

## THE ALTARPIECE of KLOSTERNEUBURG

The abbey of Klosterneuburg is one of the most important places for the history of enamelling. Founded in 1114 by the will of **Leopold III of Babenberg**, the monastery adheres to the Augustinian rule since **1133**. They rebuilt the building on many occasions, particularly during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, the most important moment for the enamel art lovers is the year 1181, when they added one of the most noteworthy masterpieces of enamelling: the **Altar of Nicholas de Verdun**.

### NICHOLAS DE VERDUN

The inscription of the altar contains the clear name of the author. **NICOLAUS VIRDUNENSIS**. Our knowledge of this artist are scarce. There are only three works attributed to him with some certainty: the **Altar of Verdun**, the **Casket of Our Lady of Tournai** (1205) and the **Shrine of the Three Kings** in Cologne (1181-1230). For many other works, the attribution appears to be more complex. According to some historians, Nicholas de Verdun received his artistic education from another great master, Godefroy de Huy, a representative of the **Mosan School**; despite this, the experts consider Nicholas de Verdun the greatest artist of the **Rhine School**, whose main centre is the city of Cologne, where we can find the Shrine of the Three Kings. The master expresses his art in the technique of *champlevé* on golden copper, obtained by the engraving of copper figures, the gilding and then the enamelling of the surface. This technique was probably born in **Conques** about one century earlier and hence spread in Limoges (France), Spain (Salou), Liege (Belgium) and Cologne (Germany), following the most important route of the time, the "Camino de Santiago".

### DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTARPIECE



As it looks today, the large altarpiece shows immediately that it is an ordered compositional project, the fruit of a reasoned scheme. The long inscription above the altarpiece written in leonine hexameters and the captions of the single panels offer a few information about it. The work offers a large ensemble view on the History of Salvation, from the original revelation to its accomplishment in the end of times: for that reason, the artist arranged the tiles on three tiers corresponding to the three epochs of the history of salvation. The three panels that constitute the Altarpiece have figures in *champlevé* enamel on copper; above the central panel lies a reliquary that, although imitating the style of the altarpiece of Nicholas de Verdun, dates to the 1525-1529 period.

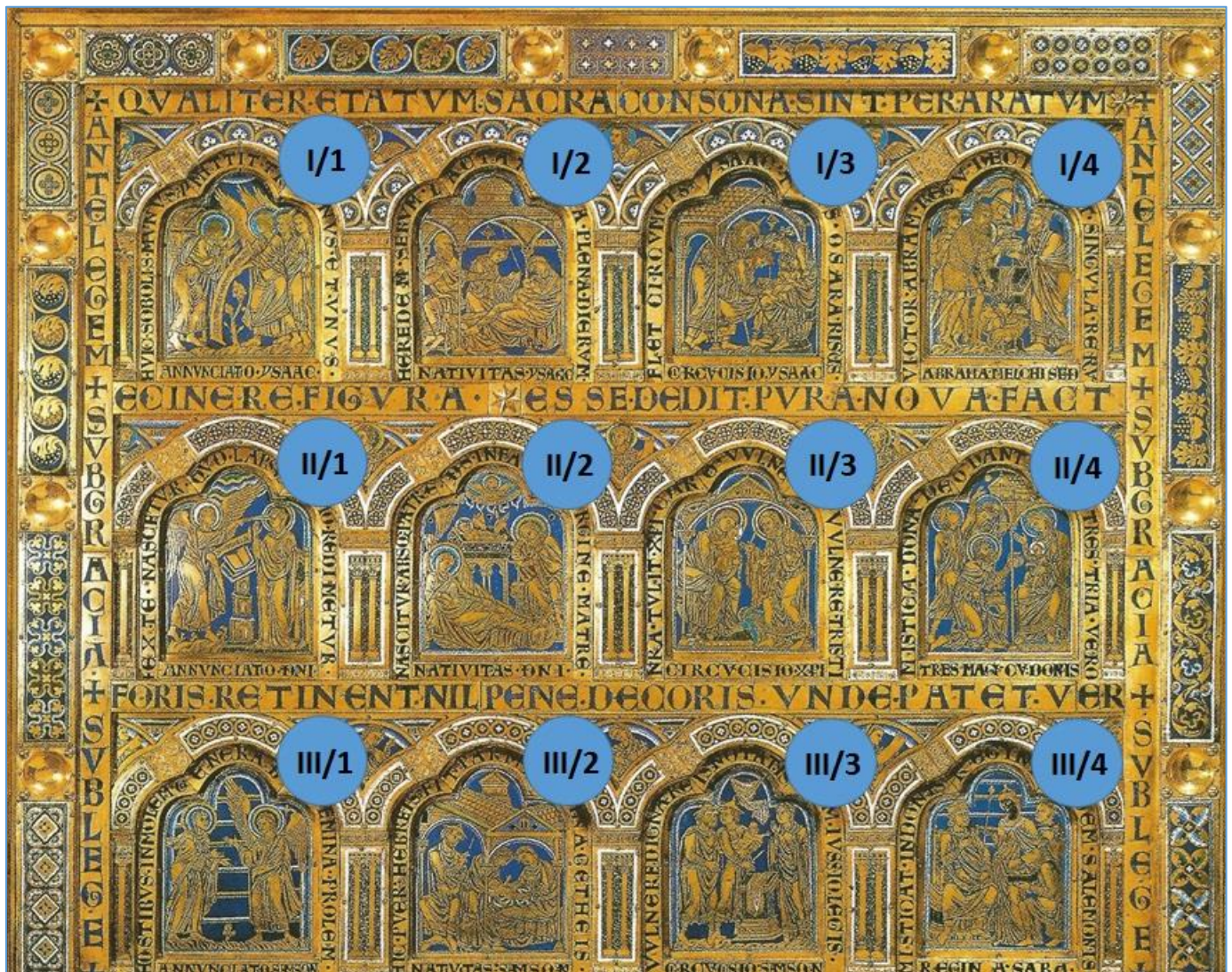
The upper tier (I) is called ANTE LEGEM (before the Law) and gathers the events from the Creation of the world up to Moses, the time when God reveals himself to the patriarchs. The bottom tier (III) is called SUB LEGE (under the Law) and goes from the gift of the Law on Mount Sinai up to the end of the Old Testament era. This is the time when revelation was confined to the people of Israel. The centre tier (II) is called SUB GRATIA (under the Grace) narrates the fulfilment of the Old Testament figures under the New Covenant. This is the time of the Messiah, where we live today. Only the last two columns alter the scheme, where the theme is that of the End Times, entirely confined to the SUB GRATIA period.







## LEFT PANEL



I/1 Annunciation of Isaac – II/1 Annunciation of Jesus – III/1 Annunciation of Samson

I/2 Birth of Isaac – II/2 Birth of Jesus – III/2 Birth of Samson

I/3 Circumcision of Isaac – II/3 Circumcision of Jesus – III/3 Circumcision of Samson

I/4 Abraham and Melchizedek – II/4 Adoration of the Magi -- III/3 Queen of Sheba



## CENTRAL PANEL – LEFT SIDE



I/5 Crossing of the Red Sea – II/5 Baptism of Jesus – III/5 Bronze Sea

I/6 Moses returns to Egypt -- II/6 Entrance in Jerusalem – III/6 Entrance of the Paschal Lamb

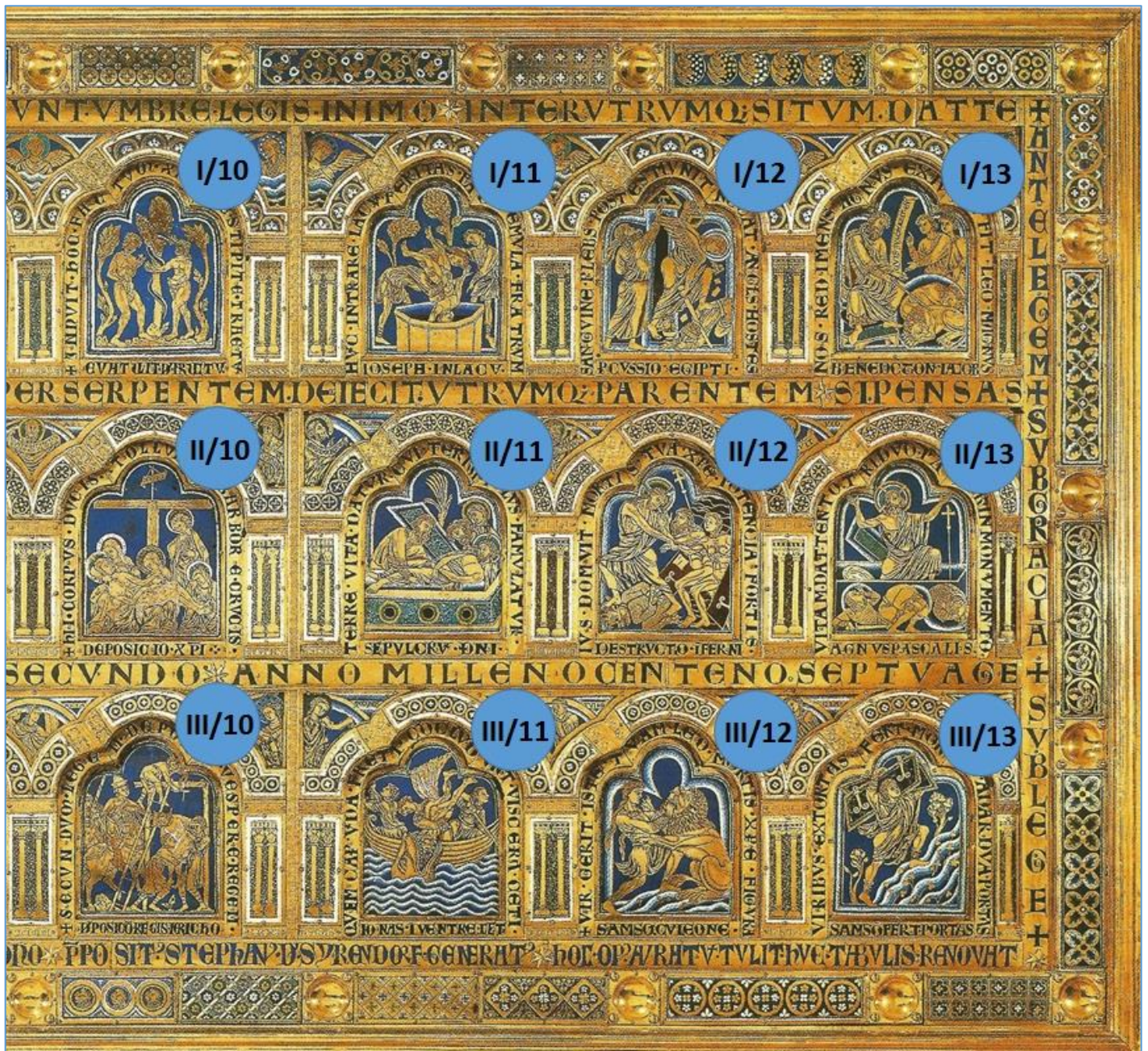
I/7 Oblation of Melchizedek – II/7 The Last Supper – III/7 The manna in the wilderness

I/8 Murder of Abel – II/8 Judah's kiss – III/8 Murder of Abner

I/9 Sacrifice of Isaac – II/9 Death of Jesus – III/9 Explorers and the grapes



## CENTRAL PANEL – RIGHT SIDE



I/10 Adam and Eve – II/10 Deposition from the Cross -- III/10 Hanging of the king of Jericho

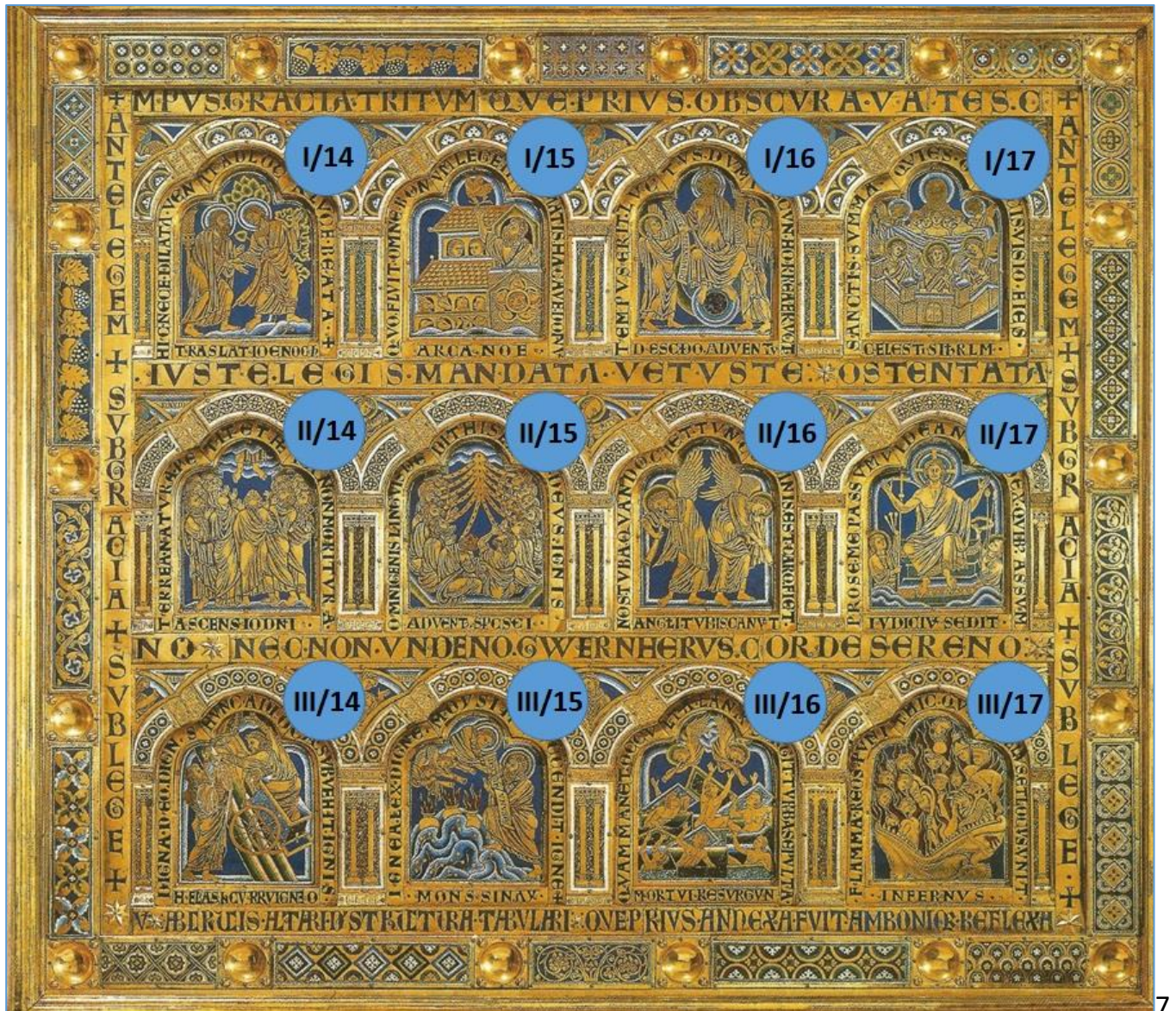
I/11 Joseph in the cistern -- II/11 Burial of Jesus Christ -- III/11 Jonah in the whale

I/12 Massacre of the firstborn -- II/12 Christ in hades -- III/12 Samson kills the lion

I/13 Blessing of Jacob -- II/13 Resurrection of the Lord -- III/13 Samson and the gate



## RIGHT PANEL



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I/14 Rapture of Enoch -- II/14 Resurrection of Jesus Christ -- III/14 Assumption of Elijah

I/15 Noah's ark -- II/15 Descent of the Holy Spirit -- III/15 Gift of the Law on the Sinai

I/16 Parousia of the Lord -- II/16 Angels with trumpets -- III/16 Resurrection of the Dead

I/17 The Heavenly Jerusalem -- II/17 Christ Judge -- III/17 Hellfire