

ARNAO DE BRUSELAS

A Brabant sculptor who triumphed in Spain

Carlos Herrero Starkie



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Brussels (?)—c.1565 Logroño

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The discovery of a relief representing the Prophet *Nathan rebuking King David* by Arnao de Bruselas (figs. 1, 2) offers us a magnificent opportunity to give the appropriate importance to the great influence which the artistic currents of the Brabant region exerted on the development of Spanish Renaissance sculpture, particularly on two of the richest and most important movements in sculpture which developed in Spain beginning in the 1530s: the Navarre-Aragonese-Riojan school and the Andalusian school. The important group of artists originating in Brabant, who already flourished in the concluding years of the XVth century onwards, became increasingly productive during the first half of the XVIth century. In my opinion, this is a field of study which will arouse the same intensity of interest among scholars of the Low Countries, as it has in Spain, where it has always received universal recognition.

At the beginning of the XVIth century, the exquisite Flemish tradition of sculpture, which had its origins in the works of Claus Sluter, (educated in Brabant), and in the work-shops specialised in small, high quality altar-pieces developed in Brussels, will survive and even have a second blossoming in Spain, promoting a symbiosis between the wealth of artistic canons brought by Italian artists, imbued with the mannerism of the North, and the strength of the local Spanish religious temperament. All these elements will lead to the polychrome sculpture of the Spanish Renaissance, the origin of an artistic tradition which is almost unique in the European artistic panorama and which will survive until well into the XVIIIth century. This resolute Spanish artistic interest in religious expression by means of polychrome sculpture, which came into being at the outset of the XVIth century, gained strength through other currents, such as the Romanism of Gaspar Becerra in the middle of the century and continued to develop forming the school of Navarra with its Master Ancheta, the school of Seville with the great Martinez Montañés, the school of Granada, with Alonso Cano and Pedro Mena as principal leaders, the school of Castile – which favoured the Italian influence brought by the Eagles of the Renaissance and by Gaspar Becerra with his Michelangesque nuances – reaching its apotheosis with Gregorio Hernández, and coming to an end in the XVIIIth century with the school of Murcia, magnificently represented by Francisco Salcillo.

The influence of the artistic movements of Brabant in the kingdom of Spain was not a novelty. During the XVth century Castile was one of the principal importers of Flemish panels and later of painters such as Michael Sittow (1492), Juan de Flandes (1496; fig. 3) (Queen Isabel's favourite painter), and Juan de Borgoña (fig. 4), who was particularly patronised by the Church, so that in painting it was the *Hispano Flamenco* style that prevailed, and in architecture and sculpture, the *Isabelino* style, whose greatest exponent was Gil de Siloé, also called *Gil de Amberres*, a native of Brabant, in the opinion of the majority of distinguished scholars.

This influence was accentuated during the first thirty years of the XVIth century during the reign of Charles V, by the political union of Spain and the northern territories, and the notable increase of commercial relations with Spain as a result of the consolidation of the discovery

pp. 2, 4
Figs. 1, 2 Arnao de Bruselas
Nathan rebuking King David, c.1556/68
86 x 85,5 cm
Polychrome walnut wood
Private collection



Fig. 3 **Juan de Flandes**
Lamentation on the Dead Christ
 Madrid, Museo Nacional
 Thyssen-Bornemisza

of America, much more than by the support of the monarch whose artistic taste favoured Italian art rather than the Flemish style, as can be seen in the unfinished work of Charles V's Palace at Granada, and his own special predilection for Titian.

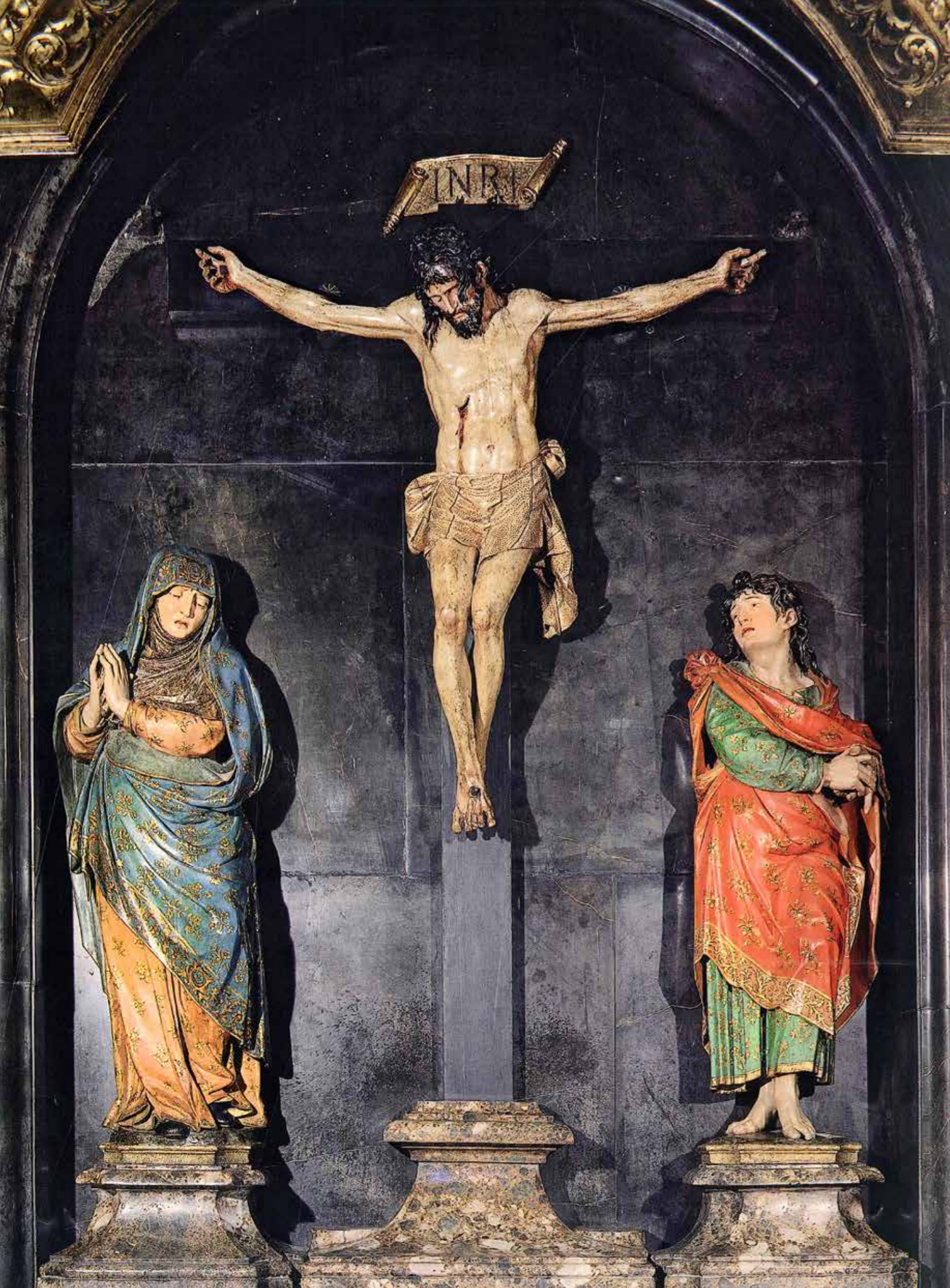
Therefore, the main reasons behind the emigration of Flemish talent in sculpture-making at the beginning of the XVIth century to Spain, were the religious fervour of the Spanish people and the wealth of a powerful Church resulting in better remuneration. Compounded with this, was the growing lack of interest in sculpture as a form of artistic expression in precisely those Northern regions, caused by a change in the aesthetics of the altar-piece and, above all, as a result of a growing repulsion towards sculptures as images of religious cult, and a gradual cultural separation in the Brabant. Providentially, the kingdom of Spain therefore becomes the principal magnet for European sculptors seeking important commissions from Charles V and, particularly, from the Spanish church; at the same time a profound crisis is created in the Brabant sculptural



Fig. 4 **Juan de Borgoña**
The prophet Amos
 Cuenca, Museo Diocesano

milieu, where the only dynasties to remain active are the Duquesnoy and the Verbruggen.

During this period domination in the sculptural field disappeared in favour of painting which prevailed and produced great figures like Frans Pourbus the Younger, and Rubens and Van Dyck in the following century; a never-ending stream of foreign artists arrived in Spain. From Italy came Pietro di Torrigiano, Domenico Fancelli, Giovanni da Nola, Giacopo Fiorentino, Juan de Moreto and the Leoni family; from Burgundy and Lorraine, Felipe Bigarni, Michel Perrin, Nicolas Lyon, Gabriel Joly, Jacques Bernal, the Breugnot brothers, the Beauvais brothers, the Imberto family and Juan de Juni; from the Territories of the Lower Rhine, Rodrigo Alemán, Simón de Colonia and his son Francisco de Colonia and Alejo de Vahia; from the Brabant area the best documented were Copin de Holanda, Guillen de Holanda, Cornielles de Holanda, Juan de Bruselas, Domingo de Amberes, Arnao de Bruselas, the Bolduque brothers and Roque Balduque among a number of minor artists. They all brought to Spain, who was just emerging from the *Reconquista* and from the discovery of America, the technique which Spanish artists lacked, since manual work was exclusively reserved to the *moriscos*, and their virtuosity amazed the patrons. They brought with them the tradition of organised work within a studio, and the idea of specialisation of crafts, which had only been developed in particular instances, for instance by Gil de Siloé and, finally, they promoted the recognition of the Master's hand in works of art, as the sign of the final quality which works must have, and which only in the XVIth century begins to figure in Spanish contracts.



ARNAO DE BRUSELAS

the most representative sculptor of the Navarre-Aragonese-Riojan school

If in the first instance, we shall concentrate on Arnau de Bruselas, the author of the relief representing *The prophet Nathan*, recently discovered and studied in depth by Professor Jesús María Parado del Olmo. There is no doubt that he is the most representative sculptor of the Navarre-Riojan Renaissance, a region in which, in the words of Georges Weiss, in scarcely 100 square kilometres are assembled the richest and most original group of European Renaissance sculptures in altarpieces, which display some elements of a proto-Baroque style. The figure of Arnau de Bruselas stands out as a result of a documentary discovery which provides evidence that he worked in the workshop of Damian Forment from 1536 for a period of four years. This confirms that he worked at the Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada in 1537. Furthermore, he is attested to have worked in the churches of Genevilla (1549), Alberite (1550), in the imperial church of Santa Maria de Palacio in 1553, and in the Monastery of Veruela in 1556. Success with these projects permitted him in 1557 to embark on the contract of the Cathedral of La Seo at Zaragoza, and later on the contract of Aldea de Ebro in 1564, before his death in 1565 (figs. 5, 6). These works are meticulously documented, and have been carefully studied by historians of Riojan art, specially by Professor Julián Ruiz-Navarro (1981), and subsequently

Fig. 5 Arnau de Bruselas
Calvary
Zaragoza, Cathedral of La Seo

by Francisco Fernández Pardo and Jesús Parrado del Olmo. They have managed to assemble the corpus of his work, which is entirely concentrated in this area of Spain. It is a completely coherent body of work, of high quality, and can be considered as the fruit of a fusion between the author's Flemish roots and the influence of Damian Forment and of Alonso Berruguete, whose genius he attempted to emulate.

We knew that Arnao de Bruselas was active as a sculptor of images in the work-shop of the Beaugrant brothers and Andrés de Araoz. That is the reason why many of his works before being documented were attributed to Andrés de Araoz who signed the contracts with the clients. Araoz was a *entallador* who was extremely active in the Basque-Navarre area; as a sculptor, his artistic gifts were more limited than those of Arnao, and this difference in the quality of their respective talents was clearly distinguished by Georges Weiss in the altarpiece in the church of Genevilla. The confusion between Arnao's work and that of the Beaugrant brothers who had a workshop in the Basque-Navarre area, which competed with Araoz's and the Beauvais' studios, is a different question altogether. The Beaugrants have been well studied by José Angel Barrio Loza with regard to their altarpieces, with paradigmatic examples such as the *Piedad* of the parish church of Ezcaray, which displays an entirely Flemish style without the presence of autochthonous influences, and an exquisite technique characterized by the exaggerated agitation of his compositions, the rounded and inflated clothing, the highly dramatic expressions full of the mannerisms of the north; quite the opposite of Arnao, who is more Italianate and open to local influences.

Although we have evidence of the work carried out by the Beaugrant brothers for Margaret of Austria's court in Malines in 1526, and from 1529–1532 in Bruges, where they executed the renowned Franc Fireplace, with regard to Arnao de Bruselas we can only assume that he came from Brussels as indicated in the contracts discovered in Spain. In them it is stated that his first documented works were carried out as a craftsman in the work-shop of Damian Forment, to whom he must have been introduced by the Beaugrants on the occasion of the construction of the altar-piece for the Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada in 1537. As a result of Forment's



Fig. 6 Arnao de Bruselas
*Judgment of San Valero and
San Vicente by Daciano*, detail
Zaragoza, Cathedral of La Seo

sudden death in 1540, Arnao had to complete the altarpiece basing his work on the highly prized designs left by the Valencian Master.

According to Parrado del Olmo, Arnao de Bruselas worked as an independent *imaginero* during long periods of his life, and this allowed him the freedom and artistic independence which he unabashedly enjoyed, and which was sought after by the great workshops of the area, the Beaugrants and the Araoz. Indeed, Arnao acts like another great sculptor, of French origin, Esteban Jamete, who worked as a travelling sculptor in Toledo and Andalusia, until he settled down in Cuenca.

Arnao de Bruselas' style, in his earliest period, reminds one of Damian Forment's with its balanced and leisurely rhythm, very Italianate, the best examples of which are his sculptures in Santo Domingo de la Calzada (1537–1540). The altar-pieces of the church-



Fig. 7 **Alonso Berruguete**
Adoration of the Kings
 Valladolid, Museo Nacional
 de Escultura

es in Sonsierra, Abalos and Elvillar belong to this period in which he worked with the Beaugrants, around 1545. In 1549 he worked at the church in Genevilla contracted as an *imaginero* by Andrés de Araoz; he also worked on contract for the churches of Lapoblación (Navarre) and Busto where, although he still followed the designs of Forment, we can already observe elements of Berruguete.



Fig. 8 **Arnao de Bruselas**
Adoration of the Kings
 Church of Santa María de
 Palacio Logrono

Arnao's second period coincides with his artistic meeting with Alonso Berruguete. Although we do not believe they met in person, as Berruguete was only documented in Zaragoza in 1518 on his return from Italy; however, Arnao may have come into contact with his style through the Castilian polychrome artist, Andrés de Melgar, who worked with Alonso Berruguete and who had an important



collection of drawings by the Master. Melgar painted many of the sculptures of the altar-piece in the Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada and in the church of Lapoblación.

It is from him that Arnao de Bruselas adopted his expressionistic mannerism, his original designs, the helical line, the serpentine figure, the rotatory position of figures with hunched shoulders, the importance of foreshortening in figures, the half-open lips and frowning brows, the expressions of longing and the grasping hands, which we will see displayed in his works at the end of the 1540s and, above all, from 1550 onwards. Nevertheless, he always reserved for certain figures in his compositions, an air of solemnity, a sense of majesty in contrast with the nervous energy of the rest of the figures (figs. 7–12). He may also have been influenced by Berruguete via Burgos, which exerted a strong impact on the sculpture of Rioja as well as being very open to the influence of the school of Palencia, particularly of Manuel Alvarez, who worked, when barely a youth, on the choir-stalls of the Cathedral of Toledo. Finally Arnao may also have felt the influence of Gregorio Pardo, the son of Bigarni, who was part of Forment's studio and worked actively in these territories. We cannot overlook the increasing agitation of his figures,

Fig. 9 **Alonso Berruguete**
Saint Mark
Los Angeles, County Museum of Art

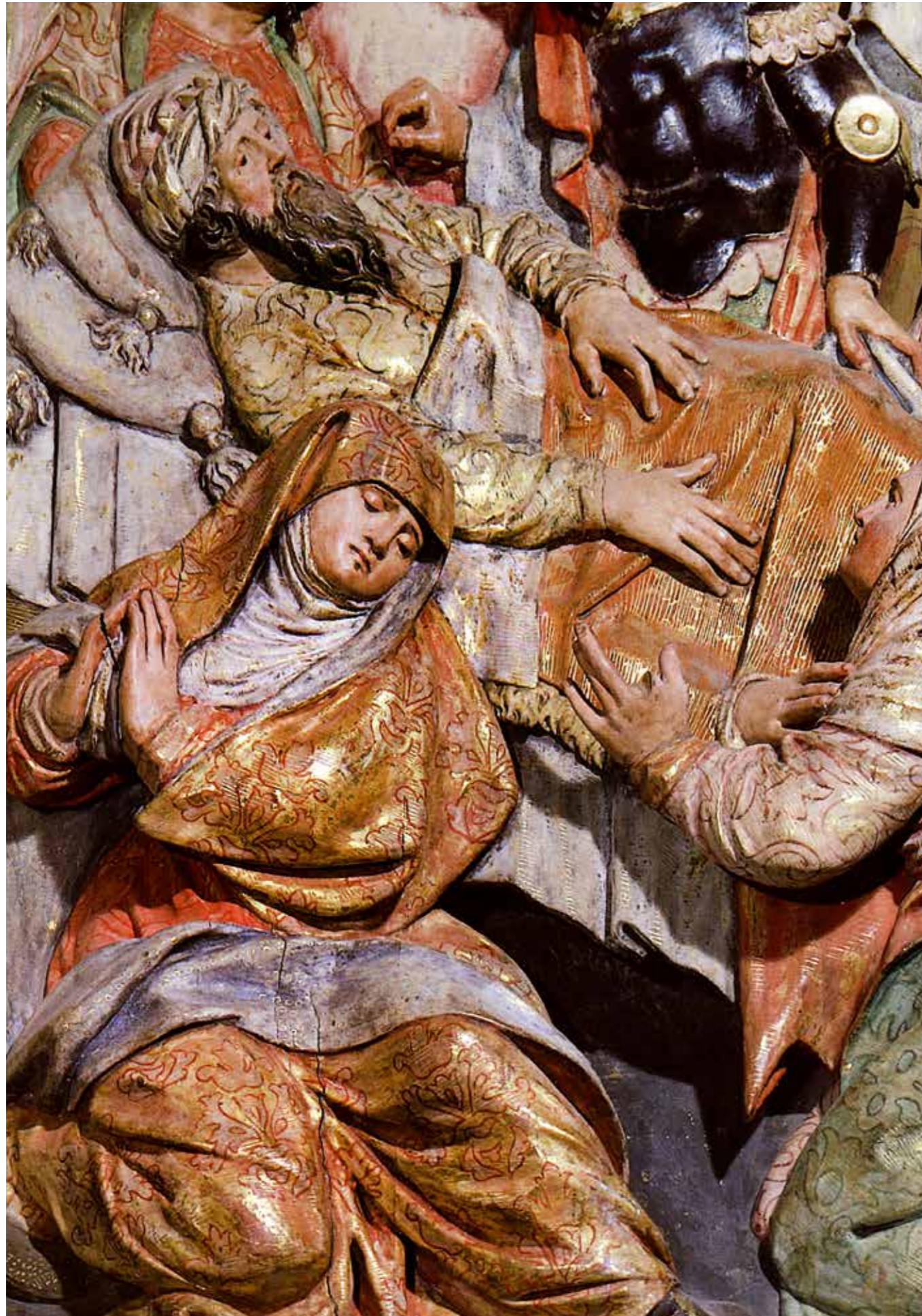
Fig. 10 **Arnao de Bruselas**
Saint Matthias
Santo Domingo de la Calzada
Cathedral



which seems to indicate the possible influence of Juan de Valmaseda and the exaggerated movement of his *Madonnas*, so characteristic of his style (figs. 13, 14); moreover we have evidence of Valmaseda's activity in Burgos during that period. We know that during this second period Arnau rented a residence – workshop in Logroño in 1552, and executed works in the churches of Aberite, and in the imperial church of Santa María del Palacio (1553). The latter is one of his principal masterpieces and its altarpiece is overwhelmingly beautiful, because of the design of its composition, more tranquil

Fig. 11 **Arnau de Bruselas**
*The Apostles Santiago, Saints
Matthew and Philip*
Genevilla, church of San Esteban

Fig. 12 **Alonso Berruguete**
Apostle, altarpiece of San Benito
Valladolid, Museo Nacional
de Escultura



and anticipating a change in rhythm in his style and carving, because it displays a most refined technique, and also because of the magnificent polychromy carried out by Francisco Fernandez Vallejo who, indeed, was the artist who executed the polychromy of the relief which we recently discovered (figs. 16–18).

From 1556 onwards, Arnao enters his third artistic period, as a result of a visit to Zaragoza where he almost certainly met with Gaspar Becerra who was returning from his journey to Italy, imbued with the canons and rhythms of Michelangelo. During these years, in 1556 Arnao de Bruselas carried out the reliefs of the chapel of San Bernardo in the Monastery of Veruela, and the *trascoro* of the Cathedral of La Seo de Zaragoza in 1557. These are masterworks in which Arnao softens the movement in his scenes and the figures acquire a greatness and a stature thanks to the form in which there are presented to us, in the foreground, with a slight *contraposto* which delicately blends with the folds of their robes which become continuous, and softly flowing, the faces displaying Michelangelesque

Fig. 13 **Arnao de Bruselas**
Death of Saint Louis King of France, detail
Monastery of Veruela

Fig. 14 **Juan de Valmaseda**
Virgin from the Calvary
Palencia, Cathedral

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Fig. 15 **Arnao de Bruselas**
Saint Lawrence
Church of Santa Maria de
Palacio Logrono

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





Fig. 17 **Francisco Fernandez Vallejo**
Polychromy, detail of the resurrected Christ
Church of Santa Maria de
Palacio Logrono

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Figs. 18, 20 **Arnao de Bruselas**
Nathan rebuking King David, details
Private collection

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Fig. 19 **Arnao de Bruselas**
The Martyrdom of Hermenegildo
King of Spain, detail
Monastery of Veruela

expressions of self-absorption and contemplation. His compositions give special importance to the inter-play of looks and corporal gestures which announce, in a restrained fashion, the Baroque. Our relief is a magnificent example of this latter period of Arnao de Bruselas' career, in which he made his last works: for the Cathedral of La Seo of Zaragoza, the Monastery of Veruela and for the church of Aldeanueva del Ebro. Professor Jesús Parrado del Olmo, in his study of our work, describes how the characteristics of the relief are specially related to the San Vicente Mártir of the cathedral of La Seo of Zaragoza, and to the different reliefs in the Monastery of Veruela (figs. 13, 19).





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