

Queen Estefania of Pamplone and the Catalan ancestry of a Romanesque altar frontal from Nájera

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Resum

L'altar major de l'església de Santa Maria *la Real* de Nájera va ser decorat a mitjan segle XI amb un luxós frontal d'orfebreria, de trets molt similars a un altre frontal elaborat pocs anys abans per a la catedral de Girona. Aquest article analitza la proximitat entre els dos mobles i la vincula amb el parentiu de les seves respectives promotores, dames de la casa comtal de Barcelona: la reina Estefania de Pamplona i la seva mare, la comtessa Ermessenda. Es proposa tant la dependència formal de la taula de Nájera respecte de la catalana, com la continuïtat familiar de les actuacions de comitència sumptuària dutes a terme per mare i filla, condicionades per la voluntat de legitimació del poder dinàstic exercit, en la viudetat, per elles mateixes. En darrer terme, l'article planteja la hipòtesi que l'empresa del frontal navarrès va estimular l'inici de l'interès per la fabricació de frontals metàl·lics als regnes hispànics occidentals.

Paraules clau: Frontal d'altar, Orfebreria romànica, Nájera, Promoció d'art, Estefanía de Pamplona, Ermessenda de Barcelona, Esmalts *cloisonné*

Abstract

In the mid-eleventh century, the high altar of the church of Santa María *la Real* in Nájera was decorated with a luxurious altar frontal, which was very similar to another frontal that had been made for the cathedral of Girona shortly before. The present article analyses the similarities between these two frontals and relates them to the family bonds between their patronesses, Queen Stephanie of Navarre and her mother, Countess Ermesinde of Barcelona. Moreover, it proposes that the Nájera frontal was made according to the model of the piece in Girona, and also suggests that Estefania's involvement in support of sumptuary arts, followed a pattern of patronage established by her mother, as both of them sought to legitimise their dynastic power. Finally, it posits that the production of the frontal of Nájera fostered the spread of metalwork altar frontals in the western Iberian kingdoms.

Key Words: Altar frontal, Romanesque metalwork, Nájera, Patronage, Stephanie of Pamplona, Ermessenda of Barcelona, *Cloisonné* enamels

The high altar of the church of Santa María la Real in Nájera was decorated in the mid-11th century with a large gold frontal, beautifully adorned with embossed images and abundant application of rhinestones and *cloisonné* enamels. Although it was destroyed in the second half of the 14th century, we know it relatively well thanks to several old descriptions that we will review below.

The aim of this article is to study the relationship between this frontal from Navarre and the metal altar panels that were made at the same time in Catalonia and, in particular, the well-known frontal of the cathedral of Girona, also golden and also exuberantly decorated with precious stones and enamels. Our hypothesis attempts to address that the Girona frontal served as a stimulus and direct model for the manufacture of the one in Nájera, as shown by the similarity of the format and materials used, as well as the nature of the object itself. The connection between the two pieces can be explained by the close kinship ties between their respective promoters, two distinguished women of the House of Barcelona: Queen Estefania of Pamplona and her mother, the Countess Ermesenda.

The Frontal of the High Altar of Nájera and Queen Estefania

The best known description of the frontal of Nájera can be found in the *Corónica general de la orden de San Benito* written by fray Antonio de Yepes.¹ The document states the materials of which the table was made and the presence of both relief and applied ornamentation. In addition, the description includes a copy of the Latin inscription on the frame, which identifies both the promoters, particularly Queen Estefania, and the goldsmith who made it, who is mentioned by the name of Almanius. It is worth reading the full description:

Un frontal grande del altar de nuestra señora, quaxado de planchas de oro de martillo, y en el mucha imaginería de bultos de oro, que estaba guarnecido con catorce piedras preciosas, veynte y quatro granos muy grandes de aljófar, y veinte y tres esmaltes grandes. Començó este rico frontal el Rey don García, y prevenido de la muerte le acabó el Rey don Sancho su hijo, y la Reyna doña Blanca. Tenía un letrero relevado de oro por toda la orla que dezía estas palabras: *Beatae Mariae quam si nesciret, nequis dubitaret certissime sciat, hoc fecit Rex Garsias. Haec Rex piissimus fecit Garsias benignus. Et Stefania me factum, sub honore Mariae scilicet Almanii decus artificis venerandi.*²

This excerpt has been quoted on numerous occasions,³ but contrary to what is usually thought, Yepes did not actually see the frontal, which had already been destroyed when he was the main

¹ See the sixth volume of the history of the Benedictine monasteries in Spain: YEPES 1617: 124-125.

² Translation of the Latin inscription: “[L’església de la] Verge Maria, per si algú no ho sabés, per si algú dubtés del què se sap amb certesa, la va fer el rei Garcia. Això va fer el pietós i bondadós rei Garcia. I a mi m’ha fet Estefania, en honor de Maria, per obra del venerable Almanius, glòria dels artífexs” [(The church of the) Virgin Mary, in case anyone did not know, in case anyone doubts what is known with certainty, was made by King Garcia. This is what the pious and kind King García did. And I have been made by Estefania, in honour of Mary, by the work of the venerable Almanius, glory of the craftsmen].

³ For along time now: MORET 1684: 744; FITA 1895: 186-187.

preacher of the monastery of Nájera (1580-1583), but rather describes it from a secondary source.⁴ There is, however, an earlier description of the frontal made when it was still in place. It is in an inventory of the monastic treasury dating from 1324, copied in an 18th-century cartulary. Although it does not reproduce the Latin inscription, it does confirm what Yepes claims and provides some interesting details:

Et un frontal de oro que está delante del altar de Santa María, con ymágenes todas de oro, et en medio de nro. Señor figurado, et están en el catorse pedras muy nobles, et veinte quatro esmaltes: et mengua y una plancha, et un bastón do está la figura en que fue bañado nro. Señor en la fuente en jordán: et mengua en el un cabo á man siniestra de oro.⁵

There is yet a third description of the frontal offered by another document from the same 14th century: the record of a judicial sentence passed in 1379 against the royal mayor from Burgos, Garci Pedro de Camargo, accused by the prior of Nájera of having stolen part of the abbey's treasure.⁶ Among the stolen pieces was the gold table, which is mentioned in similar terms to those in the inventory, although in addition to the stones and enamels, irregular pearls or "aljofares" are also mentioned ("veinte e tres granos de aljófar grandes") which agrees with Yepes' accounts. The enamels are described as «muy grandes e buenos» [big and of good quality]. The text of the sentence shows how the mayor's men who stole the pieces dismantled the metal sheets of the furniture («desollaron la foja de oro e de plata con que estaba guarnido recobierito el frontal del altar») and presumably also took all the stones and ornaments.⁷ In other words, the frontal was destroyed in the second half of the 14th century.

The image of the frontal provided by the texts is sufficiently complete. The piece, with a wooden base, was covered with gold leaf and had abundant embossed decoration. It was presided over by a central figure of the *Maiestas Domini*, and an unknown number of historical scenes—including the Baptism of Christ—were distributed along the sides in horizontal registers, probably forming a broad Christological cycle ("mucha ymaginería", writes Yepes). The sumptuous effect was completed by 14 embedded gemstones, 23 or 24 enamels and 24 pearls. All the gems must have been placed in the spaces separating the scenes and perhaps also in the outer frame of the frontal. In that same frame was the dedicatory inscription, which, according to Yepes, was "por toda la orla" [all over the border].

The inscription is truly interesting. The monarchs of Pamplona, García Sanchez III and Estefania, appear as promoters, but the figure of the king is related to the architectural project of Santa

⁴ The chronicler claims to have found «una memoria muy grande en el Monasterio, de muchas pieças riquissimas que el Rey y sus hijos dexaron, a esta casa» (YEPES 1617: 124).

⁵ The inventory was transcribed by Antonio de Trueba in 1888 and published 26 years later: TRUEBA 1914: 194. See also CANTERA 1985: II, 1.172-1.176, doc. 274.

⁶ The document is preserved in a transfer dated 1433: CANTERA 1985: III, 1.378-1.406 (esp. 1.383).

⁷ The reference to silver must be a mistake, perhaps because several pieces of silver were also stolen; the front, however, appears to have been entirely of gold.

María, while the frontal is specifically attributed to the patronage of Estefania: “et Stefania me factum”.⁸ The name of the goldsmith to whom the piece was commissioned is then mentioned, the “venerable Almanius, glory of craftsmen” to whom undisputed public recognition is given.⁹ The particular etymology of the name has long led us to believe that it was a foreign goldsmith, of Germanic origin (“Almanius”, German), a very suggestive hypothesis that, moreover, is in line with the Nordic influences that have always been detected in Iberian metalwork, both in the regions of Navarre-Castile and Leon.¹⁰

For now, we will focus on the figure of the queen as promoter. Widowed in 1054, Estefania financed and managed the construction of the frontal as a personal undertaking. Of course, this piece cannot be dissociated from the construction of the church of Santa Maria, whose original building, later replaced by the present Gothic temple (fig. 1), presided over the period of political prosperity of the city of Nájera in the mid-11th century. As the first-born son of King Sancho el Mayor, Garcia Sanchez III had inherited the kingdom of Pamplona, the centre of the vast territories controlled by his father, while his half-brother Ramiro became King of Aragon (Ramiro I), and his brother Fernando became Count of Castile and later, by marriage, King of Leon from 1037 (Fernando I). Garcia Sanchez strengthened the role of Nájera in the Navarrese context and resided in the city at various periods, turning it into a kind of second capital of the kingdom (CANTERA 2005: 39-72).

The monarch founded Santa María *la Real* in 1052 as the episcopal see of the restored diocese of Calahorra.¹¹ The preserved founding document of the church includes an extensive royal donation of movable property and territorial patrimony. (CANTERA 1985: II, 654-663, doc. 10). This document did not survive in its original form, but as a copy (several copies indeed), the most notable of which –whose dating is controversial¹²– is preserved in the Real Academia de Historia, Madrid.

⁸ It is worth mentioning that the inscription does not mention either Sancho IV (the first-born son of García Sanchez and Estefania) or his wife “doña Blanca” (a name that must be mistaken, because Sancho’s wife was called Placencia; Blanca was the wife of Sancho III of Castile, whose tomb is also preserved in Nájera), who Yepes claims had finished the piece. The chronicler must have mistaken it for a second Romanesque frontal that existed in Nájera, this one linked to the young couple as promoters. In fact, Sancho’s marriage was not celebrated until 1068, by which time the frontal we are concerned with here must have been completely finished and in use. Yepes also attributes to Sancho IV a reliquary-cross made of gold, whose miracles he explains at length (YEPES 1617: 125-126).

⁹ This is not exceptional, because the social prominence (and presence in inscriptions) of medieval goldsmiths was always remarkable. See LECLERQ-MARX 2000 i 2001.

¹⁰ The Germanic origin of the goldsmith was already suggested by GÓMEZ-MORENO 1934: 32-33. See also MORALES 1991: 404-405, and more recently BANGO 2007: 59, which tries to identify this “German” from Nájera with one of the two goldsmiths responsible for (and depicted on) the ark of San Millán de la Cogolla, with apparently Germanic names according to the inscription on the ark: *Engelram magistro et Rodolfo fillo*. On the relationship between the 11th century plastic art of Navarre and Leon see PRADO-VILAR 2009: 219, n. 55.

¹¹ On the initial history of the building see CANTERA 1982: 253-274. When, thirty years later, Nájera came under Castilian rule, King Alfonso VI converted the cathedral into a Benedictine monastery (1079) and moved its episcopal see back to Calahorra (CANTERA 1986).

¹² It is generally considered to be a late 12th-century copy (LADERO 2001). Recently, however, a mid-11th century chronology has been insisted upon, based on the style of its miniatures (ABENZA 2017: 280).

This copy is beautifully written on a large parchment with miniature decoration on the border, including an image of both Garcia Sanchez and Estefania as donors.¹³ Interestingly, this founding charter is signed by the two brothers of García Sanchez, the kings Fernando of León (*Fredinandus rex*) and Ramiro of Aragon (*Ranimirus rex*), as well as by a *Raimundus comes* who we can safely identify with Count Ramon Berenguer I of Barcelona. These signatures are a later addition and do not mean the presence of the three monarchs in Nájera at the time the act was written.¹⁴ However, they would be there only a few years later.

The same copy includes two brief documents that were also added later, both dated after the death of King Garcia Sanchez in 1054, in the battle of Atapuerca.¹⁵ The first is an addition by Estefania, who included the monastery of Santa Coloma –which was part of his personal patrimony– in the cathedral’s endowment.¹⁶ The second is a new confirmation of the endowment signed by the son and successor of García Sanchez, King Sancho IV, together with his brother Ramiro. This new confirmation is expressly made during the consecration of the church (“in sacrationis istius ecclesie”) on Saint Peter’s Day in 1056, in the presence of the archbishop of Narbonne and numerous local ecclesiastical personalities. The presence of the archbishop of Narbonne is rather curious and, by rank, he should have been the consecrator of the church. The office was then held by the Catalan Guifré, son of the Count of Cerdanya.¹⁷

The archbishop should have been part of the retinue that accompanied Count Ramon Berenguer I of Barcelona to Nájera, who therefore attended not the founding of the cathedral but its consecration four years later. This solemn act was attended, in fact, by the four greatest princes who then ruled the Christian north of the Iberian Peninsula: the young Sancho IV of Pamplona (who had inherited his father’s throne), his uncles Fernando I of León and Ramiro I of Aragon, and the Count of Barcelona. The presence of so many monarchs made the act a phenomenal pan-Hispanic political event –I would say unprecedented– and it was necessarily then that the signatures of confirmation of the two monarchs and the count were added to the endowment of 1052.

It was also a family reunion, because Ramon Berenguer I was a cousin of Sancho IV of Pamplona. It was well-known that Queen Estefania was linked to the lineage of the counts of Barcelona, but the specific genealogy of the lady was not satisfactorily resolved until relatively

¹³ On the analysis of the document and its deteriorated illustration see ABENZA 2017. The image of the donors has led us to wonder whether a similar scene might also have been present among the reliefs of the gold frontal, which, in any case, is not mentioned in the sources. (SILVA 1988: 447-448).

¹⁴ The confirmation is placed before the signature, so the preserved version of the text is interpolated. See CANTERA 2013: 69-70.

¹⁵ Battle in which the King of Navarre faced his brother Fernando I of León (MARTÍN DUQUE 2005: 31-34).

¹⁶ Estefania retains the usufruct of the monastery, and in her later will (ca. 1066) it also occupied a prominent place (CANTERA 1985: II, doc. 18).

¹⁷ As is well known, he was a person of enormous political importance, as intriguing as he was energetic. See MAGNOU-NORTIER 1974: 463-475 (esp. 472-473).

recently, after a long period of confusion. Today it is certain that Estefania was the daughter of the Countess Ermesenda of Barcelona and, therefore, the aunt of Ramon Berenguer.¹⁸ This is confirmed, beyond any doubt, by two ancient texts whose value was highlighted by Martí Aurell a few years ago (AURELL, 1994: 56-58) and which explicitly mention the queen: the *Chronicon* of Ademard de Chabannes (ca. 1030), which refers to a first marriage of Estefania to a Norman nobleman named Roger, and the later *Chronicon* of Saint-Pierre-le-Vif de Sens (ca. 1125), which mistakenly makes Estefania the daughter of the Barcelonese counts Berenguer Ramon and Sança (i.e. she is considered to be Ermesenda's granddaughter), but who is recognised as married in second marriage to a "rex hispaniae Garsias", who can only be Garcia Sanchez III.¹⁹

The wedding took place around 1040, apparently in Barcelona²⁰ Estefania, by the way, incorporated the names of her parents into the anthroponymic repertoire of the monarchy of Pamplona: one of her daughters was called Ermesenda, and one of her sons, Ramon.²¹ The fact that Estefania belonged to the house of Barcelona justifies the attendance of her nephew Count Ramon Berenguer I at the cathedral consecration of Nájera in 1056. It is most likely that the altar frontal we are concerned with here had not yet been made, because –contrary to popular belief– the liturgical ornamentation of altars was almost always made after their consecration, which was, naturally, a more pressing matter.

The inscription on the frontal mentioned by Yepes clearly states, as we have seen above, that the undertaking of the furniture was the sole responsibility of Estefania, who also presided over the consecration of the cathedral. It is reasonable to think that this consecration, and the resulting political meeting, was intended to stabilise the political situation in Navarre, and her young son's position as monarch, both in the face of internal conflicts with part of the nobility, and the external pressure –intermittent but significant– of Fernando I of Leon-Castile, responsible for the death of Garcia Sanchez III in Atapuerca. (MARTÍN DUQUE 1999: 881-882). The cathedral,

¹⁸ It has long been thought that Estefania was the daughter of the Counts of Foix and the niece of the Countess Ermesenda. She is referred to as Estefania "de Foix" in most of the traditional historiography, which seems to follow the authors of the *Histoire Générale de Languedoc* (DEVIC, VAISSÈTE 1733: 165). It is true that in the royal pantheon of Nájera an inscription also proclaims her to be "Doña Estefania de Fox", but it should be remembered that the tombs of García Sanchez and Estefania are actually a very late work, dating from the middle of the 16th century (BARRÓN 2019). The tomb inscription dates exactly from 1556, and perhaps the erroneous linking of the queen with the house of Languedoc is due to the fact that the last independent dynasty of Navarre, before the integration into the Spanish crown, was the dynasty of Foix.

¹⁹ Estefania's family origins, as well as her first union with the Norman Roger (de Tosny), have been thoroughly analysed in SALAZAR 2007: 853-864. See also SETTIPANI 2004: 147-149. In her excellent doctoral thesis on female promotion in the Pyrenean kingdoms, Veronica Abenza nevertheless maintains, strangely enough, the Occitan affiliation of the monarch (ABENZA 2018).

²⁰ In a document from the cartulary of San Juan de la Peña, the monarch states that he had gone to look for his wife there: «cuando perrexi ad Barcinona pro coniugem meam domna Stefania...» (UBIETO 1963: II, doc. 72). Incidentally, the document with the arras has been preserved, which states that Estefania was the daughter of «comitissa sanctissima» (RODRÍGUEZ DE LAMA 1976: II, 249, doc. 3).

²¹ Therefore, onomastics also confirms the Queen's affiliation with Barcelona.

also chosen as a funerary pantheon, became a centre of representation of Navarrese power and the continuity of the ruling lineage. Also, the decoration of its interior sought to consolidate the symbolic and representative spaces of the lineage Queen Estefania had joined.

The Queen's personal interest in the cathedral is evidenced by the properties and silver that she bequeathed to the cathedral in her will a few years later.²² However, the decision to promote the manufacture of an altar frontal was a very special one, and unprecedented in Navarre. The stimulus for the manufacture of a piece of furniture of this type, unknown in that environment, came from the sumptuary traditions of the Catalan counties, where the custom of decorating the altars of cathedrals and large monastic churches with metal panels was then in full swing. In fact, Stephanie's involvement followed exactly the "programme" of patronage that her mother, Countess Ermesenda, had carried out in Girona, where she had been responsible for the construction of a magnificent new cathedral and had financed a majestic gold frontal for its main altar.²³

The Frontal of Girona and Countess Ermessenda

Before marrying Garcia Sanchez and moving to Nájera, Estefania must have been aware of the flourishing manufacture of metal altar tables in the Catalan counties. The phenomenon was notorious: besides a couple of older pieces of furniture dating from the beginning of the 10th century (in the cathedral of Elna and in the monastery of Ripoll), we find, during the 11th century, the cathedrals of Girona (1038), Vic (ca. 1049), la Seu d'Urgell (1051) and Barcelona (ca. 1080), and the abbey churches of Sant Cugat del Vallès (1007), Santa Maria de Ripoll (six panels between 1008 and 1046) and Sant Sadurní de Noya (ca. 1040), among many others.²⁴

There can be no doubt, in particular, that Estefania was a direct witness to the promotion of the frontal of the cathedral of Girona. The city, capital of the county of the same name –linked to the county of Barcelona– was always the favourite residence of the long-widowed Countess Ermesenda, who promoted her young brother Pere Roger as bishop, and who not only directed the construction of the new cathedral but also designated it as burial site.²⁵

When the cathedral of Girona was consecrated in 1038, Ermesenda endowed it with a sensational donation of 300 ounces of gold «ad auream construendam tabulam» [for the construction of

²² On the testament see note 17.

²³ The connection between the two frontals has been presented in previous works, but without noting the close relationship between the respective promoters. See ABENZA 2017: 295-297.

²⁴ The dates indicate only the documentary mention of the frontals, even if they were made at a later date. On the classic account of documents see GUDIOL 1929: 26-33 and SUBÍAS GALTER 1947-1951: I, 373-382. On a recent update, with some new features and the revision of some misinterpretations see DURAN-PORTA, 2015: I, 257-306.

²⁵ Ermesenda was buried in the portico of the cathedral. The original wooden tomb was discovered in 1982 in a 14th-century sarcophagus inside the present Gothic church (ROURA 1985: 69-73).

the golden frontal].²⁶ It was an impressive amount of money, which indicates the interest of the countess in the production of the piece. Once the work had begun, this initial fund seems to have been supplemented by a second large financial contribution, which must be attributed to another widowed countess, Guisla de Lluçà, Ermesenda's daughter-in-law (and Estefania de Najera's sister-in-law).²⁷ At the beginning of the 19th century, during the War of Independence, this spectacular frontal was dismantled and the gold covering it was melted down. As a result, 400 ounces of gold were obtained, which justifies this great second material endowment.²⁸ In fact, Guisla's intervention is not reported in any historical document, but the descriptions of the frontal that we know of record the presence of a female portrait in enamel on the lower part of the table, with an unmistakable inscription that identifies the figure represented and her role as the commissioner: «Gisla comitissa me fieri iussit».

Guisla and Ermesenda were always on good terms. Guisla was the daughter of one of Ermesenda's main advisors, Sunifred de Lluçà, and had been the second wife of Berenguer Ramon I, Ermesenda's son. To a certain extent, her life was marked by the politics of marriage. When she was widowed in 1035, she was awarded the title of Countess of Osona (together with her son Guillem), but a few years later she was remarried to Viscount Udalard II of Barcelona.²⁹ This second marriage is relevant to determine the date of the frontal of Girona, because the inscription that confirms her portrait identifies Guisla as *comitissa*, and the enamelling must therefore have been executed before the betrothal to Udalard, after which Guisla is no longer referred to as such in the documentation. Unfortunately, the date of the marriage is not known, but Guisla appears as a viscountess already in a diploma of 1045, a year that must therefore be considered as the "ante quem" date for the creation of the enamel and, in general terms, also for the complete manufacture of the piece.³⁰ Thus, the frontal of Girona was made between 1038 (Ermesenda's donation) and 1045, a time interval during which we find the celebration of the marriage of Estefania and Garcia Sanchez in Barcelona around 1040.

Despite its disappearance, we know what this frontal looked like. We have plenty of evidence and at least three descriptions, which never fail to insist on the enormous quantity of precious

²⁶ The act of consecration has been published on numerous occasions. See for example ORDEIG 1993-2004: II, doc. 160.

²⁷ Certainly, it is also possible that Guisla de Lluçà was already involved from the beginning in the construction of the frontal, as suggested by ABENZA 2018: 316-324.

²⁸ The destruction of the frontal is mentioned in an account of the French occupation of Girona written by a local silversmith called Miquel Feu i Balmes, who reports with precision how «se fongué lo Palit de or de la Catedral, pes quatre sentas onssas: or molt bo» (MIRAMBELL 1959: 205-206).

²⁹ The union sealed the concord between the counts and viscounts of Barcelona after years of enmity and quarrels. See RUIZ DOMÉNEC 2006: 108-112.

³⁰ In the will of the nobleman Bernat Ermengol from Girona, dated 1048, he bequeaths two ounces of gold explicitly for the frontal ("ad opera tabulae auroe"), which could correspond to the completion of a specific element, or perhaps to an initial reform or embellishment of the piece (FELIU, SALRACH 1999: II, 714-717). The furnitures and metal objects were often the object of modifications and restorations, and in Girona we have examples of bequests to the frontal of the altar in 1118, 1132 and 1164 (DURAN-PORTA 2015: I, 277).

stones that were embedded in it. The earliest description is part of an inventory of the cathedral possessions drawn up in 1511, and published by Jaime Marqués in 1959.³¹ The frontal is described with detailed reference to the gems, and very little is said about the iconographic programme. At least the text reveals that it was focused on the New Testament (“sculptum misteri Novi Testamenti”) and was presided over by a central figure of the Virgin Mary and Child (“Virginis Marie tenentis Filium suis in brachiis”). He also mentions the presence of the enamelled medallion with the portrait of a female figure (“cum imagina mulieris”) and of the inscription identifying her as Countess Guisla.³²

Roig i Jalpí, in his *Resumen historial de las grandezas y antigüedades de la ciudad de Gerona*, provides the second relevant description of the piece in the 17th century (ROIG I JALPÍ 1678: 208-209). It offers some new information, such as the fact that the historiated scenes were in small quadrangular frames (“del tamaño de un azulejo” [the size of a tile]), but again the themes depicted are alluded to with reluctance (“tanta variedad de relieves, imagines de Santos, representación de misterios” [such a variety of reliefs, images of saints, depictions of the mysteries]). Actually, the description focuses on the precious stones and inlays, and emphasises the presence of cameos.

The third description, by Jaime Villanueva, also records the stonework, but fortunately delves into other interesting aspects.³³ Villanueva still saw the frontal “in situ” in 1807, just before it was dismantled by the French troops. He reports that “está dividido en treinta y dos cuadros, que representan de relieve varios pasages de la vida del Salvador, cuyo centro ocupa un óvalo con una imagen de nuestra Señora” [it is divided into thirty-two squares, representing in relief various passages from the life of our Saviour, the centre of which is an oval with an image of Our Lady], and also notes the presence of the enamel with the image of the Countess Guisla. He also mentions four other enamels, with the symbols of the Tetramorph “con sus respectivos lemas” [with their respective inscriptions], an interesting contribution because it contradicts the inventory of 1511, which mentioned only one “esmaltum magnum” [big enamel] with the symbols of the Evangelists, and not four different enamels.³⁴ Villanueva copies one of the inscriptions accompanying the figures («More volans aquilae verbo petit astra Johannes»), which is a well-known verse from the *Carmen Paschale* by Sedulius.³⁵

³¹ The work of Jaime Marqués is the first, and still relevant, study of the frontal of Girona (MARQUÉS 1959: 213-231).

³² The inscription must have surrounded the enamel, together with four gems that were “in circuitu”, i.e. forming a circle.

³³ For a full description of the frontal see VILLANUEVA 1850: 180-182.

³⁴ Villanueva is usually quite reliable, and the presence of four different pieces is common in the representation of the Tetramorph on preserved altar panels (namely, the frontal of Aachen, 9th century).

³⁵ “Volant així com l’àguila, amb el verb assoleix, Joan, els astres” (translation by the author) [Flying like the eagle, with the verb reaches, John, the stars]. The use of the four verses that Sedulius devotes to the evangelists has been common in the Western artistic tradition since the Carolingian period, especially in the illumination of the evangelists’ books. (FAVREAU 1993). They are not infrequent in Catalan mural painting (San Martí de Fenollar, Santa Maria de Mur) and also appear, for example, in the *Turin Beatus*, a manuscript copied in the scriptorium of Girona around 1100 (ORRIOLS 1999: 203-204), which attests to the use of this text in the cathedral of this city.

Thanks to these descriptions, we can get a relatively accurate picture of what the Girona frontal looked like. Jaime Marqués made use of these descriptions to recreate the frontal (fig. 2). The gilt surface was organised into 32 scenes, an unusual number of images in a piece of this type, with no known parallel. The countless embedded gems must have been located both in the outer frame and in the “fajas divisorias” [dividing strips] that separated the scenes, which were also decorated with beautiful fretwork and arabesques (VILLANUEVA 1850: 181).

Both the compositional format and, especially, the combination of materials and techniques, link the frontal of Girona with that of Nájera. It is also linked to another Catalan golden frontal with similar characteristics, that of the high altar of Santa Maria de Ripoll. It is usually assumed that the Ripoll frontal was already installed during the consecration of the abbey church in 1032, but it is only certain that it was finished in 1047, when it is mentioned in an inventory of the monastic treasury drawn up after the death of the bishop-abbot Oliba; it is described, concisely, in terms quite similar to those of the frontal of Girona frontal (and to those of the frontal of Nájera): «tabulam coopertam auro cum lapidibus et esmaltis XVI».³⁶

Therefore, the frontals of Girona and Ripoll must have been similar and, in any case, responded to parallel liturgical objectives and to the same procedure of representing aristocratic power through sumptuary *liberalitas*. Naturally, we must assume that the Ripoll frontal was financed by the county family from Cerdanya-Besalú (to which Oliba belonged), which ruled the monastery. Together with the frontal of Nájera frontal, they form a triad of special luxury that share many of their characteristic features: made with gold, with embossed figures, huge amounts of applied gemstones and, finally, the addition of enamels (i.e., to be exact: enamelled plates nailed to the surface). The latter makes them particularly special, and is a matter that needs to be analysed carefully.

First of all, it should be mentioned that these are always cloisonné enamels, in accordance with the strong tradition of Carolingian origin which, at the beginning of the 11th century, was at its height in Europe.³⁷ Apparently, both the Ripoll and Nájera frontals displayed decorative enamels based on geometric or perhaps vaguely vegetal motifs,³⁸ while, as aforementioned, the frontal of Girona displayed figurative representations.

European metalworks of the Carolingian and Ottonid periods provide numerous examples of this type of enamelling, both small ornamental plaques³⁹ and larger, more exuberant figurative

³⁶ The inventory is preserved (with five other inventories) in an 18th-century copy. The number of enamels reported increases to 24 in a later inventory of 1066. See JUNYENT 1933: 221-222.

³⁷ See Eckenfels-Kunst 2008 for a recent monograph on Ottoman and Salic enamelware.

³⁸ No source indicates that they had figurative motifs, although this possibility has been suggested for the frontal of Nájera. (ABENZA 2018: 303-304). The number of pieces, around twenty in both cases, suggests that they were relatively small plates, although the enamels from Nájera were said to be “muy grandes e buenos” [big and of good quality] (CANTERA 1985: III, 1.383) and, at least in principle, makes the presence of figurative motifs difficult.

³⁹ Like those on the crosses of Queen Gisela of Hungary, circa 1006 (HEYM 2008: 218-223), or the treasure of St. Servatius in Maastricht, dating from the second quarter of the 11th century (KOLDEWEIJ 2008: 198-203).

enamels.⁴⁰ Among the latter, the one containing a representation as donors of Abbess Mathilde of Essen and her brother Duke Otto in the so-called “Cross of Otto and Mathilde” (fig. 3) may evoke, albeit distantly, the medallion with the portrait of Guisla on the frontal of Girona.⁴¹

Cloisonné enamels, on the other hand, are practically unknown in the early medieval Hispanic tradition, even more so if we exclude those who decorate some Asturian works, which must be considered northern imports.⁴² Consequently, the presence of enamels on the frontals of the Catalan Counties and Nájera allows us to speculate on the introduction of the technical knowledge necessary for the creation of enamels in the south of the Pyrenees shortly after the year 1000. In this sense, it is tempting to suggest –although impossible to prove– the possible arrival of a Nordic master in the Catalan area, where the magnitude of the production documented in Ripoll and Girona⁴³ allows us to speculate on the installation of a workshop with a high production capacity and sufficient technical resources to produce not only decorative enamels, but also figurative ones, such as those on the frontal of Girona. The inscription identifying the image with the Countess Guisla certainly suggests a work made explicitly for the frontal of Girona (DURAN-PORTA 2017: 242-243).

The fact that the craftsman responsible for the frontal of Nájera was possibly of Germanic origin (“Almanius”), puts the two geographical contexts in parallel and even opens the door to consider a hypothetical movement of craftsmen from the Catalan counties, based on the needs of, and thanks to the economic and logistical resources employed by, Queen Estefania herself and her courtly entourage. In fact, the contacts between the Hispanic sumptuary arts and the Germanic tradition have been highlighted on several occasions,⁴⁴ and the appearance of cloisonné enamels could also be considered within this context of reception of North European influences. Be that as it may, this is a far-reaching question that will have to be dealt with in more detail in the future.

The Role of the Sponsors in the Dissemination of Altar Frontals

Here, I am less interested in the identity or provenance of the artisans, and more in the role of their promoters in the diffusion of metal altar furniture in the western kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. It is perfectly logical that the first route of penetration of this type of furniture was through the Catalan area, given the fact that the counties belonged to the Frankish cultural world

⁴⁰ Like, for example, those of two bindings from Northern Italy: the Evangelary of Ariberto da Intimiano (MAGGIONI 2007: 271-273) and the so-called Peace of Chiavenna (MAGGIONI 2011: 32-38)

⁴¹ On the cross see BEUCKER, FALK 2008: 177-180.

⁴² There are some enamels on sumptuary pieces from the orbit of the Kingdom of Asturias (the Agate Casket of Oviedo, the Victory cross and the cross of Santiago), but they are probably imported enamels from the north (SCHLUNK 1950: 105-110).

⁴³ We find enamels not only in gold frontals, but also in other objects both in Ripoll (the cross and the chalice of the high altar) (JUNYENT 1933: 221-223), and in Girona (an altar cross) (SUREDA, VERDAGUER 2020: 30-32).

⁴⁴ See LASKO 1999: 252-264. See also note 10.

and, of course, to Roman liturgical customs. However, it is precisely within this liturgical tradition –spread by the unifying action of the Carolingians– that the custom of decorating the altars of churches with rich metal panels, incorporating, in addition, extensive figurative iconographic repertoires, had spread on a European scale.⁴⁵

The review of the known data on the frontal of Nájera, and the unequivocal responsibility of Queen Estefania in its promotion lead us to reflect on the model of patronage followed by the monarch. This model is inspired by the patronage actions followed by her mother, Countess Ermessenda, in Catalonia. Both ladies –widowed at an early age– were concerned with the construction of a great cathedral as the spiritual centre of the territories that remained under their rule, and also as a political symbol of the continuity of a dynastic power that they exercised more or less directly, not always with the complicity of their male relatives. Going deeper into the symbolic dimension, the manufacture of magnificent liturgical furniture for the ornamentation of the high altars of these cathedrals reflects the commitment of both ladies to the ideological representation capacity of the altar tables, as well as their value as elements of reception and projection of the memory of their lineages. All of this strengthened their political role in times of conflict, sparked in Catalonia by the nobility that sought to create new spaces of feudal aristocratic power, and in Navarre by the conflicts with the powerful neighbour, the Kingdom of Leon, which largely involved the nobility of the western border of the kingdom.

Queen Stephanie reproduced her mother's interests and procedures, focusing, as she did, on the manufacture of a metal altar frontal, a type of furniture unknown in Navarre, but which in the Catalan area –firmly connected, as I said before, with the Carolingian tradition and the Roman liturgy– it had become a central element of monumental ecclesiastical ornamentation from the year 1000 onwards. The choice of this piece for the altar of the cathedral of Nájera not only reflects the family origins of the queen of Pamplona, but also highlights her actions as an artistic promoter, accentuating her character as the true and personal “author” of the work, in the medieval sense of the word. The differences between the frontals promoted by mother and daughter exist, but they are circumstantial (the central figure, the enamelled motifs, the number of gems –with the addition of pearls in the frontal of Nájera– or the presence/absence of the inscription differ), while the technical procedures and aesthetic and symbolic objectives of the panels are, on the other hand, remarkably similar.⁴⁶ The frontals decorate the high altars of two episcopal sees that were under the explicit patronage of the two ladies, both bearing witness to their interest in the symbolic reinforcement of their spaces of representation in the religious sphere, spaces that are certainly used to reinforce their own political position.

⁴⁵ The analysis of the use of frontals in the Roman liturgical framework cannot be dealt with in these pages, but relating their dissemination in the Iberian Peninsula with the substitution of the old Hispanic liturgical customs seems convincing. The phenomenon could be paralleled, for example, by the dissemination of the figure of the Crucified, which breaks with the traditional aniconism of Hispanic altar crosses (SANSTERRE, HENRIET 2009: 56-57).

⁴⁶ Naturally, as none of the panels have survived, we cannot examine whether they also shared the same figurative style, which would also allow us to consider the question of authorship in greater depth.

Estefania's initiative introduced a previously unknown piece of liturgical furniture into the Navarrese context: the frontal made of metal. In fact, this statement could be extended to the north of the Iberian Peninsula, since I know of no previous traces of the use of metal frontals for the decoration and attribution of symbolic meanings to ecclesiastical altars.⁴⁷ The frontal of Nájera is the earliest of the frontals documented in the western Hispanic kingdoms, which allows us to consider it as a fundamental stimulus –although not necessarily the only one– for the dissemination throughout the Iberian Peninsula of this type of luxury furniture. In this sense, some slightly later frontals may well have been inspired by it, especially the also golden (and also decorated with enamels) frontal offered in 1063 in San Isidoro de León by the monarchs Fernando I, Estefania's brother-in-law, and Sancha.⁴⁸

All this allows us to imagine a route for the penetration of this type of furniture into the peninsula, starting in a westerly direction from the Pyrenees. Of course, we cannot link all the metal frontals known in the Iberian territories with this Catalan-Navarre route,⁴⁹ but the resounding material similarities and the always very close relationship between the promoters of some of these frontals do allow us to state that one of the ways –probably the first– of dissemination of altar frontal panels in the Iberian Peninsula was channelled through the Catalan counties.

⁴⁷ I do not think the three «frontales vermiculos exauratos» donated by the King Ordoño II of Leon to the cathedral of de Santiago de Compostela in 911 were made of metal, as many authors argue (CASTIÑEIRAS, NODAR 2010: 613). Much more likely, they were red cloth frontals («vermiculos») embroidered with gold thread («exauratos»), similar, for example, to the frontal «*vermiculo cum cruce de argento filo*» mentioned –among other fabrics– in a document from 938 copied in the *Tumbo* of Celanova (ANDRADE 1995: I, doc. 4). A frontal made of gold is documented in Compostela, probably still from the 11th century (and, in any case, prior to the famous Gelmirez frontal, dated around 1105-1006), which was dismantled in 1118, according to the *Historia Compostellana* (II, 4) (ed. FALQUÉ, 1988: 303-306).

⁴⁸ The frontal is mentioned –among many other sumptuary objects, some of which are also decorated with enamels– in the famous act of royal donation of 1063, which is probably a mid-12th-century fake made from authentic materials. See MARTÍN LÓPEZ 2007: II, 513-539.

⁴⁹ For example, it does not seem to be linked to the frontal of Gelmirez in the cathedral of Compostela, whose descriptions do not record the presence of precious stones or applied enamels. See CASTIÑEIRAS, NODAR 2010: 607-621.

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Fig.1 Gothic church of Santa María la Real in Nájera (author: Joan Duran-Porta)

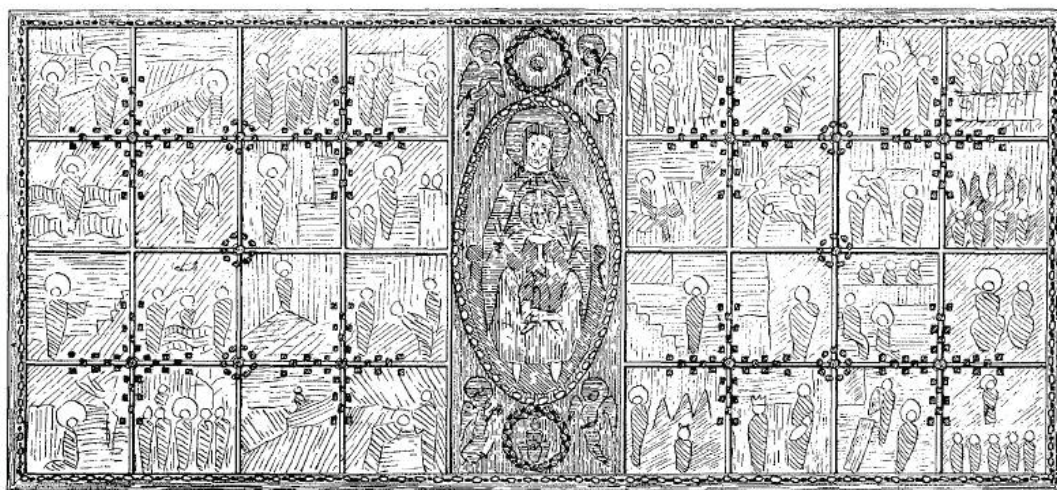


Fig.2 Frontal of Girona: composition based on data from the 1511 inventory, according to Jaime Marqués (drawing by Ginés Baltrons). Source: MARQUÉS 1959



Fig.3 Enamel from the “Cross of Otto and Mathilde” (end of the 10th century). Source: Wikipedia (Public Domain).