pieces; and they are contained in the erect tail of the monster,<sup>4</sup> as well as in the small dragons and lizards that nervously climb up the rocky promontory.<sup>5</sup> There is also a curious, tiny nude lancer who is intent on annihilating the bestial creatures, as well as the three wild men pruning tufts of grass with strange flower buds, who form the support of the reliquary. In addition, the front of the base includes the capsule, ornamented with a gold-plated vegetal motif, that originally held the blessed relics (now lost), which, together with the figure of the saint, were considered powerful protective emblems. As Jan Friedrich Richter has pointed out, the typical apotropaic function of reliquaries is coupled here with a precious object reminiscent of those typically found in *Kunstammer* collections.<sup>6</sup>

Both the artist and the metal workshop involved in producing the piece are unknown, and its historical provenance is also uncertain. These issues have been a subject of debate and controversy among specialists since the twentieth century. The city of Elbing (Elbląg in present-day Poland) is most frequently cited as the purported place of origin for the reliquary statuette<sup>7</sup> (an unlikely thesis, unsupported by any documentary evidence), though other areas in the Eastern Baltic, Northern Germany (Lübeck), Rhine region, and even the Netherlands have not been discounted either.<sup>8</sup> Another unproven hypothesis is that of Bernt Notke (as reported by Otto von Falke in 1929), who posited a connection between the shield in the dragon's maws and the one depicted in the altarpiece of Aarhus Cathedral in Denmark, dated 1479.<sup>9</sup> Based on stylistic similarities, von Falke suggested that the Berlin reliquary statuette might be the oldest model for the Hamburg reliquary (associating both with the Brotherhood of Saint George in Elbing),<sup>10</sup> as well as for the early sixteenth-century reliquary from Riga made by the master Bernt Heynemann and commissioned by the Blackheads.<sup>11</sup> According to the type of armour St George is wearing, von Falke dated the Berlin metalwork to around 1475, though it does not bear the hallmark of any master.<sup>12</sup> Ten years later, Walter Paatz supported the idea of Notke's authorship by comparing the piece with the wooden sculptural group of St George and the dragon in Stockholm,<sup>13</sup> arguing that fifteenth-centu-

ry goldsmiths in Lübeck based their work on models provided by woodcarvers.<sup>14</sup> However, he did not consider the different and specific technical processes involved in producing metal and wood sculptures.<sup>15</sup>

The 1950s brought new perspectives on the historical provenance of the Berlin reliquary, suggesting that it might be from the Rhineland.<sup>16</sup> Paul Pieper proposed that the metal piece was particularly indebted to an engraving of Saint George attributed to Israhel van Meckenem,<sup>17</sup> as both these pieces show the saint crossing his legs over the dragon.<sup>18</sup> The engraving, which is linked to prototypes by Master E.S. and to very similar body language in the iconography of Saint Michael, was created before 1470, allowing Pieper to propose it as a model for the Berlin reliquary, though translated into the proper formal language of sculpture (the human figure seems to be agile and ethereal).<sup>19</sup> He also associated it with sculptures made by the Late Gothic artist Nikolaus Gerhaert von Leyden,<sup>20</sup> who was active in Strasbourg, Trier, and Vienna, recognizing the possibility of broader contacts with fifteenth-century

3 Mónica B. Cragnolini, *Vivir de la sangre de otro. La violencia estructural en el tratamiento de humanos y de animales*, Santa Fe 2021, pp. 16–17, 31.

4 Walter Paatz alluded to the curling tail of the dragon, which softens the tension of the scene and goes with the graceful saint, who seems to be performing a courtesan dance. Cf. Walter Paatz, *Bernt Notke und sein Kreis*, Berlin 1939, p. 100.

5 In its current state, the piece includes two small dragons on the front of the base and two small lizards on the back, where there are also traces of two additional missing figures (possibly another pair of lizards). Jan Friedrich Richter, *Reliquienstatuette des Hl. Georg*, in: Jan Friedrich Richter (ed.), *Lübeck 1500. Kunstmetropole im Ostseeraum*, exh. cat. [Lübeck, Museumsquartier St. Annen; Kirchen der Lübecker Innenstadt: Dom, Aegidien, St. Jakobi, St. Marien, Heiligen-Geist-Hospital, 10.9.2015–10.1.2016], Berlin 2015, p. 368.

6 Ibid.

7 As mentioned in early twentieth-century works: Eugen von Czihak, *Der Schatz der St. Georgenbruderschaft zu Elbing*, in: *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst N.F.* 12, 1900–1901, p. 128; Wilhelm Behncke et al., *Illustrierte Geschichte des Kunstgewerbes. Erster Band. Das Kunstgewerbe im Altertum, im Mittelalter und zur Zeit der Renaissance*, Berlin 1907, p. 368.

8 Ibid., p. 370.

9 Ibid.; Otto von Falke, *Die zwei Georgsstatuetten aus Elbing*, in: *Pantheon*, 1929, p. 264; *Kunstgewerbe der Antike und des Mittelalters. Publikation zur Ausstellung*, exh. cat. [Berlin, Museum Dahlem], Berlin 1953, p. 25.

10 Beginning in the fourteenth century, Elbing became a prominent city for goldsmithing, with a dedicated guild to handle the increasing ecclesiastical and secular commissions for altars, chapels, and hospitals. Von Czihak 1900–1901, as note 7, pp. 128–130.

11 Jan Friedrich Richter 2015, as note 5, p. 370. The so-called »Blackheads« constituted a brotherhood of merchants that controlled commerce along the entire eastern Baltic coast, with the city of Riga as an important centre. They chose St George as their patron, as well as St Maurice, a Moorish leader active in Thebaid (Egypt), who was decapitated with his army near the Rhone Valley around 450, in the context of the Roman Emperor's campaigns of persecution against Christians. The Blackheads' emblem of a Moorish head is engraved on the shield of St George in the Riga reliquary. Maria Anczykowski 1997, as note 2, pp. 35–36.

12 Otto von Falke 1929, as note 9, p. 264.

13 Bernt Notke, *St George and the Dragon sculptural group*, 1489, painted wood sculpture, Cathedral of Saint Nicholas, Stockholm.

14 Walter Paatz 1939, as note 4, p. 99.

15 Jan Friedrich Richter 2015, as note 5, p. 370.

16 Theodor Müller, *Geschichte der deutschen Plastik*, Munich 1953.

17 Pieper did not include any other reference to the provenance of this engraving besides the following information: »Israhel van Meckenem: Hl. Georg. Kupferstich L. 542«. Ibid., p. 98. Paul Pieper, *Die silbernen St. Georgsfiguren aus Elbing*, in: *Festschrift für Erich Meyer zum sechzigsten Geburtstag 29. Oktober 1957. Studien zu Werken in den Sammlungen des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*, Hamburg 1959, p. 98.

18 Ibid., p. 93.

19 Ibid., pp. 96–98.

20 See, for example: Nikolaus Gerhaert von Leyden, *St George*, Strasbourg, 1462, painted wood sculpture, Saint George Church, Nördlingen.

Rhenish and Netherlandish artistic productions.<sup>21</sup> Later and current academics have reconsidered this hypothesis, and even the idea that this metalwork was imported from these western areas, in light of the fact that many models originating in the Low Countries were present and circulated in the Baltic region.<sup>22</sup>

The objective of this paper, however, is not to intervene in the debate about attribution, dates, and the place of production of the Berlin reliquary. Rather, with its theoretical contributions, it aims to enhance our understanding of the almost forgotten figure of the monster in the sculpture. What models might the main dragon be based on? In what ways does it reference actual animal species? How are its offspring depicted and how do they interact with the natural environment represented on the base of the reliquary? These preliminarily questions aim to reopen the debate about the zoomorphic figures in this extraordinary example of late medieval metalwork in the collection of the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin.

### Nature, propagation, and growth processes of dragons

In terms of hybridity, the dragon is one of the most heterogeneous imaginary beasts. Its genealogical roots can be traced back to Greco-Latin Antiquity, to the giant serpents and terrible sea monsters that were the enemies of various heroes and divinities.<sup>23</sup> During the Byzantine Empire and Western High Middle Ages, dragons gradually came to be depicted with two legs, long twisted tails, and bird wings.<sup>24</sup> In the well-known early seventh-century encyclopaedia »Etymologies«, written by Isidore of Seville, the *draco* was included in the section on serpents.<sup>25</sup> Based on these reptilian foundations, medieval artists made up a variety of specimens by adding parts of other real animals (lions, panthers, bears, eagles, etc.), ornamental darts, and vegetal shapes at the end of the tails. Regarding dragons depicted in Western medieval illuminated manuscripts (bibles, lectionaries, breviaries, psalters, Apocalyptic exegesis, etc.) from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the malleability of their bodies made it possible to adapt them to capital letters and marginal spaces in a dynamic and prominent way.<sup>26</sup> The ears, crests, and tails of Gothic dragons assumed more sinuous and stylized shapes. Jurgis Baltrušaitis noted that Gothic demons and dragons acquired membranous bat wings with spikes and spurs,<sup>27</sup> which also became very common in other composed hybrid creatures such as griffins, basilisks, bird-mermaids, and centaurs.<sup>28</sup> The late medieval and Renaissance period saw dragons with more credible bodies based on empirical studies of actual reptiles and amphibian anatomical details. In their work, artists sought to carefully imitate these creatures' dry and hard scales, viscous skins, bright and vibrant eyes, and white teeth and fangs.<sup>29</sup> They aimed to transform toads, frogs, lizards, and above all crocodiles into seemingly flesh-and-blood quadruped dragons. Originally associated more with aquatic or earthly environments, these specimens spread to the iconographic world of warrior saints, which had been very popular since the Crusades<sup>30</sup> and the imperative to fight the heretical enemies of Christianity.<sup>31</sup>

In this context, the character of Saint George slaying the dragon became quite popular<sup>32</sup> due to the broad dissemination of Jacobus de Voragine's »The Golden Legend«. As Georges Didi-Huberman pointed out, though hagiographies of St George were compiled unceasingly

for almost five centuries throughout the high Middle Ages, the earliest textual sources detailing his struggle against the dragon date mostly from the fourteenth century onwards; and it was »The Golden Legend« that consolidated the importance of this episode by mainstreaming mythical, folkloric, and hagiographical elements to generate a genuine paradigm of the dragon, the sacrificial princess, and the holy knight turned victorious hero.<sup>33</sup> The hagiography, first published in 1265, tells the story of a Roman general from Cappadocia who was converted to Christianity. When he arrived in the city of Silene (in modern-day Libya), the locals were being threatened by a dragon. To placate the beast's voracious appetite, the inhabitants offered it a group of its young

21 Pieper 1959, as note 17, p. 99.

22 Johann Michael Fritz, *Goldschmiedekunst der Gotik in Mitteleuropa*, München 1982, p. 311; Jan Friedrich Richter (ed.) *Spätgotik. Aufbruch in die Neuzeit*. exh. cat. [Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, 1.5.2021–5.9.2021], Berlin 2021, p. 322.

23 Daniel Ogden, *Dragons, Serpents, and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds*. A Sourcebook, Oxford 2013, p. 13.

24 Nadia Mariana Consiglieri, *El dragón de lo imaginado a lo real. Su simbolismo y operatividad visual en la miniatura cristiana de la Plena Edad Media hispánica*, Buenos Aires/Barcelona 2020, p. 82.

25 »4. The dragon (*draco*) is the largest of all the snakes, or of all the animals on earth. The Greeks call it δράκων, whence the term is borrowed into Latin so that we say *draco*. It is often drawn out of caves and soars aloft, and disturbs the air. It is crested, and has a small mouth and narrow pipes through which it draws breath and sticks out its tongue. It has its strength not in its teeth but in its tail, and it causes injury more by its lashing tail than with its jaws.« The *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, edited and translated by Stephen A. Barney et al., Cambridge 2006, Book XII.iv.4, p. 255.

26 Nadia Mariana Consiglieri 2020, as note 24, p. 115.

27 Cf. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Ali di pipistrello e demoni cinesi*, in: *Il medioevo fantastico*, Milán 1973, pp. 157–194; Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *La Edad Media fantástica. Antigüedades y exotismos en el arte gótico*, Madrid 1987, pp. 154–157.

28 Ibid., p. 157.

29 Nadia Mariana Consiglieri, *El dragón medieval: sus continuidades, cambios y reinvencciones en siglos posteriores*, in: Nadia Mariana Consiglieri y Esteban Greif (eds.), *Representaciones del mundo natural: de la Edad Media a la Modernidad*, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires 2022, p. 75.

30 Despite the fact that the medieval Crusades were long over by this time, the mindset of warfare persisted. There were new and other concerns regarding infidels. The Ottoman's Siege of Constantinople in 1453 had left a chaotic panorama in its wake, which promoted a remarkable flowering of pictorial cycles around St George, especially in northern and eastern Italian courts. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Celui par que s'ouvre la terre. Une iconographie à l'épreuve de ses transformations*, in: Georges Didi-Huberman, Riccardo Garbetta, Manuela Morgaine, *Saint Georges et le dragon: versions d'une légende*, Paris 1994, pp. 56–58.

31 Cf. Nadia Mariana Consiglieri, *El ojo en el enemigo. Cruces entre el dragón y el diablo contra san Miguel en pinturas góticas catalanoaragonesas*, in: *Temas Medievales* 31, 1, 2023, pp. 4–8.

32 Saint George slaying the dragon was an iconographic subject with tremendous potential to explore mimetic artistic strategies by expressing the drama of the scene. This is why it was so popular, from the Low Countries to French, Spanish, and Italian domains, as well as in the German territories and Baltic zone. The Stockholm Group, commissioned from Bernt Notke by the ruler of Sweden, Sten Sture, exemplifies this through its monumental and spectacular mise-en-scène. »The subject that may have been regarded as a classic masterpiece demonstration, since it is specified by several different guilds (Krakow, Hamburg, Lyon, Luneburg, and Prague, for example), was the figure of Saint George. Its challenges were obvious: no other subject demanded, all together, a horse, a dragon, an armoured figure, motion, drama, action, shiny surfaces, weapons, landscape, buildings, and a young princess.« Susie Nash, *Northern Renaissance Art*, Oxford 2008, pp. 184–187.

33 The ancient mythical struggles of gods and heroes against dragons, like in the stories of Hercules and Perseus, were also present in epic Anglo-Saxon sagas such as the famous Old English poem *Beowulf*, in which the hero fights a terrible dragon that is destroying the Geats' town and has stolen and hidden away in its cave a precious cup. Georges Didi-Huberman 1994, as note 30, pp. 42–52.



2 Unknown, reliquary statuette of St George, as fig. 1, detail of the main dragon

to devour. On this particular occasion, the princess had been chosen for sacrifice but was rescued by the equestrian St George, who plunged his spear into the beast's neck and then asked the young woman to lead the badly injured monster to the walls of the city on a rope. Finally, having been assured of the king's commitment to conduct a communal baptism and to give up paganism, he gave the final blow and killed the dragon.<sup>34</sup> This success story positioned St George as a remarkable devotional figure of evangelization and the struggle against heresies, turning him into the official patron of knights, crossbowmen, and weapon-smiths.<sup>35</sup> His iconography was firmly established in the Middle Ages, and particularly in the fifteenth century, throughout Europe and the Mediterranean basin,<sup>36</sup> but also in central and northern areas, including the Low Countries and German territories.

As previously mentioned, despite already being injured by the spear, the main dragon in the Berlin reliquary continues to attack the saint vehemently by biting his shield (fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> The beast's facial expression is a blend of pain and ferocity, expressed by the deep red of its eyes, which are set with garnet stones (one of which has been lost). The composition of its body (ribcage, legs, paws) corresponds to that of canine or feline specimens, while the marked dorsal spine, long tail, and snout are very similar to those of a crocodile. Its membranous wings, akin to spiky leaves, are derived from those of a bat. The well-defined ribs convey the dragon's apparent ravenous hunger, while also revealing the inhalation of its last painful breath. The only ear that has survived in its entirety is large and conical; above it, a fascinating demonstration of the meticulous work of the goldsmith<sup>38</sup> is apparent in the depiction of

an open wound in the skin, inflicted by the saint's spear or sword during the struggle. At the same time, the dragon's body is covered with a detailed network of thin lines, which were probably engraved in the metal surface with a sharp tool in imitation of a fur of sorts, perhaps due to the fact that similar textures were represented in the paintings,

34 Cf. Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*. Con le miniature del codice Ambrosiano C 240 inf. Testo critico riveduto e commento a cura di G. P. Maggioni; traduzione italiana coordinata da F. Stella. Edizione Nazionale dei Testi Mediolatini 20, Volume I, LVI [De Sancto Georgio], Florence/Milan 2007, pp. 440–449.

35 Louis Réau, *Iconografía del Arte Cristiano*. *Iconografía de los santos G-O*, tomo 2, vol. 4, Barcelona 1997, p. 156.

36 Cf. José Enrique Ruiz-Domènec, *La princesa y el dragón*, in: Lambert Botey, Victoria Cirlet (ed.), *El Drac en la cultura medieval*. *Exposició Fundació Caixa de Pensions*, Barcelona 1987, pp. 98–100; Kathrin B. Gerry, *Reliquary Statuette of St. George*, in: Martina Bagnoli et al. (ed.), *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, exh. cat. [Cleveland Museum of Art, 17.10.2010–17.6.2011; Baltimore, Walters Museum of Art, 13.2.2011–15.5.2011; London, British Museum, 23.6.2011–9.10.2011], Baltimore 2010, p. 206.

37 The shield is engraved with the monogram »CG/W«.

38 »In the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the German goldsmiths were by far the most prolific of any in Europe (...) The cities which strongly influenced the goldsmith's art after the mid-fifteenth century fall into two groups. 1 – the flourishing commercial cities, with their opulent burgher class, cities like Cologne, Strasbourg, Basel, Nuremberg, Augsburg, Frankfurt-am-Main, Lübeck and Hamburg. / 2 – is made of the larger princely capitals such as Vienna, Prague, Munich and Dresden. In the other German cities, goldsmiths were largely occupied with supplying local needs. In the main centers, however, their activities became so extensive that much of their plate was made for export to other cities and foreign countries«. Carl Hernmarck, *The Art of the European Silversmith, 1430–1830*: vol. I, text, London/New York 1977, pp. 19–20.



3 Hans Memling, panel from a diptych: St George with a donor, ca. 1480–1490, painting on wood, 43.3 × 31.2 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, Munich (outside separated; see inv. 1401)

engravings,<sup>39</sup> and in particular the wooden sculptures that might have served as primary models.

The central dragons in the three reliquary statuettes (in Berlin, Hamburg, and Riga) not only support the chronological setting of each of these pieces, but also reveal active interactions with models that were circulating all around Europe, including the more mimetic examples conceived in the Netherlands,<sup>40</sup> especially from the 1480s onwards, which often also still retained elements of the early fifteenth century dragons associated with International Gothic patterns.<sup>41</sup> The main specimen in the Berlin reliquary statuette (ca. 1475), for example, is related to generic quadruped dragons with some reptilian and amphibian features typical of other fifteenth-century northern examples also seen in Germany.<sup>42</sup> In a private devotional illuminated manuscript from 1469, the Flemish miniaturist Lieven van Lathem depicted very similar multicoloured quadruped dragons, some with characteristic Gothic bat wings and interdigital membranes on their feet.<sup>43</sup> Hans Memling's paintings of St George from around 1480 also show the dragon with the same sturdy quadruped body, long snout and tail, circular ears, and iridescent skin effects reminiscent of those of certain amphibians

(fig. 3).<sup>44</sup> A dragon like this, without wings, can also be seen in an engraving made by the German Master Israhel van Meckenem (fig. 4), which features a very pronounced spine like that of the dragon in the Berlin reliquary.

From the 1480s, and especially during the first part of the sixteenth century, other types of dragons emerged. On the one hand, they mostly resembled crocodiles, yet on the other, they revealed experimentation with a wider range of zoomorphic hybrids with vegetal shapes. Bat wings now looked like they were made of a kind of thin, wet, and sticky membrane, resembling amphibian surfaces, or pointy and irregular leaves, a type that was very common in late medieval ornamentation and marginalia (fig. 5).<sup>45</sup> It is worth considering the natural qualities of these organic and perishable materials, from the ever-changing skin of amphibians (and of course those of reptiles) to the degradable and unstable leaves of plants. As corporal elements of the hybrid dragons, they probably alluded to the putrefaction processes characteristic of these decomposable surfaces, which are often irregular, withered, and full of holes. Wings like these became frequent in fifteenth-century demons

39 Carl Hernmarck pointed out that there were dynamic exchanges among German sculptors, silver engravers (who used burins), and goldsmiths from the late fifteenth century onwards. Renowned names such as Master E.S., Martin Schongauer, and Israhel van Meckenem provided engraved models (ornamental or with certain iconographic scenes) that served as starting points for the works of goldsmiths. *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 361. Cf. *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 1960, as note 2, p. 160. The engravings were probably also used by carvers as models for making wooden sculptures. Johann Michael Fritz, *Goldschmiedekunst der Gotik in Mitteleuropa*, Munich 1982, p. 311.

40 »It was the North, France and particularly Flanders and the Low Countries, which absorbed the lesson implied in the descriptive, individualizing naturalism of the North Italian Trecento, and almost suddenly produced a homogeneous naturalistic style. The Northern Schools approached the problem from an altogether different angle: zoological and botanical specimens were not studied by them and portrayed as isolated objects as was done by the Italian specialists, but animal or plant was seen as part of and inseparable from its natural setting, its living space, its home in nature.« Otto Pächt, *Early Italian Nature Studies and the Early Calendar Landscape*, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13, 1–2, 1950, p. 32.

41 Cf. Rogier van der Weyden, *Saint George and the Dragon*, ca. 1432–1435, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.50662.html>).

42 According to Paatz, the delicate and elegant prototype model of Saint George originated in the Low Countries. Paatz 1939, as note 4, p. 100. It is important to remember that Pieper also linked the Berlin reliquary with Netherlandish trends, particularly with the art of Nikolaus Gerhaert von Leyden, thereby supporting the hypothesis of its Netherlandish influences. Pieper 1959, as note 17, pp. 99, 105.

43 Cf. Lieven van Lathem, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, 1469, tempera colours, gold leaf, gold paint, silver paint, and ink, 12.4 × 9.2 cm (leaf), J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (Ms. 37 [89.ML.35], fol. 31v) (<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/105T0B#0.4791.0.7348.1.1381>).

44 Cf. Hans Memling, *The Virgin and Child with an Angel, Saint George and a Donor*, ca. 1480, oil on oak, 54.2 × 37.4 cm. National Gallery, London (<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/hans-memling-the-virgin-and-child-with-an-angel-saint-george-and-a-donor>).

45 These whimsical leaf shapes were quite common in Late Gothic ornamental marginalia, both in manuscript illumination and architectural reliefs. The so-called »Ghent-Bruges style«, applied by miniaturists in Netherlandish territories and their extensions, frequently used *trompe l'oeil* techniques to depict them in marginalia. See, for example: Master of the Dresden Prayer Book, *Isabella Breviary*, Flanders, late fifteenth century, British Library, London (Ms. 18851), fols. 9r, 29r, 41r, 111v, 252r, 354r, 481r. In the German area, I found a curious print, possibly made by Israhel van Meckenem between 1465 and 1500, with a sort of spiky quadruped dragon surrounded by leaves, flowers, and blossoms, which seem to be an ornamental repertoire of vegetal motifs. Cf. Museum number: 1925.0406.89, London, British Museum, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1925-0406-89](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1925-0406-89).



4 Israel van Meckenem (the Younger), St George, date unknown, engraving, 15.1 × 10.6 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (inv. 482-1)



5 Master FVB, Ornamentation with owl and birds (detail), 1480–1500, engraving, 14.2 × 10 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (inv. 47-1884)



6 Martin Schongauer, St George, date unknown, engraving, 8.5 cm (diameter) Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (inv. 570-1882)

and dragons from the Low Countries (such as those of Hieronymus Bosch), and can also be seen in Spanish-Flemish examples,<sup>46</sup> as well as in German engravings made by Master FVB<sup>47</sup> and Martin Schongauer (fig. 6), later reprised by Albrecht Dürer. The stiff leaf-shaped wings of the dragon in the Berlin reliquary have been replaced by more curved and organic ones in the reliquaries in Hamburg (fig. 7)<sup>48</sup> and Riga (fig. 8). In addition, the latter two dragons feature more detailed claws, hard skin plates, and protuberances on the spine that extend to the end

46 Cf. Master of Zafrá, Saint Michael the Archangel, 1495–1500, mixed technique on wood transferred to canvas, 242 × 153 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid (catalogue number P001326). <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/san-miguel-arcangel/60682174-7834-4d2e-a3c9-7b1e0a952140>

47 Cf. Master FVB, St George, 1480–1500, engraving, 18.4 × 13.1 cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (id. no. 921-1). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett/Dietmar Katz Public Domain Mark 1.0 <https://id.smb.museum/object/1818178/hl--georg>

48 Pieper referred to the dragon in the Hamburg reliquary, which also has leaf-shaped wings, as bigger and more detailed and terrifying than the Berlin dragon. Pieper 1959, as note 17, p. 100.



7 Unknown, reliquary statuette of St George, Elbing, ca. 1480, silver, coral, amethyst, and ruby, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (inv. 1950/31)



8 Bernt Heynemann, reliquary statuette of St George from Riga, Lübeck, 1507, cast and painted gilded silver, Museen Böttcherstraß, Roselius Museum, Bremen

of the tail; moreover, in general, they have increasingly adopted reptilian prototypes, in particular that of a large crocodile.<sup>49</sup>

However, the main dragons in the Berlin and Hamburg reliquary statuettes are not alone. Some specialists refer to the »offspring of dragons« in a general way<sup>50</sup> or to young dragons creeping on the rocky hill,<sup>51</sup>

or they describe »the dragon, accompanied by smaller dragons and other beasts, crouching on a mound enclosed by a miniature fence.«<sup>52</sup> Yet they make no attempt to identify the variety of these specimens. In the Berlin reliquary, two small winged dragons alternate with a pair of small lizards on the base of the sculpture (fig. 9).<sup>53</sup> The former function

49 This kind of heterogeneous dragon with a more reptilian body and irregular, pointed, and spiny wings is in line with the huge dragon in the controversial sculptural group of St George and the Dragon in Stockholm (ca. 1483–1489). It was almost contemporary with the Hamburg reliquary (ca. 1480), and Paatz linked both dragons because of the cuts and grooves in their heads. Walter Paatz 1939, as note 4, p. 101. The carved wood dragon in Stockholm features real elk antlers attached to the sculpture (attesting to more processes of experimentation with nature) and spiny protuberances all over its body, like on the demons and monsters created by Martin Schongauer. On the ground beneath the dragon are human remains (bones

and rotting meat), along with frogs and small dragons amid imitation rocks. Peter Tängeberg, *Wahrheit und Mythos: Bernt Notke und die Stockholmer St.-Georgs-Gruppe. Studien zu einem Hauptwerk niederländischer Bildschnitzerei*, Ostfildern 2009, pp. 56–58.

50 Otto von Falke 1929, as note 9, p. 263.

51 Paatz 1939, as note 4, p. 100.

52 Gerry 2010, as note 36, p. 206.

53 Apart from these, two other molten silver figures (possibly lizards) are currently missing. Cf. Richter 2015, as note 5, p. 368.



9 Reliquary statuette of St George, as fig. 1, detail of the reliquary base



10 Reliquary statuette of St George, as fig. 1, detail of a small dragon

as small replicas of the main dragon: they are quadruped, have long necks and curled tails, relatively simple and short ears, irregular wings, and above all open jaws which seem to be emitting powerful roars, demonstrating their wild nature (fig. 10). The quadruped lizards have sinuous tails that extend parallel to the ground and textured skin simi-



11 Reliquary statuette of St George, as fig. 1, detail of a lizard

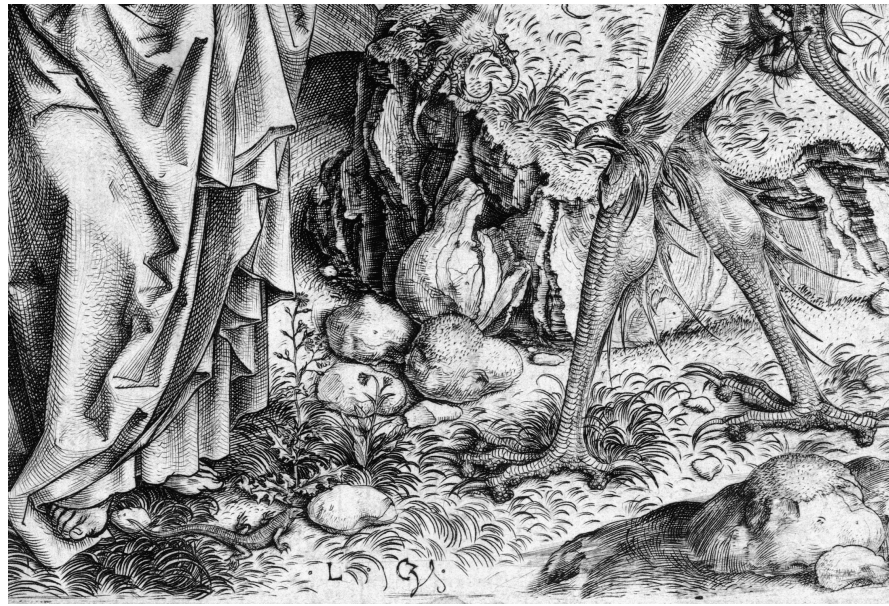
lar to that typical of these reptiles. They have marked holes in their small ears (quite similar to those of the young dragons), but ambiguous facial characteristics, due to their short snouts and some feline features (fig. 11). Even though one of these lizard-like figures may originally have been a dragon as well, based on the presence of some holes in its back where wings (of which any material evidence has been lost) could have been affixed to the body,<sup>54</sup> the stealthy and fast movements implied in its depiction is clearly related to the typical behaviour of lizards.

In early Renaissance Italian and Spanish paintings, it became very common to include small lizards near the dragon's territorial domain, thereby associating this fantastic creature with known reptiles.<sup>55</sup> From the second half of the fifteenth century, this turned into an increasingly general trend of including lizards in the foreground of compositions (not only those depicting St George, but also other Christian themes), along with plants, flowers, and rocks, indicating a more empirical view of nature, as can be seen in the German engravings of Master LCz (fig. 12), Martin Schongauer, and Albrecht Dürer.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> I appreciate this interesting point of view and extra information provided by Jan Friedrich Richter.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Antonio Pisanello, *Saint George and the Dragon*, ca. 1433–1438, frescoes, Capella Pellegrini, Church of Saint Anastasia, Verona, Italy. Some animal sketchbooks, such as that of Giovannino de' Grassi (1350–1398) reveal the possible use of life-casts by artists to reproduce the movement and semblance of animals in their mimetic studies of nature. Cf. Pächt 1950, as note 40, p. 17. It is possible to consider this composition by Pisanello as being the result of very similar processes.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Martin Schongauer, *The Escape to Egypt*, 1470–1475, engraving, 25.5 × 16.9 cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (inv. 4-1885). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett/Volker-H. Schneider, Public Domain Mark 1.0 <https://id.smb.museum/object/987077/die-flucht-nach-%C3%A4gypten>; Albrecht Dürer, *The Escape to Egypt*, ca. 1504, xylography, 31.6 × 22.1 cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin (inv. 499-2). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett/Dietmar Katz, Public Domain Mark 1.0 <https://id.smb.museum/object/1056793/die-flucht-nach-%C3%A4gypten-marienleben>



12 Master LCz, *The Temptation of Christ* (detail), date unknown, engraving, 22.8 × 17 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (inv. 175-1920)

The base of the Hamburg reliquary also features six small dragons, accompanied by four rabbits, two dogs, and a unicorn.<sup>57</sup> While some of the baby dragons mirror the large central one in terms of their long, curled tails, open mouths, and wide, outstretched leaf-shaped wings, others look like biped specimens, with long ears and protruding bone structures but no wings (fig. 13). What do these small creatures mean? Why were they included in the context of this topic of struggle? Even though, based on their visible sexual parts, the main dragons in both reliquaries are male, the small dragons seem to be their offspring. Whether from lizards to winged dragons in the Berlin reliquary or from unwinged to winged ones in the Hamburg sculpture, there seems to be an intention to show the developmental process of dragons based on rather down-to-earth perspectives. The first case underscores how a

simple lizard becomes a small winged dragon by placing it within the genealogy of actual reptiles. The implied idea is that dragons have reptilian origins, which, in this context, emphasizes the proliferation of worldly evil.

From the fifteenth century in particular, artists began creating dragons from real-life reptiles as models for inspiration and empirical study. At the time, lizards and crocodiles were the favourite choices for simulating increasingly lifelike dragons. This trend was related not only to the more mimetic artistic approaches of the Renaissance, but also to the increasing trade and circulation of both living and desiccated crocodiles from East to West.<sup>58</sup> It was common, above all in Spain and Italy, to hang stuffed crocodiles from a church's vaults and ciboria as didactic supports to better convey the extent of the evil mentioned in sermons and liturgical events.<sup>59</sup> According to Barbara Welzel, travel narratives about serpents, griffins, and dragons from faraway exotic lands, such as Marco Polo's descriptions of the curious beasts of the city of Caragian, were very popular in the commercial circles of Lübeck, Elbing, Danzig, Bruges, and other important cities.<sup>60</sup> In his book, »The Travels of Marco Polo«, said Italian trader describes local dragon hunts and the extrac-



13 Reliquary statuette of St George from Elbing, as fig. 7, detail of small dragon

57 Richter 2015, as note 5, p. 372.

58 Cf. Pamela H. Smith, Paula Findlen (eds.), *Merchants & Marvels. Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, New York/London 2002.

59 This practice dates from medieval times and was widespread in the Renaissance. One of the most well-known cases was that of the hanging crocodile in the Seville Cathedral (Spain). The living animal was a gift from the Sultan of Egypt to Alfonso X of Castile in 1260. After its death, the crocodile was taxidermied and hung in the church portal as a natural wonder, but with additional, more symbolic Christian meanings in this context. Cf. Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750*, New York 1998, pp. 84–85. Another later example is the fifteenth-century desiccated crocodile from the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie Curtatone in Mantua, Italy.

60 Barbara Welzel, *Mit dem Blick der Kaufleute. Drachen und Greifen in Lübeck*, in: Richter 2015, as note 5, pp. 34, 37.

tion of bile for medicinal purposes, as well as the commercialization and use of fossilized serpents' tongues (actually shark teeth) in European courts to detect poisoned food or drink.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, these hybrid animals were also disseminated to northern cities through their representation on embroidered Eastern silks and Italian brocades.<sup>62</sup> Images and objects depicting these monsters may have served as proof of their existence,<sup>63</sup> and in some cases apotropaic powers were attached to them.

In addition, many living reptilian specimens ended up in the private menageries of kings and other noblemen, or in the hands of scholars in *studioli* or *Kunstkammern*, who examined and ultimately preserved them in their collections through taxidermy. In sixteenth-century *Kunst-kammern*, taxidermied specimens were sometimes included in exotic collections of naturalia, which were dedicated to beings and materials from the natural world, such as animals, vegetables, and minerals related to sky, water, and land environments.<sup>64</sup> In these contexts, many natural marvels that were discovered were mounted on reused reliquaries created on the basis of Gothic pieces.<sup>65</sup> Artists in early fifteenth-century Italian workshops and later in sixteenth-century workshops in Nuremberg, led by renowned goldsmiths such as Peter Kuster and Wenzel Jamnitzer, also experimented with snakes, lizards, and frogs by making life-casts of them in silver and bronze.<sup>66</sup> These techniques, detailed in »The Book of the Art of Cennino Cennini« (ca. 1390), were later reused by Lorenzo Ghiberti in the Florentine context for the spiders, crabs, lizards, and beetles on the frames of the north doors of the Baptistery (ca. 1404–1407) and by Andrea Riccio's workshop for zoomorphic paperweights or inkpots used by Italian humanists in their *studioli* in the late fifteenth century.<sup>67</sup> The trend of making life-casts of small, volatile, creeping, and exotic animals, which resulted in similar small copies of them,<sup>68</sup> was intrinsically connected to the revitalization – in Florence, in the intellectual circles of the House of Este in Ferrara, and in Bologna, Perugia, and Padua – of certain Aristotelian ideas<sup>69</sup> about art imitating nature. Life-casting from nature became a matter of theoretical discussion, from Manuel Chrysoloras to Guarino Guarini, and of experimentation, in the case of Riccio.<sup>70</sup> Guarini evoked Aristotle's notion of the artist's capacity of turning awful or disgusting things into beauty<sup>71</sup>: »If they have depicted worms and serpents, mice, scorpions, flies and other distasteful creatures, will you not admire and praise the artist's art and skill?«<sup>72</sup> The precise process of producing life-casts involved making plaster moulds of these strange species, which were subsequently filled with a liquid metal (particularly bronze or silver) to achieve a perfect replica,<sup>73</sup> which was meant to make an impression and generate surprise, followed by visual pleasure, despite the fact that it was based on an ugly animal. It was believed that – as Theophrastus Paracelsus showed in his work »Labyrinthus medicorum errantium« (1538) – snakes, toads, frogs, lizards, and all sorts of small amphibians and reptiles arose through asexual generation from rotting matter related to mud and water, and developed through processes of metamorphosis by changing their skins or re-growing through their cut tails.<sup>74</sup> This idea of spontaneous generation was also transferred to the life-casts: the animals' fresh and dynamic positions, captured by the moulds, visually conveyed the sense of their natural and instinctive growth.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, since many of these animals were associated with putrefaction, poison, and decay (features also connected to the dragon's nature), life-casts made it possible to »interact« with them, as the hostile territories where they actually lived were taboo spaces for humans.<sup>76</sup>

The small lizards and immature, wingless dragons of both the above-mentioned German reliquaries undoubtedly are not life-casts of any actual animals. Nevertheless, they seem to be inspired by this trend and by ideas about the generative strength of nature applied to dragons due to their kinship with reptiles. Moreover, their association with mundane growth developments linked to putrefaction, death, and mysterious rebirth is in allusion to the devil. Finally, they reveal a heightened interest in discovering the secrets of nature by examining and studying its beings in more meticulous ways, even through the creation of fictional creatures based on actual zoological specimens mounted in authentic micro-environments.

### The »making of« the mises-en-scène

The way these groups of dragons are situated on the wild highlands that form the bases of the reliquary statuettes was meant as a mise-en-scène, or staging, of the story of Saint George and the dragon.<sup>77</sup> Late medieval depictions of »natural islands« consisting of circular shapes covered

61 Ibid, p. 34, quoted in note 14: Vienna, Treasure of the Teutonic Order, Inv. 76; Gren Vault/Grünes Gewölbe, inv. IV 108/ Kunstammer Wien, Vienna (inv. KK 89).

62 Ibid., p. 36.

63 Ibid., p. 34.

64 Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Kunstammer. Early Modern Art and Curiosity Cabinets in the Holy Roman Empire*, London 2022, pp. 10–11.

65 Wolfram Koeppel, *Marvels, Wonders and their Offspring*, in: Wolfram Koeppel (ed.), *Making Marvels. Science and Splendor at the Courts of Europe*, New York/New Heaven/London 2019, p. 17.

66 Life-casts were frequently collected for *Kunstkammern* in Northern Europe and Italy, especially during the sixteenth century, both as individual objects and as part of complex works of art. Robert Felfe, *Naturform und bildnerische Prozesse. Elemente einer Wissensgeschichte in der Kunst des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin/Boston 2015, pp. 22–23.

67 Norberto Gramaccini, *Das genaue Abbild der Natur – Riccios Tiere und die Theorie des Naturabgusses seit Cennini*, in: Herbert Beck, Dieter Blume (eds.), *Natur und Antike in der Renaissance*, exh. cat. [Frankfurt a.M., Liebieghaus – Museum alter Plastik, 5.12.1985–2.3.1986], Frankfurt a.M. 1985, pp. 204–205, 209. Cf. Andrea Riccio, inkpot (life-cast of a frog), Padua, ca. 1500, bronze with olive brown patina and remains of black paint, 6.3 × 10.3 × 7 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin (inv. K 4392). Credit: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum/Saturia LinkeCC BY-NC-SA 4.0 <https://id.smb.museum/object/908148/tierplastik-frosch>

68 As Norberto Gramaccini noted, one of the first documented collections with this type of natural object was that of Andrea di Odone at the end of the fifteenth century, which included, among other items, crabs, fishes, petrified vipers, a stuffed chameleon, crocodiles, and a small bronze. Ibid., p. 204.

69 Aristotle, *Poetics*, vol. IV, 2; Rhetoric, vol. I, XI, 23. Ibid., pp. 210, 216–217.

70 Ibid., p. 217; Michael Baxandall, Guarino, Pisanello and Manuel Chrysoloras, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28, 1965, p. 189.

71 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I, XI, 23. Cf. Gramaccini 1985, as note 66, p. 217–218.

72 Guarino de Verona, *Epistolario di Guarino Veronese*, Remigio Sabbadini (ed.), vol. I, Venice 1915, p. 702, quoted in: Baxandall 1965, as note 70, pp. 189–190.

73 Pamela H. Smith, Tony Beentjes, *Nature and Art, Making and Knowing: Reconstructing Sixteenth-Century Life-Casting Techniques*, in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 63/1, 2010, pp. 136–137.

74 Ibid., pp. 141–142; Pamela H. Smith, *Artists as scientists: nature and realism in early modern Europe*, in: *Endeavour* 24, 1, 2000, p. 17.

75 Felfe 2015, as note 66, p. 58.

76 Ibid., p. 54.

77 Nadia Mariana Consiglieri, *Matar al dragón; matar al diablo. La naturaleza como escenario de acción de san Miguel y san Jorge en algunos ejemplos pictóricos bajomedievales y renacentistas (siglo XV e inicios del XVI)*, in: *Anales de Historia del Arte* 31, 2021, p. 64.



14 St George and the Dragon (detail), 15<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Germany, boxwood, 19.6 × 15.4 × 8.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. 17.190.385)

with grass, leaves, flowers, rocks, and animals (birds, rabbits, weasels, unicorns, etc.) were a common iconographical shorthand to evoke a forest.<sup>78</sup> The medieval *ailleurs* (no-place) implied realms far from cities and agricultural fields: natural, wild, boundless spaces like the sea, desert, or woods themselves, related to the devil, sins, and temptations.<sup>79</sup> This, supposedly, was the dragon's habitat, its biotope (a notion suggested by Robert Felfe)<sup>80</sup>: a wasteland covered with rocks, holes, and weeds, all of which was part of its cavern. Like the stuffed crocodiles hung performatively from the vaults in churches, imitation dragon grottoes made of cardboard to look like rock caves were also frequently placed in ciboriums for religious festivities and liturgies.<sup>81</sup> These scenographic mises-en-scène were in line with the popular *ludi draconi* celebrations, in which the inhabitants of a city entered through its gates, recreating the triumph of St George over the dragon<sup>82</sup> – performances indebted to the hellmouth mansion, a scenic mechanical device used in medieval theatrical staging that recreated the well-known iconography of terrible dragons' heads symbolizing the entrance to the hell.

The dragon's space, ruled by the irrational forces of nature (seas, rivers, mountains, rocks, or deserts), is where the monster jealously guarded treasures or poisoned natural sources of water. As Georges Didi-Huberman explained, in topological terms, slaying the dragon meant conquering a wild space, which fifteenth-century artists tried to express by stressing irregular features and frontiers in the landscape, such as twisted borders, sharp pointed rocks, and holes.<sup>83</sup> Quite similar characteristics can be found in both reliquaries: the base of the Berlin reliquary has an entirely irregular and stony surface, while the Hamburg reliquary also has several holes from which some wild animals and the

small dragons seem to emerge. These circular spaces aim to exhibit the feral dragon's territory, shared by its offspring, which is conquered by the saint.<sup>84</sup> In both cases, these microspheres are held up by wild men, who reinforce the notion of untamed creatures mastering these uncivilized, rustic lands.<sup>85</sup> A German boxwood from the same period shows St George on horseback attacking the open mouth of the furious dragon with a spear; small offspring emerge from a hole in the ground (fig. 14).

78 Particularly in late medieval tapestries, such as the group *The Lady and the Unicorn*, ca. 1500, Paris, six tapestries made of wool and silk, 311 to 377 cm (h) × 290 to 473 cm (w), Musée de Cluny, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris (inv. Cl. 10831 to 10836). Cf. Élisabeth Taburet-Delahaye, Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot, *La Dame à la licorne*, Paris 2018, p. 23.

79 Paul Zumthor, *La medida del mundo. Representación del espacio en la Edad Media*, Madrid 1994, pp. 52, 61–67.

80 A biotope is a habitat with environmental conditions suitable for the development of certain forms of life. Cf. Felfe 2015, as note 66, p. 71.

81 Cf. Pierre Francastel, *Imagination plastique, vision théâtrale et signification humaine*, in: *Œuvres II, La Réalité figurative*, Paris 1965, pp. 203–225, quoted in: Georges Didi-Huberman 1994, as note 30, pp. 63–64; Consiglieri 2021, as note 77, p. 74.

82 Georges Didi-Huberman 1994, as note 30, pp. 63–64.

83 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–103.

84 In her interpretation of the Hamburg reliquary, art historian Barbara Welzel connected the rustic landscape of its base (also supported by wild men figures) to those in travel narratives about faraway lands. According to her, the precious stones that originally surrounded the relic on this metal piece (corals, amethysts, and rubies – highly desired by travellers and dealers) were a treasure that was protected by the dragon until it was finally taken by Saint George, the patron of Hanseatic merchants. Welzel 2015, as note 60, p. 37.

85 In the Middle Ages, wild men, who were thought to live in uncivilized places like the forest, represented base instincts. The typical iconography consisted of a hairy male (sometimes also female) nude figure holding a bludgeon. They were frequently mentioned in travel

Even in the fifteenth century, artists seemed to follow Cennino Cennini's formulae for recreating credible mountains by using a group of real rocks as a model.<sup>86</sup> The master also advised painters on how to apply colours to the pictorial surface, taking into account the importance of shadows and light to convincingly »model« angles and features.<sup>87</sup> For the reliquaries, as for sculptures in general, three-dimensional mock-ups mimicking rocks in a kind of promontory may have been constructed (possibly of paper, cardboard, clay, or wood) for use as visual models, making it possible to examine overall volumes. Moreover, the notion of a sculpture that reproduced the inside of the subject represented – not merely the appearance but the internal development of nature – was proposed in Francesco Colonna's »Hypnerotomachia Poliphili« (»Poliphilo's Strife of Love in a Dream«), a book with xylographs printed for the first time in 1499 by the publisher Aldo Manucio.<sup>88</sup> The micro-atmospheres of arid, rocky hills with cavities and holes on the bases of the reliquaries attempt to expose the core of the dragon's natural environment.

## Conclusion

How did these animals and environmental features work specifically in these reliquaries, in particular in the exceptional metal piece in the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin? The detailed main dragon, its physical appearance and attitude, contributed to making the Christian scene of combat more believable. In addition, the presence of its offspring – some as lizards, some as miniature dragons – not only confirms that the dragon is a descendant of actual reptiles by showing an evolution, but also link the legendary hybrid to the ideas of putrefaction, rotting, and strange generative processes that were associated with these real animal species at the time. Moreover, in both late fifteenth-century German reliquaries, these small faunae scattered across the irregular circular land invite the viewer to move around the object and to explore, discover, and recognize new things: beings moving in random directions, and lizards and small reptilian creatures that will turn into evil dragons. In other words, they are invitations to experiment in viewing the piece in a dynamic and playful way.

Even though neither of the two reliquaries includes life-casts, they may have been inspired by early Italian traditions that circulated throughout Europe and that, by the sixteenth century, definitely would

have reached the workshops of goldsmiths in Germany. As a result, the bases of these metalworks in particular reveal both Netherlandish and Italian trends. These objects show a proliferation of dragons within their biotopes, in habitats typical of those of reptiles, highlighting their factual existence in the natural and mundane world, in which the dominion of evil must be controlled by the saint's actions. Examining the significant role of dragons offers another point of view. After all, the history of art can be told not only through its victorious iconographic characters, but also through those that are vanquished.

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and chivalric literature, as inhabitants of foreign lands or as the captors of maidens in fights with knights. Cf. Diana Olivares Martínez, *El Salvaje en la Baja Edad Media*, in: *Revista Digital de Iconografía Medieval* 5, 10, 2013, p. 42. »Thought to live in remote, mountainous, and forested regions, the wild man especially flourished in the wooded or alpine regions of the German-speaking lands, such as the Harz, Fichtel, and Algäu Mountains of Germany (...). Not limited to these regions, the wild man myth thrived throughout western and central Europe. In these forests, the wild man was said to make his home in caves, rocky crags, dank burrows, hollows in tree trunks (...) and other rude places.« Timothy Husband with the assistance of Gloria Gilmore-House, *The Wild Man. Medieval Myth and Symbolism*, exh. cat. [New York, The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 9.10.1980–11.1.1981], New York 1980, p. 2.

86 Gramaccini 1985, as note 67, p. 203. *The Way to Copy a Mountain from Nature*. Chapter LXXXVIII. »If you want to acquire a good style for mountains, and to have them look natural, get some large stones, rugged, and not cleaned up; and copy them from nature, applying the lights and the dark as your system requires.« Cennino Cennini, *The Book of Art*, 1390s. Extracts, in: Patricia Railing (ed.), *14<sup>th</sup> Century Colour Palettes*, vol. II, London 2020, p. 62.

87 *On the Way to Paint a Mountain, in Fresco or in Secco*. Chapter LXXXV. »If you want to do mountains in fresco or in secco, make a verdaccio colour, one part of black, the two parts of ochre. Step up the colours, for fresco, with lime white and without tempera; and for secco, with white lead and with tempera. And apply to them the same system of shadow and relief that you apply to a figure. And the farther away you have to make the mountains look, the darker you make your colours; and the nearer you are making them seem, the lighter you make the colours.« Ibid. Cennino Cennini in Patricia Railing (ed.) 2020, pp. 60–61.

88 Felfe 2015, as note 66, p. 49.