The Master of Rimini and the tradition of alabaster carving in the early fifteenth-century Netherlands

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Alabaster constituted a high-status sculptural material in many parts of Europe during the late medieval period (c. 1400-1450). It was used for tomb sculpture in England, France, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, the Iberian Peninsula, Bohemia and German territories. Alabaster altarpieces of this date are associated primarily with England. There is clear evidence, however, that alabaster altarpieces were also produced elsewhere in Western Europe yet relatively little is known of their production or the craftsmen who specialised in carving them. Research on early fifteenth-century Northern European alabaster altarpieces has focused primarily on the specialist activity of the Master of Rimini, an early fifteenth-century alabaster carver now generally considered to have worked in the Netherlands (see below), and studied intensively from the 1920s to the 1980s by Georg Swarzenski, Walter Paatz, Anton Legner and others. The Master of Rimini is crucial to any discussion of alabaster, partly as an exceptionally skilled specialist but also because a great deal may be learned from his work about the distinctive practices of and markets for this material.

The work associated with the Master of Rimini is exclusively of alabaster; no sculpture in another material has ever been attributed convincingly to the workshop. This points to a specialist material practice, but judging by its level of craftsmanship and innovation, one without any of the attendant dangers of commercialisation, production by rote or stylistic and iconographic stagnation. From the little that is known of its clients, the Borromei of Milan and probably the Malatestas of Rimini, the workshop catered to the upper end of the market. In other words, it may have belonged to a similar niche of luxury goods as a picture by Van Eyck, and may have been produced at a similar date, if not even earlier. In addition, this specialist alabaster workshop was clearly geared for export. The importance of this precocious export trade in carved alabaster has not been stressed enough: although apparently short-lived, it parallels the trade in Netherlandish paintings and the export of Netherlandish carved wooden altarpieces, and it extended to very much the same markets.

The identity of the Master of Rimini is not known, though a tentative suggestion will be proposed later. He is named after a series of early fifteenth-century alabaster altarpiece carvings (fig. 1) now in the Frankfurt Liebieghaus but purchased from the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie outside Rimini in Covignano, also known as Scolca. Not be confused with the nearby church of Santa Maria Annunziata, founded by Carlo Malatesta (d. 1429) to pray for his deceased parents, Santa Maria delle