

## Article

# Deciphering the Inscriptions on “The Adoration of the Magi” by Bartholomäus Zeitblom on the High Altar of Blaubeuren

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**Abstract:** The Blaubeuren monastery (Germany) is home to one of the most beautiful religious artistic expressions of Swabian art from the end of the 15th century, a collaborative work of various artists and workshops, including Jörg Syrlin the Younger, Michel Erhart, Hans Schüchlin, Bartholomäus Zeitblom, and Bernhard Strigel. It is a high altar triptych with a double opening. On its right inner bas-relief is “The Adoration of the Magi”, a work by Bartholomäus Zeitblom (ca. 1455–1520), a prominent member of the Ulm School. In the scene, on King Balthazar’s leg, there is a short literary text and a number, “DIER ZVO LIEB 100”, as well as a crowned monogram among floral elements. In this decipherment study, we propose meanings for all of these inscriptions, based on a collection of various previous solutions. The conclusions lead us to a pious expression toward the Child God based on an old Tyrolean Christmas carol compiled in the 19th century, which we trace back to at least the 15th century, an author’s signature by Zeitblom, and an acknowledgment of the royalty of the Virgin Mother Mary.

**Keywords:** Bartholomäus Zeitblom; Blaubeuren; cryptography; deciphering; religious art; Ulm School



**Citation:** Jara-Vera, Vicente, and Carmen Sánchez-Ávila. 2023.

Deciphering the Inscriptions on “The Adoration of the Magi” by Bartholomäus Zeitblom on the High Altar of Blaubeuren. *Religions* 14: 868. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070868>

Academic Editor: José María Salvador-González

Received: 21 April 2023

Revised: 14 June 2023

Accepted: 27 June 2023

Published: 3 July 2023



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## 1. Introduction

The so-called Ulm School began around the end of the 14th century and the early 15th century with artists such as Hans Multscher (ca. 1390–1467), who is considered one of the main initiators of the late Gothic style, and extended until the second half of the 16th century with artists such as Martin Schaffner (ca. 1478–1546). The Ulm School has been described as “modern art, oriented towards the Italian Renaissance [...] which led out of the traditional and provincial painting style of the people of Ulm” (Maier-Lörcher 2004, p. 33; Wortmann 1993).

The high altar of the former Benedictine monastery at Blaubeuren, near Ulm, which dates back to the 11th century (Eberl 2002), is the only great Swabian altar that has survived almost intact to the present. It is one of the most important convertible double-leaf and double-themed mobile altars in medieval Germany (Kahsnitz 2005, p. 180). It was made between 1491 and 1493–1494 on behalf of Abbot Heinrich III Fabri and then Count (later Duke) Eberhard von Württemberg. It is a collaborative work carried out by the best carving and painting artists from the former imperial city of Ulm, close to the monastery, a first-rate center of 15th-century German culture; the artists were Jörg Syrlin the Younger, Michel Erhart, Hans Schüchlin, Bartholomäus Zeitblom, and Bernhard Strigel.

Among these artists, we will focus especially on Bartholomäus Zeitblom, creator of the bas-relief “The Adoration of the Magi” (Figure 1). In this work, a series of inscriptions with an unclear meaning appear on one of the characters: a short text, “DIER ZVO LIEB”, the number 100, and a monogram (Figure 2). It is our goal to decipher its meaning.



**Figure 1.** “The Adoration of the Magi”, Blaubeuren Altar (photo by the author).



**Figure 2.** Detail of a scene in “The Adoration of the Magi” ([Meurer 2002](#), p. 222).

## 2. Proposed Solutions

Regarding the text “DIER ZVO LIEB 100”, which appears in a silver inscription on the left leg of the trousers of the black King Balthazar (Figure 3), it was suggested by Carl Heideloff in 1846 that the word “Meilen” (miles) is missing or assumed: “Dir zu lieb 100 Meilen” (Heideloff 1846), meaning a distance of 100 miles away. In the same year, when J.D. Bassavant mentioned the text, he simply placed the word “Meilen” in parentheses, taking its presence for granted (Bassavant 1846, p. 171). However, this proposed solution, which is an ad hoc insertion, did not solve anything, but it raised new questions: One hundred miles from or to where? Does this refer to Bethlehem, to Ulm, or to the place of origin of the Magi from the East, Balthazar in particular? We do not have sufficient material or data to be able to clearly answer these questions. For all this, we reject this possibility.



**Figure 3.** Detail of a scene from “The Adoration of the Magi” (Meurer 2002, p. 223).

In 1884, Wilhelm Lübke and Carl von Lützow cited the previous work, stating that the words “Dir zu lieb 100” [sic] refer to the one hundred miles that the kings traveled to reach the Child Jesus (Lübke and Lützow 1884). Another possibility, suggested by Paul Beck in 1899, is to add miles, years, or another measure of time after the number 100 (Beck 1899, p. 93). This type of solution, specifically the common one referring to the measurement of length, has survived to the present day. Heribert Meurer, in 2002, again mentioned the long road, a journey of so many miles, in the embroidery of the Moorish king’s tights (Meurer 2002, p. 233). However, it is an “enigmatic inscription” (Wottke 1993, p. 34) and, therefore, has not yet been resolved.

Moving on to the analysis of the crown among the floral elements on the black king’s trousers, it presents a structure of letters in the manner of an emblem or monogram made up of initials, perhaps A, V, and M, framed by leaves and flowering plants, with no clear meaning at first. About this, Heideloff mentioned that the braiding of letters on the upper part, the monogram, refers to the Ulm weavers’ guild, whom he said contributed generously to the construction of the altar (Heideloff 1846).

Regarding the monogram, Bassavant suggested that the letters A and V were clearly visible, perhaps referring to some authorship, possibly “A. v. V.”, that is, “A. von Ulm”, although it does not fit with any existing master craftsman or painter who would have

come later than this and had the presumptuousness to place his initials under a royal crown (Bassavant 1846, p. 171). This is despite the fact that on the same altar, there is another monogrammatic emblem in the scene of the presentation of the head of John the Baptist to Herod Antipas and Herodias, this time with an A and an H on the left leg of the servant, which we also find on his hat, which may be the initials of Herodes Antipater (in Latin), and not the initials of Hans Acker, a stained glass artist in Ulm who was already dead in 1461, outside our dates (Bassavant 1846, p. 172; Lehmbruck 1968). However, the letters A and H on the servant's leg appear as a crown between branches and flowers (Kremb 2016, p. 59), as we find on King Balthazar (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** (a) Scene from “Herod’s Supper” (Wottke 1993, p. 27); (b) Details (upper and center right). (Photos by the author of a replica of the altar in the Blaubeuren monastery; author’s reconstruction of the monogram (lower right)).

Similarly, as we mentioned before, Lübke and von Lützwow affirmed that the emblem on Balthazar’s left thigh is the shield of the Ulm weavers’ guild, indicating that the guild made an important contribution to the cost of the artistic work (Lübke and Lützwow 1884).

Regarding the monogram, Beck pointed to a supposed artist from Meran, in South Tyrol, named Markus Asfahl, suggesting the letters M and A. However, everything known about him is an accumulation of assumptions; furthermore, it is strange that a painter, perhaps a collaborator, would leave his initials so visible and under a crown. Even Beck discarded the idea that the initials H.A. stood for Herodes Antipater and suggested Asfahl Halensis, criticizing the possible authorship of Hans Acker (Beck 1899, pp. 91–95). In 1907, Marie Schuette qualified the “Markus Asfahl” option as unfounded (Schuette 1907).

Wolfgang Deutsch cautiously offered the possibility that the monogram encloses the words “Ave M[aria]” (Deutsch 1969).

Kremb, in 2016, suggested that the monogram, at least the letter A, refers to one made by the Augsburg painter and engraver Hans Burgkmair the Elder (1473–1531) that represents the chamberlain of Emperor Maximilian I, Wolfgang von Polheim (1458–1512), in a 1529 tournament book. A crowned “A” with ornamental bands appears on the cloak

of the competing horse and suggests the emblem of the tournament association (Figure 5) (Kremb 2016, p. 60).



**Figure 5.** Wolfgang von Polheim by Hans Burgkmair the Elder (Burgkmair 2023).

Given this compilation of possible solutions, which we do not consider correct or complete, we will present some important data about Bartholomäus Zeitblom, together with an analysis of the artistic work of the high altar of Blaubeuren, with a focus on the panel “The Adoration of the Magi”. Then we will go into a detailed study of the meaning of the enigmatic monogram that we are considering and offer our solution and the reasons behind it.

### 3. Bartholomäus Zeitblom

Bartholomäus Zeitblom (ca. 1455–1520), who was born in Nördlingen, Bavarian Swabia, Germany, and died in Ulm (Bosch 1999, pp. 19, 62), was possibly the most outstanding figure in painting within the Ulm School (Ulmer Schule) in the final years of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th (Bosch 1999, p. 62; Koepf 1963; Maier-Lörcher 2004). In his native city around 1472, the young Zeitblom was trained artistically in the workshop of Friedrich Herlin (ca. 1430–1500) (Bosch 1999, pp. 20–21). Some two decades later, Herlin’s daughter would become his second wife (Bosch 1999, pp. 23, 52, 84).

After his period of apprenticeship in Nördlingen, in 1482 he moved to the city of Ulm, which was flourishing artistically at the time. He arrived as a master craftsman without his own workshop and without having yet formed a family (Bosch 1999, p. 25). He went to work in the studio of the best painter in Ulm, Hans Schüchlin (ca. 1435–1505), and in about 1488 he married one of Schüchlin’s daughters (Bosch 1999, p. 84).

Zeitblom founded his own workshop at the end of the 1480s after learning extensive techniques and knowledge from Schüchlin and making a name for himself, which allowed him to control his work as well as form his own family (Bosch 1999, pp. 29–30).

From the first works, such as the Dinkelsbühl Altar (ca. 1480) and the Hausen Altar (1488), to the most mature ones, such as the Kilchberg Altar (1492/93), to the most perfect and finished ones, such as the altars of Heerberg (1497/98), Pfullendorf (ca. 1510), and Bingen (ca. 1510), the one that concerns us here, the Blaubeuren Altar, was created, which we can date between 1493 and 1494 (Bosch 1999, p. 334).

#### 4. The High Altar of Blaubeuren

The Blaubeuren Altarpiece is one of the most sublime creations of Swabian art from the end of the 15th century; it is a masterpiece and the result of collaboration between the most important workshops in the territory of Ulm (Baum 1911; Moraht-Fromm 2002b, p. 131). Consecrated in 1493, although not fully completed until 1494 (Moraht-Fromm 2002a, p. 203), it is one of the great German works of the late Gothic period and an example of collaborative work among various artists of the Ulm School, including Jörg Syrlin the Younger, Michel Erhart, Bartholomäus Zeitblom, and Bernhard Strigel.

It is a triptych altar with a double closing panel and corresponding predella, with numerous paintings, including the rear part, all showing a very high degree of mastery. The front panels present two themes. One is a liturgical tour of the main moments in the life of Jesus Christ, from “The Birth of the Child God” and “The Adoration of the Magi” (two large side panels seen when the altar is completely open) to the principal moments or stations of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection (four panels seen when the altar is completely closed). The other theme encompasses sixteen scenes of the patron saint of the monastery and the church, Saint John the Baptist, from the angel’s announcement to his father, Zacharias, to his burial after being beheaded by Herod (seen on the side and central panels when the altar is in a partially open position).

Presiding over the center of the altar, among the aforementioned bas-reliefs, on a painted background of the Nativity and Epiphany, are five elaborately painted life-size sculptures (Figure 6). In the center is the Virgin Mary with the Child, crowned as Queen of Heaven, and on each side, Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist; the founder of the Benedictine order, to which the Blaubeuren monastery belongs, is on the outermost part, with Saint Benedict on one side and his sister, Saint Scholastica, on the other. On the predella is the carved group of “Salvator Mundi” with the twelve apostles. Less prominently placed, in the corners of the upper part of the altarpiece, are busts of Count Eberhard V (1445–1496), Duke of Württemberg, and Abbot Heinrich Fabri III, the abbot in 1475–1495, who designed and directed the works of the choir, hiring the best artists of the Ulm School to make the superb choir stalls and the double-leaf articulated altarpiece with painted panels, bas-reliefs, and statues.

The predella corresponding to the closure is a painting that focuses on the Lamb from the Book of Revelation surrounded by the four evangelists, as well as the patron saint of the church, Saint John the Baptist, and the founder of the Benedictine order, Saint Benedict. On the sides of the altar are busts of Count von Ruck and the Palatine of Tübingen, as well as figures of Saints Peter and Paul. There are also paintings of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as four saints, Barbara, Catherine, Cecilia, and Agnes, at different high places around the altar.

The back is a splendid and carefully placed pictorial set of sixteen figures, in the center of which are the Benedictine saints Giles, Magnus, Gall, and Othmar, flanked by the blessed popes Urban II and Saint Sylvester I and the bishops Saint Conrad of Constance and Saint Ulrich of Augsburg. On the predella, there are six holy bishops on either side of Saint Scholastica and Saint Veronica: Dionysus of Paris, Martial of Limoges, Nicholas of Myra, Barnabas of Milan, Servatius of Maastricht, and Martin of Tours, all illustrious characters of great importance to the monastery or the Benedictine order.



**Figure 6.** Blaubeuren Altar in its fully open position (photo by the author).

In the vertical towering blast in the upper part of the altarpiece, with geometric-vegetal schemes, branches, and flowers, are sculptures of the Man of Sorrows with an angel carrying his cross, accompanied by the Virgin Mary of Sorrows and the disciple John on either side. Below them are the Church Fathers: Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory, Saint Jerome, and Saint Ambrose. Beneath are busts of the deacons Saint Stephen and Saint Lawrence.

The approach, the elevation, the carpentry, and the towering blast of the altar, as well as the choir stalls, are the work of Jörg Syrlin the Younger and his workshop (Bosch 1999, pp. 148–49; Meurer 2002, pp. 217–35; Moraht-Fromm 2002b, pp. 132–33). The carving work can be attributed to the workshop of Michel Erhart (Braun-Miller 1993, p. 42; Meurer 2002, pp. 217–35; Moraht-Fromm 2002b, p. 132).

Moving on to the pictorial attributions (Bosch 1999, pp. 30–38, 145–68; Braun-Miller 1993, pp. 48–56; Moraht-Fromm 2002a, pp. 168–217), the painting was conducted by the workshop of Bartholomäus Zeitblom, or possibly, due to the influence of his father-in-law Hans Schüchlin, by the joint or cooperative workshop of Schüchlin and Zeitblom, although Zeitblom worked independently and set the direction. The style analysis seems to indicate that Zeitblom performed most of the work personally, both the design and the painting, and even some carved figures (Bosch 1999, p. 30; Michael and Westhoff 1992). Due to the situation at the time, he had to share the work with Bernhard Strigel, who came from Memmingen, and with two other collaborators from Ulm, or perhaps just one, as we will now see.

In the cycle of the Passion, Zeitblom is responsible for the panel showing Jesus carrying the cross, and in the predella of the apocalyptic Agnus Dei, he is responsible for the part on the right, showing the evangelists Saint John and Saint Luke with Saint Benedict of Nursia.

In the life cycle of Saint John the Baptist, he is responsible for six panels: “Birth of John the Baptist”, “Circumcision of John the Baptist”, “Ecce Agnus Dei”, “Baptism of Christ”, “Admonition of the John the Baptist”, and “Arrest of John the Baptist”. The paintings of Saints Cecilia and Agnes in the upper part of the altarpiece are also attributed to him. The back part is almost entirely the work of Zeitblom, or perhaps he shared the central part of the Benedictine saints with an unidentified artist called Master of the Crucifixion, with the central and right parts of the predella also being created by this unknown artist. The painting of the sculptures and reliefs in the central open part of the altar is attributed to the Zeitblom workshop, and the landscape of the Nativity is by the hand of Zeitblom.

The upper half of the panel of Christ (main scenes of “The Prayer on the Mount of Olives”, “Affronts to Christ”, and “The Crowning with Thorns”) and the left side of the Agnus Dei predella are considered to be the work of Strigel, possibly also including the Lamb of God himself, as well as the panels of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, and in the Baptist cycle, the four panels of the “Annunciation to Zacharias”, “Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth”, “John the Baptist baptizing in the Jordan”, and “Sermon of John the Baptist to the Scribes”.

In addition to Zeitblom and Strigel, two more artists are thought to be responsible for “The Beheading of John the Baptist” and “Herod’s Supper”, and for “John retiring to the desert”, “Preaching of penance”, “Burial of the body of John the Baptist”, and “Burial of the head of John the Baptist”: the so-called Master of the Baptist’s Beheading for the former and Master of the Baptist’s Burial for the latter (Buchner 1924). However, they may be the same artist, called the Blaubeuren Master of the Crucifixion, who, in addition to the works mentioned, could be the painter of the Passion panel, which gives him the Crucifixion part of his name, as well as the characters on the back of the altar, indicated above and the small outer panels of Saints Barbara and Catherine. To all of that, we should add the landscape of the relief of “The Adoration of the Magi”, of which one of Hans Schüchlin’s three painter sons, perhaps Daniel, is considered the artist (Bosch 1999, pp. 150, 167; Moraht-Fromm 2002a, pp. 205, 267).

The rest of the painting and gilding work, setting, mounting, sculptures, and wooden reliefs are attributed to the Zeitblom workshop, where two artists who carried out the work can be identified (Westhoff 2002, pp. 133–62). Apart from the altar itself, we should also mention the work over the years by the stonemason Peter von Koblenz, architect and builder of the Württemberg court, and the master Anton (Braun-Müller 1993, pp. 40–41; Halbauer 2002a, 2002b).

We are therefore examining a collaborative work by various craftsmen and artists from Ulm and its surroundings (Westhoff 2002, pp. 161–62), where the Zeitblom or Zeitblom–Schüchlin workshop directed the work of the panel and set painters on painting and gilding the reliefs (Michael and Westhoff 1992). Even the frames are from Zeitblom’s workshop, and perhaps some sculptural carving was not from Michel Erhart’s workshop, revealing Zeitblom’s hand.

## 5. “The Adoration of the Magi”

The relief of the Magi (Figure 1) is a sculptural work by Michel Erhart with a landscape in the upper background painted by the Master of the Blaubeuren Crucifixion if we consider a single unknown author, or by one or both of two supposed artists: the Master of the Baptist’s Beheading and the Master of the Baptist’s Burial. In any case, they were artists working in the workshop with Zeitblom. The mounting part of the relief was created by one of the two supposed artists from the same workshop.

The application of gold was specialized work, carried out prior to the application of paint, and two techniques are recognized in the flesh-colored painting in the relief of “The Adoration of the Magi”, possibly by two different painters (Kahsnitz 2005, p. 187). Although a painter of the caliber and mastery of a workshop director would leave secondary details to his collaborators (Kahsnitz 2005, pp. 186–87; Moraht-Fromm 2002a, p. 208), this does not mean that we can consider that the engraved text, “DIER ZVO LIEB 100”, and the crowned

monogram were a side issue but were deliberately planned from the start. We can see that King Balthazar's trousers are plated in shiny silver and covered in transparent red lacquer, and the elaborate pattern with crown, plants, and letters was previously outlined in white paint and highlighted with primer drops that were later plated (Westhoff 2002, p. 149).

What does this partially alphabetical and partially numerical text say, as well as the monogram? Who is its intellectual author, apart from the original artist or final artists?

## 6. The Meaning of the Text and the Monogram

We looked at the different solutions proposed to date at the beginning of this paper. After studying the artist and the work, as far as we are concerned, it is necessary to continue examining the enigmatic group of letters, numbers, and drawings present on the left leg of King Balthazar.

### 6.1. Is it a Biblical Text?

If we consider the relief, as well as the entire altar, to be a vast and majestic Christian catechetical teaching, we can hypothesize a biblical meaning. The first objection would be that it is not a text in Latin, as would be customary in this period, and as we found in the same monastery in numerous biblical quotations, from both the Old and New Testament, that appear in numerous sculptures and under reliefs, with cartouches, as well as in some pictorial panels of the same altar.

The most famous translation of the Bible made by Martin Luther (1483–1546) (Mullett 2010) is the one from 1545, “Biblia Das ist, Die gantze heilige Schrifft, Deudsch” (“The Bible, that is, the entire Sacred writings in German”) (Luther 1545), but this falls outside the dates of our Zeitblom Altar. However, before the reformer Luther, there were already numerous German Bibles, as decades prior, in the middle of the 15th century, Gutenberg had perfected movable type printing (Kapur 1996).

As Luther finished the translation of at least the New Testament in 1522, this date is considered the cut-off point for talking about previous Bibles. Thus, there are eighteen pre-Lutheran versions of the Bible (fourteen in High German and four in Low German) that can help us locate the said text, assuming that Zeitblom took it from one of them; they were available to the public, although they were high-value books. However, when placing the date of the work in the period 1493–1494, we have to discard the last three, from 1522, 1518, and 1507 (Eichenberger and Wendland 1977; Puff 2017; Sonderegger 1998).

That leaves us with the following choices of Bibles: Mentelin (1466), Eggestein (pre-1470), Zainer (1475), Pflanzmann (1475), Sensenschmidt (1476–1478), Zainer (1477), Sorg (1477), Kölner (1478–1479; Lower Rhine edition), Kölner (1478–1479; Lower Saxony edition), Sorg (1480), Koberger (1483), Grüniger (1485), Schönsperger (1487), Schönsperger (1490), and Lübecker (1494).

Reviewing the facsimiles of these versions in the Württembergische Landes-Bibliothek Stuttgart (Menora-Bibel 2023; Württembergische Landes-Bibliothek Stuttgart 2023), we could not find a verse that fits our text.

At first, as I had considered another time (Jara Vera 2016, pp. 939–40), the enigmatic text “DIER ZVO LIEB”, for the pictorial reason, made me consider a reference to the Incarnation of God for the love of humanity, following the biblical text of the first epistle of Saint John (1 Jn 4, 10): “In this is love: [...] but he loved us and sent his Son [...]” (Bover and O’Callaghan 2001); “Herein is love, [...] but that he loved us, and sent his Son [...]” (Blayney 1769). Along with this, I considered a prophetic reference to the Old Testament about advancing the New Covenant for the people of Israel, where we find the words “dich zu lieben” (“to love you”), a German text in Jeremiah (Jer 31, 3): “Ich hörte nie auf, dich zu lieben, ich habe dir Treue gehalten!” (“I have loved you with an eternal love, therefore I attract you with benevolence”); (“[...] I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee”) (Blayney 1769; Cantera Burgos and Iglesias González 2003; CID 1996).

However, the German versions of the Bible that Zeitblom was able to use are not among those collected here, since they differed in the following ways: “dich lieb in einer ewigê lieb” (Mentelin, Eggstein); “dich lieb in einer ewigen liebe” (Zainer-75, Koberger, Schönsperger-87); “dich lieb i einer ewigê lieb” (Pflanzmann); “dich lieb in einer ewigê liebe” (Sensenschmidt); “dich lieb in eyner ewigen lieb” (Zainer-77); “dich lieb in einer ewigen lieb” (Sorg-77, Sorg-80, Grüniger); “Van verres apêbarde fîch my die here ende myt ewiger leffde hadde ick dy leff” (Kölner, Lower Rhine); “Vâ vernes apêbarde fîk mi de here und mit ewiger leffde hadde ik dy leff” (Kölner, Lower Saxony); “dich lieb in eyner ewigen liebe” (Schönsperger-90); and “Van vernes apêbarde fîck my de here und myt ewygher lette hadde ick di leff” (Lübecker).

As can be seen, in Low German we have the two variants Kölner and Lübecker, with the rest being in High German (or German). Examining Zeitblom’s text under study, it is clear that the base language is High German.

Another verse that may come close semantically to the text that interests us is in the second letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: “And I will spend and waste myself with great pleasure for the good of your souls, although I love you more, am I less loved?” (2 Cor 12, 15) (Bover and O’Callaghan 2001); “And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved” (Blayney 1769). However, the German text is far from what we are looking for, saying, for example, in Mentelin’s version: “[...] wie das ich eûch mer liebhatt ich werd minner lieb gehabt von euch”. The rest of the High German versions do not stray much further in their form of writing from this one, and the Low German versions also differ from the text in Zeitblom’s pictorial panel.

We find the same in the letter to the Philippians: “Therefore, my beloved and dearly desired brothers . . . ” (Phil 4,1) (Bover and O’Callaghan 2001); “Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for [...]” (Blayney 1769). However, the expression we found does not help us. In the Eggstein Bible we have: “Dorumb mein aller liebftê baueder und beger lichften”. We find the same in the rest of the High German versions, and nothing of interest in the Low German versions.

Another possibility is to look at the text of the prophet Isaiah: “You are valuable in my eyes more than Ashur, you are esteemed and I love you, and I will give Edom instead of you, and peoples instead of your person” (Is 43, 4) (Cantera Burgos and Iglesias González 2003); “Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life” (Blayney 1769). The Zainer Bible version of 1475 has: “Seyt das du bift worden erfam in meinen augen und wunfam ich het dich lieb und ich gib die leut fur dich und die völker umb dein fel”. Again, there is nothing of interest in the German expression, and the same is true for the rest of the versions in High and Low German.

We mention another possibility, another text from the same prophet as before: “For the love of my Name I defer my anger, and for my honor I repress it in your favor so as not to exterminate you” (Is 48, 9) (Cantera Burgos and Iglesias González 2003); “For my name’s sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off” (Blayney 1769). The Koberger Bible version is as follows: “ich hieb dich einen ubergeer aub dê leib und ich mach vezr meinen grimmê um meinê namê und ich zwing dich mit meim lob dz du nit verdbeft”. As we see again, this is not of interest to our purposes. In the rest of the Bibles, nothing comes close to our expression on the Blaubeuren Altar, although the German Textbibel version of 1906 (Weizäcker and Kautzsch 1906) says: “Um meines Namens willen halte ich meinen Zorn hin und meines Ruhmes halber bändige ich ihn dir zu lieb, daß ich dich nicht ausrotte.”

In the same way, a fragment of the first verse of Psalm 18 does not offer a satisfactory solution either: “[...] I love you, oh Yahweh! my strength” (Psalm 18, 1) (Cantera Burgos and Iglesias González 2003); “I will love thee, O LORD, my strength” (Blayney 1769). In the version of the Schönsperger Bible from 1490, we have: “Ich will dich liebhabê herz mein ftercke . . . ”. Neither of the other versions offers anything close to the sought structure.

One more possibility is found in the book of Genesis: “[ . . . ] so that things go well for me thanks to you [ . . . ]” (Gen 12, 13) ([Cantera Burgos and Iglesias González 2003](#)); “[...] that it may be well with me for thy sake; [...]” ([Blayney 1769](#)). However, the text of the Mentelin Bible offers the following: “[...] dz mir fy wol umb dich und [...]”. In the rest of the Bibles (similar, as usual, to the expressions of the High German versions), the forms used do not lead to our search words, although the German version of the 1836 Hebrew text by Moses Mendelssohn says: “damit mir Gutes geschehe dir zu lieb” ([Mendelssohn 1836](#)).

Other biblical passages that might come close to the meaning of “to love too much”, or “to love in extreme”, are the following:

Psalm 116,1: “I love Yahweh because he listens to the voice of my supplications” ([Cantera Burgos and Iglesias González 2003](#)); “I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications” ([Blayney 1769](#))

Jn 3, 16: “For God so loved the world [...]” ([Bover and O’Callaghan 2001](#)); “For God so loved the world, [...]” ([Blayney 1769](#))

Jn 13, 35: “[...] if you have love for one another” ([Bover and O’Callaghan 2001](#)); “[...], if ye have love one to another” ([Blayney 1769](#))

Jn 21, 15: “[...] do you love me more than these? Say to him: Yes, Lord, you know that I love you [...]” ([Bover and O’Callaghan 2001](#)); “[...], lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee [...]” ([Blayney 1769](#))

1 Cor 13, 4: “Charity is [...]” ([Bover and O’Callaghan 2001](#)); “Charity [...]” ([Blayney 1769](#))

1 Jn 4, 8: “Who does not love did not know God, because God is love” ([Bover and O’Callaghan 2001](#)); “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” ([Blayney 1769](#))

None of them shows adequate similarity to our Zeitblom text. We have not yet found a structure or sequence of words consistent with the words of the black king on the altar of Blaubeuren Abbey. Much less do we find these words in other previous Bibles, such as that of Vorau (1467), which, more than being based on the original texts or Latin, is a historical Bible, that is, a spiritual summary of the biblical episodes ([Polheim 1958](#)), or the “Biblia pauperum”, the Bible for the poor, in German, circa 1472 ([Library of Congress 2023b](#)).

If we go back further in time, perhaps looking for an ancient form, we have to collect all possible options regarding the biblical text in German. The Germanic versions of the Bible that we can consider up to the date of the making of the Altar are numerous ([Britannica 2023](#); [Salzmann and Schäfer 2009](#)). For our purposes, assuming it was used by Zeitblom, we can discard the Codex Argenteus version, the fourth-century version of Bishop Ulphilas, and the sixth-century Codex Gissensis version. From the following centuries, we have individual translated fragments or books of the Bible, such as the Psalms, or stories made from the New Testament or the gospels. From the ninth century, we have the poem “Heliand” in Old Saxon, which offers a story of Jesus Christ in some 6000 verses. However, the language is very far from our text, so it is not possible to place its origin in this text ([Library of Congress 2023a](#)).

We know of translations scattered among various Christian groups as well as sectarians and heretics of the 13th and 14th centuries in German territory. In the case of Zeitblom, we have a pious and convinced Catholic who distanced himself from this type of text and from the later ones used by the Waldensians ([Haupt 1885](#)).

We leave aside, due to its distance, the New Testament from around 1350 from the so-called Augsburg Bible and also the Codex Teplensis, albeit incomplete and centered on the New Testament, from around 1400. We also disregard the Wenceslaus Bible, from 1389 to 1400, with the first books of the Old Testament, and the historical Bible by Lauber in Low German from 1420. In the same years, between 1425 and 1430, we must mention the Bible by Ottheinrich, although it only includes the New Testament. Finally, let us mention

another version, that of Furtmeyr, from 1468 to 1472, which is again incomplete, containing only the first books of the Old Testament ([Bibelarchiv-Vegelahn 2023](#)).

However, it has not been possible to find a sufficient match for the text on the relief, “DIER ZVO LIEB 100”, or even only the first part, “DIER ZVO LIEB”, in any biblical text or any probable biblical version used by Zeitblom, Schüchlin, or their workshop team.

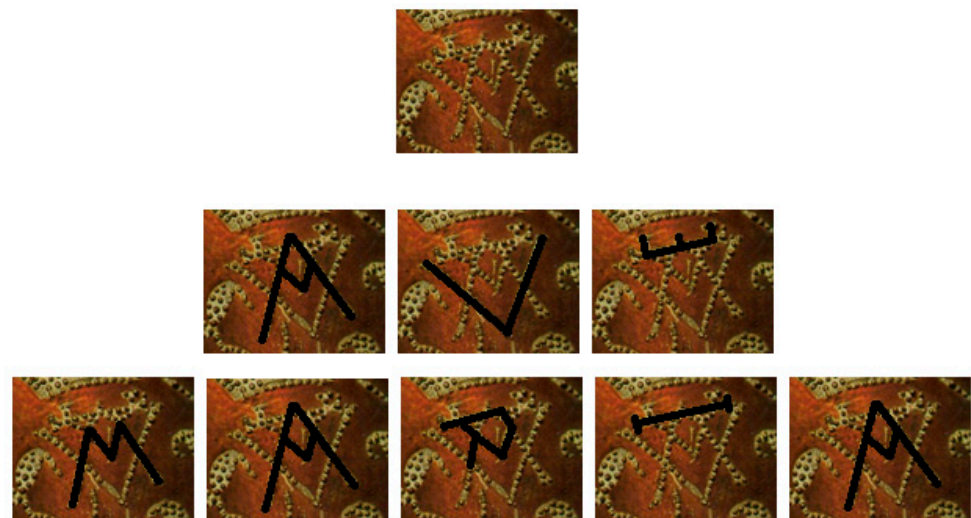
On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the biblical texts that we find on this altar and others are in Latin, the official version of the Church, according to the Vulgate text. Certainly, the vernacular text was spread throughout Christendom by the printing press. However, that does not seem to be the case for biblical or liturgical texts, whose origin is usually Scripture. For these reasons, perhaps it is a text, albeit a religious one, from another source, a profane source, although with a marked devotional and pious sense. This is the proposal that we will present.

## 6.2. Our Proposed Solution

We will develop the proposed solution by offering an answer regarding the monogram, the literary text, and the numerals.

### 6.2.1. The Monogram

We consider the aforementioned assumption of Wolfgang Deutsch to be accurate; he prudently suggested the words “Ave M[aria]” for the monogram without further detail or argument ([Deutsch 1969](#)). However, we dare to suggest that perhaps all the letters are complete, which we show in Figure 7, highlighting the various letters superimposed on the original monogram, which we also show at the top of the figure.



**Figure 7.** Possible hidden letters make up the monogram, taken from a detail of a scene from “The Adoration of the Magi” ([Meurer 2002](#), p. 223).

Keeping in mind that in the “Herod’s Supper” panel the king’s servant bears the letters H A, the initials of Herod Antipas, as a crown, although this painting is attributed to the Master of the Blaubeuren Crucifixion and not to Zeitblom, we can consider a royal meaning linked to the coronation in both cases. On the one hand, there is King Herod Antipas, and on the other, there is King Balthazar, already a wise magician king himself, referred to as one of the three kings of the East. This possibility can also be considered with regard to the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, who is present in the relief, sung as “Regina Coeli” (Queen of Heaven) and greeted as “Salve Regina” (Hail, Queen), both well-known Marian hymns in the Middle Ages and later centuries ([Budwey 2019](#)).

### 6.2.2. The Literary Text “DIER ZVO LIEB”

We will start by noting that the spelling of “Dier zuo” is very close to the German “Dir zu”. We find the German form of the second-person singular dative pronoun “dir” (Kluge and Seebold 1989b) in the form “dier” in some variants of Swiss (Staub and Tobler 1881a), an aspect of the language and region that we will develop extensively later. As for the “zu” form of the preposition “to”, note that it had the form “zuo” in Middle High German and Old High German (Kluge and Seebold 1989f).

Josef Eduard Wackernell (1850–1920), born in the community of Schlanders (South Tyrol), was a professor of modern German literary history at the University of Innsbruck and a fundamental figure in the process of compiling folk and popular songs and poems of the Tyrol as director of the committee in charge in its early years. During this collection, which was complex and full of ups and downs, a multitude of pieces were collected, many of them along with their music, and were cataloged for different times and places (Ortner 2019).

As Wackernell himself relates (Wackernell 1898, 1899), at the beginning of the 19th century, he compiled a manuscript of 94 quarto leaves bound in leather from the Pusterthal area, in the Italian Tyrolean valley, in Bolzano, South Tyrol, 300 km from Ulm, comprising 77 songs without musical notation, all of them with religious content: Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, various hymns, songs of Advent, Easter, and Christmas, festivities of certain saints, etc. Some pieces he was able to date back to the 18th century by dealing with some of the stanzas with historical themes that allowed them to be placed in time. However, the richest part of the batch was the Christmas carols, with a total of 23. Of these, 21 had very similar structure and content, with the oldest being models for those created later, written by various authors in various regions of the Tyrol at different times, as shown by the linguistic diversity. Finally, the last two Christmas carols, nos. 22 and 23, are different from the others in structure and theme.

It is number 22 that interests us (in the handwritten list, number 54). As Wackernell describes, it is a poem/carol song of the manger, or the birth of Christ, the Nativity, during the family’s stay in Bethlehem.

The scarce information prevents us from knowing its specific use. Possibly it was a family Christmas song of mountaineers and workers, perhaps even a tune sung in liturgical or paraliturgical celebrations of Christmas. It was a song transmitted from memory through the generations and compiled in writing by rural schoolteachers and parish priests, the only ones capable of perpetuating it over time, together with the memory and learning passed on within families.

This Christmas carol interests us precisely because it deals with the very theme that interests us in “The Adoration of the Magi”, as well as that of the bas-relief on the left panel, “The Birth of the Child God”, and because in it we find the text under analysis (Figure 8).

We offer the following translation:

1

Come here, children of Adam, young and old, great and small, all of you obstinate sinners, look at the little Christ Child: lying in the manger, suffering so much cold and pain, He has descended from Heaven and is the true God.

2

You, oh man, can ask him why He did this. “Love you”, He will tell you, “I have noticed; for love of you I came from the High Celestial Hall, I accepted humanity, lying here abandoned in the stable,

3

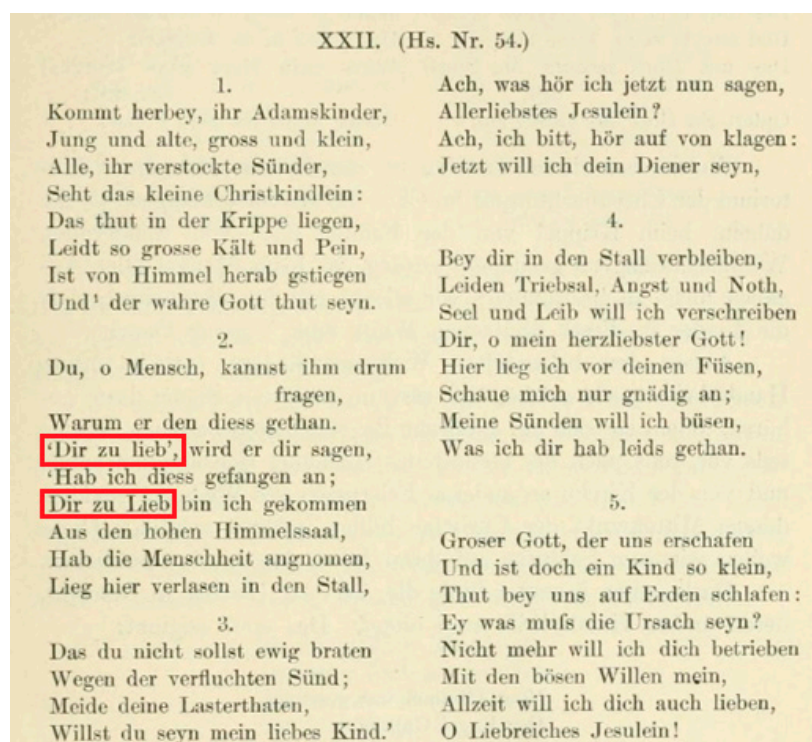
so that you would not burn eternally for the accursed sin; avoid your vices, if you want to be my dear son”. Ah! What I hear you say now, dearest little Jesus! Oh please, stop complaining: now I want to be your servant,

4

stay with you in the stable, drive of suffering, fear and need, soul and body I want to give you, oh my beloved God! Here I lie at your feet, just look at me with mercy; I want to atone for my sins, what I did to you.

5

Great God, who created us, and yet as a Child, He is so small, He sleeps with us on earth: Hey!, what will be the reason? I no longer want to hurt you with my ill will, I want to love you at all times, oh loving little Jesus!



**Figure 8.** “Kommt herbey, ihr Adamskinder” (XXII), a Christmas carol. Manuscript no. 54 (Wackernell 1899, p. 23). Highlighted by the author.

### The Geographical Relationship

There is close geographical proximity—a couple of hundred kilometers—between Tyrol and the territory of Ulm, the center of the school of the same name and a meeting place for various artists (Maier-Lörcher 2004).

If we consider Zeitblom’s relationship with other artists who may have had a clear relationship with the territory of Tyrol, we must mention the following:

In the work of the Blaubeuren Altar, along with Zeitblom, we have other artists: Bernhard Strigel (1460–1528), from the city of Memmingen, about 60 km from North Tyrol (Bosch 1999, pp. 31, 71, 149, 163; Otto 1964), and Michel Erhart (ca. 1440–1450 to 1520–1530), the great master sculptor from Swabia (Braun-Miller 1993, p. 48; Meurer 2002, pp. 217–35), who in his early years was located in the territory of Lake Konstanz, bordering Switzerland (Emmerson 2006).

No further information is available on another artist who worked on the Blaubeuren Altar, Jörg Syrlin the Younger (ca. 1455–1521), son of Jörg Syrlin the Elder (ca. 1425–1491). He was born in Ulm, where his father was also born and died, and in the absence of data, we cannot place him at a distance from this area or closer to Tyrol (Moraht-Fromm 2013), although his father seemed to have learned an inlay technique in ashlar masonry from the Tyrolean area (Gropp 1999). Of the anonymous artist, the so-called Blaubeuren Master

of the Crucifixion, or perhaps two artists, the Master of the Baptist's Beheading and the Master of the Baptist's Burial, we cannot say anything about their origins and geographical relationships.

There is also no additional information about another artist who was fundamental in Zeitblom's life, especially when we can speak about the beginning of a cooperative workshop. This is Hans Schüchlin (ca. 1435–1505), about whom we have already provided some information, whose workshop Zeitblom entered, and whose daughter he married (Bosch 1999, pp. 16–30, 83–85). Schüchlin, who was born and died in Ulm, spent his entire artistic life in the area (Pfeil 2007). On the other hand, it is suggested that during the making of Blaubeuren's work, there was some connection with either Hans Schüchlin himself or his son Daniel (Bosch 1999, pp. 150, 167).

It should be mentioned that if we place the completion of the Blaubeuren Altar between 1493 and 1494, during 1492 and 1493 Zeitblom was working on the Altar of Kilchberg (1492/93), a Swiss city near Zürich, which indicates a closeness at that time with the Swiss region. We even know of a trip Zeitblom took to Italy, specifically northern Italy, in 1492 (and again in 1500), where he made some drawings that he signed as "BZ", which was possibly a training trip (Bosch 1999, p. 61).

Returning to the relationships among artists, in the Ulm School we find numerous collaborative works for which it is not easy to single out the artists (Lichte 1993). This is the case, as we have already mentioned, of the High Altar of the Blaubeuren monastery church. On the one hand, some works require a joint effort, and here numerous artists would work side-by-side, and on the other hand, we find works completely attributed to specific individuals, as well as clear manifestations of individualism and the desire to stand out by more or less defiantly signing the works.

We even have numerous family ties between artists and artisans, including parents, children, and in-laws (Teget-Welz 2015). For example, Bartholomäus Zeitblom was the brother-in-law of Daniel Schüchlin and the son-in-law of Hans Schüchlin and Friedrich Herlin. These relationships were common (Lichte 1993). It was normal for a great painter, a future master, to marry one of the daughters of a consecrated master, thus continuing the production of his workshop and relying on his fame while trying to expand it (Lüken 2000, p. 402).

We can frame these types of relationships and work connections within the medieval guild structure, with the involvement of all family members, close relationships among apprentices, and life united in the house above the workshop (Nash 2008), and move away from the sometimes mythologized individuality of the later Renaissance. However, we cannot forget the existence of personal elements in the Ulm School, especially in its main master. All of these elements we also find in Zeitblom himself, with kinship and family relationships and day laborers and apprentices living in the workshop house (Bosch 1999, pp. 87–89).

With all that said, Ulm's relationship with Tyrol cannot be denied, as many pieces and relationships of origin indicate (Kahsnitz 2005). Relationships between painters, artists, and workshops in Swabia and Tyrol were common (Lüken 2000, p. 249). Take as a final example Hans Maler (ca. 1485–1529), a possible apprentice of Zeitblom (Bosch 1999, p. 16), who was born in Ulm and died in Schwaz, in the Austrian Tyrol, where he may have been brought by Bernhard Strigel and his workshop (Krause 2008).

One matter remains: supposing that the text on the altar that concerns us was related to a Christmas carol, which was the earlier of the two? Could it be that someone who observed the text on King Balthazar's leg composed the Christmas carol by inserting the text? Someone could have taken the three words, not the numeral, which he could have considered as well, and composed a Christmas carol to be sung in the Tyrolean area. However, we see that he could also have mentioned the Magi or even King Balthazar, but he did not. Another option is that the Christmas carol, with the theme of the Nativity and the manger, in which in the second stanza we have the cause of the Incarnation of God, the love, is the origin of the text on King Balthazar's leg: "2. You, oh man, can ask him why He

did this. ‘Love you’ [‘Dir zu lieb’], He will tell you, ‘I’ve noticed; for love of you [Dir zu Lieb] I came from the High Celestial Hall, I accepted humanity, lying here abandoned in the stable”, where the text we are analyzing appears twice.

Undoubtedly, this response, the essence of the Nativity expressed on the Blaubeuren Altar and carried on King Balthazar’s leg, clearly positioned on the side of the Altar, although not hidden, is at the same time a declaration of faith by Zeitblom, who marks with the monogram of Mary, Mother of God, signing cryptographically and shyly recording his sentiments of Christian piety. We believe that this second option is more probable in terms of events: that it was a Christmas carol known to Zeitblom, perhaps from his trip to Italy or the influence of artists close to him whom he heard singing it and from whom he learned it. Consequently, in this article, we propose dating the Christmas carol to at least the mid- to late-15th century, although this would need further corroboration and study.

### 6.2.3. The Numeral 100

The layout is in accordance with the font that we find in other works by the same artist; for example, in some halos of various saints, as can be seen in a Marian scene with several saints in the central part of the Adelberg Altar, on a vase in “The Annunciation” of the Hürbel Altar, in the drapery of “The Annunciation” of the Wengen Altar, in the cartouche of an angel in “The Annunciation” of the Eschach Altar, and even on the edge of some clothes, such as the cape of Saint Joseph in “The Adoration of the Child” of the Bingen Altar. Similarly, the numbers, specifically the 1 in the text of Zeitblom’s pseudo-self-portrait and the 0 and 1 of the astronomical clock of the Blaubeuren monastery, are consistent.

All of this, together with the analysis of the Germanic typeface used at the time (Day 2016; Derolez 2003), leads us to conclude that it is clearly the number 100 and not another type of grapheme, such as j, i, l, o, or other letters, lowercase or uppercase.

### “Zeit” and the First 0

We offer as a plausible hypothesis that the meaning of the first numeral zero is the first part of Bartholomäus Zeitblom’s surname, “Zeit”, which in Middle and Old High German had the form “zit” (Kluge and Seebold 1989e). We can see this in the way the artist wrote on the panel of Jesus carrying the cross on the same altar; next to the Virgin Mary we see Saint John the Evangelist, on whose neck we can read the German text “IH MAKt DEK ZIT” (“It was made by Zit/Zeit”), followed by a group of six dots that seem to represent a flower, that is, “blüte” in German (“bloom” in English), thus forming the painter’s last name. We further note that phonetically “zit” (“zeit”) has a certain resemblance to the German “sechs” (“six”), although in Middle and Old High German it had the form “sehs”, which is far from “zit/zeit” (Kluge and Seebold 1989d).

The primary meaning of the word “zeit”, as a noun, among the list of meanings in the German language, is “total seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, years elapsed”, and hence the meaning “part of which can be disposed of”, and with it the “hours or minutes of a day, indicated by the clock”, or, in general, “time”, or “a period of time applied to something”. In its etymology, we have “course of events, succession of events, specific section or point of this course” in Old High German (8th century); in Middle High German, we have the form “zīt”, meaning “time, age, life, year, hour”, as well as “divided, section, portion, divide, cut, tear, share, allocate” (Akademie der Wissenschaften Berlin-Brandenburgischen 2023b; Kluge and Seebold 1989e).

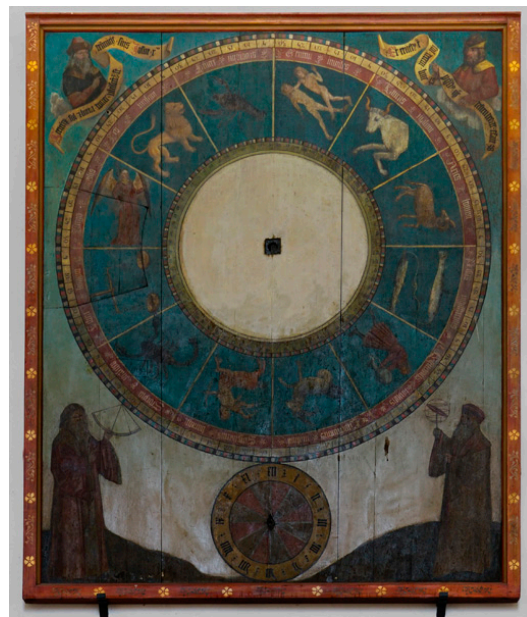
For this reason, we believe that the first zero, in its circular shape with an uninterrupted return, collects the passage of time, but above all, that the circular shape of the clock includes the first letters of our artist’s last name. Let us bear in mind that the word “zeit” has been understood at various moments in history as the total time measured by a clock (Grimm and Grimm 2023).

- The clocks

Let us delve into this sense of “zeit” and the circularity of clocks. Initially present in cathedrals and churches, time-keeping devices were soon seen in public buildings as well.

They presented great complexity by adding mechanisms to regulate the daily time as well as the positions of the sun, the moon, some major planets, and constellations. There were regular clocks (or daily clocks) and astronomical clocks (seasonal, lunar, solar, annual, etc.). In this way, the circle itself, or the circularity of daily or astronomical clocks, popular in Europe from the 14th to the 16th and 17th centuries, became identified with the passing of time (Dohrn-van Rossum 1996).

A pair of clocks were painted at the Blaubeuren monastery by Zeitblom and his workshop around 1500 or later (Moraht-Fromm 2002c). The main one (Figure 9), in the monastery itself, which is of great size, is today located on the north wall of the Chapel of Saint Peter. It is an astronomical clock attributed to the mathematician and astronomer Johannes Stöffler (1452–1531), who was linked from childhood to Blaubeuren, where he attended monastic school, perhaps because he was born in that town, where he died (Hoheisel 1981).



**Figure 9.** Astronomical clock at Blaubeuren monastery, located on the north wall of the Chapel of St. Peter (Gusbeth 2023).

It is a clock made up of a double system: a smaller daytime clock at the bottom and a larger astronomical clock with approximately four times the diameter. It is typical to find concentric circles and indicators to show the diversity of signals, segmentations, and dividing arcs to collect all the information about the different periods of the year and the day. It is interesting for our hypothesis to note that the figurative artistic part is the work of Zeitblom himself. The suggested dating has been either before 1500, perhaps after 1495, or, more likely, after 1500 (Bosch 1999, pp. 202–5).

The other clock (Figure 10), which is simpler and more basic and is on the south wall of the choir, is attributed to Johannes Stöffler (Moraht-Fromm 2002c).

In any case, and assuming that they were created after the construction of the altar, around 1493–1494, Zeitblom's knowledge of these artifacts, which would be common at this time, is clear, as is that of the craftsman watchmaker Stöffler, whose age was similar to Zeitblom's and who was known by the same Benedictine monks.

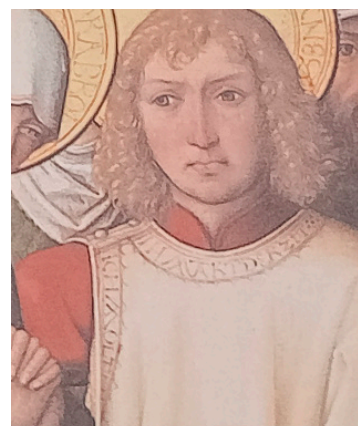


**Figure 10.** Clock of Blaubeuren monastery, located on the south wall of the choir (photo by the author).

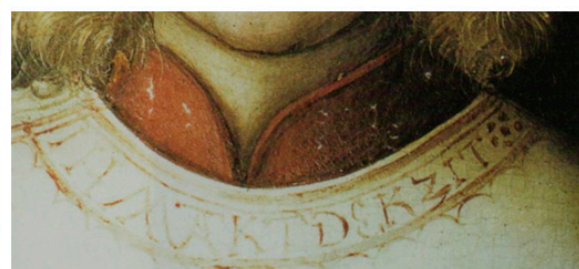
#### “Ich” and the Numeral 1

About the numeral 1, our proposal is that it is nothing more than a capital Latin “I”, which looks very similar. This is because it is the first person pronoun, in German “Ich”, in Old High German “ih”, in ancient German “ek” in Gothic “ik”, going back to Indo-European “eg” (Kluge and Seebold 1989c).

We know of Zeitblom’s use of the form “Ih” on a panel of the altar we are analyzing, on the collar of Saint John the Evangelist’s tunic, as we mentioned before: “IH MAKT DER ZIT\*”. On the tunic’s right sleeve, he uses the expression “ICH MOLT” (“I painted it”), which gives us certain flexibility, although none of these forms fully align with the “I” that we suggest here (Figure 11).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 11.** Detail of letters printed on the tunic of Saint John the Evangelist from the panel of Jesus carrying the cross at the Blaubeuren Altar: (a) photo by the author of a replica of the Altar; (b) image from Moraht-Fromm (2002a, p. 175).

However, in the Swiss German dialects, as well as the German dialects of the south of the country, such as Swabian and Bavarian-Austrian, the corresponding form of the first person pronoun is “I” in many regions, including Basel, Zürich, the Aargau area, Bern, St. Gallen, Luzern, and the Pustertal valley (where the above-mentioned Christmas carol was collected) near Innsbruck (Staub and Tobler 1881b; Wright 1906), so there is a

connection to the geographical locations of Bartholomäus Zeitblom and his collaborators and companions, as well as the text that we suggest for “DIER ZVO LIEB”.

For this reason, our proposal is that this form of the first-person pronoun be used, the form “I”, bringing it closer to the numeral 1.

#### “Blom” and the Second 0

Regarding the round shape of what may be the numeral 0, we believe that its meaning is “flower/flowering”, which is clearly related to the second part of our artist’s last name. The second part of the surname, “-blom”, in present-day German has the form “blume” and in Old High German was “bluomo” (8th century), from the Germanic “blomo-” or Gothic “blomma”, meaning “flower”; it derives from the Germanic “blo-a-”, “to flourish, flowering” ([Akademie der Wissenschaften Berlin-Brandenburgischen 2023a](#); [Kluge and Seebold 1989a](#)).

- The supposed self-portrait

On the back of the Heerberg Altar, we have what was considered for a time a self-portrait by Zeitblom (Figure 12), although there are considerable doubts ([Bosch 1999](#), pp. 39, 43–44, 195–96; [Braun-Miller 1993](#), p. 50). However, the floral motif in different phases and the emergence of the character from the flowers, the green of the foliage, and the carved and painted tendrils, as are omnipresent in other places on the altar, again bring us closer to the semantics of the second part of the painter’s last name. In addition, it redounds and consolidates other data, as well as the presence of the banner or label with the text of its authorship, profession, place, and date: “das . werck . hat . gemacht . bartholme . zeÿtblom . maller . zu . ulm . 1497” (“the work was done by Bartholme Zeÿtblom, painter from Ulm, 1497”). Note that in another area of the Heerberg Altar we have the text “bartholme zeytblom m. z. u 9.8” (“Bartholme Zeytblom, painter from Ulm, 1498”).



**Figure 12.** Detail of the Heerberg Altar: a pseudo-portrait of Bartholomäus Zeitblom (photo by the author).

- The stamp and the signature

Continuing with the linguistic game regarding the meaning of “blom” in Bartholomäus Zeitblom’s name associated with flowering, around 1491 Zeitblom was aware of his poten-

tial and capacity, to the point that he dared to sign his work with his own design, a coat of arms alluding to his surname since his own stamp was created with the letters “BZ” and a flowering plant, herbstzeitlose (in Latin, *Colchicum autumnale*) on a hill, as stated in one of his surviving letters from the same year (Bosch 1999, p. 85, note 219). This plant, known in English as autumn crocus, meadow saffron, or naked ladies, interests us because of the resemblance to our artist’s name, also called zitlose, zeitlost, zeitlosen, or even zitblome or zeitblumen, typically in the Hohenlohe area, close to Nördlingen (Marzell et al. 1958; Pritzel and Jessen 1882).

Another plant present in the landscape of Zeitblom’s work is the columbine (*Aquilegia* in Latin) (Bosch 1999, pp. 101–2), with very striking flowers that seem to extend in two directions and a multitude of shapes and colors (Nold 2003). It is a very common plant in many medieval paintings (Gallwitz 1996) and was a source of pigment during the Middle Ages (Thompson 1956). Its spectacular blooms might have attracted the attention of someone like Zeitblom, who wanted to associate his surname, either the second part or the entire surname, with blooms.

Let us add, remembering the aforementioned stamp with the letters “BZ”, that we know of some drawings, unfortunately, lost today, signed by a certain “BZ” and made, given their style and theme and in relation to all his work, by Bartholomäus Zeitblom; these were drawings and diagrams associated with the painter’s trips to the north of Italy between 1492 and 1500 (Bosch 1999, pp. 61–62, 252; Koch 1924–1925). That is, following the year during which he created his own label with the letters “BZ” and the *Colchicum autumnale* on the hill.

With all that said, since the same Bartholomäus Zeitblom, on the same Blaubeuren Altar, painted a flower with five circular strokes on the neck of Saint John the Evangelist and another in the center as a pictorial idealization of the second part of his last name, we consider that a major step in abstraction is to use a simple circular stroke to represent the number zero as a numerical idealization, and in this case, he used it to hide its own signature among the rest of the digits. It is thus an abstracted gradation from the full name, passing through all the mentioned intermediate forms, where the visual is very present, to the simple initials “BZ”, and finally the numerical 100.

Certainly, the Blaubeuren Altar was not signed in the same way as the Kilchberg Altar, the Heerberg Altar, or the lost Süssen Altar (Bosch 1999, p. 149). On the Kilchberg Altar, his first signed work, we find two inscriptions, although both are incomplete: “bartolome zeÿtblom maler zu ulm” on the predella and “Anno domini m ccc .... hat...” on the base, attributed to around 1492–1493. It is thus clear that the Kilchberg Altar was made when Zeitblom already had his own workshop, although some of the members made certain parts. However, the master of the workshop left a record of himself with his name and surname, his profession as a painter (“maler”), his place of origin, and the date (Bosch 1999, pp. 37, 136–41, 353–54). Returning to the Blaubeuren Altar, for all the previously stated reasons, we believe that it implies the unequivocal omnipresence and strong preponderance of the work of Zeitblom, as the artist who signs it, or who affirms it, in different forms and ways, showing his authorship in various places, from obvious expressions to more veiled and subtle ones.

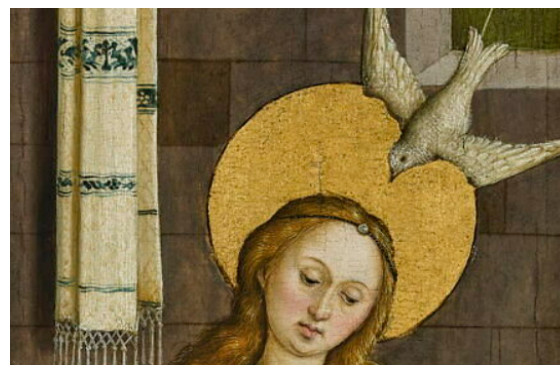
- Flower drawings

Among the collection, the presence of flowers is abundant in the frames of the Blaubeuren Altar, showing various phases of growth; for example, in the astronomical clock of the Blaubeuren monastery (Figure 9), and of course in many other altars, such as those in Heerberg, Bingen, and Pfullendorf; in the Neithart Chapel (ca. 1489–1497); and in many other pictorial panels by Zeitblom (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.** Examples of flowers in frames in works by Zeitblom: (a) Blaubeuren ([Wottke 1993](#), p. 19); (b) Heerberg (photo by the author); (c) Bingen ([Wikimedia Commons 2023a](#)); (d) Pfullendorf (photo by the author); (e) Neithart ([Wikimedia Commons 2023b](#)).

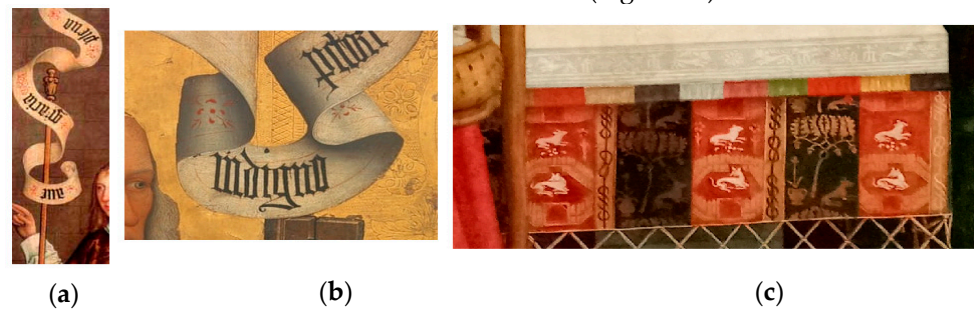
As we can see, the appearance of flowers with five petals is common. In the set “The Annunciation, Saint Anne Trinitarian, Saint Anthony the Abbot” (ca. 1475–1500), this type of flower can again be seen on the towel (Figure 14), similar to the pictorial expression on the neck of Saint John the Evangelist on the Blaubeuren Altar ([Bosch 1999](#), p. 171, note 456).



**Figure 14.** Detail of “The Annunciation, Saint Anne Trinitarian, Saint Anthony the Abbot” ([Louvre 2023](#)).

We can find similar flowers in the cartouches of the angel of “The Annunciation” on the Hürbel Altar (1497) and in the “Portrait of Peter von Hewen” (ca. 1497), and likewise in “The Presentation in the Temple of the Child God” panel of the Heerberg Altar, at the base of the animals on the tablecloth and around it (Figure 15).

However, we should not forget to mention that the presence of flowers is not unique to Zeitblom but is common among different artists, even close ones such as Friedrich Herlin, who painted similar flowers in the frame of the Altar of St. Jakob in Rothenburg ob der Tauber (1466) (Figure 16).



**Figure 15.** Details of: (a) “The Annunciation” (Hürbel Altar) (Bunuri culturale mobile clasate în Patrimoniul Cultural Național 2023); (b) “Portrait of Peter von Hewen” (Meisterdrucke Kunstproduktionen 2023); (c) “The Presentation in the Temple of the Child God” (Heerberg Altar) (photo by the author).



**Figure 16.** Detail of the High Altar of St. Jakob in Rothenburg ob der Tauber by Friedrich Herlin (Mortel 2023).

### Uniting “Zeit” and “blom”

To support our thesis regarding the double meaning of Zeitblom as “time-flower/flowering” and the various etymological forms mentioned above, we collected references from various records and annotations of the name, where we find the following written forms (Bosch 1999, pp. 425–28):

“Barthlome Zeitblom” (1482); “Bartholome Zeitblom” (1484, 1487, 1491); “Bartholome Zittblom” (1499); “Bartholome Zijtblom” (1499); “Bartlome Zitblumen” (1500); “Bartelmes Zeytblom” (1506); “Bartholmes Zeytblom” (1506); “Bartholomen Zeitblom” (1507); “Barthlome Zeytplum” (1508); “Bartleme Zeitblom” (1516); “Bartlome Zeitblom” (1517); “Bartlome Zeitlon” (1517); “Barthlome Zeytblum” (1517); “Bartlmem Zeytblum” (1518); “Bartleme Zeytblums” (1522); “Bartlome Zeytblumen” (1522); “Zittblom” (1497); “Zeytblum” (1499); “Zeytplumin” (1500); “Zeytblumin” (1500); “Zeytplum” (1503); “Zeitblom” (1521); and “Zeitblomen” (1551).

Let us add the forms that we find in his own work: “bartolome zejtblom” (Altar Kilchberg, ca. 1492–93) (Figure 17); “ZIT\*” (flower stroke with six points, five around and one central) (Altar Blaubeuren, ca. 1493–94); “bartholme zejtblom”/“zeytblom” (Heerberg Altar, ca. 1497–1498).

It seems that the Süßen Altar was also signed, although unfortunately it was burned in 1707 (Bosch 1999, p. 188, note 502). It was dated in the year 1507 and was written behind the name “Barthlome Zeitlom” (Deutsche Inschriften Online 2023).

This leaves us with the following forms for the surname, which can be divided into its two parts: {“Zeit”; “Zeyt”; “Zeýt”; “Zit”; “Zitt”; “Zijt”} and {“blom”; “blomen”; “blum”; “blums”; “blumen”; “blumin”; “plum”; “plumin”; “lom”; “lon”; “\*”}.



**Figure 17.** Detail of Kilchberg Altar (photo by the author).

Among the other authors whom we could consider fundamental in the making of the Blaubeuren Altar, such as Jörg Syrlin, Michel Erhart, Hans Schüchlin, and Bernhard Strigel, none offers clear clues for the resolution of the inscriptions. Even the shared Schüchlin–Zeitblom workshop collaboration mentioned above does not reveal the presence of Zeitblom’s father-in-law, despite the fact that Hans Schüchlin, the artist of the Tiefenbronn Altar, left his signature on it in 1469 as “Hans Schüchlin”, from Ulm (Woltmann and Woermann 1894). Regarding Schüchlin, we have several recorded forms of his first and last name, with variants {“Hans”; “Hanns”} and {“Schüchlin”; “Schühlein”; “Schuchlin”; “Schyechlin”; “Schuelin”; “Schielin”; “Schühlin”; “Schuhlin”; “Schiechlin”} (Bosch 1999, pp. 25, 427; Frantz 1894; Moraht-Fromm 2002b, p. 262; Pfeil 2007; Romberg et al. 1846). However, we have not achieved anything by tracing the minimal presence of his signature or autograph.

For all this, the simplest solution, considering the subtlety and difficulty in assuming that we have managed to decipher its meaning, or better, the least complicated and least hidden, is the one we propose: The numeral 100 is the author’s signature, below the text with parts of the Christmas carol, meaning “I, Zeitblom”, “I[ch]” (1), “Zeit-” (0), “-blom” (0), abstracting in a very idealized and conceptualized way the time/clock and the flower/bloom.

Our solution differs notably from the one we gave a long time ago at various points (Jara Vera 2016, pp. 939–40). This is mainly because the Christmas carol that we later found had not been located at that time. Our suggestion therefore focused on the text “DIER ZVO LIEB 100”, which could be translated as “For love of you 100”, possibly hiding or missing a word, perhaps in the numeral 100. Biblical texts (reviewed above) were indicated, such as 1 Jn 4, 10, perhaps together with a reference to the prophet Jeremiah, Jer 31, 3. In reference to the numerals, a possible linguistic game or enigma was proposed for the written forms, specifically 1 for “one” (“eine” in German) and 0 for “zero” (“null” in German), or better, in the sense of “nothing” or “no” (“nicht” in German), forming the set “dier zvo lieb-eine nicht...” as a hieroglyph. The following 0, once again, might mean the author’s surname in its “Zeit” form, which in German means period, clock, or clock circumference.

The previous solution, which we now discard, would lead to translations such as “too dear to you, not one, Zeit[blom]”, or, with some transformation, “dir zu lieben ich Zeit” (“to love you, I Zeit[blom]”), or “dir zu lieb, e nicht Zeit” (“too dear to you, I am Zeit[blom]”), or perhaps “dir zu lieb eine, zeit-blom” (“one too dear, Zeitblom”), or “dir zu lieb, ein ich Zeit” (“too dear to you, an I Zeit[blom]”). In short, and in any case, it would be a hidden signature in a collective work where Zeitblom would show his mercy toward the Child God.

For all that has been stated here, the most plausible solution is the one we consider to be the simplest, a simple signature: “I, Zeitblom”, “I[ch]” (1), “Zeit-” (0), “-blom” (0), at the end of the key and contextual text of the Tyrolean Christmas carol.

## 7. Conclusions

The decryption process covers areas other than cryptography as a modern science. Of course, this goes beyond the purely academic cryptographic exercises prepared at universities that teach this subject, but also even beyond the protocols and systems developed in the area of digital security. The word “deciphering” has a wide meaning and can also be applied to the knowledge of ancient and forgotten languages and, in general, to the knowledge of messages exposed under the confidentiality of all kinds: literary, numerical, musical, symbolic, visual, audible, etc. Moreover, it can even extend to those messages that are claimed to be invisible, which refers to the concealment of information or steganography as a science close to cryptography (Jara Vera and Sánchez Ávila 2021), the latter being an applied science that deals with the hiding of source messages in encrypted confidential messages.

The inscription that has occupied us in this research exists in this broader and more complex environment, hence the need to make use of various disciplines. On the one hand, we have a monogram that largely hides and confuses the meaning and makes it invisible, as a Marian figurative acrostic. Next to it, there is a partial literary text of an unknown source, which we have traced back to a Tyrolean Christmas carol as a plausible possibility, a text perhaps known to some who knew these stanzas but that, after time, turns dark. Finally, we have the number 100, which we believe must be read numeral by numeral and which confidentially hides the signature of the author, who thus links his authorship and piety to the Child God and his Mother Mary, in an abstract, figurative way, from the linguistic and rich semantics of his last name, Zeitblom.

Any confusing text present in an artistic work always generates mystery about the work. This is the case with the text that concerns us. Here the mystery increases, as there is a revealed legible part, the literary text, and a veiled part, the rest. We believe that the author wanted it to never be revealed in its entirety and depth, despite the clarity of the words that speak of love, “DIER ZVO LIEB”. However, that is only the revealed and recognizable part, followed by a numeral and preceded by a non-obvious flowered monogram.

The author went through a lot of trouble to produce these encrypted messages. They were not something put on at the end on a sudden whim, but a realization designed and thought through from the beginning, as we have indicated in this paper. Hence, its importance and significance made the effort of deciphering necessary.

We believe that all of the previous interpretations of our hypothesis regarding the numeral are lost on the surface, remaining in numerical semantics, which we consider to be erroneous and a misleading clue. It is the artist’s signature, albeit highly schematized and abstracted. As for the interpretations of the monogram given up to now, they do not offer a coherent and compact sense of the pictorial work either, often getting lost in naive artistic attributions, although the case of Wolfgang Deutsch is very close to the one that we have proposed here. Our proposal, which we believe illuminates the significance of the artistic panel, intertwines the royalty of the Magi with the Virgin Mother, Queen of Heaven, who was invoked in liturgical and popular devotion in various prayers for centuries, and all of this in a leafy, vegetal, and flowery setting, typical of her virginity. The complete salutation comprising the letters of “AVE MARIA” in the monogram, a prodigy of total setting, manifests the elegance and technical expertise of the author, who did not want to leave any letter aside but to unify them all in a complete monogram in which he recalls the angelic greeting of the Annunciation, a motif not present in the Altar as a scene, which leads us to think that, for all that we will say below, he is the one who is greeting the Mother of the Child.

We dare to suggest this personal aspect of the greeting due to the strong expressiveness of the words that follow, “DIER ZVO LIEB”. Interpreted relative to the complete text of the Tyrolean Christmas carol, they express a highly ignited and elevated gratitude to God. Zeitblom expresses an effusive declaration of love due to the love previously received from God. This is a resounding testimony that does not shut up or hold back, made evident in a direct and exclamatory statement. The God of Heaven has become a Child out of

love, and this is something that Zeitblom has personally verified. The simple and popular Tyrolean Christmas carol, the words and music of which would resonate in the mind and memory of Zeitblom, who perhaps sang or hummed it, is nothing but a profound piece in its catechetical and doctrinal message, as a reminder that everything in the Incarnation was performed for God's love for humans. Without the literary context, the three words "DIER ZVO LIEB" lose their profound meaning and remain partly veiled, and this reminds us again of the desire to conceal from prying eyes, although it is a record in the work of the artist's deepest religious feelings.

Finally, the numeral 100, which hides the author's signature, is not intended to identify the author of the work to the viewer but is a perennial declaration of someone who expressed his feelings in the monogram and the preceding words. It is about saying without being heard, or, more specifically, writing without being read, but leaving a record. It is a pious display of faith and devotion but with modesty and humility. Only He who sees what is hidden can reward prayer (Mt 6,6).

For all that has been said, the whole deciphered set allows us a glimpse of the painter in his interiority and the realization of his work. He is not a neutral artist detached from the subject he is painting. He is involved in his work affectionately, from the depths of his religious interiority. He carries out his work in a state of constant adoration and worship toward God-made-man, as a Child, and his Mother, with whom he engages in a cordial and emotional dialogue. This deciphering allows us to broaden our view in terms of knowing the artist, in this case, Bartholomäus Zeitblom, his relationship with nearby geographical regions, both his workshop and other workshops and artists, and also the religion, liturgy, literature, and folklore in the life of the artist as part of his universe of beliefs, his relationship with his work, his piety, and his deepest feelings.

Furthermore, we cannot neglect to mention that if our proposal is correct, the solution to the enigma makes it possible to date a literary work, at least with an "ante quem" date, to a Tyrolean Christmas carol at a specific and remote time, the end of the 15th century, beyond the date of its compilation, the beginning of the 19th century. In this way, the Christmas carol becomes alive and operational in time as a substantial element of the feelings of the piety of a prominent artist of the Ulm School in the artistic setting of the Blaubeuren altar.

For all that has been said, we hope this paper shows how the literary, the folkloric, the artistic, and the religious are much more intertwined and interrelated than what purely mono-disciplinary studies sometimes indicate. Thus, it is necessary to decipher those more or less confusing, enigmatic, and cryptic texts that are present in works of art, as we have performed on other occasions (Jara Vera 2016; Jara Vera and Sánchez Ávila 2017a, 2017b), since their meaning completes our knowledge of the work itself, the author, and the environment.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, V.J.-V.; methodology, V.J.-V.; validation, V.J.-V. and C.S.-Á.; formal analysis, V.J.-V.; investigation, V.J.-V.; writing—original draft preparation, V.J.-V.; writing—review and editing, V.J.-V.; images and photos, V.J.-V.; supervision, V.J.-V. and C.S.-Á.; project administration, V.J.-V. and C.S.-Á. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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