

ARNAO DE BRUSELAS  
BRUSSELS (?) - LOGROÑO (C.1565)  
BIBLICAL SCENE.

Jesús María Parrado del Olmo

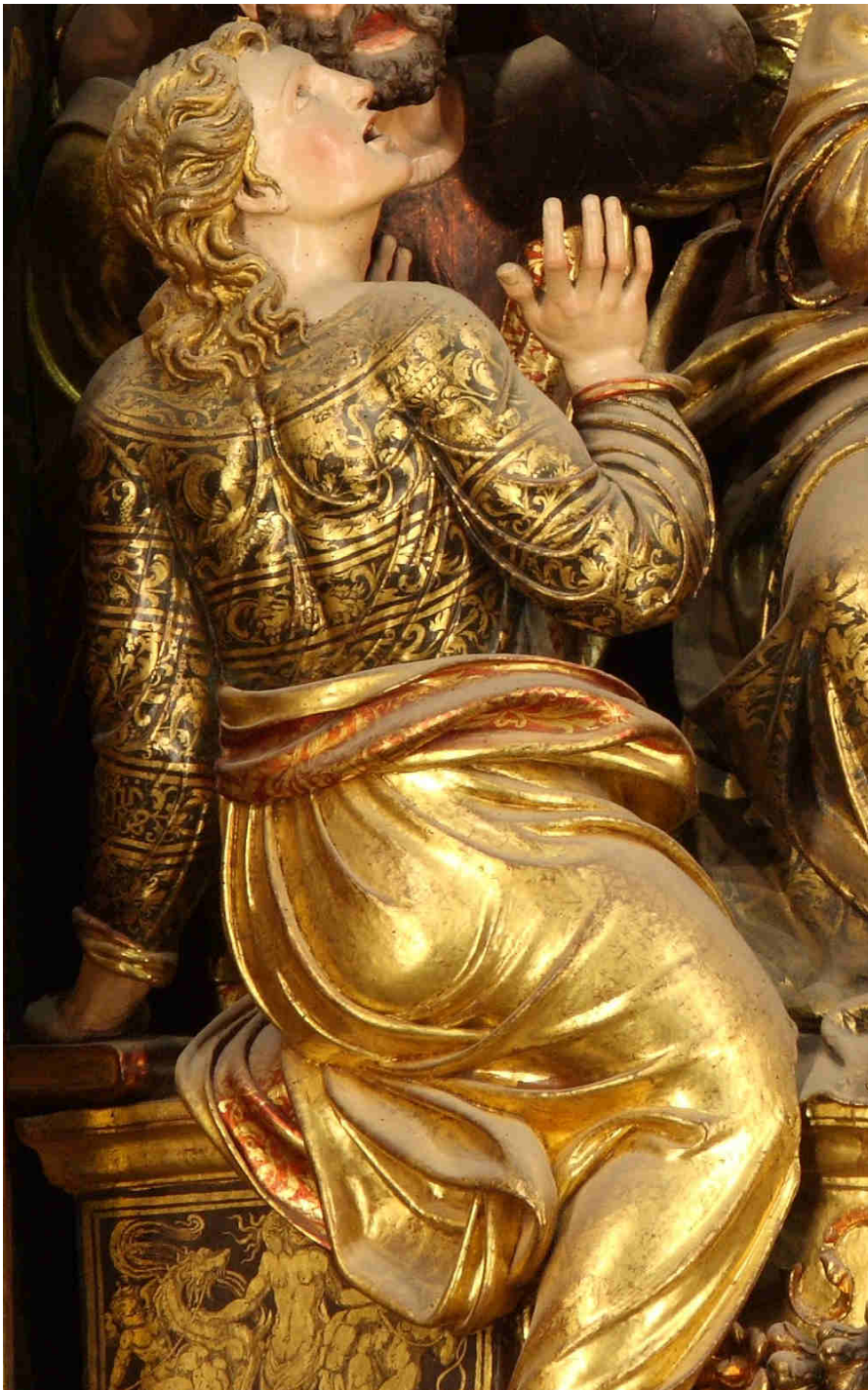
We are seeing today increasingly detailed studies of the processes of execution of XVI<sup>th</sup> century Spanish sculpture, in which the workshops involved were directed by a sculptor with whom the contract for the altarpiece was drawn-up, and who therefore had working for him sculptors who did not figure in the corresponding documents because they were not directly responsible to the patrons. However, these sculptors, by their outstanding individual, artistic personal contribution may impose their own personality on the style of the work. Such is the case with Arnao de Bruselas. This master who came from Brabant as did so many others who appeared in Spain, was extraordinarily active in the bishopric of Calahorra-Santo Domingo de la Calzada in the workshops of Damián Forment, Andrés de Araoz, Guiot and Juan de Beaugrant, the latter two being of northern origin.

Arnao is first documented in 1536 when he began his service under Damián Forment, according to a document referring to four years pay. At this time, he was already a trained sculptor who had placed his gouge at the service of the great Aragonese master, but we cannot confirm whether he was previously connected with other Castilian workshops. What is certain is that our sculptor's exquisite technique adapted itself very well to such a refined workshop as was that of Forment. When in 1537 Forment made a

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Fig. 2 **Damián Forment**  
(and collaborators) *Main altar*  
Santo Domingo de la Calzada  
Cathedral, 1537-1540; La Rioja

Fig. 1 **Arnao de Bruselas**  
*Nathan rebuking King David*,  
c.1556-1558 86 x 85,5 cm.  
Polychrome walnut wood.  
IOMR collection





**Fig. 3 Arnao de Bruselas**  
*circa 1537-1540, Apostle*  
*Saint John Santo*  
 Domingo de la Calzada  
 Cathedral, La Rioja

contract with Arnao for the altarpiece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, the Brabant artist, together with other sculptors such as the Beaugrants, moved to Forment's studio to work on the altarpiece (figs. 2, 3). This must be how the active connection between our sculptor and the bishopric of Rioja must have begun, although under the authority of other sculptors who had sufficient funds to pay for the expenses of such important commissions.

Arnao's name does not figure in any other work-contract until 1553 when he began work on the altarpiece of Santa Maria del Palacio in Logroño (figs. 4, 5), in this case as the result of the death of Juan de Goyaz, whom he replaced, and then when Arnao was contracted in person for the final works produced for his Aragonese clients, such as the altarpieces of the chapel of San Bernardo, in the monastery of Veruela, for which Arnao received the contract in 1556, and the southern side of the *trascoro* of La Seo de Zaragoza, a work undertaken in 1557 - 1558 (figs. 6-9).

After this, he was employed again as a salaried sculptor by Pedro de Troas for the altarpiece of Aldeanueva de Ebro, priced in 1565, for which he carved five scenes; this is the last known work undertaken by our master.





Thus we have a sculptor who was trained during his adolescence and early youth in Flemish workshops, whose work is characterised by his impeccable technique, encouraged by the fact that the guilds supervised all the works produced, so as to maintain the prestige of their workshops, thus enabling them to export works bearing the stamp of quality. Subsequently, we find our master sculptor in the workshop of Damián Forment, where Arnao was able to reaffirm his interest in highly-finished work, deeply studied compositions, as well as his interest in leisurely movement, a taste he shared with the great Aragonese sculptor, in whose figures there is always a classical air as also in the sequence of swirling movements of the draperies which wrap around them.

**Fig. 4 Arnao de Bruselas**  
*Saint Lawrence*, 1552, polychrome wood, Church of Santa María de Palacio, Logroño

**Fig. 5 Arnao de Bruselas**  
*Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, 1552, Church of Santa María de Palacio, Logroño.

**Fig. 6 Arnao de Bruselas**  
*Retrochoir*, Cathedral Metropolitana of La Seo, 1556-1558, Zaragoza









Fig. 7 Arnao de Bruselas *San Braulio at the Concilio of Toledo*, Aljez stone, retrochoir of the Cathedral of La Seo, 1556-1558, Zaragoza



Fig. 8 Arnao de Bruselas *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, Aljez stone, retrochoir of the Cathedral Metropolitana of La Seo, 1556-1558, Zaragoza



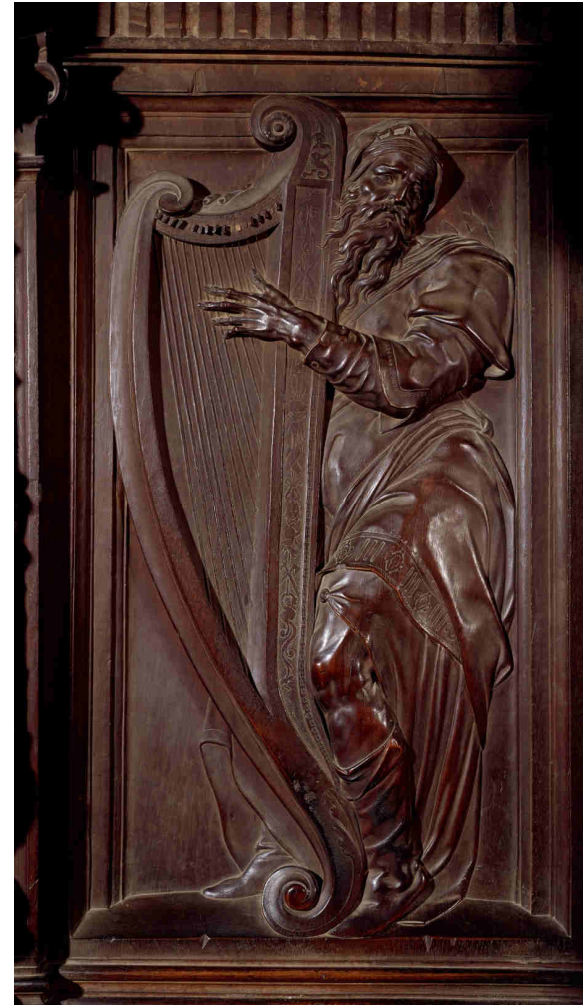


Fig. 9 **Arnao de Bruselas**  
*Calvary*, polychrome wood,  
retrochoir of the Cathedral  
Metropolitana de La Seo, 1556-  
1558, Zaragoza

Fig. 10 **Alonso Berruguete**  
*Isaias*, circa 1538, High Choir  
stalls of the Cathedral of Toledo

There is a factor which enables us to attribute to Arnao the altarpiece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada described above, namely, the greater inclination towards expressionist mannerism displayed by Arnao than Forment, which can be seen in his use of the *serpentinata* or spiral form, the helical line, and human figures vibrating with pathos, whose flowing beards and hair, elongated and twisted hands and feet, display their extreme sensitivity (fig. 11).





In this case, there is a clear trace of Castilian sculpture of the second quarter of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century and, in particular, of the work of Alonso Berruguete. We cannot deny that Arnao may have encountered Berruguete's aesthetic style, either in Valladolid, before his participation in Forment's workshop, or in Toledo, in the choir stalls of its cathedral (Fig. 10). There is also another possible link in the painter Andrés de Melgar, which may be observed in the polychromy of the altarpiece of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, as Melgar had in fact formed part of Berruguete's workshop in Valladolid.

Arnao is thus a highly individualistic sculptor, since his style can be described neither as strictly Berrugetesque nor Formentian. Rather, both of these sources fuse together to form a very individual interpretation of sculpture, in which the elegance of the Aragonese artist softens the mannerist pathos of Berruguete.

The relief we study at present represents a scene taken from the Bible, in which a personage appears on the right in a dominant position and addresses himself to another seated person wearing a royal crown and surrounded by counsellors (Fig. 12).

In the background there is a building with a colonnade, possibly representing a palace. The figures do not wear the attributes of their status, so it is difficult to identify the story, which is further complicated by the fact that the relief lacks any corresponding explanatory context, since it is no longer situated in the original altarpiece where adjacent scenes might have helped to solve the mystery. One hypothesis is that it might be a representation of Nathan rebuking King David.

**Fig. 11 Arnao de Bruselas**  
*Apostle*, 1537-1540 altarpiece  
of Santo Domingo de la Calzada  
Cathedral, La Rioja



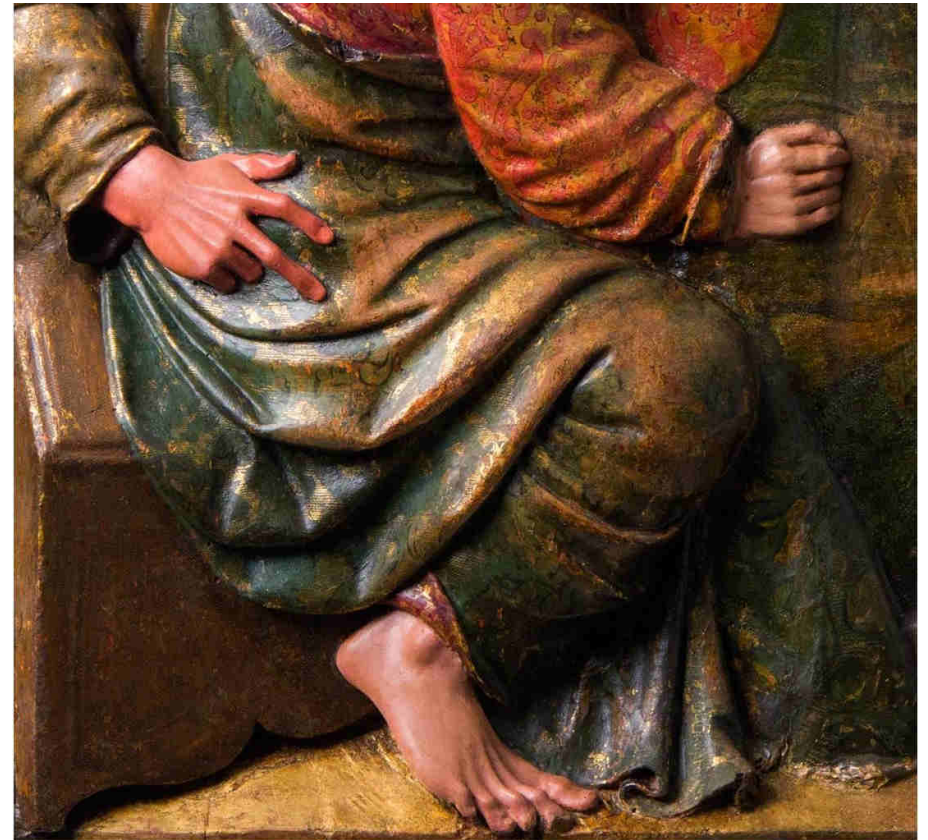


Fig. 12 Arnau de Bruselas  
*Nathan rebuking King David*,  
detail, IOMR collection



Fig. 13 Arnau de Bruselas Altarpiece  
detail feet, Santo Domingo de la Calzada  
Cathedral, 1537-1540; La Rioja

Fig. 14 Arnau de Bruselas *detail feet*,  
IOMR collection



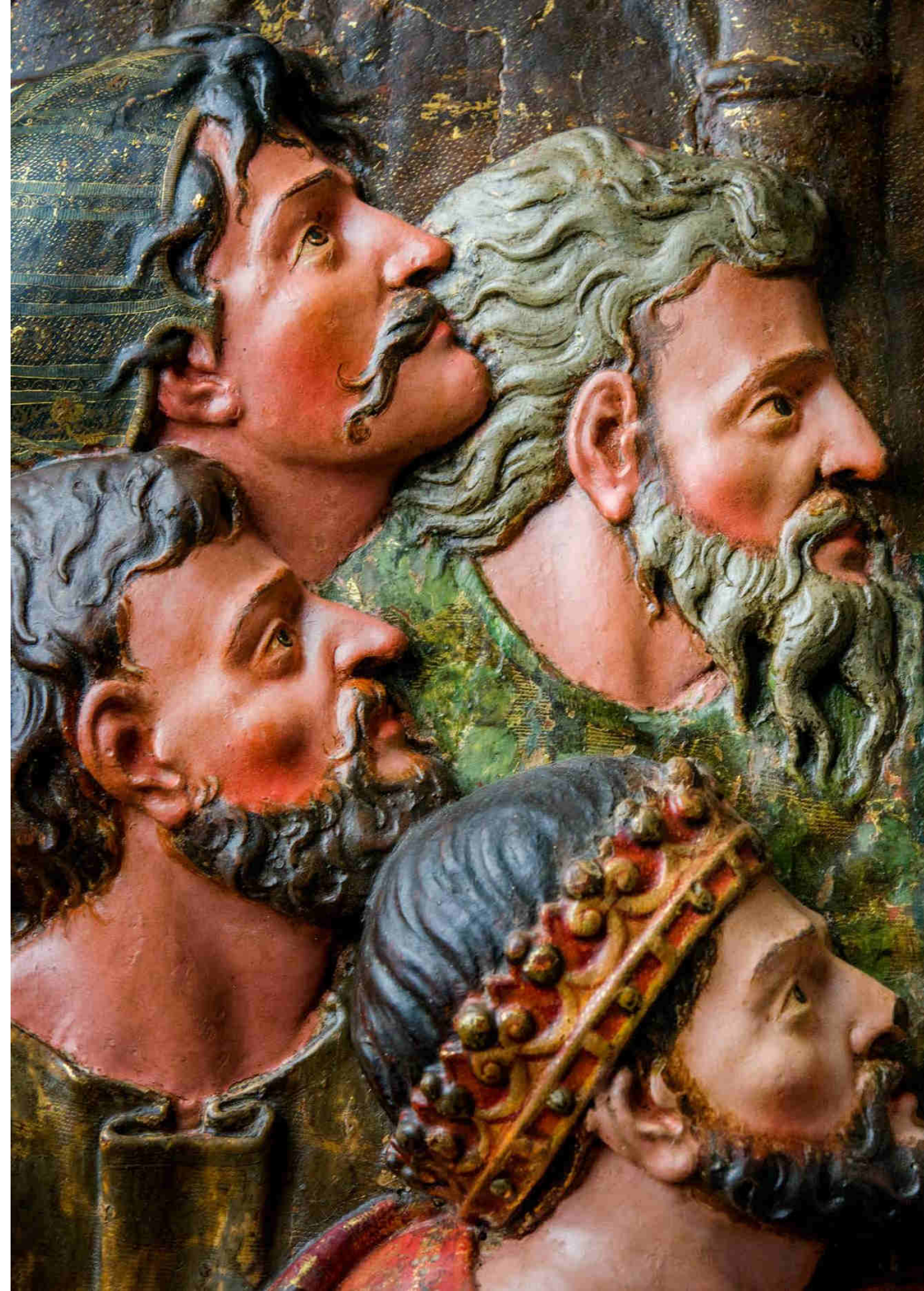




The scene is composed of two different sections; on the right the figure of the prophet and an assistant or servant, both figures standing and filling the space. The scene on the left is at a lower level, possibly as a sign of submission, representing the King seated with four counsellors. Arnao uses the psychological tension between them to unite the two groups, the king and the prophet linked diagonally by their exchange of glances, also suggesting a conflict. The human types represented by our sculptor are characteristically his own, with their elegant, expressive heads, remarkable straggly beards or unruly hair covering their foreheads. Arnao always indicates his own style in his individual way of representing feet, in which he emphasizes the elongated bones and

**Fig. 15 Arnao de Bruselas,** detail head, altarpiece of the Cathedral, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, 1537-1540, La Rioja

**Fig. 16 Arnao de Bruselas** Nathan rebuking King David, detail, IOMR collection







Even more faithful to his expressionist style are his representation of hands, with long slender fingers resting in different positions – sometimes half open, sometimes folded, but always expressing strong emotion with their accompanying gestures (Figs. 17-19).

With the exception of the rhythmically moving figure we are supposing to be that of the prophet *Nathan*, the attitudes of the persons represented is balanced; the figure of the prophet on the other hand, is endowed with an extraordinary degree of measured composure, stretching out his left arm and, at the same time, turning his head in the opposite direction, folding his right arm, and resting his hand on his breast. The folds of the drapery are uncharacteristically flattened for the central period of Arnau's production, rather than whirling around the bodies of the persons portrayed. Only the king's cloak displays an enveloping movement.

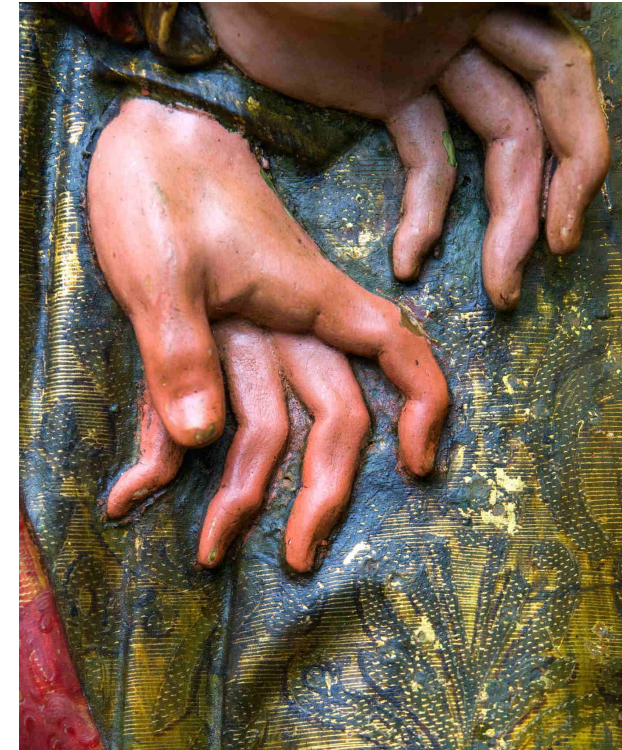


Fig. 17 **Arnau de Bruselas.**  
*detail hand*, altarpiece of  
Santo Domingo de la  
Calzada Cathedral, 1537-  
1540, La Rioja

Figs. 18, 19  
**Arnau de Bruselas**  
*Nathan rebuking King David,*  
details hands IOMR  
collection





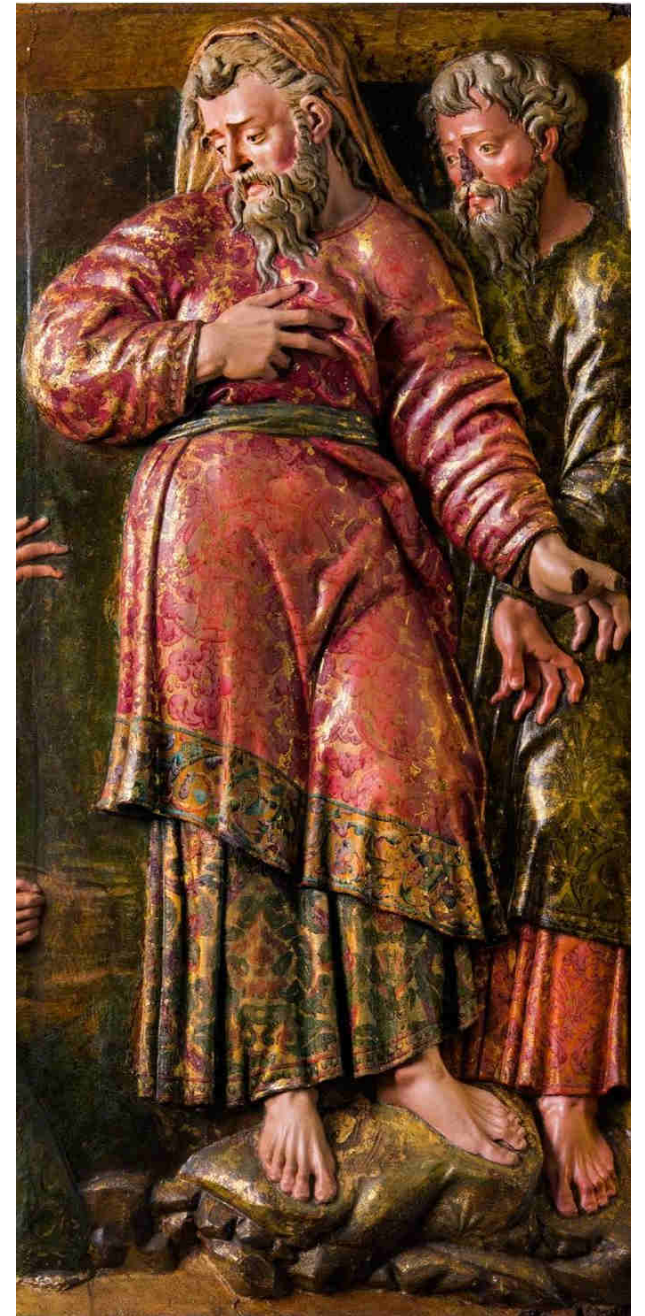


However, it is true to say that the sculptor's works carried out in Aragon show a tendency towards greater calm in their compositions, and the human types are represented with greater control in their movements and in the sequence of folds in their draperies, which fall straight down to their feet. This can be seen in this relief in Nathan, the folds resembling those of the tunic and cloak of the San Juan del Calvario in the "trascoro" of La Seo (Fig. 9), or in the reliefs of the altarpiece at the monastery of Veruela referred to above. Furthermore, the dialoguing attitude of the prophet can also be linked with the sculptures of the saints in the choir stalls of Zaragoza Cathedral and the church of Santa Maria de Palacio (Figs. 19-20). For this reason, it is possible to ascribe to the work a date close to these Aragonese works, in which we begin to observe an evolution that culminates in what may be considered the last altarpiece, Aldeanueva de Ebro (ca. 1565), which is an early example of "Romanismo".

Fig 20 **Arnao de Bruselas**, *Apostle*, polychrome sculpture, Church of Santa Maria de Palacio, circa 1552 Logroño

Fig 21 **Arnao de Bruselas**, *Apostle*, polychrome sculpture, Church of Santa Maria de Palacio, circa 1552, Logroño

Figs. 22 **Arnao de Bruselas**, *Nathan rebuking King David*, details, IOMR collection.

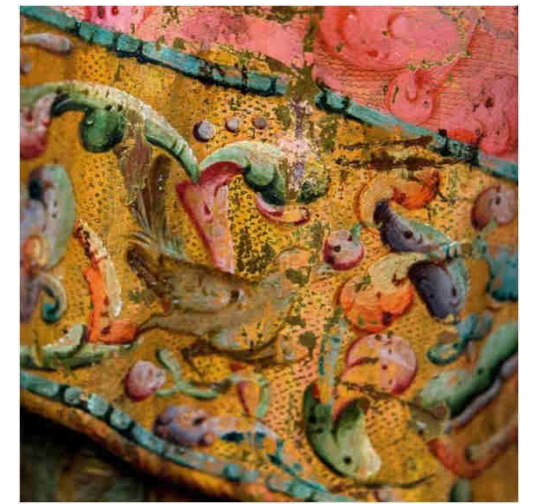
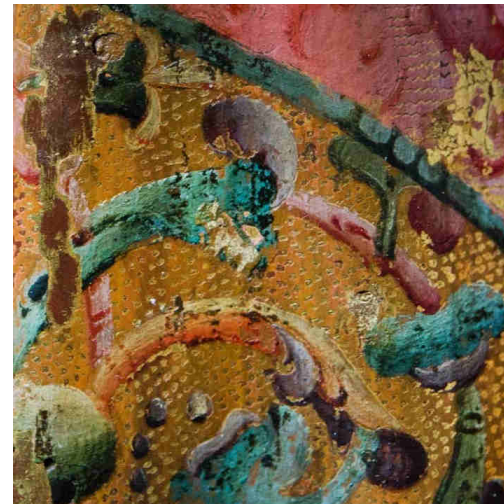
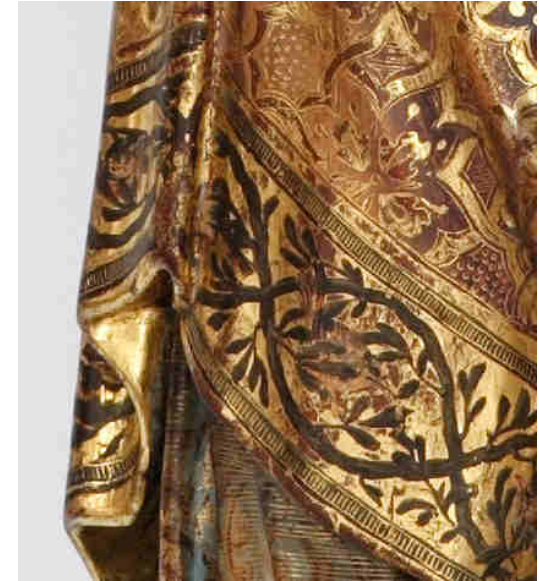






**Figs.23 Francisco Fernandez Vallejo**, Polychromy, details of the tunic of Nathan from *Nathan rebuking King David*, IOMR collection

The relief is enriched with an excellently executed polychromy (figs. 23, 26 – 28) deriving from that of the Riojan polychromers of the time, and especially resembling Francisco Fernandez Vallejo’s manner of execution, which is very close to that of the work we are at present studying, although in his documented works he presents a greater wealth of subjects, as can be seen for instance in the altarpiece of Santa María de Palacio (fig. 24-25).



**Figs.25,26 Francisco Fernandez Vallejo**, Polychromy, details, circa 1580, altarpiece of Santa Maria de Palacio, Logroño

**Figs.23,24 Francisco Fernandez Vallejo**, Polychromy, details of the tunic of Nathan from *Nathan rebuking King David*, IOMR collection



We see, however, the same exquisite technique, as observed in the splendid *corladuras*. Crimson-red, blue and green tones prevail in the collection of draperies, the flesh tones are pink, with touches of reddish colour on the cheekbones, which give vitality to the expressions. The flesh tone of the prophet is more pallid than that of the other personages, perhaps so as to distinguish him from the other figures.

The *estofados* are executed with the tip of a pointed brush combined with an extraordinarily *esgrafiado* technique. The *corladuras* are impeccable. As begins to be the custom in the polychromy of the Rioja, branches of vegetation begin to predominate on cloaks and tunics, and the fringe at the bottom of the prophet's cape displays an extremely delicate decoration of rolls of vegetation mixed with petals and birds on a gold background.

**Figs. 28 Francisco Fernandez Vallejo** Polychromy, details of the tunic of Nathan from *Nathan rebuking King David*, IOMR collection

